



ART+MEDIA

Journal of Art and Media Studies

amjournal@outlook.com

<http://www.fmk.singidunum.ac.rs/izdavastvo/art-media/>



ART+ MEDIA

Journal of Art and Media Studies

Issue No.

40 / 2026

ISSN 2217-9666

ISSN-online 2406-1654

UDK 7.01:316.774

**Aesthetics Between China and Post-Yugoslav
States in the Context of Globalization**



ART+MEDIA

Journal of Art and Media Studies

40/2026

FMK

Issue No.
40 / 2026



ART+
MEDIA

Journal of Art and Media Studies

AM
Journal of Art and Media Studies
Issue No. 40
Belgrade, September 2026

Editorial Board

Sonja Marinković Ph.D. (*Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Nikola Dedić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Bojana Matejić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Dragana Stojanović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Maja Stanković Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Aleksandra Pešić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Nataša Teofilović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Žarko Cvejić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Dubravka Đurić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Angelina Milosavljević Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*)

International Editorial Board

Aleš Erjavec Ph.D. (*Institute of Philosophy, Ljubljana, Slovenia*), Lev Kreft Ph.D. (*Faculty of Philosophy, Ljubljana, Slovenia*), Polona Tratnik Ph.D. (*Alma Mater Europaea – Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, Ljubljana, Slovenia*), Ernest Ženko Ph.D. (*Faculty of the Humanities, Koper, Slovenia*), Nataša Šegota Lah Ph.D. (*Faculty of Philosophy, Rijeka, Croatia*), Oana Camelia Serban Ph.D. (*University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania*), Marta Smolińska Ph.D. (*University of Arts, Poznań, Poland*), Tomasz Załuski Ph.D. (*Department of Media and Audiovisual Culture, University of Łódź, Poland*), Blanka Brzozowska Ph.D. (*Institute for Contemporary Culture, University of Łódź, Poland*), Nicole Haitzinger Ph.D. (*Department of Art, Music and Dance Studies, Universität Salzburg, Austria*), Veronika Darian Ph.D. (*Institute for Theatre Studies, Leipzig University, Germany*), Osakue S. Omoera Ph.D. (*Faculty of Arts, Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria, West Africa*), Pedro Hussak van Velthen Ramos Ph.D. (*Faculty of Philosophy, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil*), Aneta Stojnić Ph.D. (*IPTAR – Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research, New York, USA*), Barry Bergdoll Ph.D. (*Department of Art History and Archaeology, Columbia University, New York, USA*), Tyrus Miller Ph.D. (*Humanities Division, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA*), Sven Spieker Ph.D. (*Germanic & Slavic Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*), Eva Kit Wah Man Ph.D. (*Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, China*), Kwai Cheung Lo Ph.D. (*Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, China*)

Advisory Board

Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman Ph.D. (*Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Milanka Todić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Applied Arts, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Jelena Todorović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Biljana Dojčinović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Serbia*), Ješa Denegri Ph.D. (*Belgrade, Serbia*), Nada Popović Perišić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*)

Editorial Team

Miodrag Šuvaković Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Editor-in-Chief
Sanela Nikolić Ph.D. (*Faculty of Music, University of Arts, Belgrade, Serbia*), Managing Editor
Aleksa Milanović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Executive Editor

Guest Issue Editor

Zhang Chenghua, Ph.D., *South China Normal University, China*
Fu Qilin, Sichuan, Ph.D., *Sichuan University, China*

Secretary

Marija Simojlović (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*)

Proofreading

Ana Gorobinski

On the cover: Exhibition view. Žarko Aleksić, *Образовање и Образовање*, Galerija FLU, Belgrade, 2026. Photographs by Danilo Bursać.

Design and Layout

Aleksa Milanović Ph.D. (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*)

Reviewers

Tamara D. Bradić (*Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia*), Julen Alexandre Carreño Aguado (*Valencia Catholic University Saint Vincent Martyr, Valencia, Spain*), Limei Gou (*Communication University of China, Beijing; School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University of Arts and Science, China*), Tamara Koneska (*Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Serbia*), Daniela Licandro (*School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Estonia*), Wen Ma (*School of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing University, Nanjing, China*), Danica Milan Stojiljković (*University of Belgrade, Institute for Multidisciplinary Research, National Institute of the Republic of Serbia*), Vesna Perković Jović (*Faculty of Civil Engineering, Architecture and Geodesy, University of Split, Croatia*), Marko Špikić (*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia*), Simona Žikić (*Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Serbia*)

Publisher

Faculty of Media and Communications
Karađorđeva 65, Belgrade, Serbia
+381 11 26 26 474

**As Publisher**

Nada Popović Perišić Ph.D.

Press Artprint, Novi Sad

Print Run 100

AM Journal of Art and Media Studies was founded by

Dr. Miodrag Šuvaković and Dragorad Kovačević in Belgrade, 2011. It is issued three times per year.

The *Journal* is classified in ERIH PLUS, EBSCO, DOAJ, CEEOL, and in the List of Scientific Journals Categorization of Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of Republic of Serbia (M51 – 2019; M24 – 2021, M23 – 2024, M22 – 2025). Beginning with No. 12 2017, *AM* is indexed, abstracted, and covered in Clarivate Analytics service ESCI.

Editors' Note

The connection between China and the post-Yugoslav countries has become more significant in the 21st century. Growing political, economic, and cultural interactions have opened new avenues for dialogue. Meanwhile, globalization and artificial intelligence have drastically changed how aesthetic concepts, artistic methods, and cultural stories spread across different nations and languages. However, as this special issue shows, these interactions are not just about increasing connections. They call for ongoing historical analysis, critical comparisons, and an awareness of the unique cultural paths that shape, translate, and reinterpret aesthetic traditions.

This collection of articles in the Main Topic section examines these questions through diverse disciplinary lenses, including art history, architecture, media studies, communication theory, film studies, and digital aesthetics. Instead of focusing on a single narrative of exchange, they highlight various connections between Chinese and post-Yugoslav contexts: shared histories of modernity, similar responses to globalization, the movement of artistic styles across different media, and emerging technological conditions that alter perception, communication, and cultural identity.

The issue begins with two studies that lay the broad historical and conceptual groundwork for intercultural dialogue. Limei Gou and Jinyao Zhang reframe Constructivism as a visual logic that moved across Chinese left-wing print culture and Yugoslav Zenithism, challenging traditional views on stylistic influence and highlighting the dynamic movement of visual forms. Next, Tamara Koneska explores socialist modernism in Yugoslavia, focusing on *Kockica* to show how architecture and art served together as tools of ideological and aesthetic expression within the country's cultural politics.

These contributions highlight current artistic and media practices. Ana Frangovska offers a comparative analysis of contemporary art in China and North Macedonia, illustrating how artists in different institutional settings address shared themes like memory, identity, and visual language. Caishu Zhou explores the Chinese film industry as a "new media spectacle," asserting that cinema now plays a key role in how contemporary Chinese culture engages with industrialization, urban development, cultural heritage, and aesthetic education.

The last two articles explore how digital technologies impact modern aesthetics and intercultural dialogue. Tamara Bradić analyzes China's Social Credit experiments alongside educational data systems in Serbia, viewing both as aesthetic frameworks that shape visibility, classification, and identity within digital governance. In the final part, Simona Žikić suggests empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure for intercultural communication, emphasizing that artificial intelligence increasingly mediates not just

the flow of information but also the emotional contexts that make cultures visible and understandable to each other.

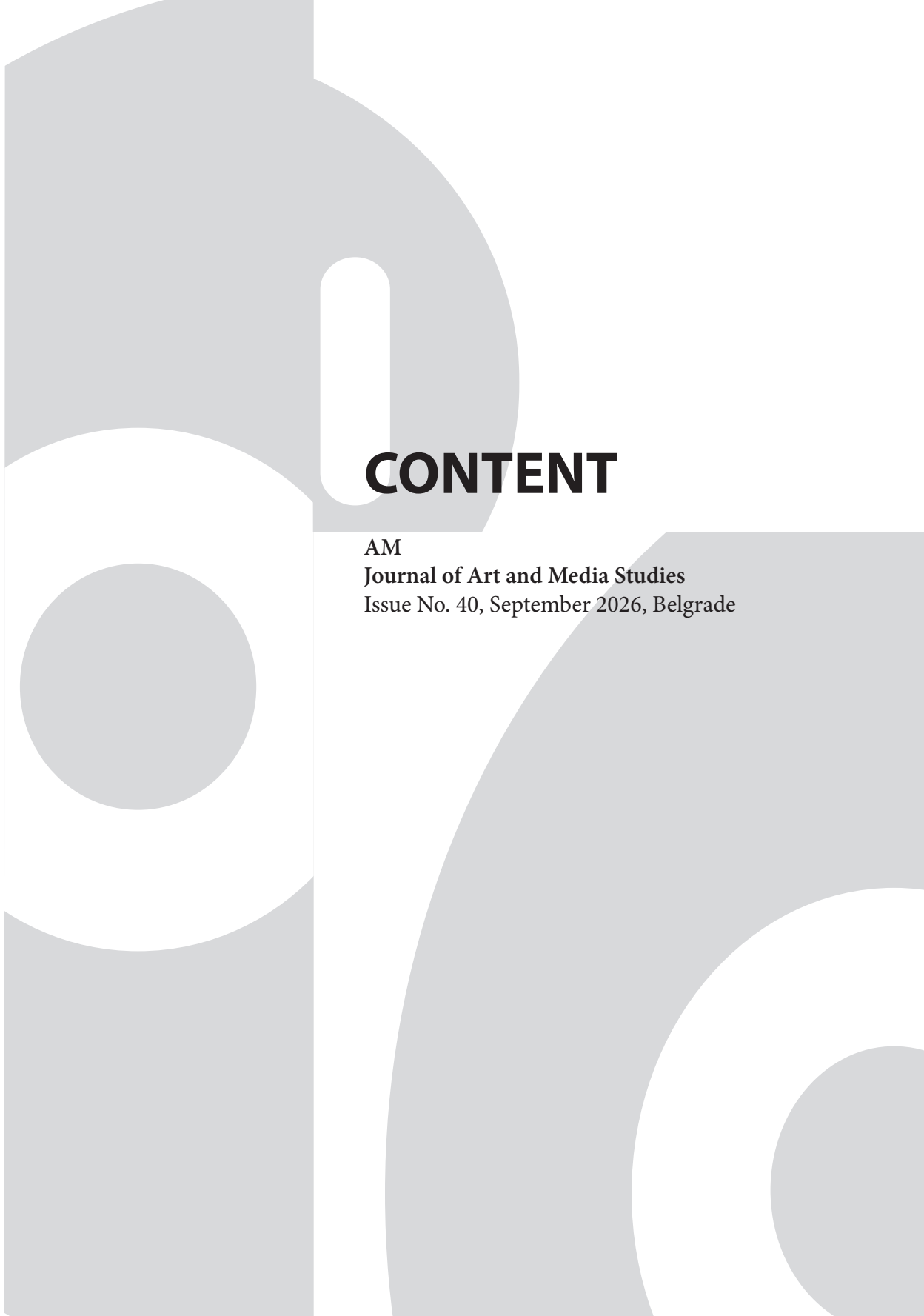
These contributions show that the dialogue between China and the post-Yugoslav states is more than just about influence or comparison. They highlight a dynamic field where historical memory, modernist legacies, current artistic practices, digital infrastructures, and emerging AI forms constantly reshape aesthetic experience. Consequently, this discussion adds to global aesthetics debates by emphasizing that meaningful intercultural exchange relies not on erasing differences, but on critically examining the media, institutions, and aesthetic forms that make differences perceptible, communicable, and dialogue ready.

Guest issue editors

Dr. Zhang Chenghua, South China Normal University, China
Dr. Fu Qilin, Sichuan University, China

Zhang Chenghua, PhD, Associate Professor at the School of Chinese Language and Literature, South China Normal University, and Director of the Editorial Department of *Aesthetic Cultural Studies*, has published books including *Australian Cultural Studies: Issues, Dimensions, and Reflections* (2022), and *Research on Yugoslav Marxist Literary and Artistic Theory* (2025).

Fu Qilin, PhD in Literature and Professor at the College of Chinese Language and Literature in Sichuan University of China, Chief Expert of a key project of the China Social Science Fund “Bibliography and Research of Eastern European Marxist Aesthetics” (15ZDB022) and the China Ministry of Education key project of philosophy and social sciences “Chinese Marxist Aesthetics for a Hundred Years and its Theoretical Construction” (2025JZD006). Fu Qilin’s published books include: *A Study of Agnes Heller’s Thoughts on Aesthetic Modernity* (2006), *An Anthropological Interpretation of Aesthetic Ideology* (2008), and *The Critique of Grand Narrative and the Construction of Pluralist Aesthetics: A Study of Reconstructing Aesthetics of Budapest School* (2011), *A Study of basic issues of Eastern European Neo-Marxist Literary and Artistic Theory* (2017), *Janus Face: selected works of Agnes Heller’s aesthetics* (2020), *The Normative Foundation of the Contemporary Literary Theory* (2024); *Marxist Aesthetics on Eastern Europe*(2025), etc.



CONTENT

AM

Journal of Art and Media Studies

Issue No. 40, September 2026, Belgrade

MAIN TOPIC: Aesthetics Between China and Post-Yugoslav States in the Context of Globalization

Limei Gou and Jinyao Zhang

Constructivist Form under Media Constraint

Tamara Koneska

Socialist and Modernist Ideology in the Synthesis of Yugoslav Architecture and Art—The Case of *Kockica*

Ana Frangovska

Contemporaneity, Media, and Meaning: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Artistic Practices in China and North Macedonia

Caishu Zhou

New Media Spectacle: Aesthetic Analysis of the Chinese Film Industry in the Twenty-First Century

Tamara Bradić

Scoring the Citizen: Aesthetic Regimes of Digital Governance in China and Post-Yugoslav States in the Context of Globalization

Simona Žikić

Empathy as an Aesthetic Infrastructure of Intercultural Communication: China and Post-Yugoslav Digital Narratives in the Age of AI

BEYOND THE MAIN TOPIC

Tram Thi Trach Oanh

The Modular Visual Language of Sculptor Diem Phung Thi and Art in Vietnamese Spatial Installation

Paula Rem

Transcultural Narratives and Religious Symbols in Mass Media—*The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006)

Joshua Wodak

An Interface to the World: Evoking Environmental Responsibility in Responsive Environments

Tajana Režnić Brenko

Transdisciplinary Pedagogy and the Constitutive Role of Art: The Perspective of Transdisciplinary Realism

ARTIST PORTFOLIO

Žarko Aleksić

Образовање и Образовање. Artistic Intervention on a living Brain

BOOK REVIEW

Dubravka Đurić

Book Review: *Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, edited by David Ayers, Margarida Brito Alves, Joana Cunha Leal, and Benedikt Hjartarson, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2025.

Biographies

Guidelines for Authors



MAIN TOPIC

**AESTHETICS BETWEEN
CHINA AND POST-YUGOSLAV STATES
IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION**



ART+MEDIA

Limei Gou and Jinyao Zhang

Constructivist Form under Media Constraint

Tamara Koneska

Socialist and Modernist Ideology in the Synthesis of Yugoslav Architecture and Art—The Case of *Kockica*

Ana Frangovska

Contemporaneity, Media, and Meaning: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Artistic Practices in China and North Macedonia

Caishu Zhou

New Media Spectacle: Aesthetic Analysis of the Chinese Film Industry in the Twenty-First Century

Tamara Bradić

Scoring the Citizen: Aesthetic Regimes of Digital Governance in China and Post-Yugoslav States in the Context of Globalization

Simona Žikić

Empathy as an Aesthetic Infrastructure of Intercultural Communication: China and Post-Yugoslav Digital Narratives in the Age of AI

Limei Gou

Communication University of China, Beijing; Lanzhou University of Arts and Science, Lanzhou, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6824-2406>

Jinyao Zhang

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-4054-4827>

Constructivist Form under Media Constraint

Abstract: This article examines how constructivist visual form operated beyond the institutional and ideological conditions of its Soviet origin. Focusing on Chinese left-wing print culture and Yugoslav Zenithism publishing, it treats constructivism not as a stylistic influence or artistic doctrine, but as a set of formal operations, including geometric organization and typographic integration. Through comparative analysis of printed visual materials, the study shows how these operations were selectively extracted and recombined within constrained, extra-institutional publishing practices. Under conditions of limited resources, censorship, and unstable circulation, constructivist strategies organized attention and structured perception in print. The article argues that through this process of operational compression, constructivist form shifted from an avant-garde artistic program into a transferable mode of visual communication, offering a framework for reconsidering cross-regional aesthetic exchange beyond stylistic influence or direct transmission.

Keywords: Constructivism; Visual Communication; Print Media; Chinese Left-Wing Print Culture; Zenithism.

Introduction

Constructivism is often discussed in relation to the political and cultural transformations of the early Soviet period, including the revolutionary ideology and reorganization of artistic labor. Its emphasis on structure, materiality, and production has typically been examined within institutional frameworks, particularly in studies of architecture and productivist programs connected to state initiatives and industrial development. Within this historiography, constructivist form is generally situated within a broader context of ideological mobilization and emerging design institutions such as VKhUTEMAS, a framing that tends to link the constructivist form closely to the institutionalized artistic production. As a result, the constructivist form is

often interpreted primarily through the institutional and ideological structures that sustained it in the Soviet context, leaving less attention to how its visual logic might operate when detached from those structures. Situated within scholarship on transnational avant-gardes, global modernisms, and print culture, this study examines how constructivist form came to function as a flexible visual resource under distinct historical and media pressures.¹

This institutional framing, however, leaves unresolved a recurring phenomenon: the reappearance of constructivist visual forms in contexts where such institutional and industrial frameworks were limited or absent. In environments without integrated design training systems or centralized production structures, visual elements associated with constructivism—such as geometric composition, axial organization, strong contrast, and functional typography—reappeared across periodicals, posters, woodcuts, book covers, magazine pages, and other reproducible media. They did not create local replicas of Soviet Constructivism as a unified artistic program, but they reshaped printed visual practice through adaptable principles of layout, image construction, and typographic organization. The question, then, is why constructivist visual form remained operational after becoming detached from the ideological, institutional, and industrial conditions under which it was originally theorized, and what kinds of visual work its formal elements performed under conditions of material constraint and communicative pressure.

This question makes a cross-context comparison of Chinese left-wing visual practice and Yugoslav Zenithist publishing especially revealing. Juxtaposing these two contexts brings into view a structural problem that might remain less apparent within the historiography of any single regional tradition. Although emerging from different political and cultural settings, both developed largely outside stable state or academic institutions, operating instead within extra- or para-institutional media environments. Neither functioned as an official state cultural institution. Both were subject to censorship, intermittent prohibition, and restricted circulation, relying heavily on periodicals, printed images, and other small-scale publications to sustain communication. In such settings, visual forms are needed to operate immediately and efficiently organizing attention, guiding reading, and condensing ideas within limited material space. Taken together, these conditions form the media constraint named in the title: the material, technical, economic, and perceptual pressures of print that shaped how visual form could be produced, reproduced, and read.

On this basis, Chinese left-wing visual practice and Yugoslav Zenithist publishing are examined as comparable print-cultural formations in which constructivist operations manifest through specific practices of layout, image construction, and visual organization. Methodologically, the analysis proceeds through a cross-context

¹ For discussions of decentered and global modernisms, see Partha Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (December 2008): 531–48; Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time* (Columbia University Press, 2015); Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, eds., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Volume III: Europe 1880–1940* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

comparative visual reading of printed materials, including book covers, woodcuts, journal pages, and typographic layouts. These materials are selected because they register constructivist visual principles in the organization of the printed surface, especially through spatial arrangement, typographic integration, geometric ordering, and relations between image and text. The argument moves from the constraints of print to the formal operations activated under those constraints, and finally to the communicative functions these operations acquired. Through this approach, the article argues that constructivist visual form could operate beyond its original institutional context as a set of transferable visual procedures adapted to constrained publishing environments.

Constructivist visual principles and their circulation

Visual Logic of Constructivism

From its inception, Constructivism defined artistic practice through the principle of construction, understood not as the production of aesthetic objects but as a mode of operation grounded in the purposeful organization of material and visual relations in real space. This definition was articulated most clearly in the early INKhUK debates, where artistic practice was redefined in terms of organization, necessity, and structural coherence. In this article, “constructivist form” refers to the visual organization of elements according to the principles of construction articulated in the early constructivist theory. Rather than treating these ideas primarily as historical doctrine, the discussion below identifies several operative principles of constructivist visual logic that inform the analysis of publishing practices that follows. The concern here is therefore not the historical meaning of constructivism itself, but how its formal principles operate as a mode of visual organization.

“There is only one kind of construction”,² Rodchenko insisted, defining it as “the organization of a work’s elements according to a purpose or goal (tsel).”³ Construction, in this sense, does not operate as a stylistic category or compositional choice but as a principle governing the purposeful organization of elements within a work. It must therefore be carried out “in such a way that there is nothing superfluous”,⁴ and it is “not just putting parts together”,⁵ allowing for “nothing accidental, nothing not accounted for.”⁶ These formulations present construction as a mode of organization in which each element derives its significance from its necessary role within an internally structured system. Taken together, these statements frame constructivist form

² Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (University of California Press, 2005), 39.

³ Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 39.

⁴ Sergey Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (MIT Press, 1987), 94.

⁵ Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko*, 87.

⁶ Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, 50.

as a principle of purposeful visual organization, in which meaning emerges from the structured relations among elements rather than from the representational content.

While Rodchenko emphasized purposeful organization, Varvara Stepanova further elaborated the structural coherence of such constructions. Instead of defining construction through external criteria or stylistic effects, she described it as a condition of organic interdependence among elements: “A mark of constructiveness is the organic way in which constituent parts are linked together. Even the most insignificant change in any of the parts leads to the destruction of the entire construction.”⁷ Stepanova’s formulation complements Rodchenko’s insistence on eliminating the superfluous by presenting construction as a self-consistent system in which meaning and structural integrity depend on the interdependence of elements. Here the constructivist form appears not as an expressive style but as a relational structure in which visual elements acquire significance through their position within an organized system.

Similarly, the writings of El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg reflect an orientation toward structural rationality. Rather than treating historical models as sources of stylistic authority, they argue that what can be retained from classical art are “the eternal laws of clarity, economy, and proportion.”⁸ In this sense, classical art is understood as a historical source of formal rationality, from which structural principles may be abstracted independently of representation or subject matter. On this basis, they define the task of constructive art not as ornamentation but as organization: “the task of constructive art is not to adorn life but to organize it.”⁹ As they further state, “Every organized work—whether it be a house, a poem, or a picture—is an ‘object’ directed toward a particular end, which is calculated not to turn people away from life, but to summon them to make their contribution toward life’s organization.”¹⁰

These theoretical principles find clear visual articulation in the constructivist practice. One of the most widely discussed examples is El Lissitzky’s *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Figure 1). In this composition, political meaning is produced without recourse to representational imagery. The composition relies entirely on geometric opposition and directional force: a red wedge penetrates a white circular field, generating significance through spatial tension rather than depicted action. Perception is organized along the wedge’s axis, guiding the viewer toward its point of impact and transforming interpretation into a process of spatial alignment.

In this way, *Red Wedge* demonstrates how constructivist form operates as a perceptual mechanism rather than a representational medium. Meaning is not conveyed through symbolic reference but arises directly from formal relations of contrast, direction, and spatial pressure. Taken together, these theoretical formulations and visual

⁷ Varvara Stepanova, “Construction,” in *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, ed. Alexander Lavrent’ev, trans. John E. Bowlt (MIT Press, 1988), 172.

⁸ El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, “The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End,” in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (Thames and Hudson, 1974), 56.

⁹ Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, “The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End,” 55.

¹⁰ Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, “The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End,” 56.

practices suggest three operative principles of constructivist visual logic: the geometric organization of visual elements, the relational coherence of structural components, and the directional structuring of perception. These principles provide a framework for analyzing the operation of constructivist visual forms.

Circulation in Yugoslavia: *Zenit*

Constructivist visual forms entered the Yugoslav avant-garde context most visibly through the magazine *Zenit* (1921–1926), founded and edited by Ljubomir Micić in Zagreb and later in Belgrade. As part of a wider European avant-garde periodical network, *Zenit* served as a site where Russian Constructivist imagery, European modernist experimentation, and Zenithism's Balkan self-positioning intersected.¹¹

Zenithism embraced Tatlin's Constructivist ideas, and the sketch of the *Monument to the Third International* was published multiple times—including in *Zenit* issue #11 (twice), the double issue #17–18, Micić's book *Damn Your Hundred Gods / Rescue Car* (1922), and on the poster for the *Great Zenithist Evening*—establishing it as a recurring visual reference within the magazine.¹² This repeated publication reinforced the Monument's status as a core visual reference within *Zenit* and imbued it with symbolic significance as a marker of internationalism and modernity, highlighting the journal's role in circulating Russian Constructivist imagery and its formal principles within the Yugoslav avant-garde context.

A more concentrated presentation of Russian avant-garde art followed in the double issue #17–18 (1922) of *Zenit*, titled “New Russian Art.” Guest-edited by Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, the issue brought together visual works and texts associated with the emerging avant-garde. As indicated in the issue's table of contents (Figure 2), the visual reproductions included Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, Rodchenko's *Constructive Form in Space*, and Lissitzky's *Construction*. Together, these reproductions formed an identifiable corpus of Constructivist visual material within the pages of *Zenit*. The issue also included theoretical and literary materials such as Malevich's *The Laws of the New Art*, poems by Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky, and essays by Ehrenburg and Lissitzky on Russian new art. These materials made the issue an early European journal publication, bringing together visual, theoretical, and literary works of the Russian avant-garde within a single issue.

As Subotić observes, *Zenit* “sought to operate within an international cultural context and participate in the new artistic spirit of the period.”¹³ Another study similarly notes that “it is difficult to find a person among the 1920s elite of the European

¹¹ Ljubomir Micić, “Zenithism as the Balkan Totalizer of New Life and New Art,” in *Zenithism (1921–1927): A Yugoslav Avant-Garde Anthology*, ed. Aleksandar Bošković and Steven Teref (Academic Studies Press, 2022), 110–11.

¹² Aleksandar Bošković and Steven Teref, eds., *Zenithism (1921–1927): A Yugoslav Avant-Garde Anthology* (Academic Studies Press, 2022), 47.

¹³ Irina Subotić, “Avant-Garde Tendencies in Yugoslavia,” *Art Journal* 49, 1 (1990): 21–27.

avant-garde whose name could not be found on the pages of *Zenit*.”¹⁴ Issue #43 (1926) of *Zenit* provides a visual record of this network through a page titled “Collaborators of *Zenit* 1921–1926” (Figure 3), where figures such as Tatlin, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Malevich, Mayakovsky, Kandinsky, Gropius, and Picasso appear together on a single page of the magazine, among many others. The list registers the transnational network of avant-garde contributors whose works circulated through the magazine during its publication. An editorial notice printed above the list of collaborators further describes *Zenit* as the first Balkan magazine—and among the earliest European publications—devoted to Constructivist artistic tendencies.

Circulation in China: Leftist print culture

On March 2, 1930, the Chinese Left-Wing Writers’ League was established in Shanghai and adopted the Program of the Chinese Left-Wing Writers’ League, which explicitly declared literature and art to be “weapons of the liberation struggle.”¹⁵ The League founded or edited a series of influential periodicals—including *Mengya Monthly*, *Beidou*, *Dazhong Wenyi*, *Wenxue Yuebao*, and *Qianshao* (later renamed *Wenxue Dao-bao*)—which served as central platforms for both theoretical discourse and creative production. During this period, other leftist cultural organizations, such as the Left-Wing Drama League and the Left-Wing Artists’ League, also emerged, collectively forming a leftist cultural front centered on revolutionary literature, drama, and visual arts. The movement sought to unify leftist forces within the literary and intellectual spheres, employing artistic practice to propagate revolutionary ideas, critique the existing social order, and mobilize public participation in revolutionary struggle.

In the early 1920s, Russian avant-garde art appeared in Chinese-language texts primarily as part of broader discussions on modern art, emphasizing abstraction and spiritual experimentation rather than operational systems. Tatlin and his *Monument to the Third International* were repeatedly invoked as emblematic references to the Soviet artistic innovation. Works such as Feng Zikai’s *History of Western Art* (1928) and translated surveys like *An Overview of New Soviet Art* (1930) introduced these images and ideas to Chinese audiences. Through their recurrent appearance across art history, architectural commentary, and cultural journalism, these motifs gradually stabilized as recognizable visual markers of Constructivism. Despite this increasing visibility, Constructivism at this stage remained largely symbolic and discursive, lacking clear operational form within artistic practice.

In the 1930s, Lu Xun played a pivotal role in transforming Constructivist principles from symbolic references into operational visual strategies. As a writer, translator, and designer, he compiled and published *New Russian Prints* (1930) and *Yinyu Collection* (1934), which included woodcuts by several Soviet printmakers, some of

¹⁴ Bošković and Teref, *Zenithism (1921–1927)*, 95.

¹⁵ Zhongguo Zuoyi Zuoia Lianmeng, 中国左翼作家联盟, “中国左翼作家联盟的理论纲领” [The theoretical program of the Chinese Left-Wing Writers’ League], 拓荒者 [*Pioneers*] 1, no. 3 (1930): 1129–32.

whom had studied or taught at VKhUTEMAS, the Moscow-based state art and technical school where Constructivist principles were systematically taught and applied in artistic practice. In the preface to *New Russian Prints*, Lu Xun distinguished “construction” from “composition”, emphasizing that Constructivism is “not in depiction, but in organization; not in creation in the aesthetic sense, but in structural building”.¹⁶ This definition clarified the meaning of “construction” as a structural principle in the Chinese context, so that Constructivism was no longer understood merely as a general expression of “new art”, but as a practical approach emphasizing relational organization.

In 1931, Lu Xun organized China’s first modern woodcut workshop in Shanghai, inviting Japanese art educator Uchiyama Kakichi to teach woodcut techniques. The workshop trained a generation of core practitioners and directly catalyzed the rise of China’s New Woodcut Movement. These initiatives provided the technical infrastructure through which modern graphic principles, including those associated with Constructivist visual logic, could be materialized in woodcut print culture.

Lu Xun’s engagement with Soviet and European graphic materials reflected a concern with how modern art could move beyond elite circles and become visually accessible to a wider public through woodcut, image, and publication. This concern extended beyond individual practice: his editorial and publishing projects were reinforced by exhibitions and international collaboration. In 1933, he organized the German-Russian and Russian-French Book Illustration Shows in Shanghai, exposing Chinese artists not only to Soviet graphic practice but also to broader European modernist book illustration and avant-garde visual languages. In 1936, he compiled *Soviet Prints*, based on a touring exhibition by the Soviet Society for Cultural Relations. Many featured artists, such as V. Favorsky, a former rector of VKhUTEMAS, embodied Constructivist principles of formal discipline, abstraction, and pedagogical clarity. The cover of *Yinyu Collection* (Figure 4), designed by Lu Xun himself, demonstrates this logic: its rectangular framing, red-black palette, and grid-like typography evoke Constructivist concerns with clarity, contrast, and modular organization. Through these editorial, educational, and exhibition networks, Constructivist visual principles gradually acquired operational presence within Chinese leftist woodcut culture.

Constructivist form in practice

Constructivist layout as spatial organization

Constructivist layout practice did not constitute a unified stylistic system. Instead, it was selectively integrated into the broader formation of Chinese left-wing publishing and Zenithist production through geometric construction, typographic embedding, and proportional contrast. In each context, these operations functioned as practical methods for structuring printed surfaces under material limitations and non-institutional production conditions.

¹⁶Lu Xun 鲁迅, “〈新俄画选〉小引” [Preface to *New Russian Prints*], in 鲁迅全集 [Complete Works of Lu Xun], vol. 7 (人民文学出版社, 2005), 362.

Two Chinese book covers—*Destruction* (Figure 5) and *Soviet Literary Debates* (Fig. 6)—illustrate this selective appropriation within the Chinese print context. The cover of *Destruction* is organized around a central diamond, with radiating triangular fields extending toward the page edges. Figurative imagery is entirely absent. Geometric elements dominate the surface, structuring it through spatial configuration rather than pictorial representation. The title characters are embedded within the central diamond, functioning as integral structural elements within the composition.

A related logic appears in *Soviet Literary Debates*, for which Lu Xun wrote a preface affirming the book's value for understanding Soviet literature. The vertically elongated “PLEKANOV” operates not simply as a textual heading but as a structural anchor for the composition. Dense red linear patterns occupy the left portion of the cover, serving as a visual anchor. Although these marks are not legible as characters, they evoke calligraphic rhythm within a Chinese visual context, generating an intermediate effect between abstract graphic texture and script-based visibility. On the right, the vertically arranged Chinese title is rendered in black type for legibility, standing in visual tension with the expansive red field. The composition juxtaposes typographic structure with rhythmic graphic density, organizing the page through contrast and alignment rather than narrative imagery.

Zenithist publishing employed comparable strategies in a more explicit geometric register. The front cover of Ljubomir Micić's *Antievropa* (Figure 7) positions a rising black triangular mass against a red circular field. The composition achieves visual emphasis through proportional contrast and directional force, without relying on representational imagery. The title is integrated into this geometric configuration, participating in the compositional balance and reinforcing spatial primacy. Its bilingual presentation—ANTIEUROPE in Latin script and Антиевропа in Cyrillic—creates a layered reading experience, situating the publication within both an international avant-garde circuit and a South Slavic linguistic context.

The back cover of *Antievropa* (Figure 8) demonstrates how layout strategies extend beyond expressive composition into an information organization. Bibliographic data and publication chronology are arranged in aligned typographic blocks and rhythmic horizontal bars, transforming the page into a visual grid that structures reading through spacing, repetition, and alignment. Here, layout functions as a practical mechanism to manage informational density, rather than as mere decorative display.

Across both Chinese and Yugoslav examples, constructivist layout operates as a transferable method of visual organization, rather than a fixed aesthetic doctrine. Both contexts employ a chromatic palette dominated by red and black. Geometric construction replaces representational imagery, typography becomes spatially embedded, and compositional coherence is achieved through proportional contrast and alignment. These cases demonstrate how selectively extracted constructivist operations enabled designers to reorganize printed surfaces into structured visual fields capable of sustaining communication within non-institutional publishing contexts.

From individual expression to collective visual arrangement

If constructivist layout reorganizes the printed surface as a spatial system, it also transforms the perceptual logic through which that system is experienced. Within this organizational framework, constructivist discourse and practice displaced personal expression by rejecting art as a vehicle of individual style and subjective aesthetic experience. As Aleksei Gan, a Russian Constructivist theorist, argued in *Constructivism* (1922), “all so-called art is permeated with the most reactionary idealism, a product of extreme individualism.”¹⁷ This individualism pushes art toward unnecessary experiments in refining subjective beauty.

Gan rejected art understood as individualized, subjective expression and instead reconceived visual practice as an organized mode of production. He called for the task “to formulate new phenomena of artistic labor within the new historic environment,”¹⁸ redefining artistic activity as “intellectual-material production” rather than expressive creation.¹⁹ Under this formulation, form no longer functions as a carrier of personal emotion or stylistic identity but operates as a structured method grounded in organization and construction. Meaning is thus no longer anchored in an individual artistic idiom, but reorganized through compositional logic—prioritizing relational structure, functional alignment, and systemic coherence over personal gesture.

This tendency can be observed in the Chinese left-wing visual practice of the early 1930s, particularly in the woodcut production. In the *Mu Ling Woodcut Album* (Figure 9), figures are not treated as individualized subjects but rendered through repeated, simplified bodily forms. Facial features are reduced, gestures standardized, and bodies aligned along shared axes. Rather than privileging singular identity, the image organizes figures as compositional units. These units are coordinated through rhythm, repetition, and directional alignment, subordinating individual presence to the overall visual structure.

This structural absorption of the figure is articulated more forcefully in *Massacre* (Figure 10). Here, bodies are arranged in dense alignment, their positions determined by directional forces within the composition rather than by narrative sequencing or expressive emphasis. Gestures converge, orientations repeat, and distinctions between individual bodies become visually unstable. The image does not construct meaning through individualized scenes of violence or victimhood; instead, bodies function as elements within a coherent spatial system. Corpse-like forms interrupt alignment not as individualized tragedies, but as structural breaks. These breaks intensify the compositional tension of the overall spatial system. In this operation, the figure no longer signifies primarily as an expressive subject but participates as a component within an organized visual field.

¹⁷ John E. Bowlt, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*, rev. and enl. ed. (Thames and Hudson, 1988), 221.

¹⁸ Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 221.

¹⁹ Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 225.

A comparable process unfolds in Yugoslav Zenithist publishing, though it operates through language rather than figuration. In visual poetry published in *Zenit* (Figure 11), words are treated not as carriers of authorial voice or linear semantic continuity but as graphic units distributed across the page. Linear reading is disrupted by spatial dispersion, shifts in scale, and non-hierarchical alignment. Language enters the domain of visual perception. Words are geometrized, semantics are subordinated to layout and reading proceeds as a process of spatial traversal. Meaning tends to emerge through visual rhythm and relational positioning rather than through syntactic progression.

In these compositions, the primacy of authorship as a source of meaning is weakened by layout. The poetic voice does not cohere around a stable speaking subject; instead, it is dispersed within a spatial system that organizes perception through contrast, repetition, and interval. Words no longer function primarily as expressions of interiority but as elements within a visual arrangement. As in the Chinese woodcuts, individual expression is overridden by compositional force.

Taken together, these practices reveal consistent operational logic across media. Figures are absorbed into alignment; language is spatialized; meaning is generated through relational structure rather than individual expression. Through these formal operations, visual organization no longer relies on an individual subject as the exclusive anchor of meaning. Perception can therefore be understood as relational rather than individual-centered, structured by formal relations rather than expressive intent.

Under such conditions, the constructivist form establishes a shared perceptual arrangement—one that viewers or readers can enter without anchoring perception in a single subjective viewpoint. In this sense, constructivism does not become collective primarily by addressing a mass audience or by explicitly invoking social unity. Rather, it achieves collectivity at the level of perceptual structure by weakening individual-centered representation and reorganizing perception as a shared structural field. Once form is detached from individual expression, it can be reorganized across publishing practices and transferred across different media environments and cultural contexts.

From avant-garde form to communication technology

The preceding analyses show that the constructivist form was mobilized in the Chinese left-wing visual practice and Yugoslav Zenithist publishing not as a stable style but as visual operations that could be reconfigured under different print-cultural conditions. In the Chinese materials, these operations were directed toward book design, woodcut imagery, and public visual legibility; in the Zenithist publishing, toward editorial experimentation, bilingual typography, and the spatial reorganization of language within an international avant-garde periodical network. These divergent uses nevertheless point to a shared transformation: detached from the institutional frameworks that had sustained the Soviet Constructivism, constructivist visual logic

no longer functioned as a systemic artistic program but became a practical means of organizing printed perception under constrained publishing conditions.

This shift cannot be adequately explained through stylistic influence or ideological continuity. Rather, it is more accurately understood as a process of operational compression, through which a broader avant-garde project was condensed into transferable visual procedures. What remained operative were its internal formal principles: the prioritization of structural relations over representational depiction, the activation of perception through contrast and directional composition, and the integration of text and image into unified visual fields. This compression process is the central mechanism examined in this article.

Within publishing contexts shaped by limited resources and unstable circulation, these principles were translated into functional devices. Axial organization, geometric opposition, and typographic hierarchy came to operate less as expressions of artistic theory than as means of organizing attention, guiding reading patterns, and producing immediate perceptual impact. Understood in this operational sense, the constructivist form functioned as a rudimentary communication technology: its “technology” lay in repeatable visual procedures that converted formal organization into communicative efficiency in print.

This shift depended on the disassembly of constructivism as a systemic artistic project. In its original Soviet articulation, constructivism relied on a dense network of educational institutions, production facilities, exhibitions, and industrially oriented design initiatives. Once constructivist practices moved into extra-institutional publishing environments, this systemic coherence dissolved. What persisted instead were discrete operational elements—diagonals, modular layouts, contrasting color blocks, typographic fragmentation, and the spatial integration of image and text—which could be selectively extracted and recombined without adherence to a unified doctrinal framework.

This fragmentation increased rather than diminished constructivism’s adaptability. Reduced to operational units, constructivist techniques became deployable across diverse publishing formats, from journal layouts to book covers and woodcut compositions. Their effectiveness depended less on theoretical fidelity than on their capacity to structure perception under communicative pressure. In both Chinese and Zenithist contexts, constructivist form functioned less as a stylistic marker than as a repertoire of visual tools.

The persistence of these operations was reinforced by the material conditions of reproducible media. Printed formats impose standardized dimensions, limited chromatic range, mechanical reproduction, and repeated circulation. Within such constraints, visual strategies grounded in structural clarity rather than material refinement gain particular advantage. Constructivist compositions, relying on geometric simplification, spatial contrast, and typographic emphasis, retained legibility across multiple reproductions while minimizing dependence on specialized craftsmanship. Through repeated application, these forms stabilized within print culture, circulating

independently of the industrial and institutional structures that originally supported their development.

The parallel emergence of similar visual strategies in Chinese left-wing and Zenithist publishing does not necessarily indicate direct transmission. Rather, it reflects the activation of comparable formal logics under historically specific pressures. In both contexts, publishing operated under censorship, restricted circulation, and material scarcity—conditions that rendered the organizational capacity of constructivist form particularly visible. These pressures revealed, rather than constrained, the operational potential of the constructivist visual logic.

Through this process, the constructivist form became detached from the avant-garde experimentation and revolutionary production systems and was reorganized as a mode of visual communication embedded in the everyday publishing practice. This reorganization did not produce a new stylistic domain; instead, it clarified constructivism's underlying operational logic: the capacity to structure perception through spatial relations, typographic integration, and formal economy.

Once this operational logic was made explicit through concrete publishing practices, constructivist form became available for redeployment across a broad spectrum of visual cultures, including commercial graphic design and postwar visual communication. In this reconfigured state, constructivist form functioned as a transferable communication technology—not because the original historical pressures were reproduced, but because the formal mechanisms consolidated under those pressures proved capable of operating beyond them, structuring perception and condensing meaning across heterogeneous media environments.

Conclusion

Within the context of aesthetic dialogue between China and the Yugoslav cultural sphere, this study argues that constructivist form functioned less as a transmitted stylistic model and more as a flexible visual resource that could be reactivated under distinct historical pressures. By approaching constructivism as a set of formal operations rather than a coherent artistic doctrine, the analysis demonstrates how geometric organization, typographic integration, and spatial structuring could be selectively extracted and recomposed within constrained publishing environments. Through this process of operational compression, constructivist visual logic no longer operated as a unified avant-garde program but as a repertoire of practical visual procedures capable of organizing attention and structuring perception across different media conditions. From this perspective, the comparison between the Chinese left-wing print culture and the Yugoslav Zenithist publishing highlights how avant-garde visual form could continue to function beyond the institutional frameworks that originally sustained it.

By focusing on formal and spatial operations in the domain of printed visual materials, this article clarifies how constructivist visual organization shaped possible modes of looking and reading. Questions of readership and spectatorship therefore

emerge at the level of the printed page itself: printed layouts did not simply present visual forms, but directed attention, structured reading, and organized visual emphasis. Future research could extend this inquiry by examining how such strategies were interpreted through circulation, criticism, and reader response.



Figure 1. El Lissitzky, Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1919. Lithographic poster. Wikimedia Commons; Original Source: Library of Congress.



Figure 2. Table of contents page, Zenit, issues # 17–18 (September–October 1922), “New Russian Art” issue. Source: Library of Congress, World Digital Library.



Figure 3. “Collaborators of Zenit 1921–1926,” Zenit, issue # 43 (February 1926). Source: Library of Congress, World Digital Library.



Figure 4. Cover of *Yinyu ji* (引玉集), edited and designed by Lu Xun, 1934.
Courtesy of Shanghai Lu Xun Memorial Hall.



Figure 5. Cover of Destruction (毁灭), 1931. Courtesy of Lu Xun Library (luxunlib.com).

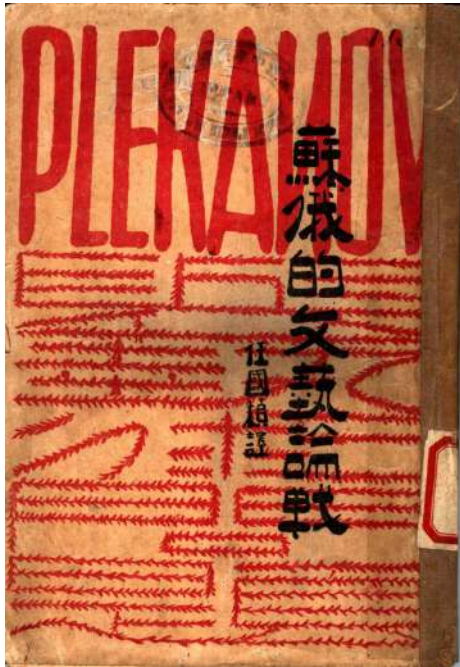


Figure 6. Cover of *Soviet Literary Debates* (苏俄的文艺论战), 1927. Source: Wikimedia Commons; original source record: CADAL no. 07015833, Fudan University. Public domain.

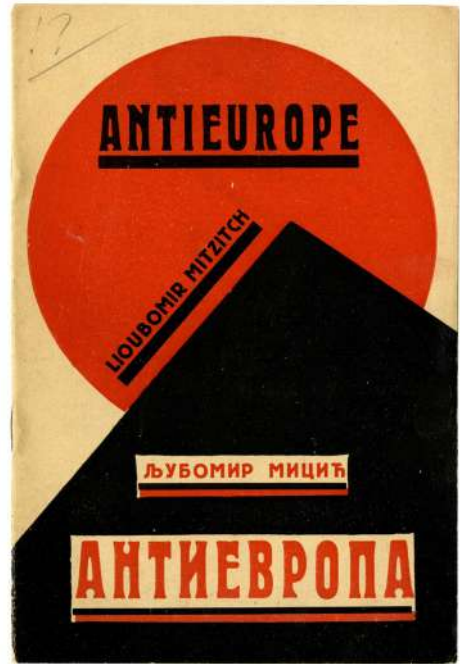


Figure 7. Front cover of Ljubomir Micić, *Antievropa*, 1926. Courtesy of Gallery RIMA.



Figure 8. Back cover of Ljubomir Micić, *Antievropa*, 1926. Courtesy of Gallery RIMA.



Figure 9. Cover of Mu Ling Woodcut Album (木铃木刻集), edited by the Mu Ling Woodcut Society, 1933. Courtesy of Shanghai Lu Xun Memorial Hall.



Figure 10. Chen Tiegeng (陈铁耕), Massacre (屠杀), Chinese woodcut print, 1933. Source: National Art Museum of China.

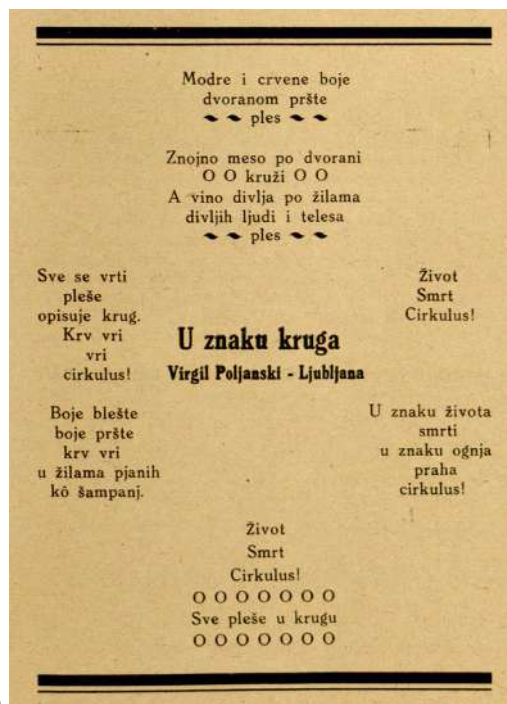


Figure 11. Virgil Poljanski (Branko Ve Poljanski), “U znaku kruga” (Under the Sign of the Circle), *Zenit*, issue # 1 (February 1921). Source: Library of Congress, World Digital Library.

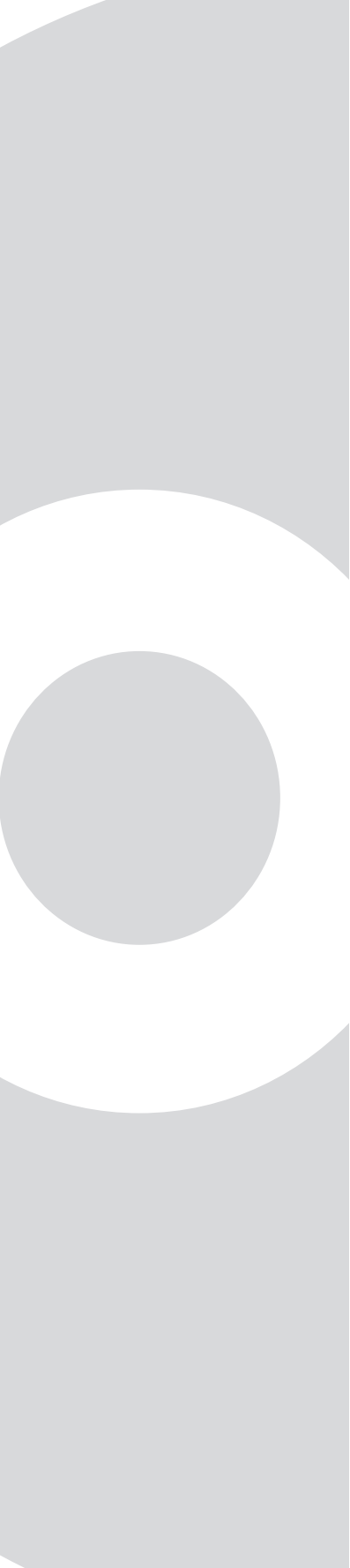
References

- Bošković, Aleksandar, and Steven Teref, eds. *Zenithism (1921–1927): A Yugoslav Avant-Garde Anthology*. Academic Studies Press, 2022.
- Bowlit, John E., ed. and trans. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934*. Rev. and enl. ed. Thames and Hudson, 1988.
- Brooker, Peter, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, eds. *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Volume III: Europe 1880–1940*. Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity Across Time*. Columbia University Press, 2015.
- Gough, Maria. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. University of California Press, 2005.
- Khan-Magomedov, Sergey. *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*. MIT Press, 1987.
- Lissitzky, El, and Ilya Ehrenburg. “The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End.” In *The Tradition of Constructivism*, edited by Stephen Bann, 55–56. Thames and Hudson, 1974.
- Lu Xun 鲁迅. “〈新俄画选〉小引” [Preface to New Russian Prints]. In *鲁迅全集* [Complete Works of Lu Xun], vol. 7, 362. 人民文学出版社, 2005.
- Micić, Ljubomir. “Zenithism as the Balkan Totalizer of New Life and New Art.” In *Zenithism (1921–1927): A Yugoslav Avant-Garde Anthology*, edited by Aleksandar Bošković and Steven Teref, 109–13. Academic Studies Press, 2022.
- Mitter, Partha. “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery.” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 531–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2008.10786408>.
- Stepanova, Varvara. “Construction.” In *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, edited by Alexander Lavrent'ev, translated by John E. Bowlit, 172–75. MIT Press, 1988.
- Subotić, Irina. “Avant-Garde Tendencies in Yugoslavia.” *Art Journal* 49, 1 (1990): 21–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1990.10792663>.
- Zhongguo Zuoyi Zuoia Lianmeng. 中国左翼作家联盟. “中国左翼作家联盟的理论纲领” [The theoretical program of the Chinese Left-Wing Writers' League]. *拓荒者* [*Pioneers*] 1, 3 (1930): 1129–32.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper



Tamara Koneska

Faculty of Architecture, University of Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5295-4903>

Socialist and Modernist Ideology in the Synthesis of Yugoslav Architecture and Art—The Case of *Kockica*

Abstract: The former Building of Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb, now housing the Ministries of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, popularly known as *Kockica*, is analyzed as a case in which the synthesis of architecture and art became an aesthetic and spatial expression of socialist modernism in Yugoslavia. Designed by Ivan Vitić between 1961 and 1968, *Kockica* emerged within a broader cultural and political context shaped by self-managing socialism, cultural modernization, and the search for a modern representative language distinct from both the Soviet socialist realism and Western capitalist iconography. The article combines historical-interpretive analysis with an ideologically critical reading of institutional space, artistic commissions and spatial experience, reflecting the evolving social and ideological paradigms that shaped Yugoslav architecture and cultural policy during the 1960s. Its main hypothesis is that the integration of architecture, visual and applied arts, design and sculpture in *Kockica* should not be understood as decorative enrichment but as a regulatory and representational apparatus through which the ideology of socialist modernization was articulated spatially and sensorially. Special attention is given to the artworks integrated into the interior, regarded as constitutive elements of a visual language of modernity, progress, and cultural emancipation. *Kockica* appears not merely as a modernist administrative building but as a cultural and ideological artefact in which architecture and art function as a unified system of representation, while its meanings continue to be transformed in the post-Yugoslav context.

Keywords: ideology; synthesis of art and architecture; socialist modernism; *Kockica*; Zagreb; Yugoslavia.

Introduction

During the 1950s and 1960s in socialist Yugoslavia, architecture and art became central to the broader project of state modernization and to the formation of a recognizable visual identity for its society. Following the adoption of the Informbiro Resolution in 1948 and the development of self-managing socialism, Yugoslavia's cultural policy was directed toward affirming a contemporary artistic language, technological innovations, and modernist spatial and architectural ideas to articulate the ideas of progress, emancipation, and the rational organization of socialist society. Modernism

in Yugoslavia should not be understood solely as an architectural style or as the formal reception of the International style but rather as a broader cultural and political process through which the state sought to distinguish itself from both the Soviet socialist realism and Western capitalist iconography.¹ In this process, art gained prominence as a vital aspect of social life, a space where political ideas were communicated through aesthetically transformed forms, thereby influencing the symbolic economy of the socialist state. The architecture of new public institutions ceased to be merely a neutral technical and bureaucratic framework and became a symbolic apparatus that silently and indirectly encoded the state's political, social, and ideological values.

Within this evolving spatial context, one of the most significant examples of Yugoslav modernist architecture from the 1960s appeared: the former Building of the Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb, now housing the Ministries of the Government of the Republic of Croatia popularly known as *Kockica*, designed by architect Ivan Vitić following the 1961 competition. The architecture of the building unites the formal discipline of modernist expression, constructive clarity, and technical innovations, and a complex program of original artworks integrated into the interior. Its strictly modulated façade grid, aluminum brise-soleils, and clear organization of public, semi-public, and administrative zones established an aesthetic and functional model of socialist modernism.² *Kockica* is not merely an administrative building; it is a carefully composed spatial apparatus that visually articulates a new image of the socialist state: rational, technologically advanced, culturally emancipated, and oriented towards modernity.

The artworks integrated into the interior of *Kockica*, including the murals by Edo Murtić and Zlatko Prica, the relief and sculptural works by Stevan Luketić, the tapestries of Jagoda Buić, the sculptures of Dušan Džamonja, and Raul Goldoni's glass compositions, are not approached as decorative features but as essential parts of the aesthetic and ideological narrative of the space. As Patricia Počanić notes, commissions and acquisitions of artworks for public institutions in Croatia during the 1950s and 1960s were part of a systematically organized cultural policy mechanism, in which the selection of artists was based on a combination of aesthetic criteria, modernist innovations, and political suitability.³ Artists involved in the interior artworks of *Kockica* were affiliated with or influenced by the postwar modernist avant-garde EXAT 51 and the New Tendencies movement, key institutions in the art scene, and they also carried cultural legitimacy through biographies linked to the partisan experience or institutional roles. This demonstrates that the synthesis of art and architecture served a dual cultural-political purpose: aesthetic and ideological. Consequently, the selection of artworks and artists was not solely aesthetic but also politically motivated, aligning with the cultural policy mechanisms behind *Kockica*, which represent

¹ Vladimir Kulić et al., *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Jovis Verlag, 2012), 32–33.

² Maroje Mrduljaš, "Kockica," *Arhitektura* 54, no. 217 (2005): 140–42.

³ Patricia Počanić, "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela za interijere javnih institucija u Hrvatskoj 1950-ih i 1960-ih," *Peristil* 62 (2019): 179–201.

a political economy of modernism.⁴ The applied aesthetic standards reflect not only the artistic taste of the period but also the ideological aspirations of the state.

Kockica is analyzed not only as an architectural work, but also as a complex cultural-political artefact in which modernist aesthetics, state cultural policy, and the ideology of socialist development intertwine, a system of representation in which architecture becomes an apparatus of ideological mediation and the sensory presentation of power. The central research question is how the synthesis of architecture, visual and applied arts, design, and sculpture in *Kockica* operated as a spatial form of ideological representation within the Yugoslav socialist context. The main hypothesis is that the synthesis of art and architecture in this building represents a visual and spatial manifestation of the ideology of socialist modernization, in which aesthetic and political dimensions do not appear as separate spheres, but as mutually conditioned layers of a single ideological project. The analysis of such a space contributes to understanding how socialist Yugoslavia used art and architecture as instruments of cultural emancipation, political identity, and symbolic legitimation.

Theoretical framework: architecture, state, and party

In contemporary theory of architecture and space, the building is not read as a neutral material structure or merely a technical response to functional needs, but as an active agent in the production of social relations, political meanings, and regimes of perception. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argues that space is not naturally given, but produced through complex interactions between economic, political, and cultural practices.⁵ Space is constituted through the dialectical relation of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, with architecture playing a key role in stabilizing and naturalizing dominant social orders.⁶ This triad of space views architecture as a normative system that organizes everyday practices, controls movement and the use of space, and produces patterns of behavior perceived as natural and self-evident. This perspective allows for the interpretation of public and institutional buildings in socialist Yugoslavia as spatial mechanisms of political representation. Their role extended beyond administration, shaping the state's experience as a rational and technologically advanced system. From this theoretical perspective, *Kockica* can be understood as a spatial apparatus of political rationality, in which institutional order is produced through architectural organization, movement, and visibility.

Michel Foucault's concept of the *dispositif* further deepens this theoretical understanding. The *dispositif*, as a heterogeneous assemblage of architectural forms, institutions, discourses, and normative mechanisms, enables space to be viewed as a technology of power that governs the subject's perception, movement, and behavior.⁷

⁴ Ljiljana Kolečnik, "Prilozi interpretaciji hrvatske umjetnosti 50-ih godina. Prikaz formativne faze odnosa moderne umjetnosti i socijalističke države," *Radovi Instituta povijesti umjetnosti* 29 (2005): 307–310.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1991), 26–34.

⁶ Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 38–42.

⁷ Mišel Fuko, *Moć/Znanje: Odabrani spisi i razgovori 1972–1977* (Mediterranean Publishing, 2012), 64–65.

For Foucault, power operates not mainly repressively but productively: it organizes the field of possible actions, shapes regimes of visibility, and directs bodily practices. Architecture does not serve as a symbolic illustration of power but as its material condition, making it possible to view the interior of *Kockica* through the concept of *dispositif* as spatial arrangements that regulate movement, visibility, and hierarchies, thereby producing specific regimes of behavior.

Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses further illuminates architecture as a form of political practice. Ideology is reproduced not only through repressive means, but through institutions that operate in everyday life, shaping subjects who recognize themselves within the existing social order. In this sense, the architecture of institutions can be viewed as a significant material carrier of ideological influence and interpellation.⁸ Spatial configurations not only organize movement and spatial use but also shape how individuals relate to institutions and their symbolic authority. In the case of *Kockica*, the party and the state apparatus were not only housed within architecture but also represented and mediated through it. Architecture, artworks, materials, and spatial sequences formed a coordinated space in which the ideology of socialist modernization became perceptible as an institutional order.

By integrating Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, Foucault's analysis of the *dispositif*, and Althusser's concept of ideological apparatuses, public and institutional buildings such as *Kockica* are not merely sites of administrative and bureaucratic work, but rather spatial apparatuses through which the political rationality of socialist Yugoslavia is produced and sustained. Architecture, therefore, becomes the primary medium through which ideology is not merely communicated but actively enacted in the everyday experience of space.

Synthesis of art and architecture: idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*

The synthesis of art and architecture in socialist Yugoslavia developed as a key instrument of cultural policy in the 1950s and 1960s, especially in the design of public buildings. This process cannot be understood as a decorative enrichment of architectural space, but as the conscious establishment of an aesthetic, spatial, and symbolic system in which art becomes a constitutive element of the state's political representation. The integration of original artworks into the architecture of public institutions enabled the production of a coherent cultural framework in which the ideas of modernity, rationality, and social progress were not only represented but perceptually and sensorially embedded in the space.

The concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, therefore, requires a specific modernist re-interpretation. Its broader genealogy includes Bauhaus debates on the integration of art, craft, design and architecture, as well as Walter Gropius's formulation of total architecture. However, in the Yugoslav context, synthesis did not function as a universal model of aesthetic unity. Rather, it was rearticulated within the specific conditions of

⁸ Luj Altiser, *Ideologija i državni ideološki aparati: beleške za istraživanje* (Karpos, 2009), 65–70.

socialist cultural policy, self-management, and the need to construct a new modern language and image of social emancipation. In contemporary art theory, Miško Šuvaković argues that *Gesamtkunstwerk* should not be understood as a utopian totality but rather a regulated relationship between artistic practices and social institutions, in which aesthetics operates within clearly defined cultural and political frameworks.⁹ Architecture, in this sense, does not appear as a neutral background for art, but as the spatial condition through which different artistic practices become part of a broader institutional order.

The Yugoslav model of the synthesis of art and architecture was strongly shaped by the EXAT 51 group, whose 1951 manifesto advocated abolishing hierarchical boundaries among architecture, painting, sculpture, and design. Denegri notes that the EXAT program was not exclusively an aesthetic experiment but a politically relevant platform that affirmed abstraction as the visual language of a contemporary, emancipated, and internationally oriented society.¹⁰ Within this framework, abstract art was legitimized as an appropriate form of expression for a socialist state aiming for modernity, as well as for promoting cultural distinction from both the Eastern bloc and the West. Abstraction did not withdraw from social reality; rather, it became one of the ways in which the relationship between artistic autonomy, modernization, and political representation could be negotiated. Yugoslav debates on synthesis were therefore not limited to the cooperation of separate artistic disciplines. They concerned the possibility of producing a different spatial and social order through the integration of architecture, visual arts, design, and urban thinking. This is particularly visible in Richter's understanding of synthesis, where the problem is not the additive inclusion of artworks in architectural space, but the production of an integrated spatial situation. In this sense, synthesis becomes both an artistic and ideological question: it proposes a model of space in which visual form, social organization, and modern life are mutually conditioned.¹¹

This distinction is important for the analysis of *Kockica*. The artworks integrated into its interior should not be read as later additions to an already completed architectural structure, but as elements that participate in the production of institutional space. The realization of this synthesis was supported institutionally through a system of art commissions and acquisitions for public buildings. Patricia Počanić analyses the processes of commissioning artworks in Croatia during the 1950s and 1960s as a component of a systematically organized cultural policy mechanism where aesthetic criteria were intertwined with ideological acceptability and the international visibility

⁹ Miško Šuvaković, "Umjetnost i ideologija," in *Umjetnost i ideologija: pedesete u podijeljenoj Europi*, ed. Ljiljana Kolečnik (Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2004), 92–93.

¹⁰ Ješa Denegri, "Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, eds. Dubravka Đurić and Miško Šuvaković (MIT Press, 2003), 178–83.

¹¹ For Yugoslav debates on synthesis, see Branko Petrović, "Hoćemo li sintezu ili kompartmentalizam?," *Čovjek i prostor* 2, no. 34 (1955): 4–5; Tomislav Premerl, "Prostor i likovna sinteza," *Čovjek i prostor* 12, no. 145 (1965): 3, 8; and Vjenceslav Richter, *Sinturbanizam* (Mladost, 1964).

of artistic expression.¹² In this sense, art in public institutions does not operate independently but as part of a broader apparatus of political and cultural representation where artistic expression is employed to stabilize the modern socialist state. Jacques Rancière's theory of the distribution of the sensible helps to understand aesthetics as a political space that defines what is visible, perceptible, and legitimate within institutional environments.¹³ From this perspective, the synthesis of art and architecture in *Kockica* functions not as an illustration of political ideology but as its spatial and sensory expression. Aesthetic forms here generate political effects precisely because of their perceived autonomy and the absence of explicit propaganda, thereby shifting ideological meaning from the realm of narrative to spatial and perceptual experience.¹⁴

Case study: *Kockica* between ideology and memory

The Building of Socio-Political Organizations in Zagreb emerged at a time when architecture in socialist Yugoslavia became a key medium of political rationality. In the context of consolidating self-managing socialism and Yugoslavia's position between East and West, *Kockica* does not appear as a neutral administrative building but as a spatial apparatus for representing political ideology. This configuration can be understood more clearly in the context of Yugoslav "*unfinished modernisations*"¹⁵: here, modernisation is not merely an aesthetic project but also a pragmatic infrastructure for governance, development, and international positioning.¹⁶ Instead of relying on an imposing language of power, *Kockica* belongs to a modernist paradigm in which authority is stabilized through forms that appear rational, functional, and socially legible.¹⁷ Vitić's conception of modern representativeness is based on a conscious rejection of traditional patterns of political monumentality. Abstract geometry, the strict modulation of the façade, constructive clarity, and the organization of public, semi-public, and administrative zones produce a rationalized but not spectacular space of power.¹⁸ *Kockica* is thus a paradigmatic example of a 'cold' representation of ideology, in which political power and ideology are not explicitly demonstrated but are normalized through the day-to-day functioning of institutional space. Situated within a zone of intense postwar development in Zagreb, it is integrated into a network of traffic routes and urban flows, without symbolic separation from the city. This form of integration allows institutional power and ideology not to be experienced as

¹² Počanić, "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela," 185–90.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (Continuum, 2004), 56–60.

¹⁴ Šuvaković, "Umjetnost i ideologija," 92–93.

¹⁵ Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić, "Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism," in *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism: Architecture and Urban Planning in the Former Yugoslavia and the Successor States*, ed. Maroje Mrduljaš and Vladimir Kulić (Croatian Architects' Association, 2012), 6–7.

¹⁶ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 138.

¹⁷ Vladimir Kulić, "The Scope of Socialist Modernism: Architecture and State Representation in Postwar Yugoslavia," in *Sanctioning Modernism*, ed. Vladimir Kulić et al. (University of Texas Press, 2014), 37–45.

¹⁸ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 142–44.

externally imposed but as a natural part of the everyday urban life. Political authority, therefore, is manifested not through distance and separation, but through a constant, yet unobtrusive, presence in the city space.

If the architecture of *Kockica* establishes the rational framework of socialist ideology, the interior is the space where that rationality is translated into sensory experience. The integration of artworks into the building's interior functions not only as decoration but also as a crucial element of a spatial system that shapes a specific regime of perception, movement, and institutional symbolism. In this context, the interior can be viewed as an ideological landscape where political ideology and power are not merely conveyed but experienced; where experience pertains not to an individual psychological state but to a publicly created atmosphere of institutional seriousness and control. The works of art within the interior demonstrate a pragmatic approach to postwar integration of architecture, design, and visual arts in municipal and republican commissions. Consequently, the interior was designed as an extension of the state discourse, not through slogans or iconography, but as a coordinated system of materials, light, color, and tactility.¹⁹ The spatial dramaturgy of the interior relies on carefully structured sequences of entry, movement, and stopping. Halls, corridors, and formal rooms are designed to evoke a sense of stability, control, and institutional seriousness. The choice of materials—stone, wood, metal, textile, and glass—fosters this effect not through decoration, but through the weight, durability, and tactile authority of surfaces. The materiality of space acts as a sensory reflection of political stability and continuity, in line with the modernist discourse of rationality and functionality. Simultaneously, interior materials also serve a pedagogical function: guiding movement, defining points for stopping and passage, and disciplining the user's body before any content is explicitly communicated.²⁰

The involvement of established artists and their works: Jagoda Buić, Dušan Džamonja, Raul Goldoni, Stevan Luketić, Edo Murtić, and Zlatko Prica, is part of a broader strategy in which abstract expression confirms the official stance on the freedom of artistic creation within an institution of the highest political significance. In this context, abstraction does not serve as an escape from politics, but as an institutionally approved language of modernity through which both cultural policy and the very system of power are legitimized.²¹ Murtić's interventions in enamel and mosaic are spread across several locations: the fountain on the plateau, the mosaic in the entrance vestibule, and the painted ceiling of the restaurant. They do not disrupt the functionalist ambiance but channel it through controlled chromatic energy. In the context of *Kockica*, such liveliness does not suggest privacy but rather indicates the stability of a system that permits intense colors without losing authority. Zlatko Prica's wall compositions act as a specific type of abstract wall—not pictures viewed from a distance but surfaces that alter the experience of movement along the architectural

¹⁹ Patricia Počanić, "Između ideje i realizacije: umjetnička djela u interijeru Kockice," *Život umjetnosti* 110 (2022): 126–27.

²⁰ Mrduljaš, "Kockica," 142–44.

²¹ Počanić, "Između ideje i realizacije," 110–25.

envelope. Stevan Luketić's reliefs in stainless steel and brass employ monumentality and reflection, shifting the 'weight' of ideology from iconography to the tactile and optical properties of material. Even when the material is 'heavy,' the relief treatment and the rhythm of modulation produce a dynamic stability within space. Dušan Džamonja's sculptural signature remains recognizable but is refracted through the architectural and spatial framework of collaboration: technical, constructive, and spatial requirements influence the form, without compromising the artist's consistency. Jagoda Buić's tapestry achieves monumentality through textile means: approximately seven meters high, predominantly red, and created by the vertical superposition of forms, producing an abstract 'totem' that imparts the interior with a sense of height without relying on vertical architectural pathos.

The key characteristic of this synthesis is its spatial integration where artworks are not treated as autonomous objects placed in space but as elements that actively participate in shaping it. Their positioning relative to architectural axes, communication routes, and gathering points influences the rhythm of movement and the hierarchy of space.²² The fusion of art and architecture in *Kockica* does not create spectacle but stabilizes the sensory experience of institutional space, where mosaic, enamel, metal, textile, glass, and design operate as a coordinated system. Abstract art, due to its lack of narrative iconography, becomes an effective language of institutional modernity: its formal apoliticality does not mean it lacks ideology; on the contrary, ideology shifts from the realm of discourse to that of sensory experience.²³

Following the breakup of Yugoslavia and the transformation of its political system, *Kockica* entered a new phase of existence in which its symbolic significance underwent a profound transformation. The building no longer serves as a central symbol of political representation but as part of the administrative and bureaucratic infrastructure of the modern state. This change does not remove the ideological layers embedded in the architecture and its interior but makes them layered and often conflicting: what was once designed as an obvious framework of legitimacy now becomes a subject of negotiation, amnesia, selective memory, and cultural reinterpretation.

In the contemporary context, *Kockica* functions as an architectural palimpsest. Spatial arrangements, materials, and artworks that once symbolized institutional legitimacy are now interpreted from a distance, through experiences of transition, depoliticization, and routine institutional practices. Artworks that were once active elements of representation now serve as archival traces of the political and aesthetic paradigms of socialist modernism. Their abstract forms allow reinterpretation and detachment but also raise questions about the contemporary understanding and social significance of such heritage. Furthermore, the fact that *Kockica* was one of the buildings of greatest political importance in Croatia makes its interior particularly sensitive: what was once justified as the freedom of artistic expression is now often viewed either as neutralized aesthetics or as burdened heritage, depending on the observer's ideological stance. This transformation highlights the broader issue of the

²² Sanja Horvatinčić, "Pogled iznutra o (ne)mogućoj sintezi Kockice," *ORIS* 110 (2018): 134–48.

²³ Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*, 56–60.

relationship to modernist heritage in the post-Yugoslav space. Architecture that once served as an apparatus of political rationality now becomes a site of negotiation between memory and forgetting, between aesthetic appreciation and ideological burden.²⁴ *Kockica* does not represent a fixed monument to the past but rather a dynamic field of interpretation in which history, institutional practice, and contemporary cultural discourses intertwine.

Concluding remarks: synthesis of architecture and art as mirror of ideology

The analysis of *Kockica* shows that the synthesis of architecture and art in socialist Yugoslavia was not just a secondary aesthetic phenomenon, but a key part of the process of cultural modernization and a symbolic display of political power. *Kockica* serves as a paradigmatic space in which architectural logic, artistic modernity, and the ideological goals of socialist progress do not merely coexist but are closely linked. Its significance lies not only in its status as an example of Yugoslav modernism, but also in its function as a spatial apparatus through which the ideology of socialist modernization was rendered perceptible.

Ivan Vitić's architectural language, grounded in modernist geometry, formal discipline, and the intentional absence of monumental iconography, enabled power to be naturalized through everyday spatial practice rather than displayed through spectacle. The works of Murtić, Prica, Luketić, Buić, Džamonja, and Goldoni do not serve as autonomous aesthetic objects; they are essential parts of the institutional framework. Their abstraction, materiality, and positioning within the interior produced a visual language that was simultaneously internationally legible and ideologically impactful. The political influence was achieved precisely through the seemingly apolitical nature of abstraction: ideology was shifted from the sphere of discourse into the realm of sensory experience, becoming part of perception, movement, and inhabitation.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the transformation of the political system, *Kockica* entered a new phase of existence. What was once designed as a self-evident framework of legitimacy became a subject of selective memory, negotiation, and critical reinterpretation. The building does not represent a stable monument to the past but a dynamic field of interpretation in which different temporal and ideological layers intertwine. *Kockica* thus demonstrates that the synthesis of art and architecture within the Yugoslav socialist context cannot be reduced to a question of style or aesthetic program. It represents a form of socialist aestheticism in which aesthetic coherence serves as the symbolic capital of a social project. In this sense, the building remains relevant not as a completed modernist artefact but as an open interpretive framework, a place where socialist ideology is not only represented but, through historical ruptures and contemporary critical readings, continuously transformed and re-examined.

²⁴ Tihana Hrastar and Mia Roth-Čerina, "Rooting Art-Based Interdisciplinary Practice," *Prostor* 31, no. 2 (2023): 182–86.

References

- Altiser, Luj. *Ideologija i državni ideološki aparati: beleške za istraživanje*. Karpos, 2009.
- Denegri, Ješa. "Inside or Outside 'Socialist Modernism'? Radical Views on the Yugoslav Art Scene." In *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991*, edited by Dubravka Đurić and Miško Šuvaković. MIT Press, 2003.
- Fuko, Mišel. *Moć/Znanje: Odabrani spisi i razgovori 1972–1977*. Mediteran Publishing, 2012.
- Horvatinčić, Sanja. "Pogled iznutra o (ne)mogućoj sintezi Kockice." *ORIS* 110 (2018): 134–48.
- Hrastar, Tihana, and Mia Roth-Čerina. "Rooting Art-Based Interdisciplinary Practice." *Prostor* 31, no. 2 (2023): 182–97. [https://doi.org/10.31522/p.31.2\(66\).4](https://doi.org/10.31522/p.31.2(66).4).
- Kolešnik, Ljiljana. "Prilozi interpretaciji hrvatske umjetnosti 50-ih godina. Prikaz formativne faze odnosa moderne umjetnosti i socijalističke države." *Radovi Instituta povijesti umjetnosti* 29 (2005): 307–315.
- Kolešnik, Ljiljana, ed. *Umjetnost i ideologija: pedesete u podijeljenoj Europi*. Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2004.
- Kulić, Vladimir, Maroje Mrduljaš, and Wolfgang Thaler. *Modernism In-Between: The Mediatory Architectures of Socialist Yugoslavia*. Jovis Verlag, 2012.
- Kulić, Vladimir. "The Scope of Socialist Modernism: Architecture and State Representation in Postwar Yugoslavia." In *Sanctioning Modernism*, edited by Vladimir Kulić et al. University of Texas Press, 2014.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991.
- Mrduljaš, Maroje, and Vladimir Kulić. eds. *Unfinished Modernisations: Between Utopia and Pragmatism*. UHA & Arkitekturskole Aarhus, 2012.
- Mrduljaš, Maroje. "Kockica." *Arhitektura* 54, no. 217 (2005): 137–50.
- Petrović, Branko. "Hoćemo li sintezu ili kompartmentalizam?" *Čovjek i prostor* 2, no. 34 (1955): 4–5.
- Počanić, Patricia. "Između ideje i realizacije: umjetnička djela u interijeru Kockice." *Život umjetnosti* 110 (2022): 106–29.
- Počanić, Patricia. "Narudžbe i otkupi umjetničkih djela za interijere javnih institucija u Hrvatskoj 1950-ih i 1960-ih." *Peristil* 62 (2019): 179–201.
- Premierl, Tomislav. "Prostor i likovna sinteza." *Čovjek i prostor* 12, no. 145 (1965): 3, 8.
- Ranciére, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Continuum, 2004.
- Richter, Vjenceslav. *Sinturbanizam*. Mladost, 1964.
- Šuvaković, Miško. "Umjetnost i ideologija." In *Umjetnost i ideologija: pedesete u podijeljenoj Europi*, edited by Ljiljana Kolešnik. Institut za povijest umjetnosti, 2004.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper

Ana Frangovska

National Gallery of the Republic of North Macedonia; Institute of Art History and Archaeology, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje, Republic of North Macedonia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8827-1771>

Contemporaneity, Media, and Meaning: A Comparative Study of Contemporary Artistic Practices in China and North Macedonia

Abstract: This research examines contemporary artistic practices in China and North Macedonia through a comparative perspective that brings together medium-based and conceptual correspondences within the broader context of globalization. Rather than relying on historical parallelism, the research focuses on works produced after 2000 with the intention to trace how different artistic approaches engage similar concerns—particularly those related to identity, memory, and the shifting nature of visual language. The analysis places Chinese artists such as Cao Fei, Yang Fudong, and Xu Bing in relation to Macedonian artists including Robert Jankuloski, Slavica Janešlieva, and Monika Moteska. While operating within different institutional and cultural conditions, their practices converge around questions of body, memory, and language, articulated through materiality, image construction, and archival and spatial processes. Rather than establishing direct historical equivalences, the study highlights the aesthetic resemblances across different media, emphasizing how artists in both contexts respond to globalization through distinct yet comparable visual and conceptual approaches. Although centered on the contemporary production, these works are understood as shaped by earlier post-socialist transformations that continue to shape artistic and institutional conditions. The paper argues that globalization does not produce homogenization, but rather allows for the emergence of parallel aesthetic strategies that reflect both shared global frameworks and specific local trajectories. By bringing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure into the foreground, the study proposes a model of comparison that prioritizes aesthetic relations over chronological symmetry, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary art in China and the post-Yugoslav contexts.

Keywords: contemporary art; globalization; China; North Macedonia; body; memory; language.

Introduction

In the context of globalization, contemporary art has increasingly operated within transnational networks which have enabled new forms of visibility, exchange, and conceptual translation.¹ However, these processes do not result in homogenized

¹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 27–30.

*Author's contact information: anafrangovska@gmail.com;
anafrangovska@yahoo.com

visual cultures. Rather, they have produced complex configurations in which local artistic practices are continuously rearticulated through global frameworks, while simultaneously retaining distinct historical and cultural trajectories.² This tension between global circulation and local specificity becomes particularly evident when examining artistic developments in China and the post-Yugoslav context.

This paper proposes a comparative approach that focuses on aesthetic and medium-based correspondences between contemporary artistic practices in China and North Macedonia. Rather than establishing direct historical equivalences, the analysis centers on works produced after 2000—a period marked by intensified globalization, the expansion of the art market, and increasingly dense connections between artistic scenes.³ Within this framework, artists engage with their shared thematic interests—such as identity, memory, and the transformation of visual language—through diverse yet conceptually comparable strategies.

The study discusses selected Chinese artists working across painting, video, and conceptual practices—Cao Fei, Xu Bing, and Yang Fudong—and Macedonian artists including Robert Jankuloski, Slavica Janešlieva, and Monika Moteska. The artists were selected not as representative figures of national artistic scenes, but as individual case studies whose practices reveal comparable artistic concerns despite emerging from different cultural and institutional contexts. Although their works employ different media and visual strategies, they converge around questions of body, memory, and language, which form the principal analytical framework of this study. In this sense, the comparison is not based on medium equivalence or historical symmetry, but on the identification of aesthetic structures and conceptual correspondences that operate across different visual systems.

Cao Fei and Monika Moteska are paired through their different approaches to embodiment and transformation; Yang Fudong and Slavica Janešlieva through their engagement with memory, temporality, and fragmented narrative structures; Xu Bing and Robert Jankuloski through their investigation of sign systems, interpretation, and the instability of meaning. These pairings are therefore based on shared artistic problematics rather than medium specificity, geographical proximity, or historical equivalence.

At the same time, the contemporary practices examined in this paper are rooted in earlier post-socialist transformations. Rather than marking a closed historical phase, the post-socialist condition can be understood, following Boris Groys, as an ongoing negotiation between ideological residue and contemporary cultural production, where past systems persist in transformed and often invisible forms.⁴ In China, the shift from socialist ideology to market-oriented reforms, particularly since the 1990s, has paved the way for the emergence of hybrid visual languages that remain relevant in today's artistic production.⁵ In North Macedonia, the transitional period

² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 212–214.

³ Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (Laurence King, 2011), 6–12.

⁴ Boris Groys, “The Post-Communist Condition,” in *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), 149–153.

⁵ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s–2000s* (Thames & Hudson, 2014), 177–180.

following the declaration of independence in 1991 gave rise to a more gradual and layered development in which contemporary artistic practices increasingly embraced fragmentation, process-based structures, and archival strategies. This development reflected a broader shift away from object-centered production toward relational and socially embedded practices.⁶ These trajectories are evidently different, but do not necessarily render their comparison invalid; rather, they highlight the importance of considering globalization as a framework that accommodates asymmetrical and non-synchronous developments.

By bringing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure to the foreground, this paper aims to move beyond models of comparison based on chronological simultaneity. Instead, it proposes an approach that emphasizes aesthetic relationships as dynamic processes shaped by both global conditions and specific histories of local significance. Through this lens, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how contemporary art in China and the post-Yugoslav contexts—that North Macedonia is a part of—have managed to negotiate the intersections of globalization, memory, and visual culture.

Theoretical framework

The comparative approach developed in this study is grounded in the perception and understanding of contemporaneity, namely as a heterogeneous and discordant condition. Rather than assuming the existence of a distinct present time on a global scale, here contemporary art is approached as a field which is structured by multiple temporalities, uneven developments, and context-specific trajectories. In this sense, globalization does not erase diversity, but it rather reconfigures it, thus producing a complex interplay between local circumstances and transnational visual languages.⁷

Within this framework, aesthetic production is not seen as a reflection of well-established cultural identities, but rather as a dynamic process of negotiation. As Nestor Garcia Canclini suggests, contemporary cultural practices emerge through processes of hybridization, where different historical, social, and visual elements intersect and generate new forms of meaning.⁸ This perspective allows for an analysis that goes beyond binary oppositions—such as local versus global or tradition versus modernity—and instead focuses on the fluid and relational nature of artistic practices.

At the same time, the notion of the image itself requires reconsideration within contemporary visual culture. As Mitchell argues, images are not passive representations but active agents that participate in the construction of meaning and social

⁶ Suzana Milevska, *Participatory Art: A Paradigm Shift from Objects to Subjects* (Kontrapunkt, 2023), 23–25, 31.

⁷ Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 6–12.

⁸ Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 12–20.

relations.⁹ This understanding is particularly relevant when examining artistic practices that engage with ideology, memory, and the body, as these are not merely depicted but materially and conceptually produced through visual strategies.

In post-socialist contexts, these processes are further complicated by the legacy of the ideological systems and their subsequent transformation. Rather than viewing post-socialism as a permanent historical condition, it can be understood as an ongoing process that continues to shape artistic production. In this regard, Piotr Piotrowski emphasizes the importance of contextualizing art within specific geopolitical and historical frameworks, particularly in regions marked by political transition and cultural reconfiguration.¹⁰

This theoretical framework has facilitated a comparative analysis that does not rely on direct equivalence, focusing instead on identifying aesthetic correlations across different media and contexts. By emphasizing medium, visual language, and conceptual structure, the study proposes a model of comparison that recognizes both the interconnectedness of contemporary art and the endurance of locally specific traits within global cultural dynamics.

Contexts: China and North Macedonia

China: From ideological representation to expanded media practices

Contemporary Chinese art has emerged through a complex trajectory, shaped by the transition from a socialist ideology to a globalized cultural production. While the 1990s marked a crucial moment of artistic transformation—characterized by critical engagements with political imagery and mass culture—subsequent decades have introduced a broader expansion of media and conceptual approaches. This shift has reflected not only in the changes in a specific artistic language, but also the reconfiguration of institutional, economic, and cultural conditions in which art is created and circulated. As noted by Wu Hung, the transformations of Chinese contemporary art since the 1990s are closely tied to broader socio-political and institutional shifts that have redefined the relationship between art, ideology, and public space.¹¹

Following this initial phase, Chinese contemporary art has entered a period of diversification, as artists shifted beyond painting-based practices toward video, installation, digital media, and interdisciplinary forms. This development corresponds to the intensified pace of globalization, the growth of the art market, and the increasing integration of Chinese artists into international exhibition platforms. As Terry Smith suggests, contemporary art in such contexts operates within a condition of “world

⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 28–34.

¹⁰ Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (Reaktion Books, 2009), 8–12.

¹¹ Wu Hung, *Contemporary Chinese Art*, 177–180.

currents”, where multiple temporalities and visual systems coexist within a global but unbalanced framework.¹²

Crucially, these developments do not represent a complete divergence from earlier artistic interests. As Gao Minglu emphasizes, contemporary practices in China should be understood not as a rejection of ideological structures, but as their transformation and reconfiguration within new cultural and economic conditions.¹³ Questions of ideology, identity, and collective memory therefore remain a central theme, yet they are articulated through new media and conceptual strategies that have shifted beyond representation and more towards simulation, fragmentation, and performativity.

Thus, contemporary Chinese art after the year 2000 can be understood as a field in which historical legacies and new technological conditions traverse, producing hybrid forms that reflect both continuity and transformation within a globalized visual culture.

North Macedonia: Intermediality, fragmentation, and contextual practices

The development of contemporary art in North Macedonia follows a different, more gradual trajectory, shaped by the political and cultural transformations following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. While the 1990s marked a period of transition, it was during the 2000s and 2010s that a more distinct contemporary artistic language began to emerge, characterized by intermediality, conceptual approaches, and research-based practices.

As Suzana Milevska notes, the Macedonian art scene has long operated in a context of marginality and limited visibility, which has significantly influenced both the artistic production and its institutional development.¹⁴ This position, however, has also fostered a particular sensitivity to context, leading artists to engage critically when addressing questions of identity, memory, and socio-political transformation.

The shift toward multimedia and interdisciplinary practices is further emphasized in the writings of Sonja Abadžieva, who identifies the emergence of new media and experimental forms as a defining characteristic of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Macedonian art.¹⁵ These developments have marked a departure from medium-specific modernist paradigms and signaled the formation of a heterogeneous field in which the boundaries between disciplines have become increasingly fluid and open to experimentation.

In this context, contemporary artistic practices often operate through fragmentation, layering, and the use of archival materials. Instead of producing stable narratives, artists have begun constructing open-ended structures that strongly reflect the

¹² Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 6–15.

¹³ Gao Minglu, *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art* (MIT Press, 2011), 221–225.

¹⁴ Suzana Milevska, “A Story with Many Beginnings,” in *Manifesta 2* (Manifesta Foundation, 1998), 247–248.

¹⁵ Соња Абацијева, “Мултимедијална уметност во Република Македонија,” In *Визуелните уметности во Македонија - XX век*, кн. 2 (Остен, 2017), 5–7.

complexity of the post-socialist experience. As Nebojsa Vilić argues, these practices can be seen as forms of critical art that question dominant systems of representation and engage with broader cultural and political frameworks.¹⁶

The distinguishing element of the Macedonian context is precisely this emphasis on processes, materiality, and conceptual investigation, with artistic practices frequently moving beyond traditional media and engaging with installation, photography, video, and research-based methodologies. In this sense, contemporary Macedonian art reflects not only the relevant local conditions, but also its position within a broader network of global artistic exchange.

Body and identity: from representation to simulation

Contemporary artistic practices in both China and North Macedonia show increasing engagement with the body, and not as a stable representational form, but as a site of transformation, construction, and mediation. This shift reflects broader changes in visual culture, where the body becomes entangled with technological, social, and ideological frameworks and is no longer understood as a fixed biological entity but as a dynamic and contingent construct. In this sense, the body operates as a critical interface through which contemporary subjectivity is negotiated, produced, and destabilized.

In the work of Cao Fei, the body is frequently displaced into virtual environments and constructed through digital identities that blur the boundaries between what is real and what is simulated. Her long-term project *RMB City* (2007–2011), developed within the virtual platform Second Life, has constructed a speculative urban environment that reflects the rapid transformation of Chinese society under globalization, urban expansion, and technological acceleration.¹⁷ Within this environment, the artist operates through an avatar (China Tracy), embodying a subjectivity that is simultaneously personal, fictional, and collective.

Here, the body is no longer grounded in physical presence; instead, it emerges through performative interaction, networked participation, and digitally mediated environments. This displacement into virtual space may be understood through Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulation, where the distinction between reality and its representation collapses, producing a condition in which identity is constructed within systems of signs rather than material presence. *RMB City* does not reproduce an existing city but generates a hyperreal environment that operates according to its own internal logic. In Baudrillard's terms, the project no longer represents reality but replaces it with a self-sustaining system of signs. The avatar therefore becomes not a representation of identity, but a simulation of subjectivity itself.¹⁸ Identity becomes

¹⁶ Небојша Вилић, *Критичка уметност 2* (ЗП с.из., 2010), 20–23, 31–32.

¹⁷ Cao Fei, *RMB City*, virtual project, 2007–2011.

¹⁸ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1–7, 10–12, 17–19.

fluid, distributed, and contingent upon technological systems that mediate perception and social relations. This shift signals a broader transformation in the ontology of the image: rather than representing reality, the image becomes a space in which reality is actively constructed and reconfigured. As a result, the body is transformed into a mutable interface—simultaneously present and absent—situated between embodiment and abstraction.

A different, yet conceptually related, exploration of the body can be observed in Cao Fei's earlier video work *Whose Utopia* (2006), produced in collaboration with a group of factory workers in the Pearl River Delta.¹⁹ In this project, workers temporarily deviate from the routines of industrial labor by performing gestures, dances, and imaginative acts within the factory. The body here is caught between discipline and resistance, production and imagination, thus revealing the tension between individual agency and systemic control. Unlike *RMB City*, where the body is fully virtualized, *Whose Utopia* places the body within material, palpable conditions even, yet still manages to frame it as a point of transformation and projection.

A comparable yet conceptually distinct approach can be observed in the practice of Monika Moteska, whose work engages with the body through material, organic, and symbolic processes. With projects such as *Embroidery in Stone* (2020), Moteska explores the relationship between the human body, labor, and material transformation, using natural substances and repetitive gestures to construct forms that exist between sculpture, installation, and process.²⁰ The body is here not directly represented but it is imprinted within the material itself, through traces of action, tension, and transformation.

A related strategy is evident in the video installation *Crucifixion*, where the absence of the body is articulated through an interplay of media. The work combines highly detailed drawings of iris flowers—traditionally associated with both dignity and mourning—with a central video element featuring a suspended industrial hook. While the drawings operate in a static, contemplative register, the video introduces movement and sound, generating a tension between stillness and latent violence. In this configuration, the body is never directly represented, yet it is strongly evoked through symbolic, material, and affective associations. The interplay between image and video thus constructs a space in which corporeality is displaced, but persistently implied.²¹

In other works, Moteska employs organic materials—often fragile, perishable, or mutable—to depict processes of decay, regeneration, and instability. The body is thus approached not as a coherent entity, but as a permeable and vulnerable system, embedded within broader ecological and material conditions. This emphasis on materiality introduces a temporal dimension, which is in sharp contrast to the simulated temporality of digital environments. Cao Fei's work points to a continuous, networked

¹⁹ Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia*, video, 2006.

²⁰ Ана Франговска, „Егзистенцијална деконструкција,” in *Моника Мотеска; Везење во камен* (exhibition catalogue) (Национална галерија, 2020), 3–8.

²¹ Франговска, “Егзистенцијална деконструкција,” 3–8.

present, whereas Moteska's practice highlights the endurance, entropy and the measured transformation of matter.

In this context, the body is not simulated, but is rather materially reconfigured, positioned between presence and dissolution. It becomes a site of tension between control and exposure, structure and disintegration, reflecting broader existential and ecological concerns. Instead of constructing alternative realities, Moteska amplifies the conditions of the physical world, drawing attention to the body's limitations and its entanglement with natural processes.

As Sanja Kojić Mladenov observes, Moteska's artistic practice consistently investigates fundamental relationships between life and death, nature and culture, as well as processes of archiving and memory through material traces and preserved remnants of human experience.²² These concerns further reinforce the artist's tendency to evoke bodily presence indirectly, through absence, residue, and transformation rather than direct representation.

The comparison between these practices reveals a shared movement, drifting away from representation and toward construction, yet on fundamentally different trajectories. While Cao Fei prefers to explore and work within digital and virtual frameworks that redefine subjectivity through simulation and networked interaction, Moteska is inclined to engage with material processes that emphasize embodiment, labor, and physical transformation. Both approaches, however, articulate a reconfiguration of the body, placing it as a central category of contemporary art, and demonstrating how identity is no longer given but acquired or produced through complex interactions between media, materiality, and context.

Memory and image: narrative, atmosphere, and fragmentation

The question of memory occupies a central position in contemporary artistic practices, particularly in contexts shaped by rapid social and political transformation. However, rather than a stable narrative, memory is increasingly articulated through fragmented, atmospheric, and non-linear visual forms. In this sense, memory is not simply represented but actively constructed through processes of mediation, displacement, and reinterpretation.

In the work of Yang Fudong, memory is articulated through cinematic language that operates between narrative suggestion and visual ambiguity. His multi-part film *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest* (2003–2007) constructs episodic scenes inspired by classical cultural references, yet in the midst of contemporary contexts. Shot in black-and-white and structured through slow, carefully composed sequences, the work produces a suspended temporal space in which past and present coexist without clear hierarchy.²³

²² Sanja Kojić Mladenov, "Landscape Experience—The Banality of Evil: Monika Moteska & Robert Jankuloski," in *Landscape Experience: Jankuloski/Moteska. Pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, 59th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia* (National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2022), 16–17.

²³ Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*, multi-channel video installation, 2003–2007.

Rather than reconstructing historical memory, Yang Fudong creates impressions that evoke memory as a subjective and unstable condition. His protagonists occupy spaces that appear both familiar and peculiar, suggesting a form of temporal dislocation in which the purpose of memory is not intended to document, but rather it works more as an affective and perceptual field.

A materially and conceptually distinct, yet related, approach can be observed in the work of Slavica Janešlieva, where memory is constructed through layering, material accumulation, and narrative fragmentation. The latter is evident in pieces such as *Grafting* (2007), *Fragility of Life* (2003), and more recently *Inter Spem et Metum* (2024), and the artist has developed complex spatial and visual systems which see the intersection of personal and collective histories.²⁴

Rather than depicting memory as a linear narrative, Janešlieva constructs what may be understood as a multi-layered ‘visual oratorium’, in which different materials, texts, and symbolic elements coexist and interact. In *Inter Spem et Metum*, for instance, the use of organic materials such as feathers, combined with neon textual interventions and reflective surfaces, produces an environment that engages the viewer physically and perceptually. The work does not represent memory directly, but activates it through sensory experience, spatial dislocation, and the confrontation with otherness.

Central to this approach is the notion of the “stranger” or the “Other”, not only as a social category but as an internalized condition. As articulated in the artist’s own discourse, memory is inseparable from processes of self-reflection, displacement, and the negotiation of identity within broader socio-political frameworks.²⁵ In this sense, memory becomes a position where personal experience intersects with collective structures of meaning, shaped by migration, mobility, and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

The comparison between these practices reveals two distinct yet conceptually related approaches to memory. While Yang Fudong constructs memory through cinematic atmosphere and temporal ambiguity, Janešlieva approaches it through material layering, spatial construction, and discursive complexity. As Maja Cankulovska-Mihajlovska has observed, Janešlieva’s projects frequently intertwine personal, familial, and collective histories through fragmented narrative structures and layered visual sequences, producing an open and multidimensional field of remembrance.²⁶ The former produces distance through visual suspension, whereas the latter generates proximity through tactile engagement. Yet, both strategies move away from narrative coherence toward open, processual forms of meaning, where memory is not seen as a fixed trace of the past but as a continuously evolving field of interpretation.

²⁴ Ana Frangovska, “A State of Limbo,” in *Slavica Janešlieva: Inter Spem et Metum* (exhibition catalogue), Pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, 60th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia (National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2024), 7–8.

²⁵ Frangovska, “A State of Limbo”.

²⁶ Maja Cankulovska-Mihajlovska, “Slavica Janešlieva: Grafting,” *The Large Glass / Големото стакло* 23–24 (2008/09): 113.

Language and visual systems: Sign, text, and the uncertainty of meaning

Language and visual sign systems represent a crucial field of inquiry within contemporary art, particularly in relation to questions of communication, interpretation, and the construction of meaning. The understanding behind signs is moving away from the view that they are transparent bearers of information. Regardless of whether they are textual or visual, signs are increasingly seen as variable, constructed and context dependent systems that resist rigid interpretation. The work of Xu Bing offers a paradigmatic exploration of language as a visual and ideological structure. His seminal project *Book from the Sky* (1987–1991) consists of hand-printed books and scrolls filled with thousands of meticulously invented characters that resemble traditional Chinese script but remain entirely unreadable.²⁷ At first glance, the work evokes the authority, history, and visual density of written language; however, this apparent familiarity is immediately disrupted by its illegibility.

By applying this strategy, Xu Bing exposes the constructed nature of linguistic systems and destabilizes their claim to meaning. Language is revealed not as a neutral medium of communication, but as a system shaped by conventions, power structures, and cultural assumptions. The viewer is thus in a curious position and tasked to interpret the language with great uncertainty, and is confronted with a piece of writing that demands to be read yet resists all attempts at understanding it. In this sense, the work operates as a critical reflection on the relationship between signs, knowledge, and authority, suggesting that meaning is not inherent in the sign itself but is ultimately achieved by a process of interpretation.

A related, though materially and conceptually distinct investigation can be identified in the photographic practice of Robert Jankuloski. In his work, the image functions not as a direct representation of reality, but as a coded visual structure that invites interpretation while withholding the definitive meaning. This understanding also resonates with Nebojša Vilić's observation that contemporary Macedonian photography increasingly shifted from a technical medium toward an interdisciplinary field in which photographic images operate beyond documentation and become active agents in the construction of meaning.²⁸ Through strategies of reduction, minimal intervention, and careful framing, Jankuloski constructs images that appear deceptively simple, yet are charged with latent symbolic and contextual significance. This approach resonates with what Hal Foster defines as the "archival impulse." He argues that archival practices do not simply recover historical information but actively construct new relationships between fragments, documents, and narratives. In Jankuloski's work, photography functions in a similar manner. The image does not operate as evidence, but as an archival structure that reorganizes traces of reality into new constellations of meaning. The archive therefore becomes a productive rather than documentary space.²⁹

²⁷ Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, installation, 1987–1991.

²⁸ Небојша Вилић, *Исчекори: Македонската фотографија 1990–2005* (3П с.из., 2015), 19–23.

²⁹ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (2004): 3–5.

While Foster's notion of the archival impulse provides a theoretical framework for understanding the productive nature of archival practices, curator and researcher Sanja Kojić Mladenov emphasizes the specific relationship between Jankuloski's photographs and collective memory, describing them as investigations of places and objects "saturated with history" and as explorations of the archaeology of space, layered landscapes, and the revival of the "presence of the absent"³⁰.

Rather than presenting clear narratives, Jankuloski's photographs operate through absence, silence, and ambiguity. The image becomes a site of projection, but also of archival reconstruction. As evidenced in projects such as *New Landscapes—Archives of Reality*, Jankuloski approaches photography as a system of collecting, re-contextualizing, and reactivating visual fragments that function as traces of collective memory. Instead of simply documenting reality, the photographic image serves as an active archival structure—both recording and constructing meaning through the process of selection, juxtaposition, and contextual displacement.³¹ In this sense, the photographic image functions analogously to Xu Bing's written constructions: both create systems that appear intelligible but ultimately resist stable interpretation.

While Xu Bing works through the deconstruction of language and Jankuloski through the reduction of the image, both practices reveal the instability of signification as a central condition of contemporary visual culture. Meaning is no longer guaranteed by the structure of language or the indexicality of the photographic image, but is instead contingent, relational, and open-ended.

The comparison between these practices thus expands the notion of language beyond the written text to include visual systems more broadly. Both artists challenge the authority of representation and expose the mechanisms through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and destabilized. In doing so, they articulate a shared concern pertaining to the limits of interpretation, demonstrating how contemporary art operates within a field where signs no longer communicate transparently, but function as sites of uncertainty and critical reflection.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis developed in this study demonstrates that aesthetic similarities between contemporary Chinese and Macedonian art cannot be analyzed and understood through direct historical parallelism or chronological simultaneity. Instead, these associations emerge through shared conceptual concerns that are articulated across different media, contexts, and temporal frameworks.

The analysis demonstrates that globalization does not produce uniformity, but rather a condition of structured heterogeneity. Artistic practices operate within interconnected yet asymmetrical systems, in which similarities emerge not from identical

³⁰ Sanja Kojić Mladenov, interview by Tamara Babić, "Kultura sećanja ima sve veći značaj u kontekstu izgradnje ličnih i kolektivnih identiteta," *Nedeljnik*, June 7, 2024.

³¹ Ана Франговска, "Нови архиви на колективната свест," in Роберт Јанкулоски: Нови пејзажи—архиви на реалноста (catalogue) (Национална галерија, 2020), 3–6.

conditions, but from analogous responses to broader transformations in visual culture, technology, and socio-political environments.³²

Across the three case studies—body, memory, and language—a consistent shift can be observed: from representation toward construction. The body is no longer depicted but mediated and produced; memory is not narrated but assembled and fragmented; language is not transparent but destabilized and rendered opaque. These shifts indicate a broader redefinition of artistic practice, where meaning is not fixed but emerges through processes of interaction, interpretation, and contextualization.³³

At the same time, the comparison reveals significant, equally important differences. In the Chinese context, artistic practices are often shaped by rapid urbanization, technological acceleration, and integration into global networks, resulting in a strong engagement with digital media and simulation. In contrast, the Macedonian context is characterized by a more gradual and materially grounded development, where artistic practices frequently engage with physical processes, archival structures, and localized socio-political conditions.

However, these differences should not be seen as limitations, but as productive distinctions that supplement the comparative framework. The Macedonian context, often positioned as peripheral within global art systems, demonstrates a capacity for critical reflection precisely through its engagement with fragmentation, marginality, and material specificity. Conversely, Chinese contemporary art illustrates how global integration can generate new forms of visual and conceptual complexity, while still retaining links to historical and ideological frameworks.

This comparison suggests that contemporary art operates within a field where meaning is continuously negotiated between global structures and local conditions.³⁴ Rather than seeking equivalence, the analysis proposes a model of relational comparison, in which aesthetic correspondences emerge through shared problematics rather than identical forms. Such an approach allows for the examination of artistic practices across asymmetrical cultural contexts without reducing them to simplified narratives of similarity or difference. At the same time, it should be emphasized that this study does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of contemporary art in China or North Macedonia. Rather, it focuses on a limited number of case studies selected for their capacity to illuminate specific conceptual and aesthetic correspondences across different cultural contexts.

³² Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 18–22.

³³ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 35–38.

³⁴ García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures*, 40–42.



Figure 1. Robert Jankuloski, *New Landscapes—Archives of Realities*, 2020, photography, 112x148, photo: Robert Jankuloski



Figure 2. Monika Moteska, *Embroidery in Stone*, 2020, space installation, photo: Robert Jankuloski

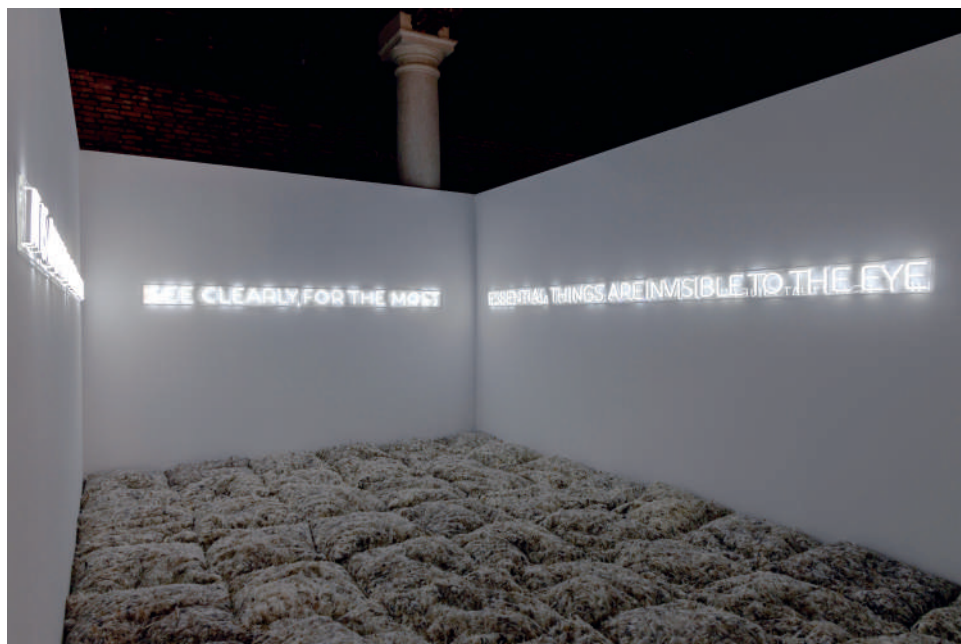


Figure 3. Slavica Janešlieva, *Inter Spem et Metum*, 2024, space installation: duck feathers, neon lights, textile, photo: Robert Jankuloski



Figure 4. Yang Fudong, *Seven Intellectuals in Bamboo Forest, Part 3, 05*, 35mm black and white film transferred to DVD; 53 min. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, photo: Yang Fudong



Figure 5. Cao Fei, *Whose Utopia?*, 2006, video still, Courtesy and photo: Cao Fei

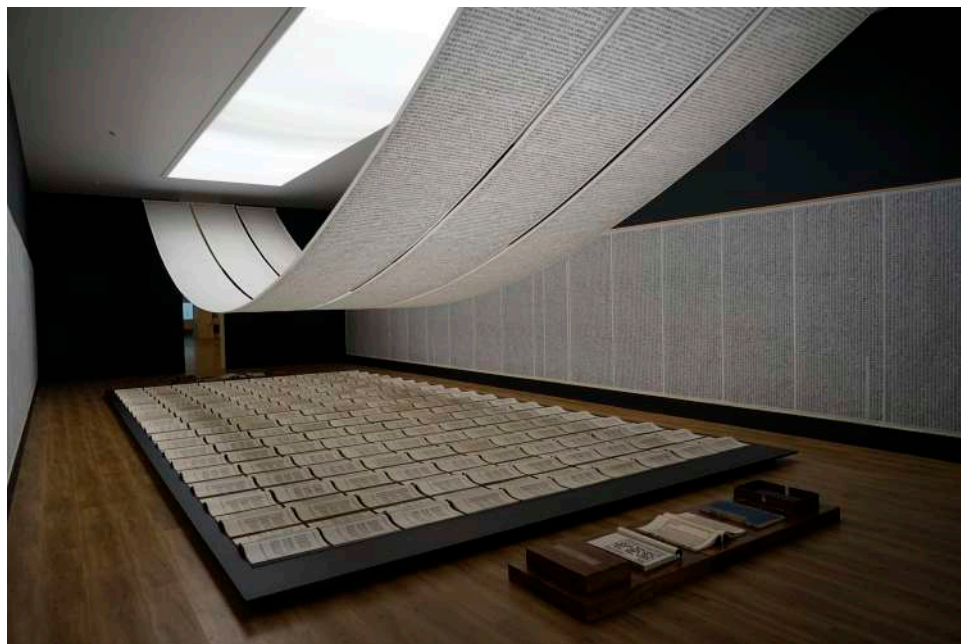


Figure 6. Xu Bing, *Book from the Sky*, 1987–1991, multi-media installation, installation view, Xu Bing: *Thought and Method*, Museum MACAN, 2019, photo: Xu Bing Studio

References

- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Cankulovska-Mihajlovska, Maja. "Slavica Janešlieva: Grafting." *The Large Glass/ Големото стакло* 23–24 (2008/09): 113.
- Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110 (2004): 3–22.
- Frangovska, Ana. "A State of Limbo." In *Slavica Janešlieva: Inter Spem et Metum (exhibition catalog)*. National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2024.
- Gao Minglu. *Total Modernity and the Avant-Garde in Twentieth-Century Chinese Art*. MIT Press, 2011.
- García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press, 1995.
- Groys, Boris. "The Post-Communist Condition." In *Art Power*, 149–153. MIT Press, 2008.
- Kojić Mladenov, Sanja. "Landscape Experience—The Banality of Evil: Monika Moteska & Robert Jankuloski." In *Landscape Experience: Jankuloski/Moteska*. Pavilion of the Republic of North Macedonia, 59th International Art Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, 16–17. National Gallery of North Macedonia, 2022.
- Kojić Mladenov, Sanja. Interview by Tamara Babić. "Kultura sećanja ima sve veći značaj u kontekstu izgradnje ličnih i kolektivnih identiteta." *Nedeljnik*, June 7, 2024.
- Milevska, Suzana. "A Story with Many Beginnings." In *Manifesta 2*, 247–248. Manifesta Foundation, 1998.
- Milevska, Suzana. *Participatory Art: A Paradigm Shift from Objects to Subjects*. Kontrapunkt, 2023.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Piotrowski, Piotr. *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989*. Reaktion Books, 2009.
- Smith, Terry. *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. Laurence King, 2011.
- Wu Hung. *Contemporary Chinese Art: A History, 1970s–2000s*. Thames & Hudson, 2014.
- Абаџиева, Соња. "Мултимедијална уметност во Република Македонија." In *Визуелните уметности во Македонија - XX век*, кн. 2, Остен, 2017.
- Вилиќ, Небојша. *Критичка уметност 2*. ЗП с.из., 2010.

Вилиќ, Небојша. *Исчекори: Македонската фотографија 1990–2005*. 3П с.из., 2015.

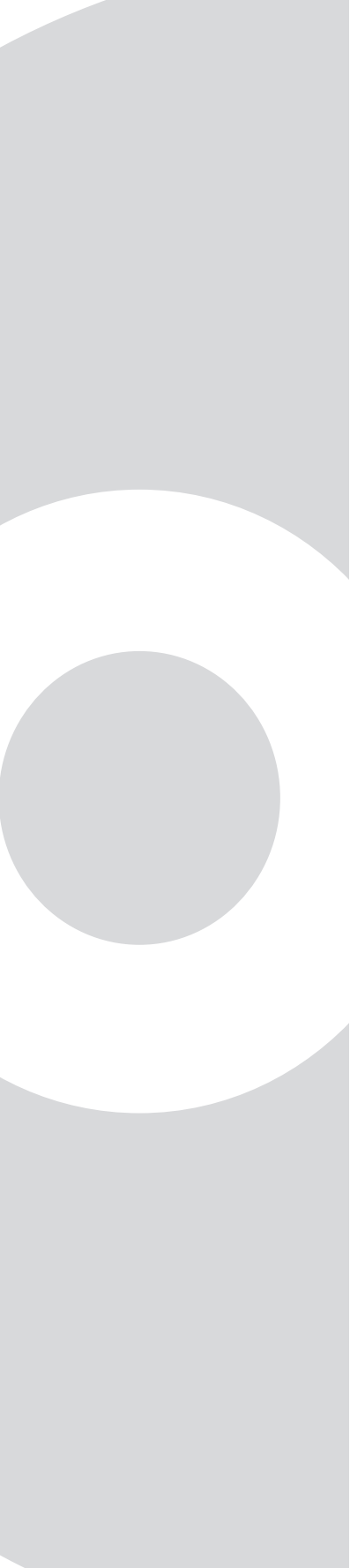
Франговска, Ана. “Егзистенцијална деконструкција.” In *Моника Мотеска: Везење во камен* (exhibition catalogue). Национална галерија, 2020.

Франговска, Ана. “Нови архиви на колективната свест.” In *Роберт Јанкулоски: Нови пејзажи—архиви на реалноста* (exhibition catalogue). Национална галерија, 2020.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper



Caishu Zhou¹

Nankai University, Tianjin, China

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4948-3070>

New Media Spectacle: Aesthetic Analysis of the Chinese Film Industry in the Twenty-First Century

Abstract: This paper investigates how the Chinese film industry exhibits itself as a new media spectacle. In 2002, the Chinese state redefined the film sector as a profit-oriented cultural industry, and it has since experienced rapid growth. Drawing on two decades of industry data, this paper proposes a three-dimensional analytical framework centered on “box office myths,” “urban spaces,” and “aesthetic functions.” First, “box office myths” reveal how high-grossing films balance socialist propaganda with commercial interests while navigating state policies and market dynamics. Second, the film industry help shape Chinese cities and redefines urban public spaces, where cinematic representations and audience responses collectively articulate traditional culture. Third, the “aesthetic functions” of film can be categorized into three aspects: artistic function, cultural inheritance function, and aesthetic education function. Together, these three aspects constitute the new media spectacle as a composite cultural phenomenon within China’s contemporary film industry.

Keywords: New media spectacle; Chinese film; urban space; audience action; aesthetic function.

Introduction

China’s film industry in the 21st century presents itself as a new media spectacle driven by capital, media convergence, and urban spatial representation—one that features industrialization, publicness, and emotional mobilization, and gives rise to three structural functions: artistic representation, cultural inheritance, and aesthetic education. In 2002, the Chinese state redefined the film industry as a profit-making cultural industry, and it has grown rapidly since then. Drawing on two decades of industry data and concrete examples, this paper examines the Chinese film industry as an aesthetic phenomenon and explores how it functions.

Reflecting on the development of Chinese film studies, scholars have seen a wealth of diverse monographs over the past decade. Some track the history and historiography,² some reevaluate the form, structure, and institution of Chinese film from

¹ Funding: “Research on the Reproduction of Contemporary Chinese Digital Literature and Art”, The National Social Science Fund of China (24BZW128).

² Song Hwee Lim and Julian Ward, eds., *The Chinese Cinema Book* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Zhang Yingjin, ed., *A Companion to Chinese Cinema* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013); Jason McGrath, *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

a revolutionary or modern perspective,³ some investigate different aspects of directors and the audience,⁴ independent cinema⁵, metacinema,⁶ martial arts film⁷ and documentary films.⁸ These scholarships contribute to the study of contemporary Chinese film. However, most English-language monographs do not trace the Chinese film industry from 2010 to the present, nor do they present its current situation based on the latest data and realities. In mainland China, many monographs track the development of the film industry, and the research has shifted from industrial analysis toward the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives. Current studies examine industrial development through the lens of capital and film-industrial aesthetics, adopting perspectives on media convergence and urban space. Most research, however, concentrates on production mechanisms and box office economics leaving the public nature, affective turn, and profound aesthetic and educational functions of film as a new media spectacle underexplored. This paper presents an aesthetic analysis of the Chinese film industry in the 21st century.

This paper argues that contemporary Chinese film constitutes a form of new media spectacle. In the context of the 21st-century China, “new media spectacle” refers to an industrially produced and emotionally charged cultural phenomenon that not only dramatizes social values but also actively reshapes urban space and aesthetic experience. It is “new” in its modes of production, spatial mediation, and aesthetic functions. Section 1 outlines the development of Chinese cinema during the first two decades of the 21st century. Section 2 interprets the film industry as a media spectacle by examining its influence on daily life and urban spaces in contemporary China. Finally, Section 3 analyzes three key aesthetic functions of film in China: its artistic function, its cultural-inheritance function, and its aesthetic-education function.

Development of Chinese film industry

How does the Chinese film industry become a media spectacle? A media spectacle is a form of media culture that embodies ideological orientation, social realities, and aesthetic perceptions. Its characteristics lie in its temporality, symptomatic

³ Chen Xiaomei, *Performing the Socialist State: Modern Chinese Theater and Film Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2023); Sheldon Lu, *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Xiao Yang, *The Evolution of Chinese Popular Cinema* (Routledge, 2026); Xiang Fan, *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2024).

⁴ Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (University of California Press, 2007); Cecilia Mello, *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film* (Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2022).

⁵ Wang Qi, *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Dan Edwards, *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics* (Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

⁶ G. Andrew Stuckey, *Metacinema in Contemporary Chinese Film* (Hong Kong University Press, 2018).

⁷ Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Film and the Philosophy of Action* (Routledge, 2021).

⁸ Ying Qian, *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China* (Columbia University Press, 2024).

quality, and critical edge—rather than merely presenting new, superficial, or novel appearances. The rise of the Chinese film industry as a new media spectacle aligns, to a considerable extent, with these very characteristics. While the industry has achieved notable market growth, at a deeper level it has advanced modern culture, shaped urban living spaces, and established certain aesthetic paradigms, thereby fulfilling its aesthetic functions.

Since 2002, Chinese films have fully entered the industrial stage. Although institutional reform and marketization began in the 1990s—allowing private capital to produce films alongside state-owned capital—it was not until 2002 that the film system underwent profound reform, followed by China's 2003 redefinition of film as a cultural industry. The government has promoted film consumption and the development of a modern cultural-industrial system, recognizing film's growing role in the economic restructuring and sustainable development. To provide an overview of the Chinese film industry, this paper selects key data from the past two decades. Table 1 presents data on China's film box office revenues, annual film output, and top-grossing films.

The crucial aspects of film production—investment, production, and distribution—all revolve around the movie's narrative. As Colman points out, "Film forms and products—cinema, television, computer games, online media industries that draw on the cinematic, that is, the film industry in its entirety—have reshaped knowledge of the world through various categorizations, genres, fields of enquiry, different methods of representation, intervention, provocation."⁹ Through its diverse assumptions and purposes, film both represents and questions how we think about things in the world, including the very nature of thinking as a perceptual activity that is entirely mediated in some form. What deserves further consideration is how film represents the world and influences the society. After China adopted market economy in the 1990s and began its industrialization in 2002, many films adjusted their presentation and approach to meet the country's market demands, thereby creating a tension between commercial and aesthetic considerations. Although the film industry is shaped by market forces and economic capital, film remains an art form that integrates commerce, culture, and aesthetics. It evokes the audience's sense of beauty in relation to the object, with the fundamental goal of creating cinematic beauty and providing an aesthetic experience. The films in Table 1 embody contemporary China's basic values; they not only reflect numerical shifts in the film industry, but also inherently reflect the changes of the times, collective emotions of audiences, and their evolving aesthetic preferences.

As Kellner argues, spectacle emerges from the interplay of capital, technology, and ideology. To examine the mechanisms of media spectacle in the Chinese film market, one must go beyond a macro-level understanding of the industry and engage in close textual readings of individual films. The changing roster of annual box-office champions over the 24 years shown in Table 1 effectively renders this interplay visible across time. The top 24 box office champions in Table 1 represent works that reflect

⁹ Felicity Colman, *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers* (McGill-Queens University Press, 2009), 17.

shifts in aesthetic tastes in the Chinese film market over the past 20 years. Between 2002 and 2011, four out of the ten highest-grossing films (*Hero*, *House of Flying Daggers*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, *The Flowers of War*) were directed by Zhang Yimou, one of China's most renowned filmmakers. *Hero* is considered a milestone film that paved the way for Chinese cinema's industrialization, transforming film production from propaganda into commercial products. Zhang Yimou's films are popular for featuring ancient Chinese stories, distinctive cinematography, and breathtaking visuals. From 2012 to 2025, box office champions have spanned various genres, including fantasy, action, comedy, war, road, and animated films. The first type consists of entertainment and commercial films that cater to market and audience demand, and they constitute the majority. Box office champions from 2012 to 2017 typically fall into this category. The second type includes more serious films that promote national ideologies and offer a sympathetic portrayal of Chinese history. Films such as *Wolf Warriors*, *Operation Red Sea*, *The Eight Hundred*, and *The Battle at Lake Changjin* fall into this category, conveying patriotism through narratives of brutal warfare and grand historical events. Referred to in China as "Main Melody Films" or "Mainstream Blockbusters", these films have particularly flourished since 2017. The top film of each year is not an accidental market choice, but a historically specific, necessary outcome of the spectacle logic at work.

The Chinese film industry has shifted from large-scale production to spectacle-driven industrial construction. These high-box-office films have a wide-ranging impact, reflecting not only the growth in box-office revenue but also changes in aesthetic tastes over the past 20 years. Box office revenue, the number of screens, audience numbers, and industrial production systems have generated together a remarkable industrial spectacle. Meanwhile, Chinese films are increasingly emphasizing visual appeal and emotional impact in their cinematic language. Through their immersive aesthetic experiences and genre evolution, many high-grossing films have become visual spectacles that resonate with audiences in the new media era.

Spectacular film and urban public space

Douglas Kellner argues "that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution."¹⁰ The film industry has been a rich domain of media spectacle, showcasing mystery, glamour, and fashion. Contemporary Chinese blockbusters are becoming, in a sense, spectacular films. Integrated into urban public spaces, these spectacular films have transformed Chinese film into a socio-cultural spectacle that stirs social emotions and shapes collective memory.

Technological innovation and media reform usually lead to new living

¹⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle* (Routledge, 2003), 2.

environments and urban spaces. New technology brings about new media. New media creates new thoughts and possibilities. New media change people's lifestyles and extend their experiences of art. The rise of digital media promotes the development of the film industry, while humanity's vision is roughly emphasized in proportion to the increased consumption of the film market. All these changes in feelings and experiences, and the new cognition of art, are fundamental elements in the development of film culture.

Chinese film, as a media spectacle, exhibits itself in the urban public space, for it is in this space that the cinematic spectacle becomes materially tangible and socially consequential. Kellner's notion of spectacle, for all its analytical power, remains incomplete without an account of the spatial conditions that enable and sustain it. This is precisely where Henri Lefebvre's theory of spatial production proves indispensable. For Lefebvre, urban space is seen as produced by social, political, and economic forces rather than as a natural given. Lefebvre claimed that "space is social", "space is a social relation"¹¹. The urban space is always a present space, with flexible changes, a current totality, and connections to people's social action. The urban space inevitably engages place and locality, which calls attention to its multidirectional flows and its historical contingency. Thousands of urban movie theaters were built and renovated in cities over the past forty years, and the box office revenue of Chinese films primarily comes from them. The theaters create new spaces for films to tell stories and present images. Audiences see a movie together in a theatre, engaging in the collective aesthetic agency. The urban public space in China, such as big cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou, has a dynamic force that shapes public art experiences and influences aesthetic expression. Big cities account for a large share of the box office, and activities surrounding films, such as premiere screenings and fan events, are very vibrant in these urban areas. The urban space encompasses social, economic, and aesthetic mechanisms that highlight its diversity and complexity.

The film industry as a media spectacle exhibits itself in urban public space; what is significant is how the process of movie practice shapes the Chinese urban public space. In this process, two interconnected mechanisms deserve special attention. First, film, as an aesthetic object, becomes embedded in the city's physical and symbolic fabric through its visual language, narrative structure, and emotional tone. Second, audience response as an aesthetic practice involves how audiences actively participate in, interpret, and re-experience film content within the urban environment, thus generating emotional connections. Together, these two aspects reveal that spectacular films not only reflect but also actively reconstruct the relationships among media, space, and daily life, transforming urban public spaces into sites of cultural spectacle and collective memory.

First, the movies that have the greatest influence in urban public space are those that express Chinese traditional culture and respond to the contemporary cultural atmosphere, thus forming a spectacle that merges the ancient with the modern. Many

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*, edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, trans. Gerald Moore, Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 186.

Chinese films are adapted from traditional novels, such as *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child*, which was the box office champion in 2019. Again, *Nezha 2* had great industrial success in 2025. They imitate and learn from the themes, motifs, and imagery of classic literary works to varying degrees in order to enhance the traditional and humanistic quality of their work. After all, what an audience demands of a film is that it presents forms and scenes and narrates a story and a plot, regardless of the profit used to produce it. Successful movies in the Chinese film industry consistently meet audiences' demands by harmonizing aesthetic autonomy with moral value, rather than merely serving as products of commercial management.

Second, audience reactions and viewing behaviors are central to box-office outcomes, and this economic reality firmly embeds cinematic art in the commodity logic of the film industry. In this context, the audience's pursuit of film as an art form is materialized through consumption, rendering aesthetic experience inseparable from the market forces that shape it. Movies provide entertainment and create imagined worlds that let audiences escape from powerlessness in reality, and audiences may identify with reality by watching them. This is precisely one of the aspirations of the diversity-based film production: to provide a more inclusive practice of film engagement, which rejects the parochialism of propaganda. Furthermore, many audiences may also develop an autonomous ideal that maintains a distance from society. Audiences establish numerous fan groups to coordinate various activities, such as supporting audiences, contributing to film organizations, and reviewing films. Audiences are not isolated individuals; rather, they constitute a collective capable of exerting influence and even shaping urban public space. From this communitarian perspective, we might value audiences' engagement with urban public space for providing unique opportunities to realize shared, collaborative aesthetic values in ways no one could achieve alone.

Aesthetic functions of film in China

The theory of media spectacle serves as the overall framework that encompasses three key dimensions of the Chinese film industry. At the industry level, it presents box office performance and representative works in the Chinese film industry; at the spatial level, Lefebvre's space theory is used to explain how film reconstructs the social attributes of urban public space; at the functional level, Ruth Garrett Millikan's functional intention theory provides a cognitive mechanism explanation for the generation of film's aesthetic value. These three aspects are interconnected and correspond, respectively, to the market-based, spatial, and psychological conditions under which the spectacle is generated.

Kellner's media spectacle, by its very nature, operates through daily life and aesthetic intensification; it captivates attention through heightened sensory appeal, spectacular visuals, and emotionally charged narratives. This aesthetic imperative,

however, does not remain at the level of mere sensory stimulation; it simultaneously organizes collective perceptual norms, shaping what audiences come to recognize as cinematically valuable and emotionally resonant.

What makes this process socially operative, however, is not merely the content of movies themselves, but their capacity to be reproduced and sustained across the film industry. Here, Millikan's theory of function proves instructive: it provides an internal mechanism for explaining how cultural products, once synchronized on a mass scale, acquire a functional character that stabilizes industrial operations within the media spectacle. Functional intention, in this sense, does not remain merely at the individual psychological level; once aesthetic judgment is synchronized on a large scale within a specific media, it transforms from a private feeling into a public spectacle.

Millikan pointed out that one thing has its "own" function and "proper" function; its own function is its actual function on various occasions of use, and its proper function is what various users intend it to perform on various occasions.¹² She points out that "all artifacts have proper functions—usually not direct ones but derived ones."¹³ The main point of her theory of proper functions is to use it as a tool for understanding language and other representations, inner and outer. What I want to highlight are the diverse aesthetic functions of film, revealed through the representation and intentional aspects of the language of cinema. The Chinese film industry has its "own" aesthetic functions, such as beauty represented by the movie's text, and its "proper" aesthetic functions, such as a movie's social effect. Both of these correspond to the producing process and the social environment.

The aesthetic functions of the Chinese film industry can be divided into three categories, namely, artistic function, cultural inheritance function, and aesthetic education function. These three functions, respectively, promote the transition of film art from content-driven narrative to a new paradigm of visual-sensory-experiential engagement; promote the modernization, popularization, and mediatization of traditional symbols; and convey dominant values and the contemporary spirit through immersive and emotionally resonant means. The aesthetic functions of Chinese cinema—artistic expression, cultural inheritance, and perceptual formation—are thus not external additions to its spectacular logic but internal entailments of it: they are the specific channels through which the spectacle accomplishes its cultural operation.

First, the artistic function refers to the functions of film as a fine art, which can be understood as the "own" function of film and is common in both China and other countries. The artistic functions are those that reflect the properties of art, such as expressing emotion, exhibiting innovative qualities, creating complex forms, and facilitating technical expression. The artistic function of film is promoted through aesthetic communication. Gary Iseminger posits a paradigm of aesthetic communication that involves a designer and maker, an artifact created for appreciation, and an appreciator: "A paradigm of aesthetic communication consists of someone's designing

¹² Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (The MIT Press, 1984), 2.

¹³ Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*, 36.

and making something to be appreciated that is appreciated by someone else.”¹⁴ Film has an aesthetic purpose, aiming to promote artistic feelings. To what extent a film approaches the artistic function within the paradigm of aesthetic communication depends on whether the film includes producers who are making an effort to design and create an artifact to be appreciated, a text that possesses the capacity for appreciation, or an audience that is at least attempting to appreciate it. The key is that the film is aesthetically autonomous, not overly controlled by economic capital or commercial logic, and has its own functions. The artistic function of a movie lies in its connection to appreciation, which involves recognizing the movie’s aesthetic experience as valuable in itself and making it enjoyable for the audience, thereby achieving communicative action and a shared experience.

Secondly, the cultural inheritance function of the Chinese film industry is to transmit traditional culture. This function is becoming increasingly central, serving as a key factor behind the distinctiveness of Chinese cinema. With a history spanning thousands of years, Chinese culture encompasses numerous outstanding artistic works that could be adapted into films as valuable IPs.

To move beyond mere description and examine how the logic of spectacle operates at the empirical level, Table 1 presents the 24 highest-grossing films over the past two decades. Among them, *Red Cliff I*, *Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons*, *Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child* can be classified in the same category according to their contents, whose stories come from the Four Greatest Classic Novels of China (“Romance of the Three Kingdoms”, “Outlaws of the Marsh”, “the Dream of the Red Mansions”, “Journey to the West”). These movies have good content, absorbing excellent traditional literature and art, arousing the audience’s universal resonance. These annual champions are not simply popular products of market forces; rather, they offer a longitudinal record in which different mechanisms of spectacle—technological guarantees, emotional consensus, and cultural familiarity—are activated at different historical junctures.

As another example, *The Wandering Earth*, a science fiction film, earned 678 million dollars, ranking second at the box office in 2019. This film is based on a short story of the same name by Liu Cixin, who received the 2015 Hugo Award. The intention to go to the moon in the film is not new; its roots are in traditional culture. There are many stories and literary works about the moon in ancient China; one of the most famous is the myth of Chang’e Flying to the Moon. There are countless beautiful poems about the moon in the Tang poems and Song lyrics. The poet Su Shi wrote: “The waning moon hangs in a sparse tung tree, the water clock breaks off, people begin to grow still.”¹⁵ The film’s amazing imagination can be traced back to an ancient Chinese philosophical concept of nature, the Unity of Heaven and Humanity. These sentences, stories, and philosophical thinking have become something like cultural genes,

¹⁴ Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (Cornell University Press, 2004), 35.

¹⁵ Stephen Owen, *Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries* (Harvard University Press, 2019), 224.

seeping into the blood of the Chinese people. *The Wandering Earth* is well received by audiences, not only for the moving visuals produced by advanced technology but also for its close alignment with the inherent spirit of traditional Chinese thought. The cultural inheritance function of the film industry is a distinctive function rooted in Chinese cultural cognition. It operates through the cinematic re-encoding of traditional symbols, with adaptation strategies serving not merely as storytelling vehicles but as systematic mechanisms for re-inscribing cultural signifiers into contemporary audiovisual grammar.

Thirdly, the aesthetic education function of film seeks to evoke emotional resonance and provide moral guidance by encouraging audiences to reflect on and align their emotions and actions with the values presented. This function is particularly important in China, where the government supports it and expects the film industry to fulfill an educational role alongside its economic role. As Yomi Braester observes, film is “often associated in China with social and political agendas”¹⁶—a characterization that suggests commercial cinema cannot be divorced from political awareness and social responsibility.

We can see the films in Table 1, some of which can be classified as works of realism, such as *Wolf Warriors II*, *Operation Red Sea*, *The Eight Hundred*, and *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, which advocate the spirit of patriotism. The educational function of film demands that producers break away from a profit-motivated attitude and look through the lenses of various ways of knowing, seeing, and feeling, in a conscious endeavor to impose social orders and ideological orientations upon the viewing experience. *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, the highest-grossing film of 2021, belongs to a series of patriotic films released during the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party. It is set against the backdrop of the Battle of Changjin Lake during the second campaign in the War to Resist U.S. Aggression and Aid Korea, and recounts the story of the Chinese People’s Volunteers fighting in the extreme cold and harsh conditions of North Korea in 1950. Produced on a substantial budget and co-directed by three filmmakers, the film celebrates collective effort and sacrifice that secured military victory, and achieves its grand aesthetic impact. Observing the soldiers’ struggle and triumph in the battle evokes sympathy from audiences, and this empathy also serves as a form of education. This movie establishes an emotional connection with its audience in a public space. Moral resonance plays an important role in the story, and many locations and scenes contribute to the war narrative.

These three categories of aesthetic functions each play a distinct role within the Chinese film industry. The first serves its own function, while the latter two are proper functions specific to the Chinese social context, where their priorities may shift over time in response to changing government policies and incentives. Over the past decade, the most influential movies in China have emerged from two primary trajectories: one presents traditional Chinese culture, thereby fulfilling the cultural

¹⁶ Yomi Braester, “Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker as a Cultural Broker,” *The China Quarterly* 183 (September 2005): 549.

inheritance function; the other engages with contemporary cultural currents, thereby realizing the aesthetic education function. Together, these aesthetic functions operate within the social organism, remaining responsive to the prevailing social atmosphere.

The aesthetic functions of the film industry are essentially institutional in China. The function that a film performs must be identifiable from an external point of view through social practice. This is the case when a community collectively accepts that a film serves a specific function, contingent upon government policies and the social circumstances of a given period. It is said that “Historically, the most common approach to the task of defining art has been functionalist. Functionalist accounts promise not only to explain what it is for something to be art, but also to explain its value.”¹⁷ It is common to say that art has some special functions, but what I want to highlight is that a function is effective only in social practice, which is the institutional character of a function. The functions of film play a role only in social practice and mean nothing if the film is not seen. We presume a plurality of interpretations and a multiplicity of aesthetic functions. This opens up more than one possibility for film as a fine art. Films that perform any of the categories of aesthetic functions can have a positive impact on the film industry. However, these functions are not equally distributed; some are prioritized under certain circumstances. The cultural inheritance and aesthetic education functions, in particular, have been prioritized by the Chinese film industry in the 21st century.

Conclusion

This paper has systematically demonstrated that the contemporary Chinese film industry operates as a new media spectacle, driven by industrial expansion, visual spectacularization, urban spatial embedding, and large-scale public participation. Empirically, this spectacle manifests itself in three interrelated dimensions: it presents the market through “box office myths”, reshapes film culture through “urban spaces,” and reconfigures audience perception through “aesthetic functions”. The empirical evidence and theoretical reasoning confirm that the Chinese film industry operates as a socially pervasive media spectacle that structures public experience and collective perception.

Drawing on the Chinese film industry over the past two decades, this paper offers philosophical perspectives on the aesthetic value of Chinese film. It is clear that the Chinese film industry continued to expand in the 21st century. It is possible to perceive beauty through high-box-office movies in the Chinese film market; thus, these commercial movies ought to be admitted to the aesthetic domain and discussed theoretically and aesthetically. Films are products carried out by filmmakers that imply beauty-making intentions. Yet these intentions never stand alone: they exist in theaters, star-audience meetings, film festivals, and film academic seminars;

¹⁷ Catharine Abell, “Art: What it Is and Why it Matters,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (November 2012): 671–91.

they accompany other artificial intentions, penetrating media spectacle to make our urban public space more active and diverse. Furthermore, this paper logically derives three interrelated aesthetic functions from the structural characteristics of new media spectacle: artistic innovation, driven by visual and industrial spectacle; cultural inheritance, realized through mediated cultural representation; and aesthetic education, achieved through immersive public engagement. These functions are not isolated classifications but organic to the formation of the new media spectacle of Chinese film. This study presents a structurally integrated and theoretically grounded interpretation of the Chinese film industry as a new form of media spectacle. These findings may serve as a reference point for investigating media-driven cultural industries in today's interconnected, digital world.

Table 1. The data of the Chinese Film Industry since the year 2002

Year	Total Box Office Dollars (million)	Feature Film Production	Annual Film Box Office Champion	Box Office Dollars(million)
2002	134.75	100	英雄	6.03
			Hero	
2003	134.75	140	手機	6.38
			Cell phone	
2004	222.69	212	十面埋伏	21.70
			House of Flying Daggers	
2005	290.77	260	無極	24.11
			The Promise	
2006	371.62	330	滿城盡帶黃金甲	32.62
			Curse of the Golden Flower	
2007	472.33	402	投名狀	27.23
			The Warlords	
2008	615.59	406	赤壁 (上)	45.39
			Red Cliff I	
2009	880.83	456	建國大業	59.57
			The Founding of a Republic	

2010	1432.58	526	唐山大地震	95.50
			Aftershock	
2011	1859.52	558	金陵十三釵	66.26
			The Flowers Of War	
2012	2421.21	745	人再囧途之泰囧	142.49
			Lost In Thailand	
2013	3087.86	638	西遊降魔篇	176.74
			Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons	
2014	4204.14	618	心花路放	165.53
			Breakup Buddies	
2015	6250.89	686	捉妖記	345.94
			Monster Hunt	
2016	6483.50	772	美人魚	481.26
			The Mermaid	
2017	7930.27	798	戰狼 2	805.47
			Wolf Warriors II	
2018	8649.40	902	紅海行動	517.84
			Operation Red Sea	
2019	9115.49	850	哪吒之魔童降世	709.44
			Nezha: Birth of the Demon Child	
2020	2895.95	531	八佰	440.98
			The Eight Hundred	
2021	6703.07	565	長津湖	818.70
			The Battle at Lake Changjin	
2022	4264.70	380	長津湖之水門橋	576.86
			The Battle at Lake Changjin II	
2023	7789.14	792	滿江紅	644.52
			Full River Red	
2024	6028.48	612	熱辣滾燙	484.67
			Yolo	
2025	7256.44	511	哪吒之魔童鬧海	2162.43
			Ne Zha 2	

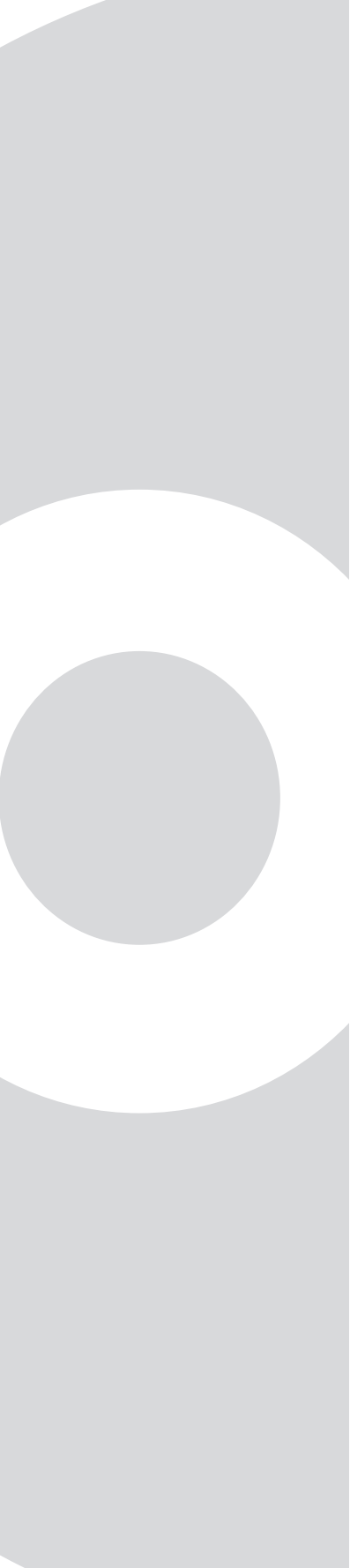
References

- Abell, Catharine. "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85, no. 3 (2012): 671–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2011.00498.x>.
- Braester, Yomi. "Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker as a Cultural Broker." *The China Quarterly* 183 (2005): 549–64. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005000354>.
- Chen, Xiaomei. *Performing the Socialist State: Modern Chinese Theater and Film Culture*. Columbia University Press, 2023.
- Colman, Felicity. *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers*. McGill-Queens University Press, 2009.
- Curtin, Michael. *Playing to the World's Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV*. University of California Press, 2007.
- Edwards, Dan. *Independent Chinese Documentary: Alternative Visions, Alternative Publics*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Fan, Xiang. *Contemporary Art Cinema Culture in China*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2024.
- Iseminger, Gary. *The Aesthetic Function of Art*. Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Kellner, Douglas. *Media Spectacle*. Routledge, 2003.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*. Ed. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden, Trans. Gerald Moore, Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden. University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
- Lim, Song Hwee, and Julian Ward, eds. *The Chinese Cinema Book*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Lu, Sheldon. *Contemporary Chinese Cinema and Visual Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2021.
- McGrath, Jason. *Chinese Film: Realism and Convention from the Silent Era to the Digital*. University of Minnesota Press, 2023.
- Mello, Cecilia. *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film*. Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2022.
- Millikan, Ruth Garrett. *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories*. The MIT Press, 1984.
- Owen, Stephen. *Just a Song: Chinese Lyrics from the Eleventh and Early Twelfth Centuries*. Harvard University Press, 2019.
- Qian, Ying. *Revolutionary Becomings: Documentary Media in Twentieth-Century China*. Columbia University Press, 2024.
- Stuckey, G. Andrew. *Metacinema in Contemporary Chinese Film*. Hong Kong University Press, 2018.
- Teo, Stephen. *Chinese Martial Arts Film and the Philosophy of Action*. Routledge, 2021.
- Wang, Lingzhen. *Chinese Women's Cinema: Transnational Contexts*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Wang, Qi. *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Yang, Xiao. *The Evolution of Chinese Popular Cinema*. Routledge, 2026.
- Zhang, Yingjin, ed. *A Companion to Chinese Cinema*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper



Tamara D. Bradić

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

Psychologist and psychotherapist, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-7516-8007>

Scoring the Citizen: Aesthetic Regimes of Digital Governance in China and Post-Yugoslav States in the Context of Globalization

Abstract: This article offers a comparative analysis of China’s Social Credit experiments and emerging educational data infrastructures in post-Yugoslav states as interconnected aesthetic regimes of digital scoring. Rather than treating these systems only as legal or technical arrangements, the article examines how they organize perception and experience: which behaviors become visible as data, how they are ranked, and which emotions—shame, pride, anxiety, aspiration—are attached to their visual forms. Methodologically, the article employs a comparative interpretative approach situated within media and cultural studies, combining discourse analysis, interface analysis, and critical policy analysis. The comparison does not aim to establish direct equivalence between political systems, but rather to examine how distinct digital environments produce comparable regimes of behavioral visibility, classification, and normalization. On the Chinese side, the analysis focuses on policy documents and critical scholarship on the Social Credit System (SCS), and shows how blacklists, redlists, and scoring interfaces construct state-sanctioned images of the “trustworthy” citizen. On the post-Yugoslav side, it discusses Serbia’s Unified Information System of Education (JISP) and the eDnevnik platform as instances of “soft” social scoring that continuously evaluate pupils and schools. The theoretical framework combines Jacques Rancière’s notion of aesthetic regimes, Shoshana Zuboff’s concept of surveillance capitalism, critical media theory (Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Lev Manovich), and Abraham Maslow’s humanistic psychology. Together, these perspectives illuminate how software interfaces, scoring metrics, and systems of continuous evaluation shape subjectivity, emotional orientation, and social behavior. The article argues that, despite substantial differences in political context and institutional coercion, both cases reveal broader global transformations in which digital governance increasingly operates through continuous visibility, behavioral evaluation, and affective modulation. At the same time, these systems also open space for contestation and for imagining more humane and autonomy-supporting digital infrastructures.

Keywords: social credit; aesthetic regimes; digital aesthetics; surveillance capitalism; China; post-Yugoslav states; educational data infrastructures; self-esteem and autonomy.

Introduction

Over the last decade, data-driven evaluation, classification, and ranking have become increasingly central instruments of governance in digitally mediated societies. In what Shoshana Zuboff describes as a regime of “surveillance capitalism”, human experience is transformed into a source of behavioral data used for prediction, optimization, and social control.¹ Beyond corporate platforms, states and public institutions have also begun to develop systems that monitor, classify, and evaluate citizens through digital infrastructures. The most widely discussed example is China’s Social Credit System, but similar logics of continuous evaluation increasingly appear in educational, administrative, and welfare systems across different political contexts.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that contemporary forms of data extraction extend beyond economic processes alone. Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias argue that digital societies increasingly operate through through what they term “data colonialism”, whereby everyday human life is appropriated as a continuous source of informational value.² Such processes transform ordinary activities—including communication, consumption, mobility, and education—into measurable behavioral traces that can be integrated into broader systems of governance and institutional management.

Rather than approaching these developments exclusively through the frameworks of law, surveillance, or political economy, this article examines them as aesthetic regimes of digital scoring. Drawing on Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “distribution of the sensible”, aesthetics is understood here not simply as a question of visual form, but as a mode of organizing visibility, perception, and social intelligibility.³ Digital scoring systems shape what becomes visible, measurable, and socially meaningful; they determine which forms of behavior appear desirable, trustworthy, risky, or deviant within digitally mediated environments.

The Chinese Social Credit agenda represents one of the most explicit attempts to institutionalize such forms of evaluative visibility. Since the publication of the Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020), Chinese authorities have developed interconnected infrastructures that combine blacklists, redlists, data-sharing systems, and reputational mechanisms intended to regulate “trustworthiness” across social and economic life.⁴ Although frequently interpreted through dystopian narratives, recent scholarship suggests that Social Credit operates through a more complex combination of governance, public legitimacy, and affective participation.⁵

¹ Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (PublicAffairs, 2019), 8–12.

² Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 3–7.

³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004), 12–13.

⁴ State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020),” June 14, 2014, accessed May 27, 2026, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-06/27/content_8913.htm.

⁵ Genia Kostka, “China’s Social Credit Systems and Public Opinion: Explaining High Levels of Approval,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1565–1593.

At the same time, less spectacular but structurally related forms of digital evaluation have emerged within educational systems in post-Yugoslav contexts. In Serbia, the Unified Information System of Education (JISP) and the electronic gradebook platform eDnevnik have been introduced as instruments of educational modernization, transparency, and administrative efficiency.⁶ These systems continuously generate and circulate data concerning attendance, grades, disciplinary records, and institutional performance, producing environments of permanent evaluative visibility within everyday educational experience.

The article situates these developments within broader debates on software, interfaces, and digital subjectivity. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has argued that digital media become most powerful precisely when they become habitual and seemingly invisible within everyday routines, while Lev Manovich conceptualizes software as a “metamedium” that structures contemporary visual and social experience through interfaces and database logic.⁷ Such perspectives help illuminate how scoring systems function not merely as technical instruments, but as infrastructures that organize perception, emotional orientation, and social behavior.

The human consequences of these systems can also be approached through the perspective of humanistic psychology. Abraham Maslow’s theory of motivation suggests that systems grounded in constant comparison, external validation, and continuous evaluation may shape subjects whose sense of worth increasingly depends on fluctuating external indicators.⁸ From this perspective, digital scoring systems do not simply manage information; they also participate in the production of affective environments structured by anxiety, aspiration, competition, and behavioral self-regulation.

By placing Chinese Social Credit experiments and post-Yugoslav educational data infrastructures within the same analytical frame, the article does not claim that these systems are politically equivalent. Rather, it argues that they participate in a broader global transformation in which digital governance increasingly operates through continuous visibility, classification, and behavioral evaluation, while simultaneously taking different institutional and cultural forms.

The central research question of this article is how contemporary digital scoring systems function not only as technical or administrative infrastructures, but also as aesthetic regimes that shape perception, emotional orientation, and subjectivity. Through a comparative analysis of China’s Social Credit experiments and educational data infrastructures in post-Yugoslav contexts, the article examines how digital governance increasingly operates through visibility, classification, and affective modulation.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the methodological and analytical approach of the study. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework. Section 4 analyses the Chinese Social Credit agenda. Section 5 turns

⁶ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, “Jedinstveni informacioni sistem prosvete (JISP)” and “Elektronski dnevnik (eDnevnik),” accessed May 27, 2026, <https://jisp.mpn.gov.rs/> and <https://esdnevnik.rs/>.

⁷ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (MIT Press, 2016), 1–15; Lev Manovich, *Software Takes Command* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 147–182.

⁸ Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (Harper & Row, 1970), 35–58.

to selected post-Yugoslav cases, with an emphasis on Serbia's JISP and eDnevnik. Section 6, titled "Comparative Dimensions of Digital Visibility", develops a comparative discussion of the two contexts, while Section 7 outlines possibilities for more humane digital infrastructures.

Methodology and analytical approach

This article employs a comparative theoretical and interpretative approach situated within media and cultural studies. The analysis combines discourse analysis, interface analysis, and critical policy analysis in order to examine how digital scoring systems organize visibility, affect, and subjectivity.

The Chinese Social Credit System and Serbian educational digital infrastructures (particularly JISP and eDnevnik) were selected as indicative rather than exhaustive case studies. The comparison does not aim to establish direct equivalence between political systems, but rather to examine how distinct digital environments produce comparable aesthetic regimes of classification, visibility, and behavioral normalization.

The analytical procedure focuses on several comparative dimensions:

- forms of visibility and data representation,
- affective mechanisms (anxiety, aspiration, shame),
- degrees of institutional coercion,
- interface logic and behavioral feedback mechanisms,
- relationships between governance and subject formation.

The Chinese case analysis is based on policy documents, existing scholarly literature, and publicly available descriptions of blacklist/redlist mechanisms and digital trust infrastructures. The Serbian/post-Yugoslav case focuses on educational data systems such as JISP and eDnevnik, including their interface structures, data organization practices, and public discourse surrounding educational digitalization.

Rather than offering quantitative empirical research, the article develops a qualitative comparative interpretation of digital governance as an aesthetic and affective regime.

Theoretical framework

The analysis in this article brings together three strands of theory that are often treated separately: aesthetic theory, critical media and software theory, and humanistic psychology. Read together, they offer a conceptual toolkit for understanding digital classificatory systems as aesthetic, infrastructural and psychological formations. In this way, the article positions itself within contemporary aesthetics by treating digital infrastructures of scoring as aesthetic regimes that organize perception and experience in datafied societies.

Building on Jacques Rancière, I approach both China's Social Credit projects and post-Yugoslav educational information systems as aesthetic regimes of governance. Extending Rancière's framework from art to interfaces and platforms foregrounds a specifically digital aesthetics of governance, in which scores, dashboards and lists function as aesthetic forms that shape political experience. Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible refers to the implicit rules that determine what can be seen and said, who is recognized as a speaking subject, and which experiences count as meaningful in a given order.⁹ Evaluative infrastructures participate in such a distribution by deciding which aspects of social life become visible as data, which are backgrounded or ignored, and how citizens, pupils and institutions are positioned within a field of legibility. Interfaces and databases do not simply reflect reality but format it, producing hierarchies of attention and value and attaching affective tones—such as pride, shame or anxiety—to specific classifications.

Critical media and software theory clarify the technological and economic conditions under which these aesthetic regimes operate. Zuboff's concept of surveillance capitalism describes a socio-economic order in which human experience is continuously monitored and translated into behavioral data, which are then used to predict and shape future conduct.¹⁰ In this regime, data are not neutral by-products but targeted extractions that feed predictive architectures and markets. Chun's analysis of habitual new media shows how digital systems become most powerful when they recede into the background of everyday life, turning checking scores, dashboards and portals into seemingly natural routines.¹¹ Manovich's conception of software as a metamedium further highlights how diverse contents are subsumed under the same programmable operations—sorting, filtering, ranking, correlating—that underpin scoring interfaces.¹² In China, these operations are legitimized by the Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020), which frames social credit as a comprehensive solution to problems of trust in markets and governance.¹³ In post-Yugoslav states, educational digitalization is narrated through promises of modernization, transparency and parental empowerment. In both cases, aesthetic forms—lists, grids, colors, icons—are tightly bound to political and economic projects.

While Rancière's concept of the "distribution of the sensible" explains how regimes of visibility organize what can be perceived, recognized, and legitimized within a social order, Maslow's framework helps explain the psychological consequences of such regimes for human motivation and self-perception. Together, these perspectives reveal how digital infrastructures simultaneously structure visibility and shape affective orientations such as anxiety, aspiration, belonging, and self-worth.

⁹ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12–13.

¹⁰ Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8–10.

¹¹ Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same*, 1–4.

¹² Manovich, *Software Takes Command*, 147–153.

¹³ State Council, "Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System."

Humanistic psychology provides a lens for examining how such environments affect subjectivity. Maslow's theory of motivation posits that human beings strive to satisfy a hierarchy of needs, beginning with physiological and safety needs and moving through belonging and esteem toward self-actualization.¹⁴ Esteem needs include both self-respect (a sense of competence, achievement, independence) and the respect of others (recognition, status, appreciation). Maslow argues that their chronic frustration produces feelings of inferiority, weakness, and helplessness, increasing dependence on external authorities.¹⁵ Systems of behavioral visibility can be read in this light as environments that mediate esteem and recognition through opaque metrics. When access to opportunities—credit, mobility, school prestige—is tied to scores that are only partly intelligible or negotiable, self-worth risks becoming tightly bound to conformity with external indicators. Public blacklists and rankings in China, as well as continuous visibility of grades and behavioral notes in educational platforms, encourage subjects to see themselves and others primarily through quantified attributes. At the same time, Maslow's emphasis on self-actualization reminds us that individuals and communities can also reinterpret, resist or subvert imposed classifications, especially in contexts marked by historical experiences of bureaucratic control and contested reforms. This integrated framework—combining aesthetic regimes, digital infrastructures and human motivation—guides the comparative analysis that follows.

China's Social Credit System as an aesthetic regime of scoring

China's Social Credit System (SCS) has often been described as a monolithic instrument of total surveillance, but policy documents and empirical research show a more heterogeneous "system of systems" that gradually intertwines legal enforcement, bureaucratic performance metrics and digital infrastructures. The *Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)*, issued by the State Council in 2014, presents social credit as a comprehensive solution to problems of trust in markets and governance, envisioning unified mechanisms for the collection, integration and use of data on the "trustworthiness" of individuals, enterprises and institutions.¹⁶ Subsequent implementation has proceeded through sectoral regulations, local pilot projects and the expansion of blacklists and redlists that classify actors according to their compliance with legal and contractual obligations.¹⁷

Analyses by Rogier Creemers, Chuncheng Liu and others emphasize that the SCS is less a single centralized database than a constellation of interoperable systems anchored in court enforcement, regulatory registries and administrative sanctions.¹⁸

¹⁴ Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–376.

¹⁵ Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," 382–383.

¹⁶ State Council, "Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System."

¹⁷ Rogier Creemers, "China's Social Credit System: An Evolving Practice of Control," SSRN Scholarly Paper ID 3175792 (Social Science Research Network, 2018), 12–17; Chuncheng Liu, "Multiple Social Credit Systems in China," *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter* 21, no. 1 (2019): 22–26.

¹⁸ Creemers, "China's Social Credit System: An Evolving Practice of Control," 12–17; Liu, "Multiple Social Credit Systems in China," 22–26.

Liang and co-authors conceptualize this constellation as a state surveillance infrastructure: digital platforms aggregate data on tax debts, safety violations, unpaid fines or dishonest commercial practices and translate them into public labels of “trustworthiness” or “untrustworthiness”, often visible through online portals or mobile applications.¹⁹ Genia Kostka’s survey-based research complicates purely dystopian readings by showing that many citizens express support for social credit initiatives, especially when they are framed as targeting corrupt officials or fraudulent businesses, though younger and more educated respondents display more ambivalence.²⁰ These findings suggest that aesthetic and affective dimensions—how the system is presented, whom it appears to target, what emotions it mobilizes—are crucial for its legitimization.

Publicly discussed blacklist mechanisms in China offer a concrete illustration of how visibility operates as governance. Individuals placed on blacklists may face restrictions related to travel, credit access, or digital platform participation, while “redlist” systems publicly reward “trustworthy” behavior. Such mechanisms do not function solely through punishment, but through the visual and affective production of reputational status, transforming social trust into a continuously visible metric.

From the perspective of aesthetic regimes, the SCS operates through specific forms of visualization and classification. Court websites, administrative portals and some commercial interfaces display lists of “discredited” persons, sometimes accompanied by photographs, ID numbers and descriptions of violations. Rankings, color-coded trust scores and badges of “excellence” or “exemplary trustworthiness” create easily readable hierarchies. Such visual devices function as *distributions of the sensible*: they make certain behaviors highly visible and morally charged, while rendering the underlying decision rules and data flows opaque. Citizens are invited to see themselves and others through the lens of scores and lists, to internalize the system’s evaluative gaze, and to adjust their behavior accordingly.

At the same time, the SCS resonates with longer histories of classification in the People’s Republic of China, including household registration (*hukou*) and archival dossiers that recorded political, educational and disciplinary information about citizens. Liu shows how contemporary credit labels and blacklist statuses can echo older categories of political reliability, even as they are articulated in the language of market trust and rule-of-law enforcement.²¹ The result is a hybrid regime in which socialist legacies of dossier-based governance intersect with data-driven techniques of surveillance capitalism, as Zuboff describes: human experience is appropriated as raw material for behavioral data, which is then used to predict and shape future conduct.²²

Viewed through a humanistic psychological lens, this configuration raises questions about the impact of continuous scoring on self-esteem and autonomy. Maslow’s

¹⁹ Fan Liang, Vishnupriya Das, Nadiya Kostyuk, and Muzammil M. Hussain, “Constructing a Data-Driven Society: China’s Social Credit System as a State Surveillance Infrastructure,” *Policy & Internet* 10, no. 4 (2018): 418–425.

²⁰ Kostka, “China’s Social Credit Systems and Public Opinion,” 1572–1582.

²¹ Liu, “Multiple Social Credit Systems in China,” 22–26.

²² Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 8–10.

theory of motivation suggests that stable self-respect and the respect of others are crucial for psychological health and for the possibility of self-actualization.²³ When one's social standing, access to services, or mobility can be affected by semi-public labels of “dishonesty” or low credibility, generated by systems whose criteria are not fully transparent, self-worth risks becoming tightly coupled to compliance with external metrics. Previous work has argued that codification of behavior through reward–punishment schemes may undermine self-respect and facilitate governance through dependence and fear.²⁴ The SCS, as a digital classificatory system, can therefore be read as an environment that not only monitors and sanctions, but also subtly shapes how citizens value themselves and imagine their room for maneuver.

Educational data infrastructures in post-Yugoslav states: JISP and eDnevnik

While post-Yugoslav states have not adopted an explicit “social credit” agenda, they have undergone rapid digitalization of public administration and education that introduces structurally similar forms of data-driven evaluation. In Serbia, the Unified Information System of Education (Jedinstveni informacioni sistem prosvete, JISP) represents the core infrastructure for collecting and integrating data on pupils, teachers, schools and educational outcomes. Its legal basis is provided by the *Law on the Foundations of the Education System* and the *Rulebook on the Unified Information System of Education*, which define categories of data to be collected, actors responsible for input and protection, and possibilities for linking JISP with other public registries.²⁵ Official documents present JISP as a neutral tool for improving planning, monitoring and quality assurance in education, in line with broader digital government strategies.²⁶

Within this framework, the eDnevnik platform functions as a key interface through which schools, teachers, pupils and parents encounter the datafication of education. As an electronic gradebook connected to JISP, eDnevnik records attendance, grades, behavioral notes and other indicators, making them continuously available to authorized users via web or mobile access.²⁷ Public communications emphasize transparency and parental “insight” as primary benefits: parents no longer need to rely on paper diaries or periodic parent–teacher meetings, but can follow their child's performance in real time.²⁸ At the institutional level, aggregated data on grades, exam

²³ Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation,” 370–372, 381–383.

²⁴ Bradić, “Socijalno bodovanje kao model društvene kontrole,” 123–134.

²⁵ Republic of Serbia, *Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja* [Law on the Foundations of the Education System]; Republic of Serbia, *Pravilnik o jedinstvenom informacionom sistemu prosvete* [Rulebook on the Unified Information System of Education].

²⁶ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, Jedinstveni informacioni sistem prosvete (JISP) [Unified Information System of Education (JISP)], accessed May 27, 2026, <https://jisp.mpn.gov.rs/>.

²⁷ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, Elektronski dnevnik (eDnevnik) [Electronic Gradebook (eDnevnik)], accessed May 27, 2026, <https://esdnevnik.rs/>.

²⁸ Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia, *eDnevnik*.

results and other metrics can be used by school administrations and ministries to monitor “success” across schools and municipalities.

Within eDnevnik, students become visible through continuously updated categories, including attendance records, behavioral evaluations, grades, disciplinary notes, and performance indicators. Parents and teachers interact through interface structures that privilege constant monitoring, notification systems, and quantifiable educational progress. The interface thus contributes to the normalization of permanent evaluative visibility within everyday educational experience.

From the perspective of aesthetic regimes, these platforms create specific visual and temporal configurations of educational life. Dashboards, tables, and charts arrange pupils and classes into grids for comparison; color-coded fields and icons draw attention to absences, low grades, or disciplinary notes; time-stamped entries produce a continuous timeline of performance. As in the Chinese case, the interface does not merely reflect events but formats them: it defines what counts as a relevant educational act, how it should be recorded and how quickly it appears to others. The possibility for parents to check the gradebook at any moment reconfigures the rhythms of family communication: information that was once mediated through the pupil and through episodic encounters with teachers now flows directly and continuously from the system to the parent.

Legally and institutionally, there are important differences between this configuration and China’s Social Credit experiments. Serbian educational law and data protection regulations formally limit the use of pupil data to educational purposes, and there is no centralized scoring of citizens across multiple life domains. Yet the aesthetic and psychological dynamics show notable affinities. With social credit, educational platforms can encourage subjects to view themselves primarily through quantified indicators. Pupils may experience their school identity as a set of entries in a digital record; parents may interpret fluctuations in grades as signs of future success or failure, reinforcing pressure and anxiety. In contexts where public debates about data protection and children’s rights are still emerging, and where socio-economic inequalities shape access to technology, the introduction of JISP and eDnevnik risks amplifying existing disparities while presenting them as neutral outcomes of measurement.

At the same time, post-Yugoslav educational systems are marked by specific historical and political trajectories that shape how such infrastructures are received. Legacies of socialist bureaucratic classification, experiences of war, and contested transitions to market economies inform public sensitivities around state data collection and control. Civil society actors, parent associations and some educational professionals have raised concerns about the opacity of data flows, the lack of clear institutional accountability for data breaches, and the potential misuse of educational records for profiling or commercial purposes. These contestations indicate that digitalization is not a linear process of modernization, but a terrain of negotiation over the meaning of education, childhood and citizenship in datafied societies.

Taken together, JISP and eDnevnik can be seen as an emergent aesthetic regime of soft scoring in which educational subjects are rendered visible through continuous data traces, arranged into comparative grids and evaluated through metrics that may extend beyond strictly pedagogical concerns. This regime differs from China's Social Credit System in scope and explicitness but shares key features with it: the translation of behavior into data, the centrality of software interfaces in structuring perception, and the potential to reshape self-understanding and social relations through seemingly technical classifications.

Comparative dimensions of digital visibility

Although the Chinese Social Credit System and Serbian educational data infrastructures emerge from significantly different political and historical contexts, both systems demonstrate how digital governance increasingly operates through continuous visibility, classification, and behavioral evaluation.

However, important differences remain. In the Chinese case, scoring mechanisms are more explicitly connected to state governance, public trust, and reputational regulation, often involving direct forms of restriction or reward. In the Serbian educational context, governance operates more softly through educational normalization, parental monitoring, and performance-oriented visibility.

The affective dimensions also differ. Chinese systems frequently mobilize shame and public reputational consequences, whereas educational scoring environments more commonly produce anxiety, competition, and aspirational self-regulation. Nevertheless, both contexts reveal how digital infrastructures shape subjectivity through continuous exposure to evaluative visibility.

Conclusion

This article has offered a comparative reading of China's Social Credit experiments and educational data infrastructures in post-Yugoslav states as aesthetic regimes of digital scoring. Drawing on Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, critical media and software theory, and Maslow's humanistic psychology, it has treated digital scoring not as a purely technical or legal phenomenon, but as an aesthetic-infrastructural formation that organizes visibility, emotion and self-understanding.

In the Chinese case, the Social Credit agenda appears as a heterogeneous but gradually consolidating infrastructure that classifies individuals and organizations according to their "trustworthiness" through blacklists, redlists and various scoring mechanisms. The aesthetic forms of these classifications—scores, rankings, public lists—attach moral and affective meanings to digital labels and invite citizens to see themselves and others through the lens of trust metrics. From a humanistic perspective, this configuration raises concerns about the erosion of intrinsic motivation and

self-respect in environments where social standing is tightly bound to opaque indicators.

In post-Yugoslav contexts, exemplified by Serbia's JISP and eDnevnik, digitalization of education introduces continuous data collection and real-time visibility of pupils' performance. Although formally limited to the educational field and framed through narratives of modernization, transparency and parental empowerment, these platforms translate complex educational processes into comparable metrics and dashboards. They thus constitute a softer, sectoral form of social scoring that can intensify pressure on pupils and families and obscure structural inequalities behind the appearance of neutral measurement.

Placing these cases side by side has highlighted both convergences and divergences. Convergences lie in their shared reliance on software infrastructures that extract behavioral data, convert them into scalar values, and feed them back as normative signals, participating in broader dynamics often described as surveillance capitalism. Divergences stem from distinct political systems, legal frameworks, and historical experiences, which shape the scope, explicitness, and contestation of scoring regimes. While China's Social Credit projects explicitly aspire to a comprehensive architecture of trust governance, educational platforms in post-Yugoslav states embody a more limited, yet still consequential, mode of datafied evaluation.

As a contribution to contemporary aesthetics, the article has proposed extending the notion of aesthetic regimes to digital infrastructures of scoring, emphasizing how interfaces, visualizations, and temporal rhythms of data circulation shape political and educational experience. For policy and design, this perspective underscores the ethical imperative to build data systems that support, rather than undermine, self-respect and autonomy—through greater transparency about metrics and algorithms, meaningful participation of those who are scored, and clear limits to the expansion of scoring logics across life domains. Future research could deepen this analysis through empirical studies of how citizens, pupils, parents and teachers actually experience and negotiate these infrastructures in everyday life, and how they imagine alternative, more humane forms of digital governance.

More humane digital infrastructures would require greater transparency regarding data collection, stronger limitations on behavioral profiling, and the preservation of spaces that allow human subjects to exist beyond permanent evaluation and quantification. Rather than organizing social life primarily through metrics and continuous visibility, digital systems should support autonomy, dignity, and forms of participation that do not reduce subjectivity to data performance.

References

- Bradić, Tamara. "Socijalno bodovanje kao model društvene kontrole" ["Social Credit Scoring as a Model of Social Control"]. *Megatrend revija* 21, no. 2 (2024): 123–134.
- Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. MIT Press, 2016.
- Couldry, Nick, and Ulises A. Mejias. *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford University Press, 2019.
- Creemers, Rogier. "China's Social Credit System: An Evolving Practice of Control." SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 3175792. *Social Science Research Network*, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3175792>.
- Kostka, Genia. "China's Social Credit Systems and Public Opinion: Explaining High Levels of Approval." *New Media & Society* 21, no. 7 (2019): 1565–1593.
- Liang, Fan, Vishnupriya Das, Nadiya Kostyuk, and Muzammil M. Hussain. "Constructing a Data-Driven Society: China's Social Credit System as a State Surveillance Infrastructure." *Policy & Internet* 10, no. 4 (2018): 415–453.
- Liu, Chuncheng. "Multiple Social Credit Systems in China." *Economic Sociology: The European Electronic Newsletter* 21, no. 1 (2019): 22–32.
- Manovich, Lev. *Software Takes Command*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
- Maslow, Abraham H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370–396.
- Maslow, Abraham H. *Motivation and Personality*. 2nd ed. Harper & Row, 1970.
- Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia. *Elektronski dnevnik (eDnevnik)* [Electronic Gradebook (eDnevnik)]. Accessed May 27, 2026. <https://esdnevnik.rs/>.
- Ministry of Education of the Republic of Serbia. *Jedinstveni informacioni sistem prosvete (JISP)* [Unified Information System of Education (JISP)]. Accessed May 27, 2026. <https://jisp.mpn.gov.rs/>.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. Continuum, 2004.
- Republic of Serbia. *Zakon o osnovama sistema obrazovanja i vaspitanja* [Law on the Foundations of the Education System]. *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, nos. 88/2017, 27/2018, 10/2019, 6/2020, and 129/2021.
- Republic of Serbia. *Pravilnik o jedinstvenom informacionom sistemu prosvete* [Rulebook on the Unified Information System of Education]. *Službeni glasnik Republike Srbije*, no. 81/2019.
- State Council of the People's Republic of China. "Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System (2014–2020)." June 14, 2014. Accessed May 27, 2026. http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-06/27/content_8913.htm.
- Zuboff, Shoshana. *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. PublicAffairs, 2019.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper

Simona Žikić

Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6093-1665>

Empathy as an Aesthetic Infrastructure of Intercultural Communication: China and Post-Yugoslav Digital Narratives in the Age of AI

Abstract: This article examines intercultural communication between China and the post-Yugoslav states in the context of globalization and the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), proposing empathy as a central yet ambivalent aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated. While digital platforms and AI technologies have dramatically increased the intensity and visibility of cross-cultural encounters, they have also transformed the conditions under which cultures are perceived, felt, and understood. Drawing on continental philosophy, moral psychology, and communication theory—particularly the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Zygmunt Bauman, Martin Hoffman, and Jürgen Habermas—this study conceptualizes empathy not merely as a psychological or ethical capacity, but as an aesthetic and communicative form shaped by media technologies. Drawing on a theoretical-comparative and interpretative approach, the article examines Chinese and post-Yugoslav affective and aesthetic regimes as they are represented, circulated, and emotionally experienced within contemporary digital environments. Chinese culture is globally circulated through narratives of harmony, technological progress, and collective futurity, while post-Yugoslav cultures are framed through trauma, nostalgia, and emotional authenticity. These representations invite empathic engagement, yet often at the cost of historical depth, internal plurality, and ethical responsibility. The article argues that AI-driven empathy produces emotional proximity without genuine dialogue, replacing communicative understanding with affective optimization. In response, it proposes a critical aesthetics of empathic communication that preserves distance, opacity, and interpretive labor as necessary conditions for meaningful intercultural dialogue. Such an approach is essential for rethinking cultural exchange between China and the post-Yugoslav space in the age of artificial intelligence.

Keywords: empathy; aesthetics; affect; intercultural communication; artificial intelligence; digital media; globalization; China; post-Yugoslav space.

Introduction

Globalization and the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies have profoundly transformed the conditions under which cultures encounter one

another. In the twenty-first century, intercultural exchange is no longer structured primarily through physical proximity, diplomatic channels, or curated artistic mediation, but through algorithmically governed platforms that circulate images, narratives, and affect across national, linguistic, and epistemological boundaries. Artificial intelligence now actively shapes how cultures are seen, felt, and interpreted, functioning not only as a technical infrastructure but as a mediator of meaning, emotion, and recognition. Yet, while the volume and speed of intercultural contact have increased exponentially, the promise of deeper mutual understanding remains deeply ambivalent. More communication does not necessarily produce more comprehension; in many cases, it produces new forms of misrecognition, flattening, and aestheticized difference.

This tension is particularly visible in exchanges between China and the post-Yugoslav space. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, political, economic, and cultural relations between China and several post-Yugoslav states have intensified, generating new forms of media visibility, symbolic exchange, and public imagination. Among these relationships, Serbia occupies a particularly significant position, as political cooperation, infrastructural investments, and public narratives of “ironclad friendship” have made China one of the most visible non-European actors within the Serbian public sphere. At the same time, the broader post-Yugoslav region remains marked by diverse political orientations, historical experiences, and media environments, producing different modes of engagement with China and its global presence.

These encounters rarely unfold through sustained philosophical or historical dialogue. Instead, they are increasingly mediated through digital platforms, audiovisual formats, and algorithmically optimized content, where complex cultural identities are translated into globally legible emotional and aesthetic codes. What circulates is not simply information about the Other, but stylized versions of cultural experience designed to be immediately graspable, affectively resonant, and economically viable within the contemporary media ecology.

Within this context, empathy has emerged as a central but under-theorized force. Contemporary digital culture constantly invokes empathy—through viral storytelling, humanitarian imagery, personalized algorithms, and AI-driven content curation—yet this empathy is rarely examined as a cultural and aesthetic form. It is typically treated either as a moral virtue or as a psychological capacity, rather than as a mode of mediation that shapes how cultures are made visible to one another. This paper proposes that, in AI-mediated intercultural communication, empathy functions as an aesthetic infrastructure: a set of representational and affective conventions through which cultural difference is rendered perceptible, relatable, and narratively consumable.

Drawing on continental philosophy, moral psychology, communication theory, and critical media studies, this article conceptualizes empathy not as a bridge that overcomes difference but as a fragile, mediated space in which difference is negotiated, stylized, and often neutralized. The analysis brings into dialogue Jean-Luc Nancy’s

and Maurice Blanchot's reflections on alterity and community, Zygmunt Bauman's critique of liquid modernity, Martin Hoffman's account of empathy as a foundation of moral responsibility, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, and affect theory as developed by Sara Ahmed and Brian Massumi. Together, these perspectives make it possible to examine how contemporary digital and AI-mediated environments transform empathy from an ethical relation into an aesthetic and technological form.

Nancy's notion of the "inoperative community" suggests that genuine relationality cannot be grounded in shared identity or emotional fusion, but in the exposure to the irreducible otherness of the Other.¹ Blanchot similarly insists on the impossibility of fully knowing or assimilating the Other, locating ethical relation precisely in this gap.² Hoffman,³ by contrast, emphasizes empathy as the basis of moral responsibility, while Habermas⁴ situates understanding within communicative processes oriented toward dialogue rather than strategic advantage. Ahmed⁵ and Massumi⁶ further demonstrate how emotions circulate through cultural and technological systems, shaping what becomes visible, recognizable, and affectively meaningful. Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity additionally helps explain why empathic engagement in digital culture often becomes fleeting, performative, and detached from sustained ethical commitment.⁷ In contrast, contemporary digital and AI-driven systems increasingly attempt to organize these processes through algorithmically tailored experiences of recognition, affective resonance, and emotional mirroring.

From this perspective, AI does not simply translate languages or images between China and Serbia; it translates affect, trauma, nostalgia, and identity into globally recognizable aesthetic forms. Importantly, these forms should not be understood as exhaustive representations of either cultural context. As scholars such as Rey Chow⁸ and Yuk Hui⁹ have argued, Chinese cultural and media production is marked by internal diversity, tensions, and competing imaginaries that cannot be reduced to a single narrative. Nevertheless, within globally circulating digital environments, certain representations achieve greater visibility than others. Narratives emphasizing social harmony, technological progress, and collective futurity frequently become privileged

¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 1–7.

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (Station Hill Press, 1988), 3–6.

³ Martin L. Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–10.

⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Beacon Press, 1984), 86–101.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 8–12.

⁶ Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Duke University Press, 2002), 25–30.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity Press, 2000), 160–165.

⁸ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (Columbia University Press, 2007), 1–10.

⁹ Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics* (Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2016), 12–20.

sites of recognition, just as post-Yugoslav narratives of fragmentation, historical trauma, nostalgia, and ironic self-reflection often acquire heightened visibility within international media circulation. Filtered through platforms that privilege emotional immediacy, visual coherence, and narrative simplification, these representations become emotionally legible shorthand for much more complex cultural realities. What emerges is not an encounter between cultures as historically situated and philosophically complex formations, but a circulation of aestheticized emotional signals that simulate understanding while often bypassing their ethical and political depth.

By reframing empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, this paper seeks to contribute to contemporary debates in aesthetics, media studies, and communication theory. It argues that the central challenge of globalization today is not merely how cultures represent themselves to one another, but how technological systems shape the very conditions under which feeling, recognition, and meaning become possible—and at times impossible or distorted—across differences.

In the case of China and the post-Yugoslav states, this challenge is particularly acute, as both cultural spaces carry deeply specific historical and symbolic formations that resist easy translation. To engage in meaningful dialogue between them therefore requires not more data, more connectivity, or more algorithmic personalization, but a critical rethinking of the aesthetic forms through which empathy itself is produced.

Methodological approach

This article adopts a theoretical-comparative and interpretative approach to the study of intercultural communication in the context of globalization and artificial intelligence. Rather than conducting an empirical analysis of specific media datasets, the paper develops a conceptual framework for understanding empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated, perceived, and emotionally experienced in contemporary digital environments.

The analysis draws on communication theory, moral psychology, continental philosophy, and media studies to examine how AI-mediated platforms shape the conditions for intercultural visibility and recognition. The comparison between China and the post-Yugoslav space is not intended to suggest that either is internally homogeneous culturally. On the contrary, both contexts are understood as historically complex, heterogeneous, and contested fields characterized by diverse cultural, political, and media practices. The comparative perspective is therefore employed heuristically, as a way to identify dominant affective and aesthetic patterns that emerge in globally circulating digital narratives rather than to describe entire cultures as coherent or unified entities.

Methodologically, the article combines theoretical interpretation with illustrative examples drawn from contemporary media and cultural circulation, including narratives surrounding China–Serbia relations, digital representations of technological progress, and post-Yugoslav memory cultures. These examples do not constitute

a systematic empirical corpus but serve as indicative cases that illuminate broader communicative and aesthetic tendencies. The purpose of these examples is not to provide generalizable empirical findings, but to demonstrate how particular affective and aesthetic narratives become visible, recognizable, and emotionally meaningful within contemporary digital environments.

For the purposes of this article, the term artificial intelligence is used in a broad socio-technical sense. It encompasses recommendation algorithms, automated content curation systems, generative AI tools, and platform infrastructures that shape the production, circulation, and visibility of digital content. The focus is therefore not on artificial intelligence as an autonomous technological agent, but on AI-enabled communicative environments that influence how cultural narratives become visible, emotionally resonant, and socially meaningful. Consequently, references to AI-mediated empathy throughout the article denote forms of empathic engagement conditioned, amplified, or structured by algorithmic systems and digital platform logics, rather than emerging solely from direct interpersonal interaction.

The article therefore positions itself as a conceptual intervention within contemporary debates on intercultural communication, artificial intelligence, and aesthetics. Its primary objective is not to empirically measure audience effects or platform dynamics, but to provide a critical framework for understanding how empathy is increasingly produced, organized, and circulated through algorithmically mediated forms of communication.

As a conceptual and interpretative study, the article does not seek to provide empirically generalizable conclusions. Rather, it aims to offer a theoretical framework that may inform future empirical research on AI-mediated intercultural communication and digital cultures.

Theoretical framework: empathy, aesthetics, and AI-mediated communication

To conceptualize empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, it is necessary to move beyond its conventional understanding as an individual psychological capacity and situate it within broader philosophical, ethical, and media-theoretical frameworks. In contemporary digital environments, empathy is no longer only something that occurs between subjects; it is increasingly designed, formatted, and circulated through technological systems. AI-mediated platforms shape not only what we see of other cultures, but how we are invited to feel about them. Empathy thus becomes a cultural and technologically mediated form of perception.

From the perspective of moral psychology, Martin Hoffman's theory of empathy provides an important foundation. In *Empathy and Moral Development*, Hoffman defines empathy as the capacity to be affectively attuned to another's experience, a capacity that grounds both caring and justice.¹⁰ Empathy, in this sense, is not merely

¹⁰ Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 29–35.

emotional contagion, but a complex process through which one recognizes the other as a moral subject. However, Hoffman's model presupposes relatively direct interpersonal or narrative encounters. In digital and AI-driven environments, this process is profoundly transformed: we do not encounter the Other directly, but through representations that have already been filtered, stylized, and optimized for affective impact. What appears as empathy is often a technologically produced emotional alignment, detached from the ethical responsibility that Hoffman associates with genuine moral recognition.

This tension becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of critical social theory. Jürgen Habermas's concept of communicative rationality rests on the possibility of mutual understanding achieved through undistorted communication.¹¹ In an ideal communicative situation, participants engage as equals, oriented toward reaching understanding rather than strategic advantage. Yet contemporary digital communication is rarely organized around such ideals. Algorithmic platforms prioritize engagement, emotional intensity, and visibility over dialogue, argumentation, or reflexivity. In this context, empathy becomes less a medium of communicative understanding and more a resource within an attention economy, where emotional resonance is engineered to maximize circulation and influence.

Continental philosophy further complicates the notion that empathy can provide transparent access to the Other. Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of the inoperative community challenges the idea that community—or by extension, intercultural understanding—can be grounded in shared identity or emotional fusion.¹² For Nancy, community emerges not from sameness but from exposure to difference, from being-with others whose alterity can never be fully absorbed. Maurice Blanchot similarly insists that the relation to the Other is marked by irreducible distance; any attempt to fully know, appropriate, or emotionally synchronize with the Other risks erasing their singularity.¹³ These insights are crucial for understanding the limits of digitally mediated empathy, which often presents itself as immediate, intimate, and emotionally transparent, while in fact operating through standardized aesthetic forms.

Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of liquid modernity provides another key dimension. In a world characterized by fluid identities, unstable attachments, and rapidly shifting social bonds, emotional experiences are increasingly short-lived, commodified, and easily replaceable.¹⁴ Empathy, under such conditions, becomes fleeting and performative: one feels with others momentarily, often through mediated images or narratives, but without sustained ethical or political commitment. Digital platforms intensify this logic by transforming suffering, differences, and cultural specificity into consumable emotional spectacles.

¹¹ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 285–295.

¹² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 11–15.

¹³ Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 1–8.

¹⁴ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 82–92.

When artificial intelligence enters this landscape, the transformation becomes even more profound. AI systems do not merely transmit cultural representations; they actively learn which emotional cues generate engagement and adjust their output accordingly. As a result, empathy is no longer simply something humans bring to intercultural encounters; it is increasingly scripted by platforms and algorithms. The “empathic” experience of another culture—whether Chinese or post-Yugoslav—is shaped by aesthetic patterns that prioritize clarity, emotional immediacy, and narrative coherence over historical depth, contradiction, or ambivalence.

This theoretical framework allows us to understand empathy as an aesthetic and technological form rather than a purely psychological or moral one. Empathy becomes a mode of perception structured by media formats, visual regimes, narrative conventions, and algorithmic logics. It is within this mediated space that contemporary intercultural encounters between China and the post-Yugoslav world take place. What is at stake is not whether empathy exists, but which forms of empathy are cultivated and whose cultural realities it allows to appear.

China and post-Yugoslav space as affective and aesthetic universes

To analyze empathy as an aesthetic infrastructure of intercultural communication, China and the post-Yugoslav space must be approached not simply as geopolitical regions, but as historically formed affective and aesthetic regimes. These affective and aesthetic regimes are not merely abstract formations but are historically mediated through concrete cultural circulations. The enduring popularity of *Valter brani Sarajevo*¹⁵ in China, for instance, illustrates how Yugoslav cultural narratives became embedded within Chinese political and affective imaginaries. More than a successful foreign film, *Valter* functioned as a symbolic narrative of anti-fascist resistance, collective solidarity, and popular heroism that resonated with broader Chinese understandings of national struggle and social cohesion. Its continued cultural visibility demonstrates that intercultural communication often unfolds not through direct dialogue, but through the circulation and reinterpretation of emotionally charged symbols that acquire new meanings in different historical and political contexts. Cultures do not encounter one another through abstract information, but through sensibilities—ways of feeling, remembering, and relating—that become stabilized in visual, narrative, and symbolic forms. As Sara Ahmed has argued, emotions do not reside within subjects but circulate between bodies, texts, and images, shaping what becomes recognizable, desirable, or distant in the public sphere.¹⁶ In this sense, intercultural communication is always already an affective and aesthetic process.

In the contemporary Chinese culture, dominant aesthetic and affective patterns have been shaped by a long philosophical tradition emphasizing relational harmony and collective coherence, combined with modern narratives of technological and

¹⁵ *Valter brani Sarajevo*, directed by Hajrudin Krvavac (Yugoslavia, 1972).

¹⁶ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 45–48.

national progress. Scholars such as Rey Chow¹⁷ and Zhang Zhen¹⁸ have shown that Chinese visual and media culture tends to privilege symbolic integration, emotional moderation, and narrative resolution, even when addressing historical trauma or social tension. More recently, thinkers such as Yuk Hui¹⁹ have argued that Chinese engagements with digital technology are grounded in distinct cosmotechnical imaginaries, in which technology is not understood as a neutral or universal system, but as embedded within specific cultural, moral, and ontological frameworks. From this perspective, digital infrastructures in China cannot be fully interpreted through Western models of technological rationality, as they are shaped by alternative conceptions of order, relationality, and governance. This has significant implications for the aesthetics of digital culture, where technological mediation appears not as a disruption but as a continuity with broader visions of social harmony and collective organization. Within this framework, digital and AI-driven cultural production frequently presents a smooth, future-oriented aesthetic in which individual emotions are embedded within collective narratives of continuity and stability.

By contrast, the post-Yugoslav cultural space is structured by historical rupture, political disintegration, and unresolved collective memory. Maria Todorova's concept of the Balkans as a symbolic and cultural "in-between" space,²⁰ together with Svetlana Boym's analysis of nostalgia²¹ and Boris Buden's critique of post-socialist cultural identity,²² have demonstrated how the collapse of Yugoslavia produced not only new political entities but deeply fractured affective worlds. Post-Yugoslav cultural production is therefore often characterized by melancholic attachment to lost common futures, ironic distance from grand narratives, and an intense engagement with trauma, displacement, and identity. Rather than harmony, its dominant aesthetic mode is one of exposure: fragmented storytelling, ambivalent characters, and unresolved endings that reflect a society still negotiating the meaning of its past and present. At the same time, these aesthetic forms cannot be separated from broader regimes of representation and power. As Milica Bakić-Hayden's concept of "nesting orientalism" suggests,²³ the Balkans have historically been situated within layered hierarchies of otherness, in which each region constructs its own "East" in relation to a perceived "West". Similarly, China has long been subject to orientalist framings that oscillate between fascination, exoticization, and ideological projection. In contemporary digital environments, these representational logics are not eliminated but reconfigured, intersecting with algorithmic visibility and affective circulation. As a result, both China and the

¹⁷ Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, 12–18.

¹⁸ Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1–10.

¹⁹ Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, 35–42.

²⁰ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–20.

²¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), 41–55.

²² Boris Buden, *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus* (Suhrkamp, 2009), 15–25.

²³ Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–931.

post-Yugoslav space are encountered not only through their own aesthetic productions, but through globally mediated imaginaries that shape how they can be seen, felt, and understood. Viewed from this perspective, intercultural communication is shaped not only by cultural difference itself, but also by historically sedimented regimes of representation. Both China and the post-Yugoslav space occupy ambivalent positions within global symbolic hierarchies: China is frequently represented through competing narratives of technological modernity, political opacity, and civilizational otherness, while the Balkans have long been positioned as Europe's internal "other". These representational frameworks influence not only how cultures are interpreted, but also how empathy becomes distributed across global media environments. Digital platforms do not eliminate such asymmetries; rather, they often reproduce them through algorithmic forms of visibility that privilege familiar narratives and recognizable emotional frames. As a result, intercultural empathy frequently operates within pre-existing structures of representation, where some forms of difference become emotionally accessible while others remain distant, unintelligible, or invisible.

These divergent affective regimes profoundly shape how China and the post-Yugoslav space become visible within global media. Chinese digital narratives tend to aestheticize coherence, progress, and technological optimism, inviting admiration and affective alignment with a vision of collective futurity. Post-Yugoslav narratives, in contrast, are frequently framed through emotional intensity, authenticity, and historical depth, inviting compassion, fascination, or melancholic intimacy. As Zizi Papacharissi has shown in her work on affective publics, digital platforms organize these emotional orientations into communicable and shareable forms, transforming cultural difference into emotionally legible content.²⁴

However, this process also involves significant reduction and distortion. As emotions circulate through global platforms, they are filtered through algorithmic logics that privilege immediacy, recognizability, and emotional impact. Complex cultural histories become condensed into aestheticized affective signals: Chinese culture appears as a smooth surface of technological modernity and social harmony, while post-Yugoslav culture appears as a landscape of perpetual trauma, irony, or raw authenticity. In both cases, what is amplified are those elements that can be most easily felt, shared, and consumed.

This is where empathy operates as an aesthetic infrastructure. It does not simply connect viewers to distant others; it structures how those others are allowed to appear. The global audience is invited to feel with China through admiration and aspirational identification, and to feel with the post-Yugoslav space through compassion, nostalgia, or emotional intimacy. Yet, as Ahmed and Nancy would suggest, such aestheticized empathy risks erasing the irreducible alterity of the Other, replacing genuine relational exposure with emotionally satisfying but politically shallow forms of recognition.²⁵

²⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 3–10.

²⁵ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10–12; Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 34–40.

Understanding China and the post-Yugoslav space as distinct affective and aesthetic universes thus reveals the limits of contemporary intercultural communication. What appears as mutual understanding is often a carefully formatted emotional encounter, designed to circulate within a global digital economy rather than to sustain ethical and historical depth. In the age of AI, this formatting becomes increasingly automated, raising urgent questions about whose emotional realities are made visible and whose are rendered invisible in the global circulation of culture.

Digital narratives, AI, and aesthetics of empathy

The transformation of intercultural communication in the twenty-first century cannot be understood without examining the role of digital platforms and artificial intelligence in shaping how cultural narratives are produced, circulated, and emotionally experienced. Unlike earlier forms of cross-cultural exchange—such as literature, cinema, or diplomacy—contemporary encounters between China and Serbia increasingly unfold through algorithmically curated environments where visibility, affect, and narrative coherence are optimized for engagement rather than understanding, but also for economic extraction and geopolitical positioning within the global platform economy, where visibility itself becomes a strategic resource. Within these environments, empathy does not arise organically from dialogue or shared experience; it is actively designed as an aesthetic effect.

Digital platforms operate through what Brian Massumi describes as affective modulation: they do not merely represent emotions but preemptively organize how users are likely to feel.²⁶ Recommendation systems, engagement metrics, and AI-driven content generation privilege emotional cues that can be rapidly recognized and circulated—hope, fear, admiration, nostalgia, outrage—while filtering out ambivalence, contradiction, and historical complexity. As a result, cultural difference becomes legible primarily through simplified affective frames. China and the post-Yugoslav space appear not as internally plural and contested formations, but as emotionally coherent brands, each associated with a limited set of recognizable feelings.

In the case of China, digital narratives circulated globally through platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and state-supported media ecosystems often emphasize visual smoothness, technological sophistication, and scenes of collective coordination. A particularly visible example can be found in short-form video platforms such as TikTok, where widely circulated videos frequently present Chinese urban infrastructures, high-speed rail networks, automated services, and technologically advanced cityscapes through visually compelling and emotionally engaging formats. Such content often invites admiration and curiosity, encouraging audiences to relate to China through narratives of innovation, efficiency, and futurity rather than through the social, political, or historical complexities that underpin these developments. These images and stories produce what Han Byung-Chul has described as a “positive” aesthetic

²⁶ Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 25–30.

regime—one that minimizes friction, negativity, and contradiction in favor of emotional fluency and visual harmony.²⁷ AI systems trained on such content reinforce these patterns by learning which representations generate admiration, curiosity, or aspirational identification. Empathy, here, is aligned with fascination and respect: global audiences are invited to feel with China as a technologically advanced and socially cohesive future.

Post-Yugoslav digital narratives, by contrast, circulate through a different affective economy. Social media, documentary platforms, and global news outlets often frame the region through emotionally charged stories of historical trauma, cultural authenticity, political volatility, or ironic self-awareness. These narratives resonate within what Papacharissi has described as affective publics—networked spaces where emotion becomes a primary mode of political and cultural engagement.²⁸ AI-driven systems learn to amplify those elements that provoke emotional intensity: stories of suffering, resilience, or exoticized differences. Empathy, in this context, becomes linked to compassion, melancholy, or intimate identification with perceived vulnerability.

In both cases, AI functions as a powerful aesthetic filter. It does not simply distribute content; it reorganizes cultural visibility according to affective profitability. As algorithms learn which emotional tones maximize attention and sharing, they begin to privilege certain versions of cultural identity over others. Complex social realities—internal dissent in China, or everyday normality in post-Yugoslav societies—are overshadowed by those representations that fit the dominant affective templates. What remains visible is what can be easily felt.

This process profoundly alters the nature of intercultural empathy. Rather than emerging from sustained engagement with difference, empathy is produced as a momentary emotional alignment with preformatted narratives. From the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, such algorithmic proximity undermines the very conditions of ethical relation: instead of being exposed to the irreducible alterity of the Other, the subject encounters an emotionally pleasing simulation of closeness that erases distance.²⁹ Empathy becomes less a space of being-with and more a mechanism of emotional consumption.

This shift also entails a significant moral transformation. While Martin Hoffman's theory of empathy situates affective attunement as the foundation of responsibility toward others, AI-driven empathy produces resonance without obligation. One may feel with distant cultures, but without the ethical demand that follows from genuine recognition. Emotional alignment becomes detached from moral accountability.³⁰

From a Habermasian perspective, this represents a further distortion of communicative rationality. Instead of dialogue oriented toward mutual understanding,

²⁷ Han Byung-Chul, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 1–10.

²⁸ Papacharissi, *Affective Publics*, 5–12.

²⁹ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 34–40; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 9–12.

³⁰ Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 55–60.

algorithmic mediation privileges affective optimization and strategic engagement. Intercultural communication becomes less a space for reciprocal interpretation and more a competitive arena in which emotionally effective narratives dominate visibility.³¹

In this sense, AI-mediated digital narratives do not merely connect China and the post-Yugoslav space; they configure the very conditions under which this connection becomes imaginable. Empathy, as an aesthetic infrastructure, enables cultural visibility while simultaneously delimiting what kinds of difference can be perceived. The challenge for contemporary intercultural communication is therefore not only how to circulate more diverse images, but how to resist the reduction of cultural worlds to emotionally optimized surfaces.

Aestheticized empathy and the loss of otherness

The expansion of AI-mediated communication has produced a paradox at the heart of contemporary intercultural exchange. Never before have distant cultures been so emotionally present to one another, yet never has their radical difference been so thoroughly neutralized. This paradox emerges from the transformation of empathy into an aestheticized and algorithmically managed experience. While empathy promises proximity, recognition, and care, its contemporary digital forms increasingly operate as mechanisms of simplification that render cultural otherness emotionally accessible but epistemologically shallow.

From the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy's inoperative community, this transformation is deeply problematic. For Nancy, being with others does not consist in sharing emotions, identities, or narratives, but in being exposed to the irreducible alterity of those with whom we coexist. Community arises not through fusion but through the acknowledgment of distance. Aestheticized empathy, however, collapses this distance by offering emotionally gratifying simulations of closeness. When China and the post-Yugoslav space are encountered primarily through emotionally optimized digital narratives, their cultures appear less as autonomous worlds and more as affective experiences designed for consumption.³²

Maurice Blanchot's insistence on the opacity of the Other further sharpens this critique. Genuine ethical relation depends on accepting that the Other can never be fully known, represented, or emotionally synchronized with. AI-driven empathy undermines this ethical opacity by producing the illusion of transparent access: it suggests that by watching, liking, or emotionally reacting to a narrative, one has entered into a meaningful relation with distant cultures. In reality, this relation remains mediated by aesthetic conventions that filter out ambiguity, conflict, and historical depth.³³

This process also erodes the moral foundations of empathy as theorized by

³¹ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 310–320.

³² Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 25–30.

³³ Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 12–18.

Martin Hoffman. In Hoffman's model, empathy is inseparable from responsibility: to feel with another is to be called into a relation of care and moral consideration.³⁴ In digital environments, however, empathy becomes detached from action. One may feel sorrow for post-Yugoslav suffering or admiration for Chinese technological achievement, yet such feelings rarely translate into sustained ethical engagement. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, media narratives surrounding Chinese medical assistance to Serbia were frequently framed through emotionally charged imagery of solidarity, friendship, and mutual support. Public discourse was saturated with symbolic gestures, visual representations, and narratives of gratitude that generated strong affective responses and reinforced perceptions of exceptional closeness between the two countries. While such representations successfully mobilized empathy and emotional identification, they often simplified the broader political, economic, and diplomatic complexities that structured these relations. The result was not necessarily deeper intercultural understanding, but a form of affective proximity organized through highly visible and emotionally resonant narratives. Empathy becomes episodic, momentary, and ultimately disposable, reinforcing what Bauman describes as the liquidity of contemporary moral life.³⁵

The consequences for intercultural communication are profound. When empathy is aestheticized, cultural differences are no longer encountered as challenges that demand interpretation, negotiation, and ethical reflexivity. Instead, it is packaged into emotionally legible forms that allow the global audience to feel connected without confronting the historical and political realities that structure those cultures. China becomes a spectacle of harmony and progress; the post-Yugoslav space becomes a theater of trauma and authenticity. Both are reduced to affective identities that circulate easily but obscure the lived complexity.

From a Habermasian standpoint, this reduction represents a further colonization of communicative space by strategic and technological rationalities. Rather than fostering conditions for mutual understanding, digital platforms engineer emotional engagement in ways that prioritize visibility and circulation over dialogue. Intercultural communication is thus reorganized around what can be felt quickly and shared widely, rather than what can be understood deeply.³⁶

In this context, the loss of otherness is not accidental but structural. AI-mediated empathy produces a world in which difference is tolerated only insofar as it can be aesthetically framed and emotionally consumed. What resists such framing—internal conflict, historical contradiction, ethical ambiguity—is pushed to the margins of visibility. The challenge for China–post-Yugoslav dialogue, and for a global intercultural communication more broadly, is therefore not to generate more empathetic images, but to cultivate forms of engagement that preserve the opacity, difficulty, and irreducibility of the Other.

³⁴ Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 68–75.

³⁵ Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 160–165.

³⁶ Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 385–395.

Conclusion: toward critical aesthetics of empathic communication

This article has been set out to examine intercultural communication between China and the post-Yugoslav space in the context of globalization and artificial intelligence, proposing empathy as a central yet ambivalent aesthetic infrastructure through which cultural difference is mediated. While contemporary digital technologies have dramatically expanded the reach and intensity of cross-cultural contact, they have not necessarily deepened mutual understanding. On the contrary, AI-mediated environments increasingly translate cultural complexity into emotionally legible but simplified forms, reshaping how cultures are perceived, felt, and valued. This transformation raises broader questions about the future of intercultural communication in digitally mediated societies. If cultural encounters are increasingly organized through systems designed to optimize attention, visibility, and emotional engagement, then the challenge is no longer merely how cultures communicate, but how communicative environments themselves shape the possibilities of recognition and understanding. The question is not whether empathy remains important, but what forms of empathy become possible under conditions of algorithmic mediation. In this sense, the future of intercultural dialogue may depend less on technological connectivity and more on the capacity to preserve interpretative openness, critical reflexivity, and sensitivity to cultural complexity within increasingly automated communication systems. In this process, cultures are not only represented but pre-structured as affective experiences, where recognition depends less on knowledge and more on immediate emotional intelligibility. As a result, intercultural understanding is increasingly replaced by affective familiarity, which creates the impression of closeness while leaving underlying differences insufficiently examined. This shift raises the question of whether contemporary intercultural communication still operates as a space of interpretation, or whether it is increasingly reduced to the circulation of emotionally optimized images.

Within this landscape, dialogue can no longer be understood as a transparent exchange of meanings between stable cultural subjects. In the age of AI, dialogue is structurally mediated by platforms that preconfigure visibility, affect, and narrative coherence. What appears as intercultural dialogue is often an encounter between algorithmically formatted representations rather than between historically situated cultures. The case of China and the post-Yugoslav space illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity: distinct affective and aesthetic universes are rendered globally intelligible through empathic narratives that privilege harmony, trauma, progress, or authenticity, while marginalizing internal plurality and contradiction.

This transformation demands a rethinking of empathy itself. Rather than treating empathy as an unqualified good or as a simple moral capacity, this article has argued for understanding empathy as an aesthetic and communicative form—one that can either open or foreclose genuine engagement with otherness. When empathy is reduced to emotional alignment without ethical responsibility, it risks becoming a technology of proximity that erases distance, difference, and historical depth. Such

empathy may generate feelings of closeness, but it does so at the cost of critical understanding.

Critical aesthetics of empathic communication, therefore, does not aim to abolish empathy, but to reclaim its ethical and epistemological potential. Drawing on Nancy and Blanchot, it insists on preserving the distance and opacity that make ethical relation possible. From Hoffman's perspective, it reanchors empathy in responsibility rather than momentary affect. From a Habermasian standpoint, it resists the reduction of communication to affective optimization and reasserts the importance of dialogue oriented toward understanding rather than engagement metrics.³⁷

In practical terms, this means acknowledging that genuine intercultural dialogue cannot be fully automated, optimized, or aesthetically smoothed. Dialogue between China and the post-Yugoslav states—and between cultures more broadly—requires spaces in which discomfort, misunderstanding, and interpretive labor are not eliminated but sustained. It requires communicative practices that allow cultures to appear not only as emotionally resonant images, but as historically complex, internally diverse, and ethically demanding worlds.

In the context of globalization and AI, the question is no longer whether cultures are connected, but how they are allowed to be encountered. Empathy remains indispensable to intercultural communication, but only when it is practiced critically—when it resists aesthetic reduction and remains open to the irreducible otherness of the Other. Such critical empathy does not promise immediate understanding, but it offers the possibility of a dialogue that is both ethically grounded and aesthetically attentive to difference. In an age increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, the task of intercultural communication may therefore not be to eliminate distance, but to cultivate forms of empathy capable of engaging with difference without reducing it to familiarity.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Bakić-Hayden, Milica. "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia." *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–931.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press, 2000.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris. Station Hill Press, 1988.
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Buden, Boris. *Zone des Übergangs: Vom Ende des Postkommunismus*. Suhrkamp, 2009.
- Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

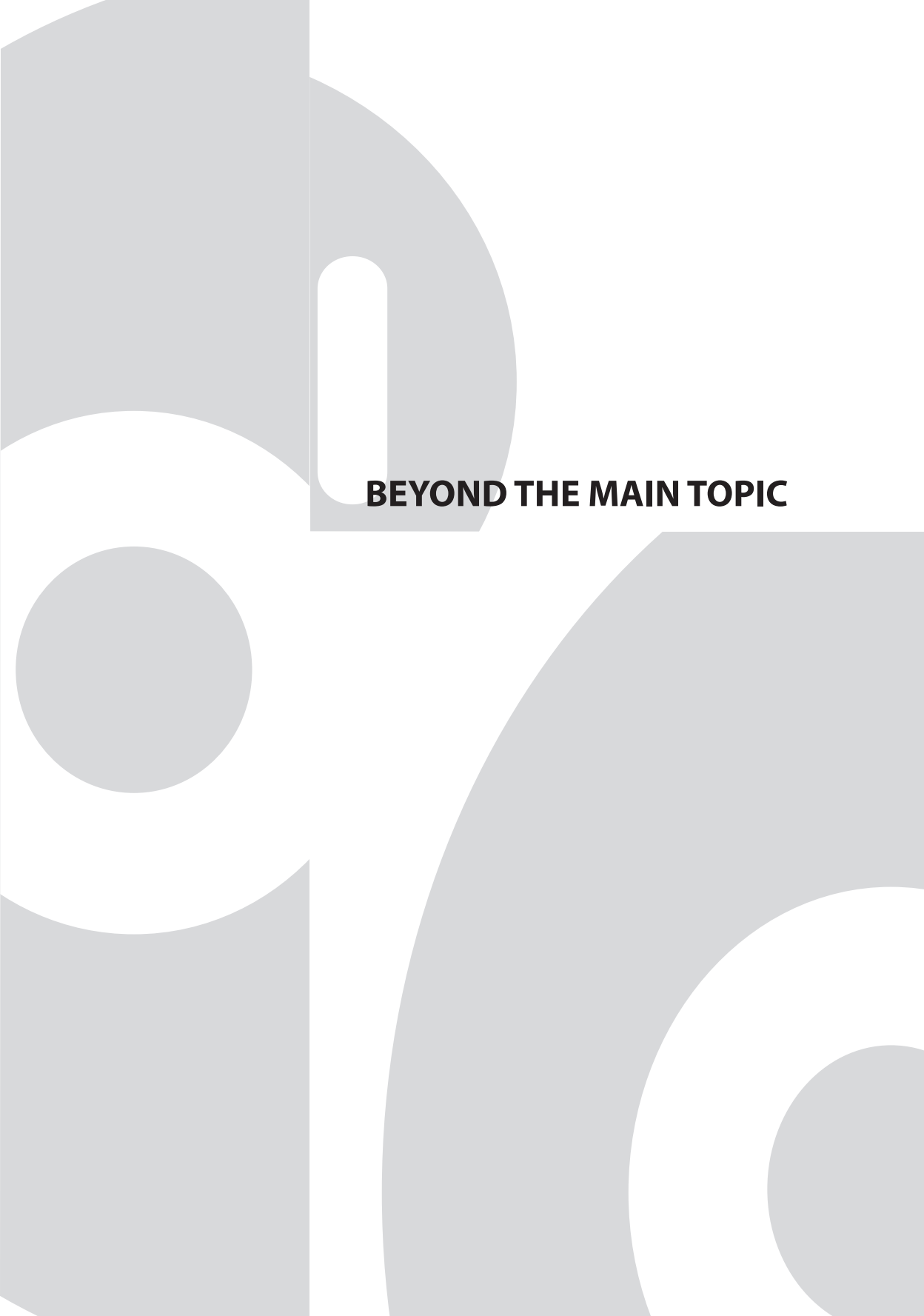
³⁷ Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, 30–35; Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 15–18; Hoffman, *Empathy and Moral Development*, 75–80; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, 390–400.

- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Beacon Press, 1984.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Translated by Erik Butler. Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Hoffman, Martin L. *Empathy and Moral Development: Implications for Caring and Justice*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Hui, Yuk. *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. Urbanomic and Sequence Press, 2016.
- Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press, 2002.
- Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Edited by Peter Connor. University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
- Papacharissi, Zizi. *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Todorova, Maria. *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper



BEYOND THE MAIN TOPIC



ART+MEDIA

Tram Thi Trach Oanh

The Modular Visual Language of Sculptor Diem Phung Thi and Art in Vietnamese Spatial Installation

Paula Rem

Transcultural Narratives and Religious Symbols in Mass Media—*The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006)

Joshua Wodak

An Interface to the World: Evoking Environmental Responsibility in Responsive Environments

Tajana Režnić Brenko

Transdisciplinary Pedagogy and the Constitutive Role of Art: The Perspective of Transdisciplinary Realism

Tram Thi Trach Oanh

University of Science and Education, The University of Da Nang, Da Nang, Vietnam

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-2668-9394>

The Modular Visual Language of Sculptor Diem Phung Thi and Art in Vietnamese Spatial Installation

Abstract: This article examines the modular visual language developed by the Vietnamese sculptor Diem Phung Thi (1920–2002) as a self-sufficient system of plastic signs, and analyses its extended influence on Vietnamese spatial installation art. Drawing on the case study of the exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* (The Outpost Art Organization, Hanoi, 2024), the article argues that Diem Phung Thi's seven elementary forms constitute a visual grammar a structured set of minimal units capable of generating infinite spatial configurations. Through a theoretical framework combining Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's social semiotic approach with the concept of materiality inherited from international Concrete Art, the article demonstrates that the modular system operates simultaneously as formal language, cultural inscription, and spatial practice. Rather than positioning Vietnamese installation art as derivative of Western movements, the article foregrounds the ways in which Diem Phung Thi transformed international influences into a distinctly local aesthetic logic rooted in the Vietnamese architectural form, material culture, and spatial thinking. The analysis contributes to current debates on non-Western trajectories in contemporary installation art and to the broader historiography of the Concrete Art's global legacies.

Keywords: Diem Phung Thi; modular visual language; spatial installation; Vietnamese art; Concrete Art; visual grammar; plastic semiotics.

Introduction

In the history of the twentieth-century art, few practices so precisely embody the intersection of form and system as the modular sculpture created by the Vietnamese artist Diem Phung Thi. Having spent most of her career in France before returning to Vietnam, she developed a system of seven elementary curved forms, which she termed *modules*. These could be assembled, rotated, and stacked to produce sculptures of vastly different scales, materials, and spatial effects. Critics responded with a vocabulary that sat uneasily between art criticism and linguistics: the French art critic Raymond Cogniat described her modules as an *alphabet* of forms,¹ while the musicologist Tran Van Khe compared them to the seven notes of a musical scale, observing

¹ Aware Women Artists, "Diem Phung Thi," accessed January 15, 2025, <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/diem-phung-thi/>.

that “the seven modules she created are like seven musical notes for a musician to compose a melody.”² These analogies, drawn independently by two observers from different disciplines, point to something structural: the modules function as a system, not merely as shapes.

The central question this article addresses is whether this system constitutes a genuine visual grammar, a coherent plastic language that generates meaning through combination, repetition, and spatial disposition, and how that language has been received, reinterpreted, and extended by subsequent generations of Vietnamese installation artists. To answer this question, the article focuses on the exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules: A Visual Essay on Diem Phung Thi's System of Signs* (The Outpost Art Organization, Hanoi, 2024), in which five Vietnamese artists Le Thuan Uyen, Hachul Le Do, Ngo Dinh Bao Chau, Do Thanh Lang, and Nguyen Huu Hai Duy engaged directly with her modular inheritance over five years of archival research.³

The article proceeds in four stages. Section #2 establishes a theoretical framework for analyzing modular visual language, drawing on social semiotics and the material aesthetics of international Concrete Art. Section #3 examines the formation and logic of Diem Phung Thi's seven modules, arguing that their significance lies not in individual forms but in the relational possibilities they generate within space. Section #4 analyses the 2024 exhibition as a case study in the transmission and transformation of visual grammar across generations and media. Section #5 draws conclusions about the role of modular language in Vietnamese spatial installation, and its contribution to a non-Western genealogy of Concrete Art's legacies.

Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative case study approach. This choice is deliberate: case study is the appropriate instrument when the object of analysis is a historically situated practice whose significance cannot be abstracted from its specific institutional, cultural, and material context. The exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* was selected as the central analytical example on the basis of three criteria: its explicit and documented engagement with Diem Phung Thi's modular grammar as a subject of collective investigation; its situation within an independent curatorial space operating outside state institutional frameworks, making it a particularly revealing site for examining how a canonical Vietnamese practice is reactivated in contemporary critical conditions; and the representativeness of its curatorial format the collective visual essay as a model for the transmission of a shared visual logic across generational and media boundaries. The analytical procedure combines close formal analysis of the modular system with contextual reading of the exhibition's spatial and institutional conditions, drawing on published criticism, artist statements, and the author's direct observation of the exhibition in October 2024.

² Kieu Nga, “Doc dao nghe thuat dieu khac Diem Phung Thi” [English translation: The Distinctive Sculptural Art of Diem Phung Thi], *Song Lam Magazine*, June 18, 2023, <https://www.tapchisonglam.vn/doc-dao-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-diem-phung-thi/>.

³ Vietnam News, “Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit,” *Vietnam News*, October 2024, accessed November 1, 2024, <https://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/1663977>.

Visual grammar, plastic signs, and spatial dimension of form

The theoretical framework for this analysis rests on two bodies of scholarship that, taken together, provide the tools necessary to describe what is specifically grammatical about a visual material system. The first is the social semiotic approach to visual communication developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen; the second is the aesthetic theory underlying international Concrete Art, particularly as it articulates the relationship between form, space, and meaning.

In their foundational study *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Kress and van Leeuwen argue that visual composition is not a neutral arrangement of elements but a structured system in which spatial relations proximity, salience, framing, directionality generate distinct meanings.⁴ Their model proposes that visual texts can be analyzed according to representational, interpersonal, and compositional metafunctions. For our purposes, the compositional metafunction is most directly relevant: it concerns the way elements are organized within a given space to form a coherent whole. Applied to sculpture and installation, this framework allows us to ask how the arrangement of modules within a gallery or public space produces meaning beyond what any single module could generate in isolation. This approach connects productively with emerging scholarship on the Southeast Asian installation art and postcolonial spatial practices. Patrick Flores's work on curatorial epistemologies in Southeast Asia, T. K. Sabapathy's studies of regional modernisms, and recent contributions to exhibition studies in postcolonial contexts, including the critical framework developed around the Asia Pacific Triennial, collectively provide a comparative horizon against which the specificity of Vietnamese spatial practice can be situated. The present analysis does not engage these traditions exhaustively, but the argument is informed by their shared premise: that spatial and installation practices in Southeast Asia articulate local aesthetic and political logics that cannot be reduced to derivative responses to Western movements.

The second strand of the framework concerns the aesthetic theory of Concrete Art, and specifically the concept central to both the Brazilian Noigandres group and the European Concrete movement that the material form of an artwork is itself its content. In the 1958 Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry, Augusto de Campos, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos declared that form and content are unified in the material sign: the work is an object in and of itself, not the depiction of another object.

Although the Pilot Plan was addressed to poetry, its underlying logic that the elementary unit of a work should be stripped to its material essence and organized according to spatial rather than sequential logic applies with equal force to the plastic arts.⁵ Sérgio Martins has shown, in his analysis of Ferreira Gullar's Neo-Concrete writings, that the movement's key contribution was to extend this spatial logic into

⁴ Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2006), 1–19.

⁵ Augusto de Campos et al., *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* (1958), in *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Indiana University Press, 1970), 71–72.

three-dimensional environments, dissolving the boundary between art object and inhabited space.⁶ It is in this expanded sense material sign organized spatially that we can speak of a modular visual language in the work of Diem Phung Thi.

What distinguishes Diem Phung Thi's practice from both these traditions is not a theoretical declaration but a practical invention: the creation of a finite set of elementary forms whose power lies entirely in their combinatorial potential. This combinatorial principle distinguishes the modules from conventional sculptural forms and explains their capacity to generate diverse spatial configurations. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge the limits of such linguistic analogies when applied to visual and spatial systems. Unlike verbal language, in which syntactic rules are largely formalized and shared across speakers, the "grammar" of a visual-material practice is inherently contextual: its rules are implicit, its meanings are not fixed by convention, and its reception depends on embodied, sensory, and culturally situated responses that resist the systematicity of a linguistic description. The concept of visual grammar should therefore be understood as a productive heuristic rather than a strict structural claim a way of foregrounding the relational and combinatorial logic of the modular system without reducing the openness and ambiguity that constitute its aesthetic force.

Diem Phung Thi's seven modules: formation and visual logic

Diem Phung Thi was born in Hue city, Vietnam in 1920 and trained at the University of Hanoi before moving to France, where she completed her doctorate in dentistry in Paris while simultaneously pursuing a career as a sculptor.⁷ Her development of the modular system began in the 1960s, when as she later recounted she was working with scraps of leftover wood, selecting ten basic signs from the fragments before refining them, through a long process of formal elimination, into the definitive seven modules.

The seven forms are all derived from a single geometric principle: the convex-concave curve. They differ from one another in the degree of curvature, the ratio of concave to convex surface area, and the implied directionality of their silhouettes. Individually, they are semantically neutral. As *Fine Arts Magazine* observed, these modules have "the ability to transform in space, lending uniqueness to her works across diverse materials"⁸. The artist articulated the logic precisely: "After making the modules, I only need to structure them in the sculptural space, whatever that space may be. Each work created in this way is a new whole with its own soul, its own life, and its own dimension"⁹. (Figure 1)

⁶ Sérgio B. Martins, "The Pulp of Color: Toward a Notion of Expenditure in Ferreira Gullar's Neo-Concrete Writings," *October* 152 (2015): 108.

⁷ Aware Women Artists, "Diem Phung Thi."

⁸ Le Quang, "Diem Phung Thi va nhung dau an tren ban do nghe thuat dieu khac quoc te" [English translation: Diem Phung Thi and Her Imprint on the International Sculpture Map], *My thuat* magazine, July 17, 2024, <https://tapchimythuat.vn/diem-phung-thi-va-nhung-dau-an-tren-ban-do-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-quoc-te/>.

⁹ Kieu Nga. "Doc dao nghe thuat dieu khac Diem Phung Thi."

The critical vocabulary that emerged around her work consistently reached for linguistic analogies. Cogniat's description of the modules as an alphabet has already been noted; Tran Van Khe's musical analogy adds a combinatorial dimension that the alphabetic metaphor leaves implicit. Most significantly, the critic Luu Huynh Lam observed that in Diem Phung Thi's installation works, natural space becomes "the eighth letter"—the module she did not carve but always incorporated.¹⁰ This formulation is theoretically precise: it recognizes that the spatial environment is not a neutral backdrop but a structural element of the work's visual grammar.

The materials Diem Phung Thi employed—including wood, stone, ceramic, fabric, metal—were not interchangeable. Each material inflects the module's visual and tactile qualities, modulating its weight, surface texture, light absorption, and perceived temperature. This sensitivity to material as signifier is consistent with the Concrete Art tradition. It also resonates with a specifically Vietnamese architectural tradition: several commentators have noted the formal parallels between the modular logic and the "*chống rường*". (the main load-bearing structure of the roof consists of short wooden beams (called purlins) stacked on top of each other in a tower shape.) The system of interlocking bracketed beams characteristic of Vietnamese communal halls and pagodas is a system in which elementary curved forms are combined to support and distribute structural load across space.¹¹ (Figure 2)

Recognizing the national significance of her artistic contribution, in 1994 Diem Phung Thi donated her entire artistic estate of 367 works to the city of Hue, thereby establishing the Diem Phung Thi Art Center at 1 Phan Boi Chau Street. The gesture encapsulated the dual character of her practice: formed in dialogue with the European modernism and rooted in the particularity of the Vietnamese culture and space.

"The Curious Adventure of the Modules" (2024): case study in transmission of visual grammar

The exhibition "The Curious Adventure of the Modules: A Visual Essay on Diem Phung Thi's System of Signs", held at The Outpost Art Organization in Hanoi in October 2024, provides an exceptionally rich case study for the analysis of how a visual grammar is transmitted, transformed, and recontextualized across generations and media. The exhibition brought together five artists: Le Thuan Uyen, Hachul Le Do, Ngo Dinh Bao Chau, Do Thanh Lang, and Nguyen Huu Hai Duy, whose work emerged from five years of collaborative archival research into Diem Phung Thi's practice.¹²

The Outpost, established in 2017, is one of the small numbers of independent contemporary art spaces in Hanoi operating outside the institutional framework of

¹⁰ Luu Huynh Lam, "Nhà điêu khắc Diem Phung Thi: Cuộc hóa thân của đất đá" [English translation: Sculptor Diem Phung Thi: The Metamorphosis of Earth and Stone], *Song Huong* magazine, accessed January 25, 2025, <https://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p11/c34/n20649/Nha-dieu-khac-Diem-Phung-Thi-CUOC-HOA-THAN-CUA-DAT-DA.html>.

¹¹ Nora A. Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (NUS Press, 2009), 45–62.

¹² Vietnam News, "Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit."

state-sponsored cultural organizations. Labbe, Zuberec, and Turner have documented how such spaces occupy a structurally ambiguous position in the Vietnam's cultural landscape, simultaneously tolerated and marginalized by a system that has no established category for independent curatorial practice.¹³ The choice to stage a re-examination of Diem Phung Thi in this particular context is significant: it positions her modular grammar not within the official narrative of the Vietnamese art history but within a living critical conversation about the contemporary spatial practice.

The exhibition's most significant formal decision was to present the five artists' responses not as independent works but as a collective visual essay, a term that positions the installation as a form of argumentation, a spatial equivalent of discursive reflection. Each artist was engaged with the modular vocabulary in a distinct manner, yet all remained faithful to its core structural principle: the primacy of relation over form, and of combinatorial logic over individual image.

Le Thuan Uyen's contribution focused on the materiality of the modules themselves. By employing textiles—a medium absent from Diem Phung Thi's repertoire—she introduced a vocabulary of softness and surface variation, thereby reactivating the tactile dimension of the modular system. Hachul Le Do extended the modular language into a three-dimensional installation that engaged directly with the architecture of The Outpost, incorporating the walls, floor, and ceiling as integral components of the spatial composition. Ngo Dinh Bao Chau introduced a temporal dimension by presenting the modules as objects in a process that was incomplete, partially assembled, and suspended between configurations.¹⁴

A dimension that the preceding account does not fully address is the role of the spectator within this spatial grammar. Installation art is, by definition, a practice that activates the viewer's body: it cannot be experienced from a single fixed point but requires movement through space, and its meaning is partly constituted by that movement. At *The Curious Adventure of the Modules*, the spatial disposition of the five artists' contributions created itineraries of navigation that were meaningful: the sequence in which a visitor encountered different responses to the modular grammar shaped the interpretive possibilities available to them. Le Thuan Uyen's textile works, encountered at tactile proximity, invited a haptic engagement that Hachul Le Do's architecturally scaled arrangement extended into full-body spatial orientation. This embodied dimension of reception, which phenomenological accounts of installation describe as the work's dependence on the perceiving body in space, is not incidental to the modular grammar but intrinsic to it. In the artist's own formulation, the modules are structures that require the spatial environment as a constitutive element. A fuller account of how audiences navigate, and bodily encounter the exhibition space would require dedicated ethnographic or reception-based research and is identified here as a productive direction for future exploration

¹³ Danielle Labbe et al., "Creative Hubs in Hanoi, Vietnam: Transgressive Spaces in a Socialist State?" *Urban Studies* 60, no. 1 (2023): 5.

¹⁴ Vietnam News, "Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit."

What the exhibition collectively demonstrates is the openness of Diem Phung Thi's modular system, whose continued vitality depends on reinterpretation and adaptation. Taylor has argued that one of the structural difficulties facing contemporary Vietnamese art is the absence of a sustained critical discourse capable of linking individual practices into a shared conversation.¹⁵ *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* represents a significant exception: a curatorial project in which the modular language of a single artist becomes the occasion for a collective investigation into the possibilities of spatial form.

Conclusion

The argument of this article has been that Diem Phung Thi's seven modules constitute not a personal style but a visual grammar, a relational system whose meaning is generated by combination and spatial disposition rather than by individual form. This system shares certain formal properties with the visual logic of international Concrete Art, particularly in its insistence on the material sign as self-sufficient content and on space as a structural agent. But it transforms these shared principles through a sustained engagement with the Vietnamese material culture, architectural tradition, and spatial practice, most visibly in the resonances between the modular logic and the “*chống rường*” system of the Vietnamese traditional architecture.

The 2024 exhibition *The Curious Adventure of the Modules* demonstrates that this grammar is capable of generative transmission: the visual logic Diem Phung Thi created can be reinterpreted, extended, and challenged by later artists without losing its structural coherence. The five artists' responses collectively map possibilities latent within the modular system tactile, temporal, architectural, conceptual that the original work had opened but not exhausted.

As the writer Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong observed, Diem Phung Thi's art demonstrates “a capacity for super-language to convey the artist's messages to all people everywhere.”¹⁶ That observation points toward what is perhaps the most important conclusion of this study: the modules are not a closed artistic vocabulary but an open system capable of generating new interpretations across generations.

The article necessarily leaves several questions open. The most pressing concern is the transmission mechanisms by which Diem Phung Thi's modular grammar reached the five artists in the 2024 exhibition. This question requires sustained archival and interview-based research into the pedagogical and curatorial networks through which her work has circulated within Vietnam. A second concern is the gender dimensions of her reception: as a female sculptor working outside the institutional frameworks of both the French and Vietnamese art worlds, her relative neglect by academic scholarship is not merely an oversight but a structural condition that warrants specific investigation.

¹⁵ Nora A. Taylor, “Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and their Communities in the Face of Geography,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (2011): 10.

¹⁶ Hoang Kim Dang, “Nho xuan xua gap nha dieu khac Diem Phung Thi.”



Figure 1. Diem Phung Thi, seven modules, various materials. Permanent collection, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.



Figure 2. Diem Phung Thi, two sculptures in bronze and wood, post-1970. Permanent collection, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.



Figure 3. General view, Diem Phung Thi Art Center, 1 Phan Boi Chau Street, Hue city, Vietnam. Photo: Tram Thi Trach Oanh, 2025.

References

- Aware Women Artists. “Diem Phung Thi.” Accessed January 15, 2025. <https://awarewomenartists.com/en/artiste/diem-phung-thi/>.
- Campos, Augusto de, Décio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos. “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” (1958). In *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, edited by Mary Ellen Solt, 71–72. Indiana University Press, 1970.
- Cogniat, Raymond. *Trien lam dieu khac Diem Phung Thi 1960–1971* [Temporary English translation: *Diem Phung Thi Sculpture Exhibition 1960–1971*]. n.p., 1971. Translated and introduced by Buu Chi. *Song Huong Magazine*, no. 30, April 1988.
- Diem Phung Thi Art Foundation. Artist documentation and archive. Hue city, Vietnam: Diem Phung Thi Art Centre, n.d. Accessed January 20, 2025. <https://diemphungthiartfoundation.com>.
- Hoang Kim Dang. “Nho xuan xua gap nha dieu khac Diem Phung Thi” [English translation: Remembering a Springtime Meeting with Sculptor Diem Phung Thi]. *Art Times*, February 1, 2023. <https://arttimes.vn/my-thuat/nho-xuan-xua-gap-nha-dieu-khac-diem-phung-thi-c15a20966.html>.
- Kieu Nga. “Doc dao nghe thuat dieu khac Diem Phung Thi” [English translation: The Distinctive Sculptural Art of Diem Phung Thi]. *Song Lam Magazine*, June 18, 2023. <https://www.tapchisonglam.vn/doc-dao-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-diem-phung-thi/>.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2006.

- Labbe, Danielle, Celia Zuberec, and Sarah Turner. “Creative Hubs in Hanoi, Vietnam: Transgressive Spaces in a Socialist State?” *Urban Studies* 60, no. 1 (2023): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221086371>.
- Le Quang. “Diem Phung Thi va nhung dau an tren ban do nghe thuat dieu khac quoc te” [English translation: Diem Phung Thi and Her Imprint on the International Sculpture Map]. *My thuat Magazine*, July 17, 2024. <https://tapchimythuat.vn/diem-phung-thi-va-nhung-dau-an-tren-ban-do-nghe-thuat-dieu-khac-quoc-te/>.
- Luu Huynh Lam. “Nha dieu khac Diem Phung Thi: Cuoc hoa than cua dat da” [English translation: Sculptor Diem Phung Thi: The Metamorphosis of Earth and Stone]. *Song Huong Magazine*, n.d. Accessed January 25, 2025. <https://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tin-tuc/p11/c34/n20649/Nha-dieu-khac-Diem-Phung-Thi-CUOC-HOA-THAN-CUA-DAT-DA.html>.
- Martins, Sérgio B. “The Pulp of Color: Toward a Notion of Expenditure in Ferreira Gullar’s Neo-Concrete Writings.” *October* 152 (2015): 103–120. https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00219.
- Solt, Mary Ellen, ed. *Concrete Poetry: A World View*. Indiana University Press, 1970.
- Taylor, Nora A. “Art without History? Southeast Asian Artists and their Communities in the Face of Geography.” *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (2011): 6–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2011.10790996>.
- Taylor, Nora A. *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art*. NUS Press, 2009.
- Vietnam News. “Artists Celebrate Late Sculptor Diem Phung Thi with Exhibit.” *Vietnam News*, October 2024. Accessed November 1, 2024. <https://vietnamnews.vn/life-style/1663977>.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper

Paula Rem

The Academy of Arts and Culture, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University, Osijek, Croatia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9138-7009>

Transcultural Narratives and Religious Symbols in Mass Media—*The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006)

Abstract: Researchers have identified many transcultural elements in mass media, especially in popular films. According to the *Matrix* trilogy director Lilly Wachowski, science fiction, dystopian and fantasy narratives, compared to other mass media, often have “fabulous subtext”. The use of symbols in mass media can be understood through several theories of communication: symbols are an important segment of every communicative process according to Burkart (2002); Noam Chomsky’s concept of generative grammar suggests that all humans have equal capacity for the development of language, which results in similarities among various cultural narratives and symbols. The results of research by Vladimir Propp and Claude Levi-Strauss show that similar topics and stories occur worldwide, enabling intercultural and interreligious dialogues. The same premise can be applied to films. Film is a mass medium which includes references to different cultures and religions. Films by Darren Aronofsky are especially filled with religious subtext (Davidowicz, 2016). This paper aims to systematically identify and compare religious and transcultural elements by analyzing narratives and visual symbols of the film *The Fountain* (2006). The methods used include a narratological analysis according to Maša Grdešić (2015) as well as a content analysis of signs and symbols in the film. The method is interdisciplinary, based on communication sciences for the analysis of messages and signs, while also including an approach of cultural and religious studies. The paper has a pragmatic implication for communication sciences. It indicates how film as a mass medium unites different cultural contents and facilitates intercultural and transcultural communication.

Keywords: film analysis; religious symbols in mass media; transcultural narratives in mass media.

Introduction

According to the *Matrix* trilogy director Lilly Wachowski, science fiction, dystopian and fantasy narratives, compared to other mass media, often have “fabulous subtext.”¹ At the level of meaning literal, fantasy and science fiction films conventionally revolve around action-oriented plots. However, on a connotative level, such films

¹ Kayla Cobb, “Here’s Why Lilly Wachowski (Probably) Won’t Be Part of ‘The Matrix 4,’” *Decider*, 2019, <https://decider.com/2019/08/21/the-matrix-4-lilly-wachowski/>.

are often filled with religious elements. The genres of science fiction, dystopia and fantasy frequently combine elements from different cultures and religions.

Researchers have identified many transcultural elements in mass media, especially in popular film. Klaus Davidowicz² explores aspects of the Jewish religion and culture in popular film, while also considering influences of other cultures in mass media. His work is the starting point for this paper. Davidowicz identified various transcultural influences in *The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006). The film uses elements from Jewish and Christian, as well as Buddhist, Hindu, Mayan and Taoist theology and mythology.³ It also contains elements of the New Age and Zoroastrianism.⁴

This paper aims to systematically identify and compare the religious and transcultural elements in *The Fountain* by Darren Aronofsky (2006) through an analysis of its narratives and visual symbols.

Previous research⁵ has been done on identifying particular religious and cultural elements in *The Fountain*. However, no study has systematically analyzed multiple signs and symbols therein, approaching them from a theoretical perspective of intercultural and transcultural communication.

Methodology

The film is analyzed as a mass medium that conveys certain types of transcultural and religious messages to viewers. The aim is not to interpret the film as a work of art, nor to focus on its aesthetic qualities. The goal of this paper is to analyze the plot (a narratological approach) as well as signs and symbols. The method is interdisciplinary, based on communication sciences for an objective analysis of messages and signs according to visual and narrative cues of mass media contents, while also including an interpretative approach of cultural and religious studies. A narratological approach is applied according to Grdešić (2015), while signs and symbols are analyzed using the methods of Vladimir Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss and Noam Chomsky.

Therefore, film theory and media aesthetics do not constitute the primary focus of this paper. Rather, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theories of communication sciences with cultural and religious studies in order to understand how mass media can produce and circulate transcultural meanings. Methodologically, the analysis combines narratological, descriptive, and explanatory approaches to the film's content.

The topic is socially relevant, as the paper has a pragmatic implication for communication sciences. It indicates how film as a mass medium can be used to unite different cultural contents and facilitate intercultural and transcultural communication.

² Klaus S. Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017).

³ Michael Atkinson, "The Fountain," *Sight & Sound* 17, no. 3 (2007): 56.

⁴ Annamária Hodosy, "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall," *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 78–102.

⁵ Atkinson, "The Fountain," 56.

Theoretical approach

The unification of various cultural backgrounds in mass media can be understood through several theories of communication. The two fundamental aspects are *medium* and *message*. Language is the most important primary *medium*, while *message* relates to the content exchanged by communication partners.⁶

Theories of communication show that symbols and narratives, which represent certain meanings, generated by people from different cultures worldwide may be similar. Therefore, it is possible to achieve meaningful communication between various cultures.⁷ One of the most important theories related to researching language as a *medium* is Noam Chomsky's generative grammar theory. Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss made significant contributions to the study of similarities of messages in narratives worldwide.

Noam Chomsky's concept of generative grammar explains that all humans have equal capacities for the development of language, which reflects on their abilities to create stories and utilize certain symbols to convey meanings.⁸ So it is not surprising that members of individual cultures speaking different languages may use similar symbols in their myths and narratives. This is particularly visible in mass media products such as films.

Communication is defined as an exchange of meaning,⁹ and religious symbols and narratives are especially useful for the creation of particular shared meanings among various cultures. Film is a particular medium because it uses visual as well as verbal language, so the content conveyed through visual aspects may differ from the narrative itself.¹⁰ Thus film is a particularly useful medium for connecting different cultures and societies.

Apart from visual aspects, film as a medium utilizes a basic narrative structure, similar to written texts, so its contents can be analyzed through systematic myth analysis. Numerous studies have been done to demonstrate that Hollywood films repeatedly utilize the same type of narrative. This is consistent with Propp's research results, who had analyzed societal codes within certain cultural narratives.¹¹ Lévi-Strauss uses the methods of social sciences to analyze narratives originating from different societies. His findings suggest that similar oppositions and central conflicts recur among various cultures.¹²

⁶ Roland Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft: Grundlagen und Problemfelder; Umriss einer interdisziplinären Sozialwissenschaft* (Böhlau, 2002).

⁷ Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft*.

⁸ Noam Chomsky, Ángel J. Gallego and Dennis Ott, "Generative Grammar and the Faculty of Language: Insights, Questions, and Challenges," *Catalan Journal of Linguistics*, Special Issue (2019): 229–61.

⁹ Burkart, *Kommunikationswissenschaft*.

¹⁰ Chomsky, Gallego, and Ott, "Generative Grammar and the Faculty of Language: Insights, Questions, and Challenges," 229.

¹¹ John L. Fell, "Vladimir Propp in Hollywood," *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1977): 19–28.

¹² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2 (Školska knjiga, 1988).

Mass media narratives can be deduced to certain functions and elements which are common in each society, regardless of their culture and origin. The only differences are to be found in underlying ethical systems, as all societies have certain systems of norms and values. In particular systems, the same symbols may be used in slightly different ways. According to Levi-Strauss, it is important to analyze the exact symbol utilization in these narratives in order to systematically decode the underlying message.¹³

Each use of symbols conveys a certain message connected to underlying norms and values of particular societies. Due to these common symbols and narratives, communication can be achieved across different cultures and languages. The structures of each society arise from the symbolic structures of the collective unconscious, but also vice versa, because changes in a society change the collective unconscious structures.¹⁴ Therefore, it is important to analyze film content using methods that combine communication sciences with cultural and religious studies.

Narratological approach: plot structure in *The Fountain*

The Fountain has three narratives which take place in different dimensions of time and space but features the same two characters—Tom (Hugh Jackman) and Isabella (Rachel Weisz). Therefore consciousness, represented in the Male/Female pair, is set in three dimensions of time and space. This fragmentation resembles the condition of Adam and Eve after consuming from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.¹⁵ A certain degree of duality between the Male and the Female principle exists in Judeo-Christianity.¹⁶ Dualism is also important for Zoroastrianism, while Hinduism and Buddhism do not endorse this concept.¹⁷ It is understood through the lens of a unique ability of human transcendence over nature.¹⁸ In many traditions, communication between the Male and the Female is equivalent to communication between the soul and the body, the spiritual and the material.¹⁹ Relations between the characters in the film display traditional dynamics between the Male and the Female, wherein the Male protects the border/territory/body of the Female; the Male is more transcendent, and the Female is more immanent.²⁰

¹³ Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2, 14.

¹⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *Strukturalna antropologija* 2, 14.

¹⁵ Rodolfo Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*," *Humanimalia* 5, no. 1 (2013): 80–103.

¹⁶ Eric Katz, "Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism," in *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, ed. Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg (MIT Press, 2000), 17–42.

¹⁷ Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (University of Georgia Press, 1996), 3–14.

¹⁸ Hodosy, "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall," 81.

¹⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature," in *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment* (Routledge, 2004), 388–99.

²⁰ Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*."

The first narrative is set in the 16th-century Christian Spain. The protagonist is a knight who searches for the Tree of Life in the name of his queen. Ironically, his quest to find the lost Garden of Eden takes him to the ancient Mayan temples of Central America (and not to the Middle East, as would be logical). So, the ancient Mayan culture is obviously not seen as something separate from the Christian culture (dominant in the first narrative). In the present day (the 21st century), Tom is a rational scientist, functioning again in a dominantly Christian society, who searches for the cure to heal his beloved Isabella. His perspective is purely logical and not religious. In the 26th century, Tom is completely transcendent, existing in a kind of bubble, a microcosm somewhere in deep space. The past is thus connotated by Christianity, the present by science as the currently dominant worldview, and the future by Buddhist imagery. So Judeo-Christianity, Buddhism, Mayanism and even Science as a present-day non-religious paradigm coexist in various realities of the film. They are not clearly separated from each other. According to the director Darren Aronofsky, the purpose of the film is to show that “there’s a spiritual truth that connects all religions, a shelf underneath them.”²¹ This singular spiritual truth converges with scientific pursuit, so the message of the film points towards overall unity of Creation, as suggested by the biblical quote used in the beginning.

The concept of Trinity is a common intercultural and interreligious symbol. Buddhism endorses the “*Trikaya*” doctrine of the Buddha being divided into three aspects, while Hinduism groups its three supreme deities into “*Trimurti*.” Their functions are creation, preservation and destruction of the world.²² The three narratives in the film can be seen as the 16th-century story signifying creation, the 21st-century story signifying preservation and the 26th-century story as destruction—after which the cycle is repeated. In Jewish theosophy, the Trinity consists of the Crown (*Keter*), Beauty (*Tiferet*) and Kingdom (*Malchut*).²³ The Crown may be interpreted as the past, Beauty as the present (signifying the Male principle) and Kingdom (signifying the Female principle) as the future,²⁴ which suggests a correlation to the three narratives as they are presented in *The Fountain*.

The three narratives in *The Fountain* can be understood through this concept of Trinity. The past indicates the Crown (*Keter*) because Isabella is literally the queen of Spain. The second story points to Beauty (*Tiferet*), as she just wants to enjoy the simple beauty of life; she is completely immersed in the present-day reality, disregarding the past and the future. The third narrative related to Kingdom (*Malchut*) tells a story about the birth of the universe.

²¹ Michael Guillen, “The Fountain—Roundtable Interview With Darren Aronofsky,” *Screen Anarchy* (November 15, 2006), <https://www.google.com/amp/s/screenanarchy.com/amp/2006/11/the-fountainroundtable-interview-with-darren-aronofsky.html>

²² Jan Gonda, “The Hindu Trinity,” *Anthropos* 1, no. 2 (1968): 212–26.

²³ Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*.

²⁴ Pierre Riffard, “Sefirah, sefirot,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 343–44.

The concept of Trinity in Christianity also has a temporal aspect—the Father as the creator of the world, the Son as the Word incarnate set in a particular time and space, and the Holy Spirit as related to the eschatological future.²⁵ However, the three stories in the film are not united in the sense of Christian Trinity. The Trinity in the film is violated by the cyclical nature of time, so the ultimate goal can never be reached. The scenes are edited so that the plots seem to intertwine—action in one reality seemingly influences another reality—even though each one had already ended before the next one started (the 16th century ends before the 21st century starts; the 21st century ends before the 26th century starts).

The narratives are visually similar and the plots resemble each other. The quest for the Tree in the 16th century turns into a quest for the cure for an illness. The protagonists evolve into less physical and more spiritual beings, as implied with Tom's appearance similar to that of a Buddhist monk in the 26th century. Therefore, the passage of time is implied, but there is no real ending, as the protagonist's body, uniting with the star Xibalba, gives birth to another version of the universe in a cyclical manner.

Visually, the film is dominated by circular shapes. Lights and shadows of individual scenes often portray a full circle.²⁶ A cyclical concept of time belongs to the Hindu-Buddhist cultural context. This example shows the method of intertwining different religions and cultural traditions. While the characters may be based on the Judeo-Christian tradition (the protagonists connotating the biblical Adam and Eve, banished from the Garden of Eden), the universe in which the plot takes place is modeled on the Hindu-Buddhist understanding of time as repeating itself in cycles.

The three narratives are separated by five centuries from each other, they unfold simultaneously, as though they constitute a unified whole (a trinity). The fact that each narrative ends five hundred years before the next one starts has a symbolic meaning. Exactly five hundred years is the distance from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil to the Tree of Life within the Garden of Eden, according to Jewish theosophy.²⁷ After five hundred years, Tom becomes closer to Bina (the sphere of Reason) through actual physical knowledge. As a scientist, he learns a lot about life. After two five hundred years, he ultimately reaches Hochma (Wisdom), represented as a star, in Mayan mythology known as Xibalba, where the creation of the universe takes place. In Judaism, the number five hundred represents Understanding, and one thousand represents Wisdom.²⁸ In the film, Tom from the 16th century travels five hundred years into the future, where he as a scientist reaches Bina (Reason), and then another five hundred years in the future, where he finally reaches Hochma (Wisdom).

²⁵ Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

²⁶ Piskorski, "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*," 83.

²⁷ "The Tree of Life (...) extends for a journey of 500 years and all the waters of Creation part underneath it" (*Zohar*, Beresheet A 45, 425).

²⁸ "500 is a number of Bina, and 1000 is a number of Hochma" (*Zohar*, Acharei Mot 31, 191).

Symbolic significance of the Tree

The mystical Tree is the central visual and thematic element of the film. Judeo-Christianity, Hindu-Buddhism, Mayanism and Zoroastrianism all have mythologies connected to the symbol of the Tree.²⁹ The Tree in religious symbology is usually linked to the ideas of life, knowledge and the ever-renewing cosmos.³⁰ In the Hindu-Buddhist mythology, the roots, the trunk and the branches of the Tree of Enlightenment symbolize the three supreme Hindu deities.

In Judeo-Christianity, the Tree of Life is contrasted with the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.³¹ The Tree of Life is composed of ten spheres (Sefirot)³² which connect heaven and earth. The Tree is a medium of communication between different dimensions, Male and Female, in various traditions.³³ In India, the Tree symbolizes the universal substance; in ancient Greece, it signifies primordial matter; in Chinese philosophy, it represents one of the five elements; in Norse and Celtic mythology, the Tree stands for knowledge. “The general symbolism of the tree is constant: the tree hides superhuman wisdom and knowledge.”³⁴

The Tree is a symbol of life in various societies “because it is in constant development and ascent towards the sky.”³⁵ The tree represents at the same time the linear ascent towards the sky and the cyclical character of cosmic evolution. It stands for cyclical development in the universe; especially deciduous trees that shed their leaves and gain them again every year. This very cyclicity is of crucial importance in the film.

In different religious traditions, the Tree connects the three levels of the universe: the underworld, the surface and the sky, as well as all the elements. “Water flows through its sap, the earth enters its body through its roots, the air nourishes its leaves, and fire breaks out when we touch it.”³⁶ Many cultures consider the Tree a medium of communication between the three levels of the worlds. Judeo-Christianity believes that the Tree of Life is the only remedy for the first humans Adam and Eve after their consumption from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, which had brought them death.³⁷ “The Tree of Life is exactly in the middle of the Garden and receives all

²⁹ Alain Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” in *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (Matica hrvatska, 1989), 626–29.

³⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Payot, 1964).

³¹ Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

³² The Tree of Life consists of ten Sefirot: Keter (Crown—principle), Hochma (Wisdom—word), Bina (Reason/Intellect—femininity), Chesed (Love/Mercy—life), Gevura (Strength/Discipline—death), Tiferet (Beauty—emotions), Netzah (Victory—balance), Hod (Glory—law), Yesod (Foundation—birth), Malkhut (Kingdom—harmony). (Pierre Riffard, “Sefirah, sefirot,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 343–344).

³³ Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

³⁴ Françoise Le Roux and Christian-J. Guyonvarc’h, “Drvo,” in *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, ed. Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (Matica hrvatska, 1989).

³⁵ Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

³⁶ Gheerbrant, “Stablo,” 626–29.

³⁷ Klaus S. Davidowicz, *Die Kabbala: Eine Einführung in die Welt der jüdischen Mystik und Magie* (Böhlau Verlag, 2009).

the waters of Creation.”³⁸ In Jewish symbolism, the Tree of Life is the Male principle (Zeir Anpin), the garden is the Female principle (Malchut), Eden is Wisdom (Hochmah), the river is Brain (Mochin) and the fountain is Reason (Bina).³⁹ “The Tree has roots in Bina and its fruits are the souls of the righteous.”⁴⁰ This suggests that the Tree symbolically represents the souls that have to be born in the world (Malchut) and become righteous people. Tom in the film, for example, wants to help people heal in his quest for the cure, and Isabella wants to find the Tree of Life and make it once again accessible, and so nullify Adam and Eve’s biblical error.

Dualism of corporeality and transcendence

The three narratives within *The Fountain* are intertwined, mutually affecting each other. The plots visually merge into one another. The universe from the 26th century turns into a motif in the church in the 16th century, which then again merges into the present day. These visual cues suggest that the characters are going through reincarnation (known as Gilgul in Judaism).

Tom is a Spanish conquistador in the 16th century, a scientist in the 21st-century USA and a space traveler in the 26th-century universe. He is permanently on the quest for eternal life. Isabella is the Spanish queen in the 16th century, Tom’s beloved woman in the 21st century and the Tree/Mayan star Xibalba in the 26th century. Her societal position differs significantly. In the first narrative, she is the omnipotent queen of Spain. In the second narrative, her role diminishes as she becomes solely a “plot device” to motivate the protagonist in his scientific quest for the cure. In the third narrative, she is not even a person, but either the Tree or the star Xibalba. The evolution of the Male is diametrically opposite—in the first story, he is only a servant to the queen; in the second, he is a distinguished scientist on a quest for the cure of an illness; in the third story he becomes a Nietzschean Übermensch.⁴¹

Visually, Isabella is portrayed in soft white and silver nuances, while the colors surrounding her are usually golden (in the case of the star Xibalba) or red (the inquisitor’s clothing). Red and gold signify the sphere of Discipline (Gevura), whereas white/silver implies Loving-kindness (Chesed).⁴² The inquisitor says that “[a]ll bodies are prisons for our souls. Our skin and blood, the iron bars of confinement (...) death frees every soul.” In Christianity, bodily pain is considered a road to salvation by reproducing Jesus’ suffering.⁴³ The same inquisitor is shown whipping himself due to his religious beliefs. Asceticism and the nullification of the self are necessary steps

³⁸ Zohar. *The First Unabridged Translation with the Sulam Commentary*, trans. Michael Berg (Kabbalah Centre International, 2016), Beresheet A 45, 425.

³⁹ Zohar, Tazria 22, 160.

⁴⁰ Zohar, Beresheet B 4, 26.

⁴¹ Paolo D’Iorio, “The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation,” *Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas* 2 (2014): 41–96.

⁴² Zohar, Tazria 31, 163.

⁴³ Tarja Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky* (Berghahn Books, 2015), 82.

toward freeing oneself from the physical world in Buddhism.⁴⁴ In the beginning (the 16th century), both characters are physically strong, whereas in each subsequent story they drift apart from the material world.

The visuals of the film are dark, with very few light sources. Light is either golden (the stars, the lights in the church and the hospital) or silver, shining from above. Wisdom is compared to light in the Bible: “Wisdom lights up a person’s face.”⁴⁵ Isabella loves to spend time walking and sitting in the snow, not feeling cold, as her disease is progressing. The element of snow is mentioned in the biblical book of Isaiah: “Be your sins like crimson, they can turn snow-white.”⁴⁶ In biblical tradition, snow signifies purification not only of individuals but also the world, allowing the protagonists to embark on a new beginning after planting a seed in the ground, beneath the snow.

Most important symbols in the film

The film starts with a biblical quote: “Humankind was driven out; and east of the Garden of Eden were stationed the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.”⁴⁷ At the beginning of the film, there is a guard at the entrance of the Mayan temple, resembling an angel (Cherub) who guards the entrance to the Garden of Eden. The sword is a symbol of harsh judgment in Judaism.⁴⁸

The film clearly refers to the Mayan creation myth of the First Father who sacrificed himself in order to create the Universe.⁴⁹ Tom hears this story from a museum guide, but it annoys him, as he is looking for a more pragmatical solution to the problem. On the other hand, Isabella likes this Mayan myth and its spiritual connotations.⁵⁰

A creamy white liquid flows from the mystical Tree once it is stabbed with the “revolving sword.” After consuming it in the 16th century, Tom plants the tree in the 21st century.

In the 16th century, he heals his wound, having been stabbed by the guardian of the sword, with this creamy foam. “Red flesh comes from the side of Discipline (Gevurah), whereas white skin comes from Loving-kindness (Chesed).”⁵¹ The white liquid on a red flesh wound signifies the merging of the Male and the Female principle. In the 26th century, there is no more foam, only light coming from the star Xibalba.

⁴⁴ Nguyen Quy Hoang, “The Doctrine of Not-Self (Anattā) in Early Buddhism,” *International Review of Social Research* 9, no. 1 (2019): 18–27; Kiseong Shin, *The Concept of Self in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and Its Implication for Interfaith Relations* (Wipf and Stock, 2017); Lynn A. Silva, *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1979).

⁴⁵ *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*, trans. Jewish Publication Society (Jewish Publication Society, 1985), Ecclesiastes 8:1, <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh>.

⁴⁶ *Tanakh*, Isaiah 1:18.

⁴⁷ *Tanakh*, Genesis 3:24.

⁴⁸ *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 22, 160.

⁴⁹ Evrim Ersoz Koc, “The Road to Awe: Legitimizing the Anomy of Death in Darren Aronofsky’s *The Fountain*,” in *Perspectives on the Sublime in American Cultural Studies* (Dokuz Eylül University, 2018), 127–41.

⁵⁰ Koc, “The Road to Awe,” 134.

⁵¹ *Zohar*, Beresheet A 27, 281.

According to Davidowicz,⁵² the director intentionally used *the fountain* as a Kabbalistic symbol for Wisdom (Hochmah), envisioned as a water source from which four rivers flow. In the Kabbalistic book of *Zohar*, the universe is based on the opposition between the Male and the Female principle. The Male principle is Wisdom (Hochmah) and the Female principle is Reason/Intellect (Bina). The river connects the Male worlds (Zeir Anpin) and the Female worlds (Malchut). The fountain symbolizes Hochma, which rises in the upper world and descends to the Female world via Bina. The world is constructed in such a way that Hochma, which is creative and unregulated, has to be confined by the strict principles of Bina in order to transform it into useful and applicable knowledge (Da'at). Therefore, water not only springs up, but takes shape through these flows that pass across different worlds and finally reach our world (Malchut). In the film, Chesed is visible in Tom's motivation and desire to save Isabella, Bina in his strict scientific and naturalistic approach, and Da'at through concrete actions. Therefore, a Kabbalistic element is visible in the use of the sign of the fountain to describe the materialization of a certain immaterial goal. The Female principle collects water in order to distribute it further: "springs gush forth in torrents; they make their way between the hills, giving drink to all the wild beasts; the wild asses slake their thirst."⁵³ The verses indicate that the fountains of knowledge give life to everything, as water is a metaphor for knowledge.⁵⁴

The opening quote in the film addresses the biblical topic of searching for the Garden of Eden, which was hidden after Adam's consumption from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.⁵⁵ Everyone is trying to find it because "whoever eats from the Tree of Life shall live forever."⁵⁶ However, the Tree which Tom finds turns out not to be the Tree of Life, but just a regular tree. As it dries out, the fountain is sealed. The 16th-century Queen Isabella promises Tom: "together we will live forever"—if he manages to find the Tree of Life.

The Female principle is occasionally referred to as "the Queen" in Judaism.⁵⁷ She is "a path to the strong tree called the Tree of Life,"⁵⁸ whereas Queen Isabella in the film orders conquistador Tom to search for the Tree. The phrase "forever and ever" ("*le'olam ve'ed*" in Hebrew) literally means "from the world to the world"—infinity appears to point to the union between two worlds, Male and Female. In the film, it is a union of the first narrative (the 16th century, standing for Chesed) and the second narrative (the 21st century, standing for Gevurah) into the third narrative (standing for Tiferet, the central pillar).

⁵² Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

⁵³ *Tanakh*, Psalms 104:10–11.

⁵⁴ *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 16, 105.

⁵⁵ Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

⁵⁶ *Zohar*, Beresheet A 22, 253.

⁵⁷ *Zohar*, Acharei Mot 7, 23.

⁵⁸ *Zohar*, Beshalach 13, 148.

According to certain scholars, Tom represents the biblical Adam.⁵⁹ His purpose is to discover the cure for a specific illness. As the laboratory monkey heals and becomes rejuvenated by ten years, it turns out that Tom had successfully found the cure. Unfortunately, his discovery happens a few minutes too late for Isabella. Tom's life goal is therefore based on a Jewish idea that each person should do what they can to repair the world as much as possible: "it is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."⁶⁰

The protagonist's name "Tom" is taken from the New Testament as an allusion to the Doubting Thomas. Only he is not doubting life, but death,⁶¹ which is for him a "disease like any other." His last name, "Creo," means "I believe" in Latin, signifying a belief in life over death.⁶² "Isabella" means "beautiful," which is a description of the sphere of Tiferet, literally meaning "beauty" in Hebrew. The protagonists are brought from one reality to another through different kinds of passages. Gates are a very important motif in the film. Many longitudinal dark doors are shown; for example, the entrance to the church in the 16th century and the entrance to the laboratory in the 21st century. The light in the shape of a cross shines through the doors whenever they are opened. In biblical imagery, gates connote the passage between the present and the future, between the current world and the Messianic era.⁶³ Gates are supposed to lead a person towards righteous behavior, which would cause them to participate more efficiently in *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world") and bring the Era of Redemption closer. The doors visually represent a passage of time, space and consciousness from one reality to another.

The characters metaphorically search for these gates of redemption in the film, but they end up back at the beginning. However, the protagonists are not giving up on their quest, so the ending is a new beginning for them.

Anthropomorphic universe

Isabella represents the Mother (Ima) and Tom represents the Father (Abba).⁶⁴ The concepts of the Mother and the Father are present in Judaism and Christianity, as well as other religions. The film explicitly references the Mayan creation myth featuring the First Father. The Father in Jewish theosophy represents Wisdom (Hochma). Together with Reason (Bina, representing the Mother, Ima), He creates the Male principle (Zeir Anpin) and the Female principle (Malchut). In the film, the 26th-century Tom, becoming the Father, reunites with the Tree/star Xibalba/Isabella, who becomes

⁵⁹ Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

⁶⁰ "Pirkei Avot," in *Mishnah*, trans. Joshua Kulp (Sefaria, 2026), <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Mishnah>.

⁶¹ Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

⁶² Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*.

⁶³ *Tanakh*, Psalms 118:19.

⁶⁴ Davidowicz, *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*, 75.

the Mother. Together they give birth to the universe, including the 16th-century Tom and Isabella (the Male and the Female principles), participating in their own *tikkun olam* (“reparation of the world”). Therefore, Tom and Isabella from the future give birth to Tom and Isabella from the past. This contradiction stems from the fact that the film endorses a cyclical, rather than a linear concept of time. The Judeo-Christian logic (history as leading towards the fulfillment of a certain goal) stops here, as time in the film seems to endlessly repeat itself in circles.

The idea of the “eternal return” in contemporary Western society was popularized by Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.⁶⁵ However, the concept of the eternal return (palingenesis) stems from Asia and it was accepted by the ancient Greeks. The main premise is that the universe keeps repeating itself. “Eternal repetition, up to every detail, of same events, after a certain period is over (The Big Year).”⁶⁶ Hinduism believes in the repetition of time periods (yugas), while Buddhism views time as consisting of repetitive cycles (kappa) of evolution (vivatta) and dissolution (samvatta).⁶⁷ This kind of a cyclical concept of time seems to dominate the narrative of the film.

The ending is open, as Tom and Isabella both transcend physical reality. Since a cyclical nature of time is suggested, the characters may just keep repeating these same actions in eternity. Alternatively, they might reach the ultimate redemption. This remains unclear.

Imagery associated with the 26th-century narrative is particularly Buddhist—Tom resembles a bald monk-like figure dressed in simple clothing that floats through the universe in the lotus position. Gold signifies eternity (rather than judgment) in Buddhist tradition and is regarded as a typical Buddhist color. This transcendent reality is contrasted to the real-life pain and vulnerability of a lived body.⁶⁸

There is an apparent duality in the shape of juxtapositions between the mind and the body, science and spirituality, finitude and infinitude, and ultimately Tom and Isabella. However, all these “contradictions” are essentially intertwined, coming from the same source.⁶⁹ The film shows that narratives from different cultures have similar motifs (the Tree of Life, sword, fountain, gates) in order to show interconnectedness, or unity, rather than dualism. Similarly, religion and science are intertwined. Xibalba, the Mayan legendary place where the souls go to reincarnate, is an actual physical star within the cosmos of the film. In the end, Tom’s head remains in the bubble floating around Xibalba. This “head” suggests problems of the intellect. It symbolizes a common problem of the 21st-century society: “Wisdom without Kindness.”⁷⁰ Too im-

⁶⁵ D’Iorio, “The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation,” 41–96.

⁶⁶ Pierre Riffard, “Palingeneza, palingenezija,” in *Rječnik ezoterizma*, ed. Pierre Riffard, trans. Radmila Zdjelar (August Cesarec, 1989), 294–95.

⁶⁷ David J. Kalupahana, “The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality,” *Philosophy East and West* 24, no. 2 (1974): 181–91.

⁶⁸ Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, 95.

⁶⁹ Laine, *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*, 73.

⁷⁰ Zohar, Acharei Mot 11, 75; Beresheet A 40, 378.

mersed in his scientific quest to find the cure, Tom neglects to show Isabella kindness and affection in the present moment.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to analyze *The Fountain* using theories of communication sciences in order to explain underlying similarities of narratives and symbols coming from different cultures and religions.

The paper identified the following main elements of the narrative (*message*) conveyed through the film (*medium*):

1. A Trinitarian structure;
2. Tree, Garden, Fountain (related to nature); Gates, Key, Sword (related to technology);
3. Dualistic relationships: Male and Female, Corporeality and Transcendence, Human and Nature, etc.;
4. An anthropomorphic conception of the universe;
5. Reincarnation;
6. The role of humans in: a) creation, b) maintenance, c) repairing of the world;
7. Time: linear vs. cyclical.

The concept of the Trinity exists in Jewish and Christian, as well as Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Therefore, the three narratives can be understood as consistently and consciously incorporating perspectives of different religions.

The motifs of Tree, Garden, Gates, Keys, Sword and Fountain are present in all the aforementioned religions as well. The symbols of the lost paradise and the search for a mystical Tree, in which the fountain of life is concealed, exist in multiple religions. Apart from having a mystical meaning, these elements often transmit messages about the relationship between humans and nature.

The results suggest that the stories and symbols from different cultures can be mutually consistent and not contradictory.

The first difficulty arises when considering the concept of dualistic relationships. Dualism is more strongly accentuated in certain religions than in others. Zoroastrianism in particular endorses it, while in Hinduism and Buddhism there is no strong opposition between humans and nature. Rather, humans, animals and plants seem to be on a similar metaphysical level. The opposition between corporeality and spirituality seems to be the strongest in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the ultimate goal is to escape the cycle of reincarnation through associating oneself with the soul, rather than the body. Judaism on the other hand places no contradiction between corporeality and spirituality. Christianity endorses the body, as resurrection is expected, but less strongly than Judaism. This is also the main problem regarding the anthropomorphic conception of the universe. Different religions hold different views of the position of humans in relationship to other living things. Hinduism, Buddhism and Mayanism place humans lower in the hierarchy of all living entities, equating humans

with plants and animals in an almost biocentric sense. In contrast, Judeo-Christianity holds that the human soul originates from a higher metaphysical level than that of animals or plants. This also seems to be the case with the perception of reincarnation. The film draws on both Judeo-Christian and Hindu-Buddhist conceptions of reincarnation, emphasizing the role of its human protagonists, while also allowing for the possibility of a human being reincarnating as a tree at some point in the future.

The film relies on the Judeo-Christian perspective regarding the role of human beings in the creation of the world—so Tom actively tries to improve his reality—but it also includes a Hindu-Buddhist idea that time keeps repeating itself in cycles. This is the biggest problem in the film narrative: how to unite these two opposite perspectives, how to allow the protagonists to reach their goal without being stuck in a time loop? Hinduism and Buddhism offer the only solution: the nullification of the self and distancing oneself from the physical world. No ultimate redemption in Judeo-Christian sense is shown in the film.

Using *The Fountain* as a case study, this analysis demonstrates how symbols and narratives from different cultures and religious traditions can be integrated within mass media to form a unified and consistent whole. Consequently, film as a mass medium has potential for unifying cultures worldwide and enabling an easier intercultural and interreligious dialogue.

References

- Atkinson, Michael. "The Fountain." *Sight & Sound* 17, no. 3 (2007): 56.
- Burkart, Roland. *Kommunikationswissenschaft: Grundlagen und Problemfelder; Umriss einer interdisziplinären Sozialwissenschaft*. Böhlau, 2002.
- Chomsky, Noam, Ángel J. Gallego and Dennis Ott. "Generative Grammar and the Faculty of Language: Insights, Questions, and Challenges." *Catalan Journal of Linguistics, Special Issue* (2019): 229–61. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/catjl.288>.
- Cobb, Kayla. "Here's Why Lilly Wachowski (Probably) Won't Be Part of 'The Matrix 4.'" *Decider*, 2019. <https://decider.com/2019/08/21/the-matrix-4-lilly-wachowski/>.
- Davidowicz, Klaus S. *Die Kabbala: Eine Einführung in die Welt der jüdischen Mystik und Magie*. Böhlau Verlag, 2009.
- Davidowicz, Klaus S. *Film als Midrasch: Der Golem, Dybbuks und andere kabbalistische Elemente im populären Kino*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017.
- D'Iorio, Paolo. "The Eternal Return: Genesis and Interpretation." *Lexicon Philosophicum: International Journal for the History of Texts and Ideas* 2 (2014): 41–96. <https://doi.org/10.19283/lph-20142.414>.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Traité d'histoire des religions*. Payot, 1964.
- Ersoz Koc, Evrim. "The Road to Awe: Legitimizing the Anomy of Death in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*." In *Perspectives on the Sublime in American Cultural Studies*, edited by Carl Boon. Dokuz Eylül University, 2018.

- Fell, John L. "Vladimir Propp in Hollywood." *Film Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1977): 19–28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1211770>.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 14 (1914–1916)*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey. Hogarth Press, 1957.
- Gheerbrant, Alain. "Stablo." In *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, edited by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant. Matica hrvatska, 1989.
- Gonda, Jan. "The Hindu Trinity." *Anthropos* 1, no. 2 (1968): 212–26.
- Grdešić, Maša. *Uvod u naratologiju*. Leykam International, 2015.
- Guillen, Michael. "The Fountain—Roundtable Interview With Darren Aronofsky." *ScreenAnarchy*. (November 15, 2006), <https://www.google.com/amp/s/screenanarchy.com/amp/2006/11/the-fountainroundtable-interview-with-darren-aronofsky.html>
- Habito, Ruben L. "The Trikāya Doctrine in Buddhism." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 6 (1986): 53–62.
- Hill, Bernice. "A Review of *The Fountain* (2006), Written and Directed by Darren Aronofsky." *Psychological Perspectives* 51, no. 1 (2008): 180–84.
- Hoang, Nguyen Quy. "The Doctrine of Not-Self (*Anattā*) in Early Buddhism." *International Review of Social Research* 9, no. 1 (2019): 18–27.
- Hodosy, Annamária. "Aronofsky's Two Visions of the Ecological Fall." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 29, no. 1 (2023): 78–102.
- Kalupahana, David J. "The Buddhist Conception of Time and Temporality." *Philosophy East and West* 24, no. 2 (1974): 181–91.
- Katz, Eric. "Against the Inevitability of Anthropocentrism." In *Beneath the Surface: Critical Essays in the Philosophy of Deep Ecology*, edited by Eric Katz, Andrew Light and David Rothenberg. MIT Press, 2000.
- Laine, Tarja. *Bodies in Pain: Emotion and the Cinema of Darren Aronofsky*. Berghahn Books, 2015.
- Le Roux, Françoise, and Christian-J Guyonvarc'h. "Drvo." In *Rječnik simbola: Mitovi, snovi, običaji, geste, oblici, likovi, boje, brojevi*, edited by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant. Matica hrvatska, 1989.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Strukturalna antropologija 2*. Školska knjiga, 1988.
- Niemiec, Ryan M., and Danny Wedding. "Wisdom II: Open-Mindedness, Love of Learning, and Perspective." In *Positive Psychology at the Movies: Using Films to Build Virtues and Character Strengths*. Hogrefe Publishing, 2008.
- Peters, Ted. *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.
- "Pirkei Avot." In *Mishnah*. Translated by Joshua Kulp. Sefaria, 2026. <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Mishnah>.

- Piskorski, Rodolfo. "Vicious Circles: Intersections of Gender and Species in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain*." *Humanimalia* 5, no. 1 (2013): 80–103.
- Riffard, Pierre. "Palingeneza, palingenezija." In *Rječnik ezoterizma*, edited by Pierre Riffard, translated by Radmila Zdjelar. August Cesarec, 1989.
- Riffard, Pierre. "Sefirah, sefirot." In *Rječnik ezoterizma*, edited by Pierre Riffard, translated by Radmila Zdjelar. August Cesarec, 1989.
- Riley, Denise. *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*. Capsule, 2012.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. "Ecofeminism: Symbolic and Social Connections of the Oppression of Women and the Domination of Nature." In *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb. Routledge, 2004.
- Shin, Kiseong. *The Concept of Self in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Christianity and Its Implication for Interfaith Relations*. Wipf and Stock, 2017.
- Silva, Lynn A. *The Problem of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1979.
- Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*. Translated by Jewish Publication Society. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Tanakh>.
- Teng, Yuan-Wei. "A Soul Journey to Repair the Broken World: An Overview of Kabbalah's Concept of *Gilgul*." *Journal of Life Education* 11, no. 1 (2019): 1–36.
- White, Lynn, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. University of Georgia Press, 1996.
- Zohar. *The First Unabridged Translation with the Sulam Commentary*. Translated by Michael Berg. Kabbalah Centre International, 2016.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original Scholarly Paper

Joshua Wodak

School of Arts, Western Sydney University, Australia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5095-2910>

An Interface to the World: Evoking Environmental Responsibility in Responsive Environments

Abstract: The late twentieth-century art form Responsive Environments (REs) comprised interrelations between artist, artwork, and audience, wherein response-ability and responsibility to the social and/or physical environment of the artwork could be tangibly evoked. Wherein participants' collective behavior within an artwork-as-environment serves as a proxy for the cumulative effect of human behavior on the more-than-human environment. As an extreme form of interactive art, behavior within a Responsive Environment, both to fellow human participants and to the installation itself, thus offers an interface to the world. In so doing, this art form offers a particular capacity to address human understanding of self and other at an amoral level that can encompass the scale of the self-other/response-responsibility crises facing contemporary Western society. To articulate what this capacity entails, this article uses theoretical analysis and case studies of Responsive Environments by Allan Kaprow, Myron Krueger, Simon Penny and David Rokeby, to explore the interaction between responsiveness (the motor dimension of interactivity) and responsibility (its moral/social dimension). Such questions of selfhood and otherness, especially as they relate to responsibility, are highly pertinent to current society, where individual responsibility seems invisible, and our sense of engagement with that which is 'outside' our personal 'inside' seems severely lapsed. Wherein, the article explores how the dynamics of response-ability and responsibility within Responsive Environments actually manifest, in order to untangle where authorial responsibility ends, and the unpredictable act of participatory art begins. Therein, the article re-examines the potential of REs as an important and valuable art form moving into the twenty-first century, drawing on a body of historical artworks whose mechanics reflect some of the most pressing social, cultural, and political conversations needed in a global community facing down the Anthropocene, which apparently has no mechanism for conducting that conversation.

Keywords: responsibility; responsivity; self–other relations; interactivity; responsive environments; environmental responsibility; environmental ethics.

Introduction: art theory of responsive environments

The late twentieth-century art form Responsive Environments comprised interrelations between artist, artwork, and audience, wherein responsivity and responsibility to an other, be it the social and/or physical environment of the artwork, could

be tangibly evoked. This art form's medium was the dynamics of reaction, response, and responsibility among constantly fluctuating selves and others. In this article, we examine how the dynamics of responsibility and responsivity within REs manifest through the exemplary work of practitioners and practitioner-theorists at the peak of the art form in the late twentieth century. RE is usually denoted as interactive installation, in the form of architecture, robotics, kinetic sculptures, electro-acoustic music/sound, aural and visual literature (e.g., speech and computer-generated text), visual media (e.g., video, motion-paintings, animation, and photomedia), and hybrid recombinations.

The art form emerged during the late 1960s, with the terms Responsive Environment and Interactive Art coined in 1969 by theorist-practitioner Myron Krueger. Krueger, based at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, drew on his background as an artist, computer scientist, and academic in his practice and posited REs as immersive, interactive, electronic artworks whose technological responsiveness was fundamentally important. In his manifesto on REs, *Artificial Realities II*, Krueger posits that both artists' and audiences' responsibilities are integral to the art form. Here, Krueger argues that "when participation becomes the subject of the aesthetic work, the viewer's critical faculties are given new responsibilities" such that "their own actions complete the piece. Thus, within the framework of the artist's exhibit, the participants also become creators."¹ By contextualizing REs as principally stemming from Environments and Dada, Krueger drew from the practice established by these precedents, in that "the artist surrendered immediate control, stepped back to a higher level, and gave the actors and the audience a level of control heretofore unknown."² Before turning to how such art, media, and technology arguably changed the respective responsibilities of artists and audiences, it is instructive to theoretically analyze the same issues as they apply to the relatively non-technological art form of Environments.

The notion of artworks as Environments was introduced and pioneered by artist Allan Kaprow, beginning with the first staging of his *Environment Words*, in New York City in 1962. In the catalogue for this exhibition, Kaprow declared that *Words* "is an 'environment,' the name given to an art that one enters, submits to, and is—in turn—influenced by."³ Environments denote immersive, participatory and multi-sensory 'total works of art' in the manner of *gesamtkunstwerk*. In the case of *Words*, this involved two adjoining rooms filled with strips of words written on the ceiling and walls, with variable lighting and modifiable record players and loudspeakers. Audience participation with the content and form was central to this Environment, as attendees were invited to "turn on the phonographs; roll the rollers; [and] add your own words."⁴

The pivotal issue explored in this article, of how such evocations of responsibility constitute an interface to the world-at-large, is encapsulated in an excerpt from Kaprow's statement for the first exhibition of *Words*:

¹ Myron Krueger, *Artificial Reality II* (Addison-Wesley, 1991), 15.

² Krueger, *Artificial Reality II*, 13.

³ Allan Kaprow, "About *Words*," in *Words* (Smolin Gallery, 1962), 2.

⁴ Rose Moose, "Words About Kaprow," in *Words*, ed. Allan Kaprow (Smolin Gallery, 1962), 3.

Of course, being active, we can misuse any environment, natural or artistic. We can destroy a landscape through carelessness, and here we can refuse to consider what responses are appropriate to the nature of the idea. For instance, it is inappropriate to staple word-strips askew, onto the floor or anywhere in the smaller room; and it would be just as unfit to write with the coloured chalks in the larger room. There are freedoms for the visitor (as there are for the artist), but they are revealed only within the limits dictated by the artwork's immediate as well as underlying themes.⁵

In this article, what Kaprow referred to as “freedoms” for attendees and artists are considered ‘environmental responsibilities’: for how artists, as the instigator, create the “environment” for how participants may write, re-write, move and remove the content (in this instance words on cardboard, paper and chalk) and influence the overall dynamic of the physical environment (in this instance modify the lighting, record players and loudspeakers). In such situations, participants negotiate hybrid responsibilities: to the social environment, being fellow attendees within the *gesamtkunstwerk*, and to the physical environment, being their interventions with the material content of the space.

Collectively, environmental responsibility was evoked by participants explicitly engaging with the content of the “environment” to influence both contemporaneous co-participants and future participants. Kaprow argues that attendees and artists’ responsibilities were “revealed [...] by the artwork’s immediate as well as underlying themes”: he ceded significant responsibility to participants (via incorporating their unpredictable influences in the form and content of *Words*) within a structure of limitations whereby his authority as author was maintained (via the instructions for different participation in the different rooms). In so doing, *Words* explored the permeable membrane between immediate material responsibility and implicit or “underlying” social responsibility in participant-participant interaction. By combining these two intertwined modes of responsibility, Kaprow highlighted one of these “underlying themes”, of evoking environmental responsibility, as *Words* questioned whether people “misuse any environment, natural or artistic.”

These themes are amplified in the electronic form of REs, whose technological basis adds a significant dimension to their representation of the “misuse [of] any environment, natural or artistic.” In REs, artist and audience responsibilities grow in complexity as the artwork’s complexity increases. Through the computationally generated behavior of REs, audience responsibility is no longer *to* inert words on cardboard strips, but *with* interactive entities that may unpredictably respond to participants, such as in Krueger’s pioneering REs. However, evoking participants’ responsibility via technologically mediated responsivity creates myriad challenges for engaging participants in an RE, whose engagement is a precondition for being responsive to the artwork and, thus, responsible.⁶

⁵ Kaprow in Julie Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (MIT Press, 1999), 14.

⁶ Joshua Wodak, “Responsivity and Responsibility in Responsive Environments: Art and Interactivity on a Rupturing Planet,” *Leonardo* 58, no. 1 (2025): 24.

The central theoretical question is thus how REs may be created to evoke environmental responsibility in the interaction between artist, artwork and audience. On balance, such evocation is determined by combining three principal elements—content, form and interactivity—in an opposite strategy for the subject and context of each artwork. Content and subject matter signify what RE is about. For instance, artworks expressly about responsibility may evoke a sense of responsibility toward the artwork's physical environment through relatively simple interactivity. One such means is to combine subject matter with interactivity that encourages awareness of how participants' behavior influences the artwork. This approach prioritizes narrative over interactivity to communicate relatively 'intact' content. Such levels of interactivity allow the content to retain narrative cogency, facilitating relatively easy engagement with the subject matter through narrative. Consequently, the responsivity of such artworks is relatively simplistic, with audiences' responsibility often remaining indirect, implicit, and symbolic.

In an RE, form, structure and functionality exert strong mutual influence over one another. For instance, prioritizing form over content may facilitate greater complexity and more interactivity, through which participants may exert more nuanced and multifaceted consequences. As a result, the interactivity of such artworks may be relatively complex, so that attendees' responsibility may be relatively direct, explicit, and literal. Therein, the manner of interactivity decisively influences how participants may engage with an RE (and one another in works designed for multiple simultaneous co-participants).

As the combination of content, form, and interactivity determines the manner of responsivity, so do they also determine the associated mode of responsibility. This arises because responsivity and responsibility reinforce one another and are indexically tied in an RE. Responsivity and responsibility share a common etymology and are meaning-relative to one another, given "the ethical conception of responsibility as responsiveness to the other."⁷ Wherein, the Oxford English Dictionary defines "responsibility" as "a moral obligation to behave correctly towards or in respect of" a person or thing.⁸ For David Rokeby, widely considered the most influential and innovative interactive artist of the movement's peak period during the late twentieth century, "accepting responsibility is at the heart of interactivity", since he defines responsibility as being "literally, the ability to respond."⁹ It is this dimension of responsibility that this article concerns itself with, given the interaction between responsiveness (the motor dimension of interactivity) and responsibility (its moral/social dimension). Here it is important to explore the evocation of responsibility as distinct from 'ethics,' wherever the artists concerned favor the term 'responsibility.'

⁷ Andrew Schaap, "Assuming Responsibility in the Hope of Reconciliation," *Borderlands* 3, no. 1 (2004): 5.

⁸ Oxford English Dictionary (3rd Edition), "Responsibility," accessed February 11, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/responsibility_n?tl=true.

⁹ David Rokeby, "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media," in *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, ed. Simon Penny (SUNY Press, 1995), 155.

Throughout his artist statements, interviews, and academic articles, Rokeby is adamant about the repercussions of interaction design in evoking multifarious responsibilities, since interfaces are material devices that relate artwork to audience and to the immaterial *processes* through which content is engaged with. For instance, he argues that “the interface becomes the organ of conscience, the mechanism of interpretation, the site of responsibility” such that “the design of these technologies becomes the encoding of a kind of moral and political structure with its attendant implicit social contract.”¹⁰ However, an important distinction must be made: while *an* interface can be programmed, the *ways* in which people interact with it cannot, *provided that* their autonomy and agency are genuinely respected.

In the above definition of responsibility, what constitutes correct behavior depends on the specific context and content of each artwork. This encompasses the potentially amoral nature of responsivity, as the article includes art that evokes ambiguous, uncertain responsibility, such as Kaprow’s *Words*, rather than the targeted use of art to induce ethical behavior. Namely, behaving responsibly in response to the interactivity required to engage with an artwork may include actions considered irresponsible under bylaws or societal conventions. This capacity for structured suspension of normative conventions is part of what makes REs so valuable when dealing with subjects that fall into ethical grey zones. Our discussion aligns with Rokeby’s argument that interacting in an RE offers “a representation of responsibility” wherein “each participant in an interaction receives the *sensation* of responsibility; each has the *ability to respond*.”¹¹ The concern is creating REs to *evoke* a “sensation” or “representation of responsibility,” as evocation is defined as bringing or recalling “a feeling, memory, or image to the conscious mind” and “the action of eliciting a response.”¹² Rather than catalyze, advocate for, or induce normative ethics. These properties highlight the artform’s value for any artist wishing to explore morally ambiguous topics or reset participants’ familiar ethical compass within the safe space of a constructed environment.

In REs, the two interconnected domains of an artwork’s social and physical environments impinge upon one another. The social environment encompasses cybernetic cycles of Human-Human interactions (artist-attendee and attendee-attendee), while the physical environment encompasses Human-Environment interactions (artist and attendee with the artwork’s physical environment). The physical environment includes the interface through which artists and attendees interact, namely, Human-Machine interaction, whereby attendees engage with the artwork. Collectively, all such domains configure how an RE may act as an interface to the world at large.

All the above categories engage in some kind of self-other confrontation and blurring the boundaries between the self and the other is instrumental in evoking

¹⁰ Rokeby, “Transforming Mirrors,” 155.

¹¹ Rokeby, “Transforming Mirrors,” 155. Emphasis in original.

¹² Oxford English Dictionary (3rd Edition), “Evocation,” accessed February 11, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/evocation_n?tl=true.

responsibility in REs.¹³ This occurs via the environment of the ‘self’ (or, in spatial language, ‘interior’), which serves as a proxy for the environment of the ‘other’ or ‘exterior.’ Therein, key practitioners, such as Simon Penny, argue that the “aesthetically manipulated quality” in such artforms is the “behavior” of the artwork and participants’ interaction with the artwork. With artists’ responsibility focused on designing the “aesthetic of behavior” he argues that “the model for this behavior must necessarily be human behavior, the way in which humans interact with each other, or with other living things.”¹⁴ As an engineered microcosm of quotidian environments, responsibility to the self may thus symbolically represent responsibility to the other.

This self-other relationship is shaped by the influence of Environments on REs. Kaprow expanded upon this self-other relationship in his essay on “The Shape of the Art Environment,”¹⁵ which articulates the central concern manifested in his work *Words*. In such a constructed context, participants’ responsibility determined their collective and cumulative “misuse” or use of “natural or artistic”¹⁶ environments. This particular Environment evoked implicit responsibility for the natural environment by prompting explicit responsibility for the artwork’s social and physical environment. In this section, the processes of actually creating REs, in tandem with reflections from practitioners on evoking environmental responsibility in their REs, will be the topic.

Between artist intention and audience experience: challenges of responsive environments

My creative process doubles as a personal critical inquiry into ideas of relationship and interaction and the ways that the explicit mechanical interactive relationships made possible by computers change, challenge, enlarge and diminish notions of relationship and interaction. (David Rokeby)¹⁷

Rokeby does not refer to his art as practice, but rather “as a public research laboratory” where “my ideas about interaction and experience are tested, affirmed, or shot down.”¹⁸ The distinction is that being *research* practice, Rokeby’s works begin with “a couple of questions” principally about interactivity and interrelationships, wherein a resultant work will entertain “a dialogue within itself” rather than “end with

¹³ Joshua Wodak, “I Interact, Therefore We Are: Mediating Relations Between Self and Other in David Rokeby’s Interactive Art,” *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 23, no. 2 (2025): 37.

¹⁴ Simon Penny, “Why Do We Want Our Machines to Seem Alive?,” *Scientific American*, September 1995, 216.

¹⁵ Allan Kaprow, “The Shape of the Art Environment,” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (University of California Press, 2003), 90.

¹⁶ Kaprow in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, 14.

¹⁷ Rokeby in Roberto Simanowski, “Very Nervous System and the Benefit of Inexact Control: Interview with David Rokeby,” *Dichtung Digital: Journal für Kunst und Kultur digitaler Medien* 5, no. 1 (2003): 5.

¹⁸ David Rokeby, “The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content,” in *Digital Illusion: Entertaining the Future with High Technology*, ed. Clark Dodsworth (Addison-Wesley, 1998), 33.

a finished piece.”¹⁹ For instance, Rokeby’s most acclaimed artwork *Very Nervous System* (VNS) (1982–2004) was initially inspired by the first RE, Myron Krueger’s *Videoplace* (1974–1984), wherein VNS also used cybernetic feedback between artwork and participants’ behavior. However, VNS also marked Rokeby’s departure from Krueger’s practice, as it was based on sensing subtleties and nuances in participants’ behavior, in contrast to the surveillance of presence/absence that characterized Krueger’s interaction design. Therein, his research practice shifted from what the art theorist Erkki Huhtamo termed an “unrestrained enthusiasm as an almost orgiastic celebration of the possibilities of interactivity” in VNS, to “discursive explorations” in his subsequent REs *Silicon Remembers Carbon* (1993–2000), *Measure* (1992–1994) and *Watch* (1995), such that the latter explored “pessimism or doubt” about the “changing implications of interactivity.”²⁰ These shifts stemmed largely from Rokeby’s stances on appropriate responsivity and concomitant audience responsibility: in short, the mechanics of self-other relations. Rokeby’s resolution to produce artworks *responsive* to the participant, while the participant is responsible for them, has now been manifested in over 25 years of producing re-iterations of VNS, demonstrating both the artform’s ongoing relevance and the enduring influence of Krueger’s *Videoplace*.

By evoking relations of such co-constitution and mutual obligation, Rokeby’s work provides not only prescient insights into relations between self and other, but between the responsibility and responsivity that arise through such encounters. With regard to VNS, the art theorist Ross Gibson remarks how the work uniquely explores self-other relations, including the porous boundaries between such seemingly discrete entities. Gibson observes that we find ourselves “inside—but also outside—but also inside—but also outside—but also inside. This rhythm is restless. And it’s necessary. Because the world of lived experience is restless like this, not simple, static or stable.”²¹ As Rokeby found, reflecting back on VNS almost four decades after first developing the work: “I was also exploring the relationship between the self we imagine as contained within the membrane of our skin and an enlarged sense of self that takes into account the complex bidirectional flows across this boundary as we interpenetrate with our environment.” Through so doing, he was able to explore the human self and other dichotomy by using “a computer [...] as a sort of prosthetic organ of philosophy, allowing us to ask age-old philosophical questions in new ways”, whereby “one can use the alienness of technology as a new mirror to consider ourselves in.”²²

VNS presents an exemplary evocation of self-other relations, and of the ability of REs to present an interface to the world, due to the cybernetic relationship at

¹⁹ Peter Ride, “Who Remembers What?”, catalogue essay for David Rokeby: *Silicon Remembers Carbon* exhibition, Center for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, 4 August–15 September 2007.

²⁰ Erkki Huhtamo, “Silicon Remembers Ideology, or David Rokeby’s Meta-Interactive Art,” in *David Rokeby: The Giver of Names*, ed. Anne McPherson and Deborah Esch (Guelph, 1998), 21.

²¹ Ross Gibson, “Inside Outside,” catalogue essay for *Mirror States* exhibition, May 17–July 28, 2008, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, 33.

²² Pia Kleber and Tamara Trojanowska, “Performing the Digital and AI: In Conversation with Antje Budde David Rokeby,” *TDR: Drama Review* 63, no. 4 (2019): 107.

“the core of the work”, wherein human movements are instantaneously translated into sounds/music. According to Rokeby, this occurred because interacting with “interfaces leave[s] imprints on our perceptual systems which we carry out into the world,” with this “effect” becoming “stronger”²³ over the course of interaction. Such self-other (or ‘Inside-Outside’) relations were pushed further by unconventionally installing VNS in public outdoor spaces as well as galleries and performance spaces. Therein, the ‘Inside’ environment stands as proxy for an ‘Outside’ environment, meaning responsibility on the Inside may symbolically represent responsibility to the Outside. As Rokeby argued in 1995, during Huhtamo’s aforementioned “almost orgiastic celebration of the possibilities of interactivity”:

It is not the individual interactor who is reflected in these works so much as human behavior itself. In a sense, the responsive environment and the automaton complement each other, representing both sides of the relationship between man, and the social and natural environment.²⁴

Penny has used a similar process methodology over his long career involving an exceptionally wide skill set across disparate domains. Citing *Petit Mal* (1993–5), his “autonomous robotic artwork,” Penny “define[s] my research as ‘the aesthetics of real-space interaction’”²⁵ through which *Petit Mal* simultaneously explores Human-Computer and Human-Human Interaction. For Penny, such “research emerges from artistic practice and is therefore concerned with subtle and evocative modes of communication rather than pragmatic goal-based functions.”²⁶

However, this raises a methodological bind between artworks that require artist-audience communication and the collaboration and communication required to create such works. Namely: the disjuncture between an artist’s intention and actual audience experience of an RE. While finding collaboration “a necessity” in his process of creating REs, Penny argues that communication in collaboration is fraught with difficulties. As his production process “necessitates deep and sensitive engagement with people trained in disciplines so distant from the goals of art that conversation can, at times, seem impossible,” he argues that “solving technical problems and resolving communications issues among the collaborators is a labor in itself.”²⁷

Taking a step sideways into the processes involved in creating REs, we find that much is revealed about the conundrums of collaboration and communication when we compare different modes of writing about such work: for example, by comparing catalogue essays and artists’ statements that are usually provided at stagings. Such

²³ Rokeby, “Construction of Experience,” 31.

²⁴ Rokeby, “Transforming Mirrors,” 152.

²⁵ Simon Penny, “Embodied Cultural Agents: At the Intersection of Art, Robotics and Cognitive Science,” paper presented at AAAI *Socially Intelligent Agents Symposium*, MIT, Massachusetts, November 8–10 1997, 5.

²⁶ Penny, “Embodied Cultural Agents,” 3.

²⁷ Simon Penny, “Systems Aesthetics and Cyborg Art: The Legacy of Jack Burnham,” *Sculpture* 18, no. 1 (1999): 4.

comparison is in fact integral for understanding artists' attempts to evoke responsibility in their work, as their practice may explore ambiguous responsibility, while their scholarly writing may articulate their rationale for evoking such modes of responsibility.

As a case in point, Ken Feingold's *The Surprising Spiral* (1991), one of the first canonical interactive artworks, utilizes trammelled interactivity, which is antithetical to the intuitive interactivity that Rokeby and Penny advocate. In *Against Friendly Interfaces: Aesthetics of Trammelized Interaction*, Maciej Ozog defines trammelled interactivity as "bewildering, changeable and unpredictable forms of the artifact and/or creating unconventional forms of the interface that hinder the interaction with the artifact."²⁸ Feingold's scholarly writing details his rationale for such interactivity, wherein the "complex cause and effect structure" involved non-predictable variations between instantaneous, delayed, and cumulative consequences from participants' interactions with *The Surprising Spiral*. He designed the work for participants to be ambiguously responsible for future participants' experiences whereby "the actions of previous viewers will also affect the structure found by another viewer."²⁹ Feingold's rationale was that he "wanted these [types of consequences] to mirror our daily cause and effect experiences" which he argues are similarly complex and ambiguous. As public information at the stagings of this artwork did not mention these topics, Feingold found that "many who encountered this work were frustrated"³⁰ while the interactive art theorist Erkki Huhtamo similarly observed that "users have frequently felt puzzled."³¹

Nevertheless, Ozog, like Feingold, maintains that trammelled interactivity may viably evoke responsibility, provided "the construction of the artifact and the interface should disclose the interactor's role in the process of interaction and emphasize his/her responsibility for its course."³² This highlights the role of artists' disclosure in their scholarly or exhibition catalogue writing in emphasizing audiences' responsibility, given the discrepancies between what can be communicated solely by an artwork and writing designed to augment an artwork. Such discrepancies are widespread, given that ambiguity and indeterminacy are desired qualities in such artworks. Further, REs have particular properties that problematize second-hand information and understanding, placing primary importance on understanding the art form through first-hand experience. Therein, whether an RE features an unpredictably morphing garden maze or a hermetically sealed dataset of content, each encounter reveals different facets, literally and hermeneutically, for different participants.

²⁸ Maciej Ozog, "Against Friendly Interfaces: Aesthetics of Trammelized Interaction," in *Proceedings of the 12th International Symposium on Electronic Arts 2004* (ISEA Press, 2004), 4.

²⁹ Ken Feingold, "The Interactive Art Gambit," in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, ed. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp (British Film Institute, 2002), 122.

³⁰ Feingold, "Interactive Art Gambit," 123.

³¹ Erkki Huhtamo, "Trouble at the Interface, or the Identity Crisis of Interactive Art," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2, no. 1 (2004): 41.

³² Ozog, "Against Friendly Interfaces," 3.

To these ends, the art theorist Beryl Graham's "hybrid and pragmatic research methods"³³ of curating and visiting artworks formed the "public research laboratory"³⁴ for her quantitative and statistical examination of audience engagement with REs. Her PhD concluded that many audiences did not reach, find, explore, or encounter significant areas of many works due to their understanding of responsivity and their associated responsibility.³⁵ This revealed a wide disjuncture between artists' intentions and audience experience, which impedes the evocation of responsibility through interaction between artwork and audience. Importantly, this disjuncture existed in these works' hermetically sealed form and interactivity, with all participant influence contained within predefined possibilities for interaction (as was the case in interactive art in the 1990s).

This disjuncture between artists' intentions and audience experience would, of course, be exacerbated in any artworks involving evolving and emergent forms, but in REs this has a greater impact due to highly variable responsivity-responsibility ratios. Yet it is precisely this disjuncture and disturbance between intention, action, reaction, response, and the shared and contrasting responsibilities that emerge among artists, audiences, and scholars that makes these artforms peculiarly appropriate for opening doors to topics that evade any direct approach. The processes of engagement, the potential for unique manifestation of self-other dynamics and the open possibility for confusion or miscomprehension can, in this way, actually be seen as part of the value of such artworks. REs require a far greater effort from all parties, from artists to audience to scholar, as their execution, exhibition, evolution, engagement and examination are all fraught with complexities that demand fluid yet critical thought and force unique forms of examination of the artwork. The following section explores what these efforts entail by analyzing the mechanics involved, from Kaprow's *Words* through to fully-computational REs.

Mechanics of responsivity and responsibility in responsive environments

The problem is [...] most successful communication involves a great deal of craftsmanship and authorship and point of view and storytelling and narrative [...] Interaction largely destroys all that. By giving the audience control over the raw material you give them precisely what they don't want. They don't want a load of bricks, they want a finished construction, a built house. (Max Whitby)³⁶

³³ Beryl Graham, "A Study of Audience Relationships with Interactive Computer-Based Visual Artworks in Gallery Settings, through Observation, Art Practice and Curation" (PhD diss., University of Sunderland, 1997), 147.

³⁴ Rokeby, "Construction of Experience," 37.

³⁵ Graham, "Study of Audience Relationships," 136.

³⁶ Max Whitby in Andrew Cameron, "The Future of an Illusion: Interactive Cinema," *Millennium Film Journal* 28 (1995): 42.

Whitby's analogy refers to the organicist basis of REs being made from a "load of bricks" that are composed into configurations. The metaphor encapsulates just how and why REs involve interfacing with such seemingly disparate worlds, given the difference between a highly interactive "load of bricks" versus, at the other extreme, a minimally interactive "built house." Therein, locating an RE along this spectrum, according to its organicist basis, is central in terms of the capacity of an artwork to evoke environmental responsibility. These units are also referred to as "primitives"³⁷ in contemporary practitioners' Jon McCormack's Artificial-Life-Based REs, or "interactive granularity"³⁸ in Karl Willis' audiovisual interactive installations. All refer to the size, form, and microstructure of the components and their associated means for being combined into macro-structures that collectively create REs. In the three most commonly used media of words, images and sounds, the smallest may respectively be phonemes, pixels and, through granular synthesis, sound particles of roughly 25 microseconds. Primitives heavily influence the evocation of responsibility as they determine the relationship between content, form and interactivity.

In his practice, Willis posits "the challenge" as being about achieving the "right balance" between the size of primitives and their corresponding interaction modalities. This balancing act requires a compromise, which Willis terms "the balance of specification,"³⁹ being the relationship between primitive size and interactive potentiality. As an example, smaller primitives permit "more functionality" and hence greater interaction difficulty, with larger primitives offering less functionality and hence "simpler" interactivity, as per Willis' "goal of empowering the user to create in diverse ways."⁴⁰

Balancing primitive size with interaction modality is not readily apparent without a guiding principle or rationale. For this article, this concerns the creation of REs to evoke environmental responsibility in the interaction between artist, artwork and audience. Applying this rationale to Whitby's analogy, REs made from smaller Lego-sized "bricks" offer greater scope for audiences to recombine them into more complex and diverse structures. In contrast, larger Duplo-sized bricks have less recombinant potential, which limits audience responsibility to interacting with relatively inflexible structures. Willis positions the innumerable options for arriving at a "balance of specification" along a "scale [where] finer granularity provides smaller individual elements with which the interactor can begin to construct and create in diverse ways" (as represented by Lego) while "coarser granularity with larger individual elements" allows for a "merely *selective*"⁴¹ interactivity (as represented by Duplo). Willis argues that smaller primitives "allows greater creative possibilities but can

³⁷ Jon Bird, "Containing Reality," in *Impossible Nature: The Art of Jon McCormack*, ed. Jon McCormack (Austrian Centre for the Moving Image, 2004), 45.

³⁸ Karl Willis, "Open Interactions: The Balance of Specification," paper presented at *Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth*, Perth, September 1–7, 2004, 8.

³⁹ Willis, "Open Interactions," 9.

⁴⁰ Karl Willis, "User Authorship and Creativity within Interactivity," in *Proceedings of the 14th ACM International Conference on Multimedia* (Association for Computing Machinery Press, 2006), 20.

⁴¹ Willis, "Open Interactions," 2. Emphasis in original.

potentially create a more complex learning process”⁴² due to their greater recombinant potential. If these primitives coalesce into a narrative (such as a deliberate sequence of words, images or sounds), then smaller primitives offer engagement with their more fragmentary narratives, while larger primitives facilitate semi-cogent narratives by being relatively less interactive.

Whitby’s primitive—bricks—have relatively finite malleability (in contrast to sand or wet cement). This is at odds with artists’ common composing with mutable forms, as they do not merely repackage existing structures like bricks or Lego but rather generate the “raw materials” (in Whitby’s analogy) and the rules and tools for their recombinant potentiality. This is illustrated via the analogy of artist-audience responsibilities in REs being akin to the relationship between cooking and eating. In an RE composed of ingredients being Alphabet Soup, each primitive is a piece of pasta shaped like a letter. The contemporary interactive artist John Bird uses a cognate approach, defining “primitive” as “a basic building block of a system that cannot be derived by combining other elements. A useful analogy is to see primitives as letters of an alphabet that can be combined in different ways to form words.”⁴³ Wherein, dry letters are combined to spell words or sentences. If artists construct words and sentences that audiences re-arrange without being provided with a guiding principle or rationale, the artists effectively abrogate their authorial responsibility.

In contrast, in order to evoke participant responsibility to the physical environment of the artwork, recombinant potentiality is subject to constraints, within which artists communicate by engaging audiences through interactivity without the content being rendered ‘meaningless.’ For instance, with regard to Jon McCormack’s interactive installation *Eden* (2006), Bird argues that this RE has “the potential to display ‘combinatoric emergence’” whereby it “can explore the conceptual space defined by the primitives and the rules for combining them.” However, Bird still found the emergent behavior that such a system could manifest was limited by how “the additional ‘letters’ were selected from a pre-specified, finite list and it is a matter of debate whether a computational system such as this can transform its underlying generative system in a way that is comparable to the creative emergence evident in biological evolution.”⁴⁴

Despite seismic differences in the media and technology involved, this relates back to Kaprow’s *Words*, with which this article began. Kaprow defined the primitive as one word, so participants were requested not to chop words up into letters or to add individual letters that were not part of a phrase. He also instructed that words should only be written in chalk in the smaller room (which had chalkboards) and it was “inappropriate to staple word-strips askew”⁴⁵ in the larger room, composed entirely of words on cardboard strips. However, in REs the form of the letters themselves are also mutable, as artists seek to evoke responsibility to form as well as content. For instance,

⁴² Willis, “Open Interactions,” 2.

⁴³ Bird, “Containing Reality,” 45.

⁴⁴ Bird, “Containing Reality,” 46–47.

⁴⁵ Kaprow in Reiss, *From Margin to Center*, 14.

applying this rationale to words (symbolizing a primitive in any medium), the middle letters of words can be rearranged, but the first and last letters of each word are fixed. Within this relationship between primitive size and interactive modality, the brain can still read coherent sentences, such as the following from Hamlet:

To be, or not to be: that is the quesoutin:
Weehhtr 'tis nbelor in the mnid to suffer
The snlgis and aowrrs of ougautores furntoe,
Or to take amrs angisat a sea of tboulres,
And by oopinpsg end them?

The brain reads the first and last letters of each word, paying inconsequential attention to the order of the letters in between. This opens hermetically sealed databases to participants' responsibility for exerting novel and unpredictable influences by allowing variable levels of primitives (words and letters) and flexible, constrained recombinant potentiality (only middle letters can be rearranged), which guide participants' interactivity. This represents the approach to evoking responsibility to the physical environment of the artwork by using strategies that (ideally) balance narrativity with interactivity.

In this Alphabet Soup, artists' responsibilities are heightened when applying heat and liquid over time to deconstruct the letters, so they may be cut, molded, or squeezed into pliable, malleable shapes, or even a new 'alphabet.' Progressively deconstructing the primitives increases participants' responsibility to subsequently recombine such primitives free even from the strictures of language. At this level, there is little, if any, guidance (or responsibility) from the artists, as the primitives are at the audience's behest. While some may enjoy this freedom, others may become disengaged or feel burdened by the responsibility to do *anything* with the putty they hold in their hands. Individual letters provide the comfort of communicating by forming words but sacrifice the ability to create freeform abstract graphical constructions with the malleable primitives. This represents the approach to evoking responsibility to the physical environment of the artwork by using recipes that sacrifice narrativity in favor of greater interactivity. Therein, Willis argues that a "level of granularity" which uses "mere pixels, sound samples, words or letters" is "therefore not narrative based but instead focus on free-form creativity and play at the base level." Thus, he sees such "open interactions" as "promoting highly participatory creative experiences, rather than arranging heavily authored content into narrative-like structures."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Willis, "Open Interactions," 2.

Conclusion

Despite seemingly divergent approaches to creating REs, the art form is generally premised on attempts to negotiate between authority and control to combine responsivity germane to the environmental responsibility of both artist and audience. The divergent attempts share a desire to maximize complexity and interactivity, while reducing artists' authorial authority (and associated responsibility) and increasing audiences' authority (and associated responsibility). The tensions between what responsibility their artworks evoke, versus what they desire their artworks to evoke, arises from the intractable disjuncture between singular authorship and collective action, and the complex processes that govern how a group moves within parameters set by an authority or norm, eventually disrupting either the group or the parameters.

During its peak period, conjectures about the future directions of REs concerned a striving for evolving artworks using dialogical interactivity to evoke environmental responsibility. And yet, even at the peak of its popularity as an art form, REs received negligible critical analysis internationally. Now, the term RE has been almost completely claimed by architecture, design, and computer science. Even though contemporary practitioners such as *FoAM* and *Transmute Collective* incorporate multi-faceted interactivity in REs involving architecture, design, and computer science, such practice remains marginal to the utilitarian forms that subsumed the original movement.

Nevertheless, as an accessible means for approaching ethically contentious subject matter within a broad public spectrum, the issues this art form raises are highly relevant to pertinent issues in contemporary culture. The artists examined above and their challenges in evoking environmental responsibility in REs have left us an incredibly relevant and valuable inheritance: a body of historical artworks whose mechanics reflect some of the most pressing social, cultural, and political conversations needed in a global community facing down the Anthropocene, which apparently has no mechanism for conducting that conversation.

In that light, REs offer a scaled-down proxy of these contestations as they play out on the planetary scale of the climate and ecological crises. That is, such evocations of responsibility constitute an interface with the world at large. In doing so, REs explored factors crucial to understanding how we got into the Anthropocene and where we might go from here, including but not limited to issues of the invisibility of impacts of individual interaction with the environment and resulting lack of responsibility, the environment as authored system versus chaos requiring order, the confusion and division arising from cumulative responsibility, issues of performative responsibility and social factors impacting individual decisions, and a genuine understanding of what it means to move within authored parameters, as well as what happens when these break down. The ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity of the issues raised in reading response-ability and responsibility in REs is on par with the issues themselves.

Thereby, we are left with prescient analogies for the dearth of response-ability and responsibility, not only in art, but in the world-at-large. This should encourage us to re-examine the potential of REs as an important and valuable art form moving into the twenty-first century, where our paradigms of self and other, and our understanding of responsibility and response within those paradigms, have been altered, leaving our society, both collectively and individually, to catch up. Never before has such self-other understanding been more critical, in light of the fully fledged ecological and climate crisis and the dearth of understanding about the genuine nature and potential of individual and collective responsibility within human-planetary, human-ecology, and human-human relations.

References

- Bird, Jon. "Containing Reality." In *Impossible Nature: The Art of Jon McCormack*, edited by Jon McCormack. Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2004.
- Cameron, Andrew. "The Future of an Illusion: Interactive Cinema." *Millennium Film Journal* 28 (1995): 33–47.
- Feingold, Ken. "The Interactive Art Gambit." In *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, edited by Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp. British Film Institute, 2002.
- Gibson, Ross. "Inside Outside," catalogue essay for *Mirror States* exhibition, May 17 to July 28, 2008, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney.
- Graham, Beryl. "A Study of Audience Relationships with Interactive Computer-Based Visual Artworks in Gallery Settings, through Observation, Art Practice and Curation." PhD diss., University of Sunderland, 1997.
- Huhtamo, Erkki. "Silicon Remembers Ideology, or David Rokeby's Meta-Interactive Art." In *David Rokeby: The Giver of Names*, edited by Anne McPherson and Deborah Esch. Guelph, 1998.
- Huhtamo, Erkki. "Trouble at the Interface, or the Identity Crisis of Interactive Art." *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2, no. 1 (2004): 38–41.
- Kaprow, Allan. "About Words." In *Words*, edited by Allan Kaprow. Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- Kaprow, Allan. "The Shape of the Art Environment." In *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, edited by Jeff Kelley. University of California Press, 2003.
- Kleber, Pia, and Tamara Trojanowska. "Performing the Digital and AI: In Conversation with Antje Budde David Rokeby." *TDR: Drama Review* 63, no. 4 (2019): 99–112. https://doi.org/10.1162/dram_a_00877.
- Krueger, Myron. *Artificial Reality II*. Addison-Wesley, 1991.
- Moose, Rose. "Words About Kaprow." In *Words*, edited by Allan Kaprow. Smolin Gallery, 1962.
- Oxford English Dictionary (3rd Edition). <https://www.oed.com>.

- Ozog, Maciej. "Against Friendly Interfaces: Aesthetics of Trammelized Interaction." In *Proceedings of the 12th International Symposium on Electronic Arts 2004*. ISEA Press, 2004.
- Penny, Simon. "Embodied Cultural Agents: At the Intersection of Art, Robotics and Cognitive Science." Paper presented at *AAAI Socially Intelligent Agents Symposium*, MIT, Massachusetts, November 8–10, 1997. <https://www.aaai.org/Papers/Symposia/Fall/1997/FS-97-02/FS97-02-024.pdf>.
- Penny, Simon. "Systems Aesthetics and Cyborg Art: The Legacy of Jack Burnham." *Sculpture* 18, no. 1 (1999): 1–12.
- Penny, Simon. "Why Do We Want Our Machines to Seem Alive?" *Scientific American*, September 1995.
- Reiss, Julie. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. MIT Press, 1999.
- Ride, Peter. "Who Remembers What?", catalogue essay for *David Rokeby: Silicon Remembers Carbon* exhibition, Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, 4 August–15 September, 2007.
- Rokeby, David. "The Construction of Experience: Interface as Content." In *Digital Illusion: Entertaining the Future with High Technology*, edited by Clark Dodsworth. Addison-Wesley, 1998.
- Rokeby, David. "Transforming Mirrors: Subjectivity and Control in Interactive Media." In *Critical Issues in Electronic Media*, edited by Simon Penny. SUNY Press, 1995.
- Schaap, Andrew. "Assuming Responsibility in the Hope of Reconciliation." *Borderlands* 3, no. 1 (2004): 1–12.
- Simanowski, Roberto. "Very Nervous System and the Benefit of Inexact Control: Interview with David Rokeby." *Dichtung Digital: Journal für Kunst und Kultur Digitaler Medien* 5, no. 1 (2003): 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/17580>.
- Willis, Karl. "Open Interactions: The Balance of Specification." Paper presented at *Biennale of Electronic Arts Perth*, Perth, September 1–7, 2004.
- Willis, Karl. "User Authorship and Creativity within Interactivity." In *Proceedings of the 14th ACM International Conference on Multimedia*. Association for Computing Machinery Press, 2006.
- Wodak, Joshua. "I Interact, Therefore We Are: Mediating Relations Between Self and Other in David Rokeby's Interactive Art." *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research* 23, no. 2 (2025): 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1386/tear_00137_1.
- Wodak, Joshua. "Responsivity and Responsibility in Responsive Environments: Art and Interactivity on a Rupturing Planet." *Leonardo* 58, no. 1 (2025): 23–28. https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_02624.

Article received: March 31, 2026

Article accepted: July 15, 2026

Original scholarly paper

Tajana Reznić Brenko

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3397-2100>

Transdisciplinary Pedagogy and the Constitutive Role of Art: The Perspective of Transdisciplinary Realism

Abstract: Transdisciplinarity emerged as a part of a broader rethinking of higher education, in response to the fragmentation and increasing specialization of knowledge, which left modern science unable to address the complex problems of the contemporary world. Transdisciplinarity has articulated itself simultaneously as an educational movement, an approach to learning, knowledge, and research, as well as methodology. Systematic literature reviews warn that much of the term's application amounts to a superficial methodological label without a firm theoretical grounding. This article proceeds from the Nicolescuian line of transdisciplinarity and its axiomatics, and from the thesis that transdisciplinarity can be understood as a coherent philosophical system from which a distinctive philosophy of education follows. While pragmatic, problem-oriented approaches to transdisciplinarity can function without an artistic component, the article argues that within the Nicolescuian framework artistic practice is not merely a creative supplement but a constitutive component of transdisciplinary pedagogy. Building on this foundation, the article's principal contribution is the derivation of three pedagogical “trans” functions—transcendent, transgressive, and transformative—through which the three axioms are pedagogically operationalized; their synergetic action constitutes the attributes of *in vivo* knowledge, positioning artistic practice, as the Hidden Third, at the core of transdisciplinary pedagogy.

Keywords: transdisciplinarity; transdisciplinary realism; transdisciplinary pedagogy; art; the Hidden Third; zone of non-resistance; philosophy of education.

1. Introduction

Transdisciplinarity emerged in the 1970s both as a concept and an epistemological project within broader efforts to rethink the university¹ as a response to the fragmentation and specialization of knowledge and the consequent inability of modern science to address the complex problems of the contemporary world. It has

¹ The term was first used at the 1970 OECD seminar in Nice; cf. Leo Apostel, Guy Berger, Asa Briggs, and Guy Michaud, eds., *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities* (OECD, 1972); Erich Jantsch, “Inter- and Transdisciplinary University: A Systems Approach to Education and Innovation,” *Policy Sciences* 1, no. 4 (1970): 403–28.

since been institutionalized: from the Venice Declaration (1986) and the founding of CIRET (Paris, 1987), through the First World Congress and the Charter of Transdisciplinarity (Arrábida, 1994), to the congresses of Locarno (1997) and Zurich (2000). Transdisciplinary studies, projects, and centers are steadily multiplying, yet systematic literature reviews warn that much of the term's application amounts to a superficial methodological label without firm theoretical grounding,² and that “a lack of a comprehensive synthesis in this area is evident.”³ At the intersection of transdisciplinarity, the arts, and higher education, Wander M. van Baalen and colleagues analyze 458 papers and show that only 13 out of the 56 in their qualitative synthesis elaborate the concept theoretically, while Basarab Nicolescu, one of the field's key theorists, is cited in a mere five of them.⁴

The conceptual ambiguity surrounding transdisciplinarity begins with its basic distinctions from other research approaches. Manfred Max-Neef orders them by increasing degree of integration: disciplinarity is specialization in isolation; multidisciplinary studies several fields without establishing connections among them; pluridisciplinarity establishes cooperation among related disciplines without overarching coordination; interdisciplinarity coordinates and integrates them; and transdisciplinarity strives for a holistic integration connecting all disciplines.⁵ According to Nicolescu, the disciplinary approaches (mono-, multi-, inter-, and pluridisciplinarity) retain their belief in the structural stability and autonomy of disciplines and operate within the same logical and ontological coordinates, whereas transdisciplinarity transcends those coordinates: it is concerned not with transferring models from one branch of knowledge to another but with studying the isomorphisms among domains of knowledge, thereby constituting a new type of knowledge.⁶ Transdisciplinarity, as Nicolescu defines it, “concerns that which is at once between the disciplines, across the different disciplines, and beyond all discipline,” and its goal is “the understanding of the present world, of which one of the imperatives is the unity of knowledge.”⁷ As Nicolescu clarifies, “beyond disciplines” precisely signifies “the Subject, more precisely the Subject–Object interaction,” for “the transcendence, inherent in transdisciplinarity, is the transcendence of the Subject.”⁸

² Ana Custodio-Ferrando and Ismael Cabero-Fayos, “Transdisciplinarity in Education: A Narrative Review of Its Didactic Validity and Contributions to Sustainable Learning,” *Sustainability* 17, no. 22 (2025): 10320.

³ Hosein Daneshpour and Ebo Kwegyir-Afful, “Analysing Transdisciplinary Education: A Scoping Review,” *Science & Education* 31, no. 4 (2022): 1047–74.

⁴ Wander M. van Baalen, Tamara de Groot, and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens, “Higher Education, the Arts, and Transdisciplinarity: A Systematic Review of the Literature,” *Research in Education* 111, no. 1 (2021): 24–45.

⁵ Manfred A. Max-Neef, “Foundations of Transdisciplinarity,” *Ecological Economics* 53, no. 1 (2005): 5–9.

⁶ Basarab Nicolescu, “Methodology of Transdisciplinarity: Levels of Reality, Logic of the Included Middle and Complexity,” *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 1, no. 1 (2010): 19–38.

⁷ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 22.

⁸ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 22.

These distinctions are, however, far from settled; what prevails is what Audrey Leathard has called a “terminological quagmire” of inconsistently used and practically interchangeable terms—even dictionaries distinguish them poorly, some defining transdisciplinary simply as interdisciplinary.⁹

Behind the confusion stand two fundamentally different poles in the understanding of the relationship between interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity: some authors, in agreement with Nicolescu (Max-Neef, Sue McGregor, Paul Gibbs), insist on a radical distinction, holding them to be distinct epistemological and ontological projects, while others, in agreement with Julie Thompson Klein (Michael Gibbons, Christian Pohl, Helga Nowotny), see the relationship as a continuum of knowledge integration in which transdisciplinarity is a more intensive or broader form of interdisciplinarity.¹⁰ Connected with this unresolved debate is the divergence of the two dominant approaches within the field itself: the Nicolescuian, associated with the Locarno congress (1997), and the Zurich approach, associated with the Zurich congress (2000).¹¹ Whereas the Charter (1994) focused on philosophical and axiological foundations, the Locarno Declaration and Recommendations (1997) were directed toward operational and educational implementation. The document declares levels of reality inseparable from levels of perception and refuses to define transdisciplinarity within classical logic, but places its emphasis on education, the responsibility of knowledge, and the transformation of the university as a key site of cultural evolution.¹² The Zurich approach, by contrast, defines transdisciplinarity as pragmatic, problem-oriented joint problem solving among science, technology,

⁹ Bernard C. K. Choi and Anita W. P. Pak, “Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Health Research, Services, Education and Policy: 1. Definitions, Objectives, and Evidence of Effectiveness,” *Clinical and Investigative Medicine* 29, no. 6 (2006): 351–64; the phrase “terminological quagmire” is Audrey Leathard’s, quoted at 359.

¹⁰ For the radical distinction, cf. Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*, trans. Karen-Claire Voss (State University of New York Press, 2002); Max-Neef, “Foundations of Transdisciplinarity,” 5–16; Sue L. T. McGregor, “The Nicolescuian and Zurich Approaches to Transdisciplinarity,” *Integral Leadership Review* 15, no. 2 (2015); and Paul Gibbs, “Transdisciplinarity as Subversion: In Space and Place,” *Quality in Higher Education* 29, no. 3 (2023): 375. For the continuum view, cf. Julie Thompson Klein, “A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, ed. Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, and Carl Mitcham (Oxford University Press, 2010), 15–30, and “Discourses of Transdisciplinarity: Looking Back to the Future,” *Futures* 63 (2014): 68–74; and Michael Gibbons et al., *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies* (SAGE, 1994).

¹¹ The division should not be read as a strict opposition but as a difference of emphasis. The very axis of that difference — the Zurich approach’s pragmatic problem solving against the Nicolescuian ontology of levels of Reality — already runs within Nicolescu’s own foundational concept: Reality he determines as simultaneously pragmatic and ontological—pragmatic insofar as Reality designates that which resists our experiences, representations, descriptions, images, and formalizations; and ontological insofar as Nature participates in the being of the world, so that Reality also possesses a trans-subjective dimension, irreducible to social construction, the consensus of a collectivity, or intersubjective agreement (see the following section). The two determinations are co-constitutive: resistance is the mode in which the trans-subjective makes itself felt within experience. See Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 25; Basarab Nicolescu, “Column on Transdisciplinary Realism,” *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 23, no. 2 (2016): 77; cf. McGregor, “The Nicolescuian and Zurich Approaches,” 7, 14–15.

¹² *Declaration and Recommendations of the International Congress “Which University for Tomorrow? Towards a Transdisciplinary Evolution of the University”* (Monte Verità, Locarno, April 30–May 2, 1997; CIRET–UNESCO); cf. Lima de Freitas, Edgar Morin, and Basarab Nicolescu, *Charter of Transdisciplinarity* (Convento da Arrábida: First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity, 1994).

and society: transdisciplinary research, according to Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn and colleagues, should grasp the complexity of problems, take into account the diversity of their scientific and life-world perceptions, link abstract and case-specific knowledge, and develop knowledge oriented toward the common good.¹³ Max-Neef formulates this difference as the distinction between “weak” and “strong” transdisciplinarity, the “strong” being explicitly grounded in Nicolescu’s axioms.¹⁴

This article proceeds from the “strong,” Nicolescuian line of transdisciplinarity.¹⁵ Nicolescu articulates theoretical transdisciplinarity through an axiomatic system he calls transdisciplinary realism, the foundations of which have been elaborated elsewhere.¹⁶ The article examines what philosophy of education this system articulates, and it argues—with Florent Pasquier and Nicolescu, Hans Dieleman, and Sacha Kagan—that within this framework artistic practice is not a supplementary but a constitutive component of transdisciplinary pedagogy. This established position serves as the theoretical foundation for the article’s original contribution: the derivation of three pedagogical “trans” functions—transcendent, transgressive, and transformative—in which the three axioms are operationalized, and whose synergetic action constitutes the attributes of *in vivo* knowledge. In doing so, the article also addresses what this framework implies for the understanding of art itself: its pedagogical instrumentality is not denied but resituated, for within this framework art is, more fundamentally, an epistemic practice in a radicalized, onto-epistemological sense—a mode of access to multilevel Reality operating at the level of vertical meaning and thereby implicated in the ontological transformation of the knowing subject.

2. From transdisciplinary realism to a philosophy of education

The distinction between the Real (Fr. *le Réel*) and Reality (Fr. *la Réalité*) lies at the foundation of transdisciplinary realism: the word Real, according to Nicolescu, designates that which is, by definition, forever veiled and as such inaccessible to the

¹³ For the Zurich approach, cf. Julie Thompson Klein et al., eds., *Transdisciplinarity: Joint Problem Solving among Science, Technology, and Society* (Birkhäuser, 2001); Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn et al., eds., *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research* (Springer, 2008), 4–5.

¹⁴ Max-Neef, “Foundations of Transdisciplinarity,” 5–16.

¹⁵ Transdisciplinarity is understood here, following Nicolescu, as a single project with three simultaneously operating aspects—theoretical, phenomenological, and experimental—rather than as a plurality of competing “transdisciplinaritys”; Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 23. The typological debates surrounding these aspects cannot be treated here for reasons of space; for the present argument it suffices to note that the strong, Nicolescuian line is distinguished by its elaboration of the theoretical aspect of this single project, whose methodology nonetheless requires, on Nicolescu’s own insistence, the simultaneous and rigorous consideration of all three aspects.

¹⁶ For Nicolescu’s exposition of the concept, cf. Nicolescu, “Column,” 77–85. The theoretical foundations are systematically elaborated in Tajana Reznić Brenko, “Prema transdisciplinarnom znanju—teorijski temelji transdisciplinarnih metodologija u vidjenju Basaraba Nicolescu” [Towards the Transdisciplinary Knowledge – Theoretical Foundations of Transdisciplinary Methodology in the View of Basarab Nicolescu], *Filozofska istraživanja* 44, no. 4 (2024): 769–87.

human being, whereas the word Reality designates that which resists our experiences, representations, and descriptions, and is accessible to knowledge as a perceptual reconstruction.¹⁷ “Reality is not merely a social construction, the consensus of a collectivity, or some inter-subjective agreement. It also has a trans-subjective dimension.”¹⁸ In 1996 Nicolescu formulated three fundamental axioms that direct his methodology and make it possible to view transdisciplinarity as a coherent philosophical system, or worldview:

1. The ontological axiom: there are, in Nature and society and in our knowledge of Nature and society, different levels of Reality of the Object and, correspondingly, different levels of Reality of the Subject.
2. The logical axiom: the passage from one level of Reality to another is insured by the logic of the included middle.
3. The epistemological axiom: the structure of the totality of levels of Reality or perception is a complex structure: every level is what it is because all the levels exist at the same time.¹⁹

The axioms are derived from the experimental data of contemporary science: the first two receive confirmation from quantum physics, and in part from quantum cosmology and molecular biology, yet far exceed the exact sciences; the third has its source not only in quantum physics but also in a range of other exact sciences and the humanities.²⁰

By levels of Reality of natural systems Nicolescu understands the macrophysical level, the microphysical level, and the cyber-space-time level (with a hypothetical fourth level of superstrings unifying all physical interactions); correspondingly, for social systems he identifies the individual level, the social level, the geographical and historical level of the community (family, nation), the cyber-space-time level of the community, the planetary level, and the cosmic level.²¹ Two levels of Reality are different if, in passing from one to the other, there is a break in laws, rules, and norms, and a break in fundamental concepts.²² The structure of the levels of Reality is marked by discontinuity, akin to the discontinuity that governs the quantum world, in which between two points there is a vacuum—an emptiness full of potentiality. Nicolescu stresses that levels of Reality differ radically from the levels of organization defined in systems approaches: levels of Reality are ontological and are discovered, whereas levels of organization are social constructs that we invent: they presuppose no discontinuity

¹⁷ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 25.

¹⁸ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 25.

¹⁹ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 24.

²⁰ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 24–25.

²¹ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 27, 29; Basarab Nicolescu, “Transdisciplinarity: The Hidden Third, Between the Subject and the Object,” *Human and Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 28.

²² Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 25.

in fundamental concepts, and several of them can appear at one and the same level of Reality.²³

Each level is marked by incompleteness: the laws governing it are only part of the totality of laws, and even the totality of laws does not exhaust Reality, for the Subject must also be taken into account. From the unity of levels follows a new principle of relativity: no level of Reality constitutes a privileged place from which all the others could be understood. Such a model acknowledges at once the objectivity of the Real and the plurality of Reality, holding the subject constitutive of Reality but not of the Real—demarkating transdisciplinary realism from reductionism, which reduces everything to a single privileged level, and from relativism, which denies any objective Reality.

Coherence among the levels of Reality is secured by the zone of non-resistance. Between any two levels, and beyond them all, extends a zone of non-resistance to our experiences, representations, descriptions, and mathematical formalizations—a consequence, for Nicolescu, of the limitations of human bodies and sense organs.²⁴ The unity of levels of Reality of the Object and its zone of non-resistance constitutes the transdisciplinary Object, while the unity of levels of perception of the Subject and its zone of non-resistance constitutes the transdisciplinary Subject. The two zones of non-resistance must be identical for the transdisciplinary Subject to communicate with the transdisciplinary Object; this shared zone plays the role of a third between Subject and Object—an interaction term that unites them while preserving their difference, which Nicolescu names the Hidden Third.²⁵ In this communication, the flow of consciousness that coherently crosses the Subject's levels of perception answers to the flow of information that coherently crosses the Object's levels of Reality.²⁶ In his later work, Nicolescu refers to these two flows as spiritual and natural information, respectively, and further elaborates on their interconnectedness: “The two flows are interrelated because they share the same zone of non-resistance.”²⁷ The Hidden Third thus connects all levels of Reality: discontinuity among the levels does not mean their disconnection. The ternary structure of Subject, Object, and Hidden Third differs radically from the binary subject–object division of classical realism. The transdisciplinary Object and Subject, each with its levels, and the Hidden Third together define transdisciplinary realism: a philosophical framework describing Trans-Reality—the totality of all levels of Reality unified through the Hidden Third.²⁸

²³ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 23, 25, 27–28.

²⁴ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 26–27.

²⁵ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 26–27; Nicolescu, “Column,” 77; Nicolescu, “The Hidden Third,” 20–21. Capitalized “Subject” and “Object” designate the poles of the transdisciplinary ternary structure; the lowercase “subject” refers to the human knower.

²⁶ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 25.

²⁷ Nicolescu, “The Hidden Third as the Unifier of Natural and Spiritual Information,” *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 22, no. 4 (2015): 94.

²⁸ Nicolescu, “Methodology,” 27, 34; for the graphic representation of the transdisciplinary Object, the transdisciplinary Subject, and the Hidden Third, see Nicolescu, “Column,” fig. 2 (82). Nicolescu's own spelling is “Trans-Reality” (“Methodology,” 34; *From Modernity to Cosmodernity*, fig. 17.5, 211), whereas Pasquier and Nicolescu write “Transreality”; this article follows the spelling of the source under discussion in each case.

The logical axiom introduces the logic of the included middle, formalized as a multivalent logic by Stéphane Lupasco and developed by Nicolescu, who joined it to the levels of Reality, into transdisciplinary logic, the key methodological tool of transdisciplinarity. Classical logic rests on the axioms of identity (A is A), of non-contradiction (A is not non-A), and of the excluded middle, according to which there exists no third term T that is at once A and non-A; transdisciplinary logic retains the first two and replaces the third with the axiom of the included middle: there exists a third term T that is at once A and non-A. Classical logic is not abolished; its validity is merely restricted to simple situations. On a single level the opposites A and non-A appear as an irreconcilable conflict; the T-state, exercised at another level, resolves them as non-contradictory, securing the passage between levels—and through its iterative repetition across all levels of Reality, known and conceivable, an open structure of their unity emerges.²⁹

Nicolescu himself uses various designations for transdisciplinarity: a methodology, a model of Reality, a new vision of the world, a metaphysics of Nature, and transdisciplinary realism. For positioning transdisciplinarity as a worldview I rely on the group gathered around Leo Apostel, whose project *World Views: From Fragmentation to Integration* (1994) develops a robust metatheoretical framework for analyzing and constructing worldviews in response to cultural and epistemological fragmentation. The authors define a worldview as “a coherent collection of concepts and theorems that must allow us to construct a global image of the world, and in this way to understand as many elements of our experience as possible”.³⁰ “World” here means neither the Earth nor the merely physical universe, but the widest environment cognitively, practically, and emotionally relevant to us. A worldview must encompass all aspects of human experience: not only systems of meaning but also systems of value, as well as aesthetic and ethical sensibility.³¹ Although not simply a scientific model, such a framework must not contradict known experimental facts, yet it reaches beyond what the physical sciences alone can offer; decisive is the two-way loop in which science, art, and ethics shape the worldview and are in turn shaped by it—the function of worldview construction being the conscious generation of that interaction.³²

The authors articulate seven questions that every complete worldview must answer, which Francis Heylighen condenses into three fundamental ones: what is (ontology), what is true (epistemology), and what is good (axiology).³³ Transdisciplinary realism, as shown elsewhere,³⁴ answers all three questions coherently through its three

²⁹ Nicolescu, “Column,” 81; the action of the included middle logic is symbolically represented in fig. 1 (79).

³⁰ Diederik Aerts et al., *World Views: From Fragmentation to Integration* (VUB Press, 1994), 17.

³¹ Aerts et al., *World Views*, 20.

³² Aerts et al., *World Views*, 21.

³³ Francis Heylighen, *Complexity and Evolution: Fundamental Concepts of a New Scientific Worldview* (Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2018).

³⁴ Cf. Reznić Brenko, “Prema transdisciplinarnom znanju.” In Aerts et al., the ontological question is posed as a task and a set of proposals rather than given a structure; cf. *World Views*, 25, 66 (“Could one use the concept of finality as a link between different system levels...?”).

axioms and is thus confirmed as a complete worldview; where Apostel calls for ontological integration without giving it structure, Nicolescu provides it by radicalizing the very phenomenological tradition from which Apostel proceeds: what there remained at the level of epistemological modes of access—the levels of perception of the Subject—Nicolescu ontologizes, defining them as levels of Reality of the Subject. An axiological dimension is joined to the three axioms: Nicolescu does not single out axiology as a separate axiom—axioms, he maintains, should be kept to a minimum—but argues that values arise from their combined action and are neither objective nor subjective: they result from the Hidden Third—the interaction of the subjective objectivity of the transdisciplinary Object and the objective subjectivity of the transdisciplinary Subject.³⁵ Transdisciplinary knowledge thus carries from the outset a value-laden and embodied character, inseparable from the knowing subject. Table 1 presents the fundamental dimensions of transdisciplinary realism as a worldview.

Since transdisciplinary realism satisfies the criteria of a coherent worldview, it can also be understood as an onto-epistemological framework from which a distinct philosophy of education follows. To determine this more precisely, Table 2 compares it, by way of orientation, with several dominant currents of educational thought, showing where it converges with them and where it diverges on account of its own onto-epistemological basis. Toward essentialist and transmission models it takes a distinctly critical stance, while with pragmatism, constructivism, critical pedagogy, and phenomenology it enters into a selective dialogue, adopting particular insights but relocating them within a different onto-epistemological framework.

While pragmatism, phenomenology, constructivism, and critical pedagogy each in its own way circumvents the question of the ontological status of Reality, or resolves it only partially, transdisciplinary realism offers an objective but not objectivist foundation. The Real exists independently of the subject—an enigma that no knowledge can exhaust. Reality, by contrast, is structured in levels and is known in dependence on the subject's perceptual capacities; it is plastic, yet it resists our representations and descriptions.³⁶ The subject is therefore neither a passive observer nor

³⁵ Nicolescu, "Methodology," 31. Unlike Nicolescu, Sue L. T. McGregor advocates axiology as a fourth axiom of the transdisciplinary methodology: an explicit axiological framework would enable the reconciliation of conflicting value systems within the space of the Hidden Third. See McGregor, "Philosophical Underpinnings of the Transdisciplinary Research Methodology," *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 9 (2018): 189. McGregor's proposal responds to a real concern and has didactic value for readers first encountering the framework. Within the framework itself, however, values are not left unanchored: they emerge from the combined action of the three axioms as an effect of the Hidden Third. The difficulty the fourth axiom is designed to remedy—the absence of an explicit axiological anchor—therefore does not arise. More than redundant, a fourth axiom would alter the very status of values: posited as a separate foundation instead of emerging from that combined action, they would be reified—whereas it is precisely their emergent status, neither objective nor subjective, that enables them to mediate among conflicting value systems. I therefore follow Nicolescu's axiomatic minimalism, granting values no fourth axiom, while retaining the axiological dimension McGregor rightly emphasizes: the formation of transdisciplinary values—the accommodation and integration of values beyond those individually held—remains an explicit concern of transdisciplinary work, as an emergent effect of the three axioms rather than a further one among them.

³⁶ Nicolescu, "Methodology," 22, 25, 35.

the sole maker of the world, but a participant in a multilevel process of knowing and creating Reality. It is precisely this ontological position that enables transdisciplinary realism to avoid the traps of naive realism and radical constructivism alike.

If Reality is multilevel, relational, processual, and plastic, and the subject embodied, relational, and multidimensional, then education cannot be reduced to the mere transmission of content, to cognitive development alone, or to social action alone. It must be conceived as a process of the integral, simultaneously multidimensional development of the human being in relation to self, others, the world, and the cosmos.

3. Transdisciplinary pedagogy as an emergent field

This opens the question that guides the present section: how is transdisciplinary pedagogy articulated, and how does it relate to the philosophy of education? Transdisciplinary realism, as a worldview, is the ground from which a philosophy of education—and, consequently, a transdisciplinary pedagogy—is derived. Pedagogy is understood here as the translation of a philosophy of education into a theory of action, learning, and teaching, integrating a normative philosophy of aims and values with praxis-oriented practical pedagogics. The term transdisciplinary pedagogy is not univocal. The literature consists largely of edited volumes, and individual authors address particular segments of its educational articulation: for some it is primarily the general educational horizon, for others the principles of learning and teaching, for others curriculum, organizational models, or methods of work, with education, pedagogy, and method often used interchangeably. I read this instability as a sign of the emergent character of a field that is articulating itself on several levels at once, and I therefore retain the plurality of these approaches without positing transdisciplinary realism—from which I derive my own thesis—as its superior or sole line.

An attempt to formulate a transdisciplinary pedagogy is offered by Pasquier and Nicolescu.³⁷ Starting from the question of how to pass from describing the structure of Reality into a conscious effective mode, they develop a theory of action that translates the onto-epistemological framework of transdisciplinarity into a pedagogy. Their diagram of Transreality shows the alogical Hidden Third as the interaction of Subject and Object, each constituted of different levels of Reality, and its entanglement with the logical included middle.³⁸ From a world incarnated in three levels—the self, others, and the nature/world—the authors derive three levels of development: personal (the relation to oneself), professional (to others), and collective (to the world). Superimposed as three overlapping circles, the zones of development reveal that it unfolds not in separate categories but in a single space where the personal, the

³⁷ Florent Pasquier and Basarab Nicolescu, “To Be or Not to Be Transdisciplinary, That Is the New Question. So, How to Be Transdisciplinary?” in *Being Transdisciplinary*, ed. Basarab Nicolescu, Raymond T. Yeh, and Atila Ertas (ATLAS Publishing, 2019), 7–16.

³⁸ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 8–9, fig. 2.1.

professional, and the collective intersect and condition one another. In the zone of their intersection appears the Hidden Third; the zones of non-resistance belonging to it are accessible through “intuition, the imaginary and the imaginal, affectivity, lived experience, poetry, dreams,” vertically connecting the ontological dimensions of existence and establishing a bridge between the interior world of subjects and the exterior world of objects.³⁹ The imaginal here is a technical term, not a variant of the imaginary: it designates—as distinct from the merely imaginary, the fictive and the unreal—an intermediate world as ontologically real as the worlds of sense and intellect, and imagination, correspondingly, not as a producer of fictions but as a cognitive faculty with its own noetic value, following Corbin.⁴⁰

The model is situated on a “common pedestal,” a specific space-time containing individualities and communities immersed in the Hidden Third, grounding it in lived reality.⁴¹

Pasquier and Nicolescu ask what kind of education and educational policies we seek, and on which conception of the human being they should be based. In response, they propose a holistic approach that conceives of the human being as a “human temple.” The starting point is the claim that every newborn human being grows within a particular anthropological context (beliefs, culture, social organization, and economy), which they call Transreality or the common pedestal. Built on this foundation are four pillars—social bonds, the body, feelings and sensibility, and the mental functions—crowned by values and ontological questions.⁴² In the educational context the authors maintain that each of these levels includes and develops parts of all the others, and that the same basic scheme can be recognized in different fields, including curricula and disciplines. Transdisciplinarity appears in the fifth column, cutting across all the levels and disseminating through the whole structure.⁴³ In this context transdisciplinarity is not an addition to existing education but a principle that permeates the whole of human formation.

The pedagogy corresponding to this conception of the human being is one they call integrative and implicative: integrative, in that every form of transmission is useful depending on the moment and the context; implicative, in that learners are offered situations in which they become full actors of the process of their own learning. Such a pedagogy, they specify, manifests at the crossroads of the Hidden Third containing the subjects in their three dimensions of development: it focuses on the junction of

³⁹ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 10. For the multiple levels of development and their link with Transreality, see figs. 2.2–2.3 (10–11).

⁴⁰ Henry Corbin, “*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal,” trans. Ruth Horine, Spring (Zürich, 1972); the full English text is available at <https://www.amiscorbin.com/bibliographie/mundus-imaginalis-or-the-imaginary-and-the-imaginal/>. The French original, “*Mundus imaginalis ou l’imaginaire et l’imaginal*,” *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6 (1964), reprinted in *Face de Dieu, face de l’homme* (Flammarion, 1983), is cited by Pasquier and Nicolescu, 10n8.

⁴¹ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 10.

⁴² Pasquier and Nicolescu, 12–13; the full human temple is represented in fig. 2.5 (13).

⁴³ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 13.

“know how to do,” “know how to be,” and “know how to become,” while pursuing at the same time emancipation and direct participation in the common ground.⁴⁴ For the present argument the point is decisive: the Hidden Third itself is presented as the source of this pedagogy—a confirmation, within the framework’s own pedagogical elaboration, that the mediating term is not an addition to pedagogy but its generative core. The authors hold that a new pedagogy must include: the transdisciplinary approach and complex thinking, transdisciplinary consciousness, spirituality, the relation with nature and the cosmos, creativity, the practice of the arts, transpersonal psychology, and soft skills.⁴⁵

Crucial for transdisciplinary pedagogy is the distinction between the disciplinary (transmission) and the transdisciplinary model of education. According to Nicolescu, disciplinary education is marked by a single level of Reality, orientation toward the external world of the Object, accumulation of knowledge, analytic intelligence, binary logic, and orientation toward power and possession, excluding ethical values; transdisciplinary education encompasses several levels of Reality, the correspondence between the Object’s external and the Subject’s internal world, understanding in depth, the harmony of mind, feelings, and body, the logic of the included middle, and orientation toward astonishment and sharing, including ethical values.⁴⁶ To the transdisciplinary model corresponds what Nicolescu calls *in vivo* knowledge, opposed to the isolated, transmissible *in vitro* knowledge that presupposes a passive learner.⁴⁷ *In vivo* knowledge unites knowledge and being, and mind, feeling, and body, encompassing several levels of Reality; art, spirituality, imagination, and embodied experience are not secondary dimensions but key sources of transdisciplinary knowledge.

On this basis I derive in this article three “trans” functions of transdisciplinary education in which the axioms are pedagogically operationalized.⁴⁸ The transcendent function, grounded in the ontological axiom, enables vertical movement through the levels of Reality by means of the Hidden Third: it ensures that knowledge spans several levels of Reality, presupposes the deep connection of the Object’s external and the Subject’s internal world, and fosters the equilibrium of analytic intelligence, feelings, and the body. Grounded in the logical axiom, the transgressive function transcends binary oppositions through the third term T. It is founded on the logic of the included middle, according to which what appears contradictory at one level of Reality is perceived, from another level, as unified and non-contradictory, thereby enabling a fruitful dialogue among scientific, artistic, intuitive, and somatic forms of knowledge. The

⁴⁴ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 14, fig. 2.6.

⁴⁵ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 15.

⁴⁶ Basarab Nicolescu, “The Need for Transdisciplinarity in Higher Education in a Globalized World,” in *Transdisciplinary Theory and Practice*, ed. Basarab Nicolescu and Atila Ertas (TheATLAS Publishing, 2013), 19.

⁴⁷ Nicolescu, “The Need for Transdisciplinarity,” 19.

⁴⁸ The words “three” and “trans” share the same etymological root—three is the transgression of two, that which goes beyond two; Nicolescu, “The Hidden Third as the Unifier,” 94. The triadic derivation is thus inscribed in the very word “transdisciplinarity.”

transformative function, grounded in the epistemological axiom, sets in motion the ontological transformation of the subject through the recursiveness of knowing: the passage from mere accumulation of information to a process in which knowledge becomes lived experience, a new way of living, and a path of self-transformation, building an ethical dimension of astonishment, sharing, and responsibility into the very process of knowing. The synergetic action of the three functions directly constitutes the attributes of *in vivo* knowledge: it is not a goal to be attained but a permanent, living process that emerges from the dynamic tension and cooperation of transgression, transcendence, and transformation.

Before turning to further articulations of the field, it is necessary to examine more closely the conception of art that underpins this framework. Since Nicolescu explicitly situates intuition, dreams, spirituality,⁴⁹ and lived experience in the zone of non-resistance, art is clearly not the only access to the Hidden Third: other non-discursive practices—ritual, meditation, contemplation, embodied movement—access it as well. Art, however, performs a specific configuration of that access. What distinguishes artistic practice is that it externalizes the passage through the zone of non-resistance into a perceptible, shareable form: a work, a performance, an event, which returns into the zone of resistance and becomes intersubjectively available—discussable, iterable, available as material for shared reflection. Meditation and contemplation remain primarily first-personal. Ritual repeats a closed frame: its form is prescribed, and deviation counts as error. Through the settings and procedures on which pedagogy draws—the studio, the rehearsal, the workshop, the sketch—artistic practice establishes an open frame: a shareable structure whose very content is the trying-out of what does not yet exist, so that deviation—even error—is invited rather than sanctioned; in this sense, experiment is not an accident of artistic practice but its very norm. Such a frame creates the conditions under which *in vivo* knowledge—knowing fused with being, which cannot be handed over ready-made—may emerge, though it also may not. What can be repeated is the frame, set up again and varied; each enactment remains singular. In the event, when it takes place, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts: those involved and the emerging work interact as true subsystems, their interactions constituting a new, irreducible element. Among the practices that access the zone of non-resistance, art thus offers an access that is at once shareable, repeatable as frame, and open to the new—which is what pedagogy requires.⁵⁰ Another practice may play a similar role precisely when it is framed as a

⁴⁹ Spirituality is understood here in Nicolescu's sense: distinguished from religion as a formalized, often dogmatic system, it names a personal experience of transcendence—in his later formulation, a new spirituality free of dogmas; Nicolescu, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity*, 215. Pasquier and Nicolescu likewise expressly separate spirituality from religion (7).

⁵⁰ Nicolescu's own study of Peter Brook's theatre confirms the point: the grouping of text, actors, and audience reflects the characteristics of a natural system—when a true theatrical event takes place, it is greater than the sum of its parts, the interactions constituting a new, irreducible element, while text, actors, and audience remain true subsystems opening themselves to one another; Nicolescu, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity*, 155–57.

shared, reflexive practice: the boundary is porous, and it is the mediating function, not the label, that matters. Since the transgressive function requires a medium for the dialogue of forms of knowledge, and the artistic artifact or event is that medium, art—without being exclusive—remains pedagogically irreplaceable.

With the concept of art thus determined, we return to the further articulations of the field. Within higher education, McGregor addresses transdisciplinary pedagogy as an educational framework organized around transdisciplinary learning, cyclical learning processes, and habits of mind, deriving nine transdisciplinary pedagogies, from the integrative curriculum to transformative learning.⁵¹ Gibbs derives transdisciplinary pedagogy from the question of thinking under conditions of complexity: since disciplinary framings cannot simply be combined into a harmonious whole, transdisciplinarity has to be framed in foundational terms rather than as an extension of other approaches; refusing hegemonies of knowledge that redefine problems away from their context, it places them in local and global contexts—in a praxis that is emotional, tacit, imaginative, and reflective, not one of rational judgment alone,⁵² while David Scott shows that a transdisciplinary curriculum requires an ontological rather than merely epistemological foundation, confirming, via Bhaskar and Heidegger, the turn that Nicolescu articulates with the ontological axiom.⁵³

Dieleman and Margarita Juárez-Nájera envision the transdisciplinary curriculum as a “rich ecology” of formal, experiential, and direct knowing.⁵⁴ In their Transdisciplinary Core at the Autonomous Metropolitan University in Mexico City, artistic practices were integrated into engineering education not additively but ecologically, so that each form of knowing retains its own logic while nourishing the others. This is a concrete case of art as a constitutive rather than decorative element of the educational whole. Kagan takes the arts in the transdisciplinary context as his central subject, viewing them as a transformative force that opens spaces of possibility—shared physical, social, and mental spaces in which imagination, experimentation, and creative, participative learning develop a sensibility for complexity.⁵⁵ McGregor subsequently shifts the discussion from the implemented curriculum to the curricular document, offering a template of its philosophy and rationale, though she calls it an “inaugural

⁵¹ Sue L. T. McGregor, “Transdisciplinary Pedagogy in Higher Education,” in *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice*, ed. Paul Gibbs (Springer, 2017), 3–16.

⁵² Paul Gibbs, “Transdisciplinary Thinking: Pedagogy for Complexity,” in *Transdisciplinary Higher Education*, ed. Gibbs, 49.

⁵³ David Scott, “Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity and the Higher Education Curriculum,” in *Transdisciplinary Higher Education*, ed. Gibbs, 31–43.

⁵⁴ Hans Dieleman and Margarita Juárez-Nájera, “Introducing a Transdisciplinary Curriculum to Foster Student Citizenship: A Challenge Beyond Curricula Reform,” *International Journal of Higher Education and Sustainability* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3–18.

⁵⁵ Sacha Kagan, “Artful Sustainability in Transdisciplinary Spaces of Possibilities,” *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 10 (2019): 63–71. The concepts of the sensibility to complexity and the transdisciplinary sensibility, which the article condenses, are systematically developed in Sacha Kagan, *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity* (Transcript Verlag, 2011), chap. 4.

attempt”;⁵⁶ and where McGregor raises the question of the education of educators,⁵⁷ Shamini Dias and Shelby Lamar’s textbook offers an operationalization: joining philosophical foundations and complex-systems thinking with practical tools within a justice-oriented, transformative transdisciplinarity—not explicitly Nicolescuian, though compatible with it.⁵⁸ Together, these works show that transdisciplinary pedagogy is already being articulated as a framework for learning, a pedagogy of thinking for complexity, a curricular ecology of knowledge, and an onto-epistemological problem of the curriculum—yet mostly through individual compilations and inaugural attempts; the systematic, axiomatically grounded articulation of the place of art in them nevertheless remains the least elaborated, even though artistic practice is listed among the features of the new pedagogy. Nicolescu, it should be noted, understands transdisciplinary education as a long-term process unfolding along the entire vertical—from kindergarten to the university and beyond, in work, community, and everyday life⁵⁹—whereas most other authors focus on higher education.

The reception of Nicolescu’s concepts beyond this line confirms both their fertility and the cost of detaching them from their axiomatic ground. In sustainability science, Toddi A. Steelman et al. made the Hidden Third the operative concept of an empirical project: in the Delta Dialogue Network, art—as a boundary object carrying simultaneously particular and shared meanings—served, on the project’s own account, as the very means of entry into the Hidden Third in collaborative research with Indigenous communities. The project demonstrates the concept’s practical traction; its conceptual apparatus, however, renders the Hidden Third as a designable “transformational space”—a setting that can be deliberately created and facilitated. Yet design has purchase only on what resists it: settings, procedures, and dialogue belong to the zone of resistance and can indeed be shaped, whereas the Hidden Third dwells in the zone of non-resistance, where there is nothing for form to take hold of—the conditions of the encounter can be prepared, but the encounter itself can only be occasioned, not produced. The rendering thereby loses the ternary structure of Subject, Object, and Hidden Third, and the multilevel structure of Reality, which together give the concept its meaning.⁶⁰ At the same time, the case yields a positive lesson for

⁵⁶ Sue L. T. McGregor, “Transdisciplinary Curriculum: Educational Philosophy and Rationale,” *Integral Leadership Review* 19, no. 1 (2019).

⁵⁷ Sue L. T. McGregor, “Transdisciplinary Teacher Education,” *Education Sciences* 12, no. 7 (2022): 485; see further sec. 4 below.

⁵⁸ Shamini Dias and Shelby Lamar, *Transdisciplinary Pedagogy for Ethical Education Textbook*, with Jonathan Aragon, Jessica Knippel, and Holly Allen, 2nd ed. (Claremont Graduate University, 2022).

⁵⁹ Basarab Nicolescu, “The Transdisciplinary Evolution of Learning” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1999).

⁶⁰ Toddi A. Steelman et al., “Identifying Transformational Space for Transdisciplinarity: Using Art to Access the Hidden Third,” *Sustainability Science* 14 (2019): 771–90. The authors cite two of Nicolescu’s articles (“Methodology”; “The Hidden Third”), but the apparatus itself is not taken over: the Hidden Third receives an interpretation of their own. The substitution shows in the terms and in the figure. “Subjective” and “objective” function as commonsense categories, without the distinction between the Real and Reality, the crossing of

the argument developed here: an empirical project seeking access to the Hidden Third found that access precisely in art. Deployed not as a vehicle for transmitting science or making a political point but to “create respectful space to bridge different ways of knowing and experiences,” art functioned concretely as objects in which knowledge, practice, and belief were embedded; as a medium for sharing knowledge and art-making skills; as testimony of social–ecological change; and as artefacts of knowledge co-production⁶¹—a practice-level corroboration of the mediating, rather than instrumental, function this article assigns to art. Read from the opposite direction, the case also indicates why the present article proceeds as it does: operationalization—here pedagogical—is transdisciplinary in the strong sense insofar as it is derived from, and stays anchored in, the axiomatic foundation. It is precisely this derivation that the three “trans” functions, introduced above, undertake.

Into the field of transdisciplinary pedagogy thus mapped, this article places the thesis advanced by Pasquier and Nicolescu—that art, as the Hidden Third, is one of its constitutive components—and undertakes its systematic grounding in transdisciplinary realism as a philosophical system. The Hidden Third, the mediator connecting the levels of Reality of Subject and Object, is a-logical: unlike the included middle, which is logical and operates in the zone of resistance, it belongs to a domain that surpasses logic and cannot be captured by rational discourse.⁶² Human experience gains access to it, as noted above, through intuition, imagination, lived experience, dreams, and poetry—that is, through cultural-artistic and aesthetic/spiritual practices.⁶³ While science works with fragments of a single level of Reality, art and culture cut across several levels of Reality of Subject and Object and belong to the zone of non-resistance, in which the Hidden Third manifests itself.

subjective objectivity and objective subjectivity, or the internal structure of the transdisciplinary Subject and Object (sec. 2); and Fig. 1 depicts the Hidden Third as a bounded central region on a single plane, overlapped by four circles of experience and knowledge, with the region's properties inscribed inside it as a list. With no Subject, no Object, and no levels of Reality in the picture, a spatial region with listed contents thus stands in place of an ontological interaction term—a term real in its effects, knowable by what it enables, and never given as an object of positive description. The interpretation thereby reduces transdisciplinarity to a single one of its aspects—the experimental, detached from the theoretical. The authors' own reservation—that the weakness of the framework is just that, a theory, and one established by a Western scientist (785)—illustrates the point twice over: theory is one of the project's inseparable aspects, and axioms, by their very nature, are not demonstrated but judged by the results of their applications—the project's own success in reaching the Hidden Third through art is precisely such a verification; for the framework's practical elaborations, see Basarab Nicolescu and Atila Ertas, eds., *Transdisciplinary Theory and Practice* (TheATLAS Publishing, 2013), and Paul Gibbs, ed., *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice* (Springer, 2017). And the framework's genesis is itself transdisciplinary, born of the very dialogue between the scientific and the non-scientific, the Western and the non-Western, that it advocates, so that it already crosses the divide the label presupposes; the decolonial question, legitimate in its own order, lies beyond the scope of this article.

⁶¹ Steelman et al., “Identifying Transformational Space,” 785; the enumeration follows Rathwell and Armitage's typology of art's boundary-crossing work, as applied there.

⁶² Nicolescu, “Column,” 84.

⁶³ Pasquier and Nicolescu, 10; Basarab Nicolescu, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity: Science, Culture, and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2014). Cf. already the *Declaration of Locarno* (1997), pt. 9, where transdisciplinary education “revalues the role of [...] intuition, of the imaginary, of sensitivity, and of the body” in the transmission of knowledge.

In the hermeneutic elaboration of the methodology Nicolescu distinguishes three types of meaning: horizontal meaning—interconnections at a single level of Reality, the pursuit of most academic disciplines; vertical meaning—interconnections involving several levels of Reality, which is what poetry, art, or quantum physics accomplish; and the meaning of meaning—interconnections encompassing the whole of Reality, the Subject, the Object, and the Hidden Third—as the ultimate goal of transdisciplinary research.⁶⁴ According to this typology art operates at the level of vertical meaning.

This cutting across levels rests on the integration of the modes of knowing that rationalist discourse keeps apart. The unity of knowledge should not be understood as a single unified knowledge or a single theory, as sometimes misread, but as an “equilibrium between analytic intelligence, feeling, and the body.”⁶⁵ Dieleman reads that equilibrium through embodied cognition, as the unity of cognitive, embodied, and enactive knowing, and connects it with neuroscience and the enactivist tradition.⁶⁶

From the framework set out above follows the thesis of this article: artistic practice in transdisciplinary education is neither a superstructure nor an epiphenomenon, but an integral and constitutive part of the process of knowing. Positioned in the Hidden Third, it acts as a mediator between Subject and Object and their levels of Reality and corresponding zones of non-resistance, integrating the analytic, bodily, and experiential dimensions of knowing and thereby enabling an integration of knowledge and being that surpasses fragmented disciplinary knowledge.

That this claim is not self-evident is demonstrated by the literature on the arts in transdisciplinary higher education. Van Baalen and colleagues distinguish three positions of the arts: an instrumentalized position, in which art is a tool for attaining other ends; the artistic vantage point, in which art serves as the starting point of inquiry; and the transdisciplinary approach, in which art is an integral part of the process of knowing.⁶⁷ The position defended in this article is precisely the third: art is not reduced to a mere method or illustration but, acting as the Hidden Third, functions as a bridge between the levels of Reality and a mediator between Subject and Object, whereby it becomes necessary for the ontological transformation of the subject.

⁶⁴ Basarab Nicolescu, “Transdisciplinarity as Methodological Framework for Going Beyond the Science-Religion Debate,” *Transdisciplinarity in Science and Religion* 2 (2007): 35–60.

⁶⁵ Nicolescu, “Evolution of Learning.”

⁶⁶ Hans Dieleman, “Transdisciplinary Hermeneutics: A Symbiosis of Science, Art, Philosophy, Reflective Practices, and Subjective Experience,” *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* 35 (2017): 170–99. Dieleman notes that Nicolescu did not elaborate the connection with neuroscience, although Nicolescu repeatedly refers directly to Damasio’s research, which shows that emotions are not an obstacle to rational thought but its constitutive element; cf. Antonio Damasio, *Osjećaj zbivanja: Tijelo, emocije i postanak svijesti* [The Feeling of What Happens] (Algoritam, 2005).

⁶⁷ Van Baalen, de Groot, and Noordegraaf-Eelens, “Higher Education, the Arts, and Transdisciplinarity,” 24–45.

4. Concluding remarks

From the preceding analysis it follows that transdisciplinary pedagogy is articulated as an educational horizon in which the transformation of the subject, multi-dimensional development, and the unity of knowledge are interconnected: education extends beyond the acquisition of content to encompass the formation of a human being who learns about the self, others, and the world without separating knowledge from being. Rather than homogenizing different forms of knowing, the unity of knowledge emerges here through a dynamic interplay, dialogue and reciprocal transformation of scientific, experiential, artistic, intuitive, and relational knowledge; the task of transdisciplinary pedagogy is to create the conditions under which that encounter, and thus the unity of knowledge itself, become possible at all. Art is not set apart within this framework: in the role of the Hidden Third, it is one of the practices through which the relation of Subject and Object is enacted.

Realizing such a horizon raises a question beyond the choice of content and methods. Already the Locarno Declaration sought to build transdisciplinarity into the existing university—not by founding new chairs but by creating transdisciplinary workshops and spaces, and by recommending that a tenth of the teaching time in every discipline be devoted to transdisciplinarity; yet the same Declaration explicitly names the teaching of teachers the most complex problem of that evolution.⁶⁸ Since the connecting of different forms of knowledge and the transformation of the subject cannot be transmitted ready-made but are established in the process itself, implementation relies on an educator capable of embodying and facilitating that process—and the systematic education of such transdisciplinary educators is still largely absent. McGregor therefore articulates it as a distinct area connecting philosophical, theoretical, pedagogical, and professional components, recognizing in it a shift from the teacher as a transmitter of the inherited “grand narrative” of knowledge to the teacher as a participant in the creation of transdisciplinary knowledge, though she herself notes that this remains a nascent and untested idea.⁶⁹ That this is no technical detail but a demand touching the very disciplinary organization of knowledge and the primacy of science is shown by the resistance such a pedagogy encounters in the academic milieu: resistance to a shift that relativizes that primacy, and to abandoning the security of right and wrong answers.⁷⁰

A further question reaches into the very status of the field: does the systematic articulation of transdisciplinary pedagogy—with its concepts, its formation, and its methods—necessarily turn into yet another discipline, that is, into precisely what Nicolescu regards with wariness, holding that the founding of separate chairs and the proliferation of disciplines would be contrary to “the transdisciplinary spirit”?⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Declaration and Recommendations* (Locarno, 1997), esp. Declaration, pts. 6 and 9, and Recommendations 5 and 6.

⁶⁹ McGregor, “Transdisciplinary Teacher Education.”

⁷⁰ Dieleman and Juárez-Nájera, “Introducing a Transdisciplinary Curriculum,” 14.

⁷¹ Nicolescu, “The Need for Transdisciplinarity,” 17–29.

The question of the status of transdisciplinarity and of transdisciplinary pedagogy, however, invites a distinction: transdisciplinarity, on Nicolescu's definition, is not a discipline but that which is at once between the disciplines, across them, and beyond them. If transdisciplinary pedagogy is its pedagogical articulation, it would have a subject matter, a theoretical grounding, and a methodical elaboration, and could thus be understood as a special pedagogy, akin to intercultural, media, or ecological pedagogy—which need not contradict the transdisciplinary spirit, though it remains open whether it thereby nevertheless constitutes itself as a new discipline. The way out of this tension probably lies not in resolving it but in accepting it as productive: in the possibility that the field develop more systematically without closing itself into yet another specialization.

Individual elements of such an articulation are already present—from a philosophy of education and a theory of action to curricular models and the first attempts at teacher education—but their systematic consolidation is still to come and exceeds the reach of any single author's approach. In this sense transdisciplinary pedagogy shows itself to be an emergent field: developed enough to be distinguished from a mere methodological metaphor, yet still open with respect to its status—and, within it, with respect to the place that belongs to art.

The question of that place, however, is not settled within the field itself but at the level of the philosophical system on which the field has here been grounded. Within transdisciplinary realism, art thus receives a threefold determination. As a form of knowledge, it is a practice of *in vivo* knowledge: knowing fused with being, in which the equilibrium of analytic intelligence, feelings, and the body is enacted rather than merely described. As a way of accessing Reality, it operates at the level of vertical meaning: it does not depict one level of Reality more vividly, but establishes interconnections among levels—true artistic creation, Nicolescu writes, arises in the moment, “bridging several levels at the same time, engendering a transperception.”⁷² And as an epistemic practice, it is epistemic in a radicalized, onto-epistemological sense: since the levels of perception it engages are levels of Reality of the Subject, artistic practice is implicated in the ontological transformation of the knower. One further implication for the theory of art may be noted. The derived, secondary status of art has received its most influential theoretical codification in the scheme of base and superstructure. The scheme presupposes a fixed material substrate—matter as brute, self-identical substance—over which the symbolic would be erected. On the ontology adopted here, matter cannot be equated with substance: at the microphysical level of Reality a perpetual transformation of energy, substance, and information is observed, and materiality itself comes in degrees across levels of Reality that are discontinuous yet connected, with no privileged level; no information-free material

⁷² Nicolescu, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity*, 9–10. True scientific creation, Nicolescu adds, arises likewise, bridging several levels of representation and engendering a transrepresentation, which explains the surprising similarities between the moments of artistic and scientific creation: the creative moment in art and in science shares one and the same trans-level structure.

stratum is therefore available to play the role of such a base.⁷³ The pair is thus not an antagonism to be resolved by a third term but an interpretive construction deprived of its footing—it dissolves rather than being resolved. The material and the symbolic are accordingly not substrate and addition—meaning arises within the same multilevel and multireferential Reality in which information is already constitutive of matter—and art cannot be assigned the derived status of a symbolic supplement to material production. The implications of transdisciplinary realism as a philosophical system extend across many fields; three are of immediate concern here: toward pedagogy, where the constitutive place of art is thereby secured; toward educational and cultural policies, which lose the theoretical justification for treating art as ornament or luxury; and toward the philosophy of art and aesthetics, where the marginalization of art—“a permanent, complex, and ongoing process”⁷⁴—shows itself to be an epistemological rather than an ontological affair: what recedes is the recognition of art’s multidimensionality, not the multidimensionality itself, which persists—attested by the presence of art across all cultures and throughout the existence of the species. Its pedagogical instrumentality, finally, is not denied but resituated: art can serve education precisely because, more fundamentally, it opens access to the Hidden Third—mediator between Subject and Object and source of transdisciplinary knowledge—and thereby co-constitutes the conditions in which such knowledge emerges.

⁷³ Nicolescu, “Gödelian Aspects of Nature and Knowledge”: energy as the unifying concept, information as coded energy, substance as concretized energy; matter as the association of substance, energy, information, and space-time, with degrees of materiality differing across levels. Two cautions apply. The symbolic is not thereby reduced to physical information: meaning presupposes the Subject and arises in the Subject–Object interaction (see the typology of meaning above and the distinction between natural and spiritual information in sec. 2). And the degrees of materiality order the levels topologically, as an arrow of the transmission of information—the finer penetrating the coarser—not as a relation of base and superstructure.

⁷⁴ The formulation is that of this journal’s thematic issue “The Marginalization of Art: A Permanent, Complex, and Ongoing Process”, *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies* 37 (2025), which examines the process from critical-theoretical, feminist, media-theoretical, and political-economic perspectives; the present framework adds an onto-epistemological determination.

Table 1. Transdisciplinary realism as a complete worldview: three fundamental questions

Dimension	Question	Transdisciplinary realism (Nicolescu)
Ontology (includes the logical axiom)	What is?	Reality is multilevel and ontologically differentiated; no level is privileged or fundamental (the new principle of relativity); the transdisciplinary Object, the transdisciplinary Subject, and the Hidden Third form a ternary ontological structure; discontinuity does not mean disconnection—the levels are interconnected through the Hidden Third; the logic of the included middle enables the passage between levels.
Epistemology (the epistemological axiom / the complexity axiom)	What is true?	The structure of the totality of levels of Reality is a complex structure: from the universal interdependence and inseparability of complex systems follows global causality; the laws governing any single level are always incomplete; knowledge is neither merely exterior nor merely interior but both at once, and therefore remains forever open, incompletable, and inexhaustible by any single perspective.
Axiology	What is good / bad?	From the combined action of the three axioms—the recognition of multilevel Reality, of unity in diversity, of the openness of knowledge, and of the relational character of subject and object — emerges a po/ethical orientation toward responsibility, humility, tolerance, transparency, and respect for diversity.

Note: The term po/ethics (poethics) was coined by Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary* (University of Michigan Press, 2011), 55, and adopted by Basarab Nicolescu, *From Modernity to Cosmodernity: Science, Culture, and Spirituality* (State University of New York Press, 2014), 97.

Table 2. Comparative positioning of transdisciplinary realism in relation to the dominant currents of educational thought

Current	What it shares with transdisciplinary realism	Where transdisciplinary realism differs
Pragmatism	Emphasis on experience and on learning through action	It does not confine experience to a single level of Reality and to the horizon of practical utility, but opens it toward a vertical movement through the levels of Reality and the levels of perception of the Subject, including the zone of non-resistance in which the relation between the transdisciplinary Subject and the transdisciplinary Object is established.
Phenomenology	The centrality of embodied experience	It regards the body and feelings not only as media of lived meaning but also as legitimate modes of access to multilevel Reality; it understands the unity of knowledge as an equilibrium of mind, feelings, and the body, not as the primacy of a single cognitive mode.
Constructivism	Knowledge is always mediated by the activity of the subject	It does not permit the reduction of Reality to the constructions of the subject or of the community; constructions unfold in relation to the Real and to multilevel Reality.
Critical pedagogy	The emancipatory impulse	It does not enclose emancipation within the socio-political level: the social level is one level of Reality but not the only one, so emancipation concerns the multidimensional being and its relation to all the levels of Reality.
Essentialism	The realist commitment: a reality independent of the knower	Essentialism proceeds from an objective and fixed reality; transdisciplinary realism offers an objective but not objectivist foundation: Reality is multilevel, not fixed.

References

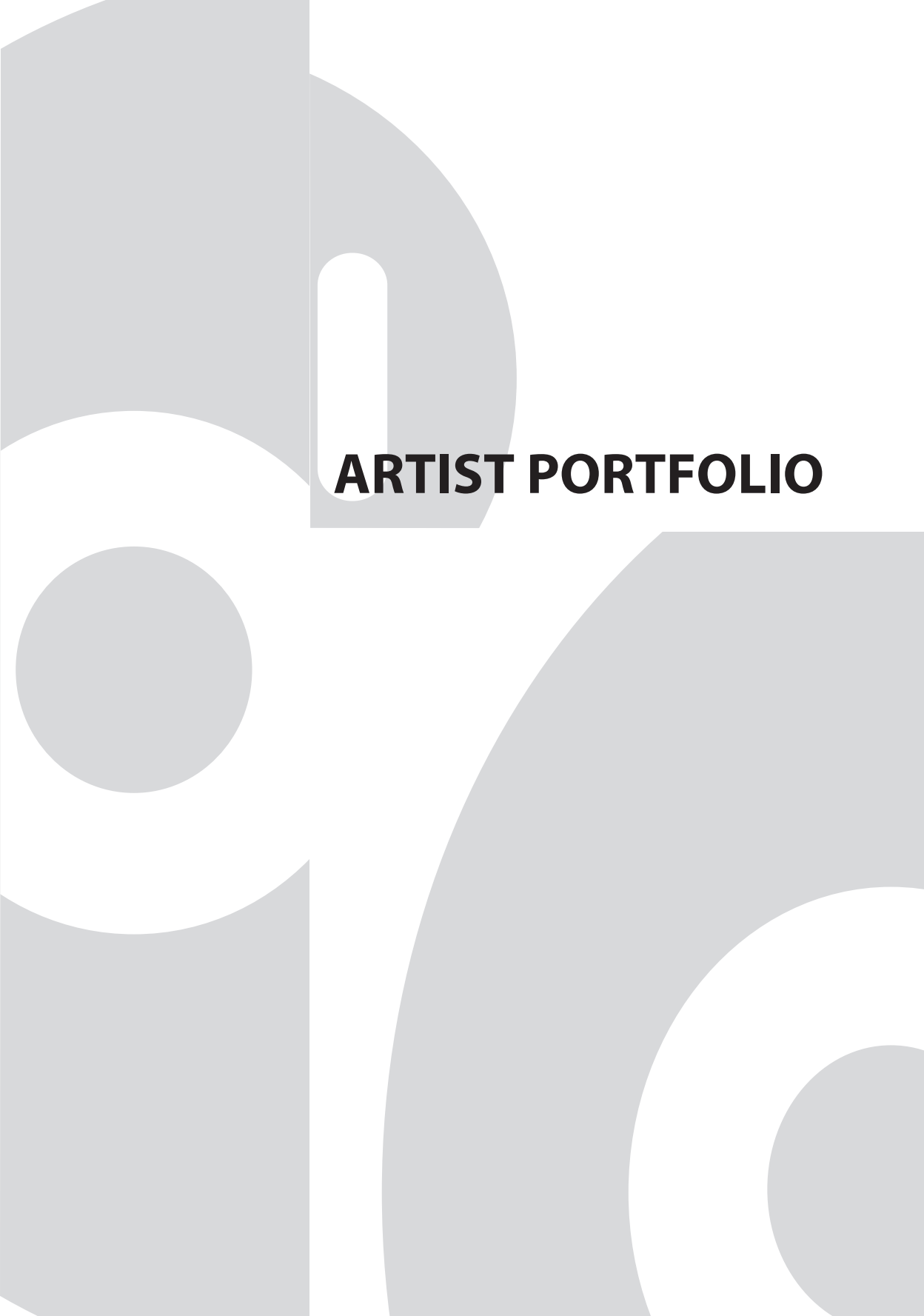
- Aerts, Diederik, Leo Apostel, Bart De Moor, Staf Hellemans, Edel Maex, Hubert Van Belle, and Jan Van der Veken. *World Views: From Fragmentation to Integration*. VUB Press, 1994.
- Apostel, Leo, Guy Berger, Asa Briggs, and Guy Michaud, eds. *Interdisciplinarity: Problems of Teaching and Research in Universities*. OECD, 1972.
- Choi, Bernard C. K., and Anita W. P. Pak. "Multidisciplinarity, Interdisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity in Health Research, Services, Education and Policy: 1. Definitions, Objectives, and Evidence of Effectiveness." *Clinical and Investigative Medicine* 29, no. 6 (2006): 351–64.
- Cilliers, Paul, and Basarab Nicolescu. "Complexity and Transdisciplinarity—Discontinuity, Levels of Reality and the Hidden Third." *Futures* 44, no. 8 (2012): 711–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2012.04.001>.
- Corbin, Henry. "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal." Translated by Ruth Horine. *Spring* (Zürich, 1972). Originally published as "Mundus imaginis ou l'imaginaire et l'imaginal," *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6 (1964); reprinted in *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme*. Flammarion, 1983.
- Custodio-Ferrando, Ana, and Ismael Cabero-Fayos. "Transdisciplinarity in Education: A Narrative Review of Its Didactic Validity and Contributions to Sustainable Learning." *Sustainability* 17, no. 22 (2025): 10320. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su172210320>.
- Damasio, Antonio. *Osjećaj zbivanja: Tijelo, emocije i postanak svijesti* [The Feeling of What Happens]. Algoritam, 2005.
- Daneshpour, Hosein, and Ebo Kwegyir-Afful. "Analysing Transdisciplinary Education: A Scoping Review." *Science & Education* 31, no. 4 (2022): 1047–74. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11191-021-00277-0>.
- Declaration and Recommendations of the International Congress "Which University for Tomorrow? Towards a Transdisciplinary Evolution of the University."* CIRET–UNESCO, 1997.
- Dias, Shamini, and Shelby Lamar. *Transdisciplinary Pedagogy for Ethical Education Textbook*. With Jonathan Aragon, Jessica Knippel, and Holly Allen. 2nd ed. Claremont Graduate University, 2022.
- Dieleman, Hans. "Transdisciplinary Hermeneutics: A Symbiosis of Science, Art, Philosophy, Reflective Practices, and Subjective Experience." *Issues in Interdisciplinary Studies* 35 (2017): 170–99.
- Dieleman, Hans, and Margarita Juárez-Nájera. "Introducing a Transdisciplinary Curriculum to Foster Student Citizenship: A Challenge Beyond Curricula Reform." *International Journal of Higher Education and Sustainability* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3–18.
- Freitas, Lima de, Edgar Morin, and Basarab Nicolescu. *Charter of Transdisciplinarity*. Convento da Arrábida: First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity, 1994.
- Gibbons, Michael, Camille Limoges, Helga Nowotny, Simon Schwartzman, Peter Scott, and Martin Trow. *The New Production of Knowledge: The Dynamics of Science and Research in Contemporary Societies*. SAGE, 1994.

- Gibbs, Paul, ed. *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice*. Springer, 2017.
- Gibbs, Paul. "Transdisciplinarity as Subversion: In Space and Place." *Quality in Higher Education* 29, no. 3 (2023): 374–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13538322.2022.2156027>.
- Gibbs, Paul. "Transdisciplinary Thinking: Pedagogy for Complexity." In *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice*, edited by Paul Gibbs, 45–56. Springer, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56185-1_4.
- Heylighen, Francis. *Complexity and Evolution: Fundamental Concepts of a New Scientific Worldview*. Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2018.
- Hirsch Hadorn, Gertrude, Holger Hoffmann-Riem, Susette Biber-Klemm, Walter Grossenbacher-Mansuy, Dominique Joye, Christian Pohl, Urs Wiesmann, and Elisabeth Zemp, eds. *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research*. Springer, 2008.
- Jantsch, Erich. "Inter- and Transdisciplinary University: A Systems Approach to Education and Innovation." *Policy Sciences* 1, no. 4 (1970): 403–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00145222>.
- Kagan, Sacha. *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity*. Transcript Verlag, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.14361/transcript.9783839418031>.
- Kagan, Sacha. "Artful Sustainability in Transdisciplinary Spaces of Possibilities." *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 10 (2019): 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.22545/2019/0117>.
- Klein, Julie Thompson. "A Taxonomy of Interdisciplinarity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, edited by Robert Frodeman, Julie Thompson Klein, and Carl Mitcham, 15–30. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Klein, Julie Thompson, Walter Grossenbacher-Mansuy, Rudolf Häberli, Alain Bill, Roland W. Scholz, and Myrtha Welti, eds. *Transdisciplinarity: Joint Problem Solving among Science, Technology, and Society*. Birkhäuser, 2001.
- Klein, Julie Thompson. "Discourses of Transdisciplinarity: Looking Back to the Future." *Futures* 63 (2014): 68–74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2014.08.008>.
- Max-Neef, Manfred A. "Foundations of Transdisciplinarity." *Ecological Economics* 53, no. 1 (2005): 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2005.01.014>.
- McGregor, Sue L. T. "The Nicolescuian and Zurich Approaches to Transdisciplinarity." *Integral Leadership Review* 15, no. 2 (2015).
- McGregor, Sue L. T. "Philosophical Underpinnings of the Transdisciplinary Research Methodology." *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 9 (2018): 182–98. <https://doi.org/10.22545/2018/00109>.
- McGregor, Sue L. T. "Transdisciplinary Curriculum: Educational Philosophy and Rationale." *Integral Leadership Review* 19, no. 1 (2019).
- McGregor, Sue L. T. "Transdisciplinary Pedagogy in Higher Education: Transdisciplinary Learning, Learning Cycles and Habits of Minds." In *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice*, edited by Paul Gibbs, 3–16. Springer, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56185-1_1.

- McGregor, Sue L. T. “Transdisciplinary Teacher Education.” *Education Sciences* 12, no. 7 (2022): 485. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070485>.
- Moraru, Christian. *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. University of Michigan Press, 2011.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “Column on Transdisciplinary Realism.” *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 23, no. 2 (2016): 77–85.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. *From Modernity to Cosmodernity: Science, Culture, and Spirituality*. State University of New York Press, 2014.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “Gödelian Aspects of Nature and Knowledge.” *Rencontres Transdisciplinaires* 12 (1998). <https://ciret-transdisciplinarity.org/bulletin/b12c3.php>. First published in *Systems—New Paradigms for the Human Sciences*, edited by Gabriel Altmann and Walter A. Koch, 385–403. Walter de Gruyter, 1998.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity*. Translated by Karen-Claire Voss. State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “Methodology of Transdisciplinarity: Levels of Reality, Logic of the Included Middle and Complexity.” *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 1, no. 1 (2010): 19–38. <https://doi.org/10.22545/2010/0009>.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “The Hidden Third as the Unifier of Natural and Spiritual Information.” *Cybernetics and Human Knowing* 22, no. 4 (2015): 91–99.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “The Need for Transdisciplinarity in Higher Education in a Globalized World.” In *Transdisciplinary Theory and Practice*, edited by Basarab Nicolescu and Atila Ertas, 17–29. TheATLAS Publishing, 2013.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “The Transdisciplinary Evolution of Learning.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, 1999.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “Transdisciplinarity as Methodological Framework for Going Beyond the Science-Religion Debate.” *Transdisciplinarity in Science and Religion* 2 (2007): 35–60.
- Nicolescu, Basarab. “Transdisciplinarity: The Hidden Third, Between the Subject and the Object.” *Human and Social Studies* 1, no. 1 (2012): 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10317-012-0002-5>.
- Nicolescu, Basarab, and Atila Ertas, eds. *Transdisciplinary Theory and Practice*. TheATLAS Publishing, 2013.
- Pasquier, Florent, and Basarab Nicolescu. “To Be or Not to Be Transdisciplinary, That Is the New Question. So, How to Be Transdisciplinary?” In *Being Transdisciplinary*, edited by Basarab Nicolescu, Raymond T. Yeh, and Atila Ertas, 7–16. ATLAS Publishing, 2019.
- Reznić Brenko, Tajana. “Prema transdisciplinarnom znanju—teorijski temelji transdisciplinarne metodologije u viđenju Basaraba Nicolescua” [Towards the Transdisciplinary Knowledge – Theoretical Foundations of Transdisciplinary Methodology in the View of Basarab Nicolescu]. *Filozofska istraživanja* 44, no. 4 (2024): 769–87. <https://doi.org/10.21464/fi44409>.

- Scott, David. "Interdisciplinarity, Transdisciplinarity and the Higher Education Curriculum." In *Transdisciplinary Higher Education: A Theoretical Basis Revealed in Practice*, edited by Paul Gibbs, 31–43. Springer, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-56185-1_3.
- Steelman, Toddi A., Evan Andrews, Sarah Baines, et al. "Identifying Transformational Space for Transdisciplinarity: Using Art to Access the Hidden Third." *Sustainability Science* 14, no. 3 (2019): 771–90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-018-0644-4>.
- Van Baalen, Wander M., Tamara de Groot, and Liesbeth Noordegraaf-Eelens. "Higher Education, the Arts, and Transdisciplinarity: A Systematic Review of the Literature." *Research in Education* 111, no. 1 (2021): 24–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00345237211005799>.

Article received: May 31, 2026
Article accepted: July 15, 2026
Original scholarly paper



ARTIST PORTFOLIO

Žarko Aleksić

Faculty of Fine Arts Belgrade, University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia

Образовање и Образовање. Artistic Intervention on a living Brain

Образовање и Образовање is a project that starts from a language game and, at first glance, ambiguously refers to *Образовање* as education (“the process of changing a personality in the desired direction by adopting different content depending on the age and needs of the individual”) and *Образовање* as an act of shaping, forming, composing, structuring and constructing.

The most important educational institutions are schools. This project re-examines the role of educational institutions in forming opinions, learning skills, production of knowledge, creating and understanding art in a narrow and broad sense, as well as the contexts in which the learned knowledge can be applied. The work is conceived as a total work of art/*Gesamtkunstwerk*, which, in an attempt to democratize knowledge and, through a critical attitude towards its elitism, seeks to destabilize the dichotomy between elitist and populist art, especially targeting the discursive aspects of the Artworld.

Knowledge and learning function as dominant ideological apparatuses of indoctrination, but also as tools of power are the subject of numerous critical reflections, including Documenta14, which raises the question “What we can learn from Athens?”. An equally important concern is that the focus should not be limited to the content of what can be learned. Rather, a deeper question emerges: what constitutes knowledge itself? This perspective challenges the standard epistemological definition of knowledge as justified true belief and invites a reconsideration of learning beyond discursive frameworks. Within a non-discursive context, knowledge may no longer be understood primarily as the acquisition of propositional content, but as a form of embodied, affective, perceptual, or experiential engagement with the world. Consequently, the question is not only what is learned, but also how learning occurs and what alternative modes of knowing become possible outside conventional linguistic and conceptual structures. Yes, this is written in English.

The project *Образовање и Образовање* is divided into two parts. The first part consists of the exhibited library and archive of faculty books, from the fundus of the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade, where I also work as an assistant professor, literature from the professor’s syllabus—books, texts, and periodicals contributed by the

participating students which were important for their own personal development. Internalized knowledge that is ‘stored’ in the brain through the process neuroplasticity literally participating in the formation of its physical structure, as Katharine Malabou says in the book *What Should We Do with Our Brains* which we read as preparation for the exhibition along other literature that includes *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* by Louis Althusser, *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor* edited by Michale Paters and Ergin Bulut and *Glossary of Cognitive Activism* by Warren Niedich. The most important tool in the offered toolkit is neuroplasticity, the brain’s lifelong ability to reorganize, grow, and form new neural connections through lived experiences rather than being ‘hard-wired’. After childhood, your brain rewires itself in response to learning new skills, adapting to environmental changes, or recovering from injuries. We need to keep that plastic ability in mind if we want to create new conditions and environments that will shape how we think. Partly with that comes responsibility, as the social and cultural environment will impact our brains and, therefore, our minds. This loop function, together with the almost proverb from pioneering neuroscientist Donald Hebb, “What Fires Together Wires Together”, is among the most important units of knowledge we have to learn and examine in the turbulent time we live in contemporary Serbia.

The books are arranged to form an opaque, non-transparent platform (only the edges of the books are visible) where one is able to move. Walking on this unstable platform produces a slight feeling of discomfort, especially in the stomach, which, in conjunction with proprioceptive sense, prompts reflection and critical review, inviting a re-examination of the position from which one stands and thinks.

The books are placed in such a way that they form an opaque, non-transparent platform (only the edges of the books are visible) on which it is necessary (floor is lava) to walk freely if you want to see the artworks, with a slight feeling of discomfort caused by the instability of the platform, which, in conjunction with the proprioceptive sense, calls for reflection and critical review, and produces a desire to reconsider the position on which one stands. The position, the platform, the fundus (from fundament) that one stands and walks on in order to enjoy the works, the unease in the stomach, this gut feeling of instability has to be re-examined. For the platform montage, we placed the drawing tables used during the entrance exam, just to bring this symbolic carrier of the institution into view. To comply with all the necessary safety procedures, we stationed three bouncers at the entrance to regulate the number of people allowed inside. At any given moment, only seven to eight visitors were permitted to be present in the space. This restriction was implemented to prevent accidents, such as injuries, falls, or damage to the books.

The second component of the project focused on student works. Importantly, the selection process was not determined by the teacher; rather, the students themselves decided which works would be exhibited. As part of the broader process of initialization and positioning within existing power relations, I was required to accept their choices rather than impose my own curatorial criteria. This redistribution

of decision-making authority formed an integral aspect of the project's methodology. The selected works addressed a wide range of topics. Some explored practices of self-discipline and self-regulation, the time needed to study and engage with art, and AI tools used in artistic productions, while others engaged with forms of institutional critique. Several works examined the acquisition and cultivation of skills, questioning prevailing models of learning and professional development and prevalent modes of art creating and consumption, addressing, for example, the so-called creative industry. Other projects challenged the media-based organization of the academy into distinct departments, interrogating the assumptions and hierarchies embedded within such structures, raising the question of "what after?" More broadly, many of the works critically reflected on the institution of art itself. Together, they addressed both specific and broader contextual issues, ranging from immediate educational conditions to wider social, cultural, and institutional frameworks.

Although the exhibition took place during a particularly turbulent political period in Serbia, it did not directly address current political events. Furthermore, given that the project had already been realized in Katowice in 2017, I assumed that its presentation in this context would not generate significant controversy. That is the reason I did not anticipate the extent of discomfort, tension, and institutional unease that ultimately emerged around the project. The reactions it provoked revealed that even works that do not explicitly engage with contemporary political developments can become entangled in broader social and political dynamics, particularly when they challenge established institutional structures, pedagogical norms, or relations of authority. What ultimately restored my confidence (faith in art) was the realization that art can destabilize not only the viewer's affective experience in relation to an artwork but also existing organizational structures themselves. Rather than operating solely at the level of perception or interpretation, the artistic practice can intervene in and unsettle established regimes of organization, authority, and power. Namely, after the opening with numerous guests and professors from the Faculty of Fine Arts, a colleague of mine from the curatorial department reported me to the Ministry of Culture under the official accusation that I am "destroying rare and old books" and unofficially that I advocate "burning the books". I immediately remembered the fate of John Latham's project with Clement Greenberg's book *Art and Culture*, which he did with his students. The commission of nine people from the Ministry showed up several days later to examine the books bureaucratically and practically, so we had to shut down the show. Within only a few days it became evident that representatives of the Ministry were unable to identify any procedural irregularities. The books had been handled, used, and preserved in accordance with the established institutional regulations, and no violations were found. Consequently, the exhibition was 'allowed' to continue. In the aftermath of these events, the faculty organized a public forum featuring invited speakers. The discussion extended beyond the immediate circumstances of the exhibition and became a broader reflection on the role of education, the functions of cultural and academic institutions, and the complex relationship among

artistic practice, public discourse, institutional authority, and cultural heritage. The controversy itself thus became an opportunity for critical debate, generating conversations that reached far beyond the original scope of the exhibition.

On the one hand, the conclusion is that, ontologically speaking, the discursivity of the artworld is inseparable from its affective aspects and that both need to be addressed as they operate in this binding process. On the other hand, several questions appeared. Is it still possible to develop a new, better, and more precise understanding of what art is and what it can be in the current regime of Cognitive Capitalism or the Informational Economy? Does art possess a specific social, cultural, or political function, and if so, what might that function be? It is also important to acknowledge the ideological framework we use as a pretext when we use the term 'art' as well as the role of educational institutions in the participating dialogue. Ultimately, my greatest fear as a professor is that I may do nothing more than reproduce the very conditions that make my current position necessary.

"What fires together wires together" works for neurons and for people.

Artists: Sanja Lazic, Sofija Stevanovic, Đorđe Tufegdžić, Uroš Ignjatović, Andreja Stanković, Luka Joksimović, Jelisaveta Kabaš, Simona Radojković, Uglješa Cvejić, Ana Stojković, Jelena Rendulić, Anđela Tasić, Katarina Maricić, Kosta Aralica, Andrea Žuljević, Mila Runjajić, Bojana Popović, Vanja Dolganov, Tijana Zurković, Milica Janković

I would like to thank all the participating students, the Department of New Media, and the dean of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Arts in Belgrade for their support.

All the visual examples have the same signature:

Exhibition view. Žarko Aleksić, *Образовање и Образовање*, Galerija FLU, Belgrade, 2026. Photographs by Danilo Bursać. Courtesy of Žarko Aleksić.

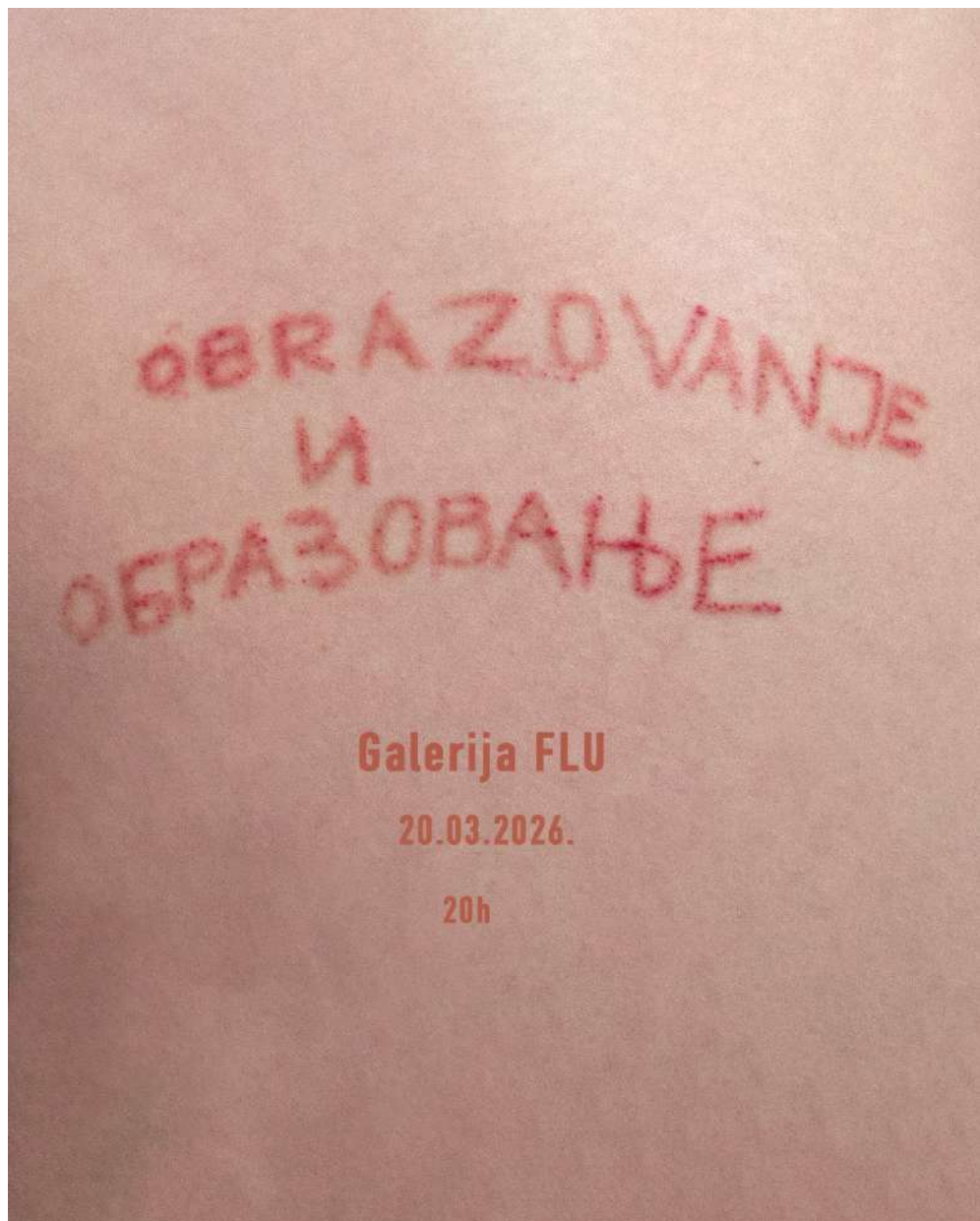














BOOK REVIEW



ART+MEDIA

Dubravka Đurić

Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3677-9015>

Book Review

***Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, edited by David Ayers, Margarida Brito Alves, Joana Cunha Leal and Benedikt Hjartarson, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2025.**

One of the most interesting books published in 2025 is *Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, edited by David Ayers, Margarida Brito Alves, Joana Cunha Leal and Benedikt Hjartarson. After the globalization of modernism, poetry studies, and visual art, we are witnessing the globalization of the avant-garde as a transdisciplinary field that encompasses visual art and literature studies. The book is divided into seven parts: “Theory,” “Japan,” “Travel and Ethnography,” “Oceanic,” “Translations and Appropriations,” “Going Global,” and “Modalities and Locations,” each of which includes from seven to two essays. In his “Introduction,” David Ayers explained the book’s structure and provided a brief summary of each essay. Many of the texts used as references are books and works in postcolonial and decolonial studies, socialist studies, new modernist studies, and new world literature, to broaden the boundaries of avant-garde studies. I will point to the first three essays because they discuss the globalizing of the avant-garde; their authors gave insight into the most important general theoretical and historical issues.

The first essay, “Pluriversal Avant-Gardism: Deworlding, Reworlding, and Worlding the Avant-Garde,” is written by Ming Tiampo, a Canadian curator, professor of art history, and director of the Institute of Comparative Studies in Literature, Art, and Culture at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. Tiampo explained the project of imagining the avant-garde on a global scale as complex, making us aware that the avant-garde is now conceptualized as temporal and spatial practices, not just as European practice. It needs to enable “the emergence of multiple epistemologies, temporalities, political and aesthetic projects, allowing the possibilities of thinking about cultural formations on a planetary scale from the bottom up and from the outside in.” (p. 9) Referring to Arturo Escobar’s term *pluriversal*, Tiampo maintained that “[i]t is through the pluriversal that the critical approach to the Avant-Garde on a global scale can be imagined.” (p. 20) She introduced the term *transversals* “in order to theorize avant-gardism as pluriversal, traversing multiple national contexts rather than as separate, disconnected avant-gardes, or multiple modernism.” (p. 20) In looking to the other avant-gardes, the researcher has to have in mind “their contextual specificities

and to understand their radical political and aesthetic practices at the scale of the local and the regional as well as on this larger scale of the global.” (p. 21) She proposes three models of articulating the responses to Western avant-garde: *agonistic avant-gardes* (for them European Avant-Garde is the measuring stick), *anthropophagic avant-gardes* (they produced “natural synthesis” and questioned the established hierarchies), and *centrifugal avant-gardes* (the authors who “rejected the notion of the West as the authoritative site of iteration” p. 29).

In the second essay, “The Globalization of the Avant-Garde: A User’s Handbook”, Paul Wood, a British art historian associated with the Open University, examines the transformations in the meanings of modernism and the avant-garde. He discussed Clement Greenberg’s definition of his coinage “Modernism,” by which Greenberg privileged “medium-specificity, at the expense of trans-media aspects of avant-garde art.” (p. 37) After discussing Peter Birger’s critique of the neo-avant-garde, which appeared in the context of the German Left, Wood pointed to the “post-modernist/identity politics critique of the concept of avant-gardism as such” (p. 38), which he objected to for being apolitical. As the last example Wood pointed to Sasha Bru’s studies of avant-garde in the book *The European Avant-Gardes 1905–1935* (2018) explaining that Bru “is writing in—and indeed *to*—the early twenty-first century, an art-context in which the counter-modernist Conceptual avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s has evolved into the new normal of an established ‘Contemporary Art’: a formation whose technical hallmark is a mixing of media and genres.” (p. 39) He objected to Bru’s approach on the grounds that it was informed by *identity politics*, which he saw as *apolitization* of the avant-garde, but also emphasized the positive aspect of Bru’s “insistence on the Europe-wide nature of the avant-garde in the decades before the Second World War.” (p. 39)

Lev Kreft, a Slovenian aesthetician, wrote the third essay, “Avant-Garde: A Global Concept?” Kreft pointed to three avant-garde theoreticians from different cultures: two from capitalist countries, Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, and one from a socialist country, Aleksandar Flaker. Poggioli’s Eurocentric model connected the proto-avant-garde and the avant-garde of his own time. Bürger’s model of the avant-garde was narrow, embracing Dadaism, early Surrealism, and Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde. Kreft emphasized that Flaker’s advantage was “that he knows all about Western European avant-gardes and all that was possible in his time about Russian avant-garde, but his specific accent is on cases of Central European and Yugoslav avant-gardes, not as additional cases of the Western cultural influence but as phenomena which have a high artistic value and are important for theory.” (p. 61) Kraft locates the paradox in the fact that some of the main protagonists were extremely nationalist (as Futurists and Zenitists), but “still cannot be grasped as ‘national culture.’” (p. 55) Remembering the 1960s and 70s in Yugoslavia and the usage of avant-garde, Kreft states that this formation was omitted from museums, and “overlooked by school curricula, an irritating phenomenon still, and still not accepted into treasury of fine national art because of avant-garde’s attack on tradition, its revolutionary charge, and its internationalism.” (p. 57) He also emphasized that “[i]t is imperative to avoid the concept of the avant-garde developed just from the traditional hegemonic centers of

the artworld.” (p. 56) In this context, the author proposed that the radical art practice in Yugoslavia had gone through four stages: *historical avant-garde*, *neo-avant-garde*, *postsocialist postmodern avant-garde* (reference to what he calls the punk effect), and the contemporary activism that appeared in the new millennium, and at the end of his essay, he discusses contemporary bioart and its Slovenian representative, artist and theoretician Polona Tratnik. (p. 59)

I will now briefly turn my attention to texts dealing with the Yugoslav/Post-Yugoslav cultures. The first is “Abe Nobuya in the Balkans: Ethnography, Travel, and the Japanese Avant-Garde,” written by Jelena Stojković, art historian and critic who teaches at Oxford Brookes University. The author deals with Abe, the avant-garde artist, who worked in the following media: painting, photography, and drawing, and was associated with Surrealism, abstraction, and the group ZERO. He was “the only Japanese avant-garde artist to travel around all regions of former Yugoslavia in the fifties.” (p. 192) Stojković emphasized that during his stay in Yugoslavia, traveling through Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, Abe was interested in “medieval burial stones called *stećci*, as well as Serbian eighteenth—and nineteenth-century tombstones and roadside monuments known as *krajputaši*.” (192) He photographed them and in 1958 wrote a text describing his first visit to Yugoslavia. The encounter of one artist from the periphery (Japan) with the past cultures of other (semi) peripheries (socialist Yugoslavia) is exotic and contextualized given the specific time of the Cold War era.

The other text, “Cosmopolitical? Political Determinants of ‘Apolitical’ Programs of Neo-and Post-Avant-Garde Artistic Groups: Selected Case Studies from United States, Yugoslavia and Poland”, is by Polish scholar Joanna Orska, a professor in the Department of Polish Studies at the University of Wrocław. Orska discussed the status of American Expressionism and its influence on socialist countries, where it was understood as ‘pure art’ and used as a tool to oppose the expansion of Soviet Realism. (p. 433) Making references to the work of various theorists, such as Piotr Piotrowski, Miklós Haraszti, Rosalind Krauss, Miško Šuvaković, Ješa Denegri, etc., Orska comparatively researched the relations of Slovene and Polish poetry to American poetry, especially the New York school. At the center of her research is Tomaž Šalamun (and the OHO Group, which he was a member of), highlighting the relations between poetry and visual art. Translation is an important topic; that is why she discussed translations of Šalamun into English and Polish, as well as translations of American poets into Polish. Comparing the situation in Yugoslavia and Poland, Orska concluded:

As in the case of the neo-avant-garde movements of the former Yugoslavia, that proper context for Polish translations of New York School should be the fear of the politicization of art, stemming from a strong aversion to political manipulation of art that characterized Cold War propaganda. (p. 444)

Globalizing the Avant-Garde is a book that should be unavoidable in any research on the avant-garde.



BIOGRAPHIES



ART+MEDIA

Žarko Aleksić

Tamara D. Bradić

Dubravka Đurić

Ana Frangovska

Limei Gou

Tamara Koneska

Paula Rem

Tajana Režnić Brenko

Tram Thi Trach Oanh

Fu Qilin

Jinyao Zhang

Caishu Zhou

Joshua Wodak

Simona Žikić

Zhang Chenghua

Žarko Aleksić is an Assistant Professor at the New Media Department at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Belgrade. After studying philosophy at the University of Belgrade, he continued his education at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna. Aleksić is currently pursuing his PhD at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna (Margareta Jahramann), where his compelling doctoral dissertation explores the theme of “Consciousness as an Artistic Medium”. The artist defines his artistic practice as post-disciplinary, grounded in personal phenomenology, and investigating consciousness, mental processes, and artificial intelligence in relation to the socio-political issues of cognitive capitalism. Žarko Aleksić has exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Serbia, Austria, and several other countries. He is living and working between Belgrade and Vienna.

Tamara D. Bradić (1982) is a psychologist, psychotherapist, and PhD candidate at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade. She graduated in psychology from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Belgrade and has over 15 years of experience in psychological practice, education, and support for children, families, and vulnerable groups. Her doctoral research focuses on representations of war trauma in literature and film, with particular attention concentrated on the media specificity, narrative form, and the ethics of representation. She has published scholarly and professional papers in psychotherapy, education, and media studies, including work on China’s Social Credit System as a model of social control. She has presented at national and regional conferences on media, trauma, education, and digitalization, and is actively involved in parental and civic initiatives related to children’s rights and educational reform.

Dubravka Đurić (1961) is poet, theoretician, translator of American Poetry, performer, and professor at the Faculty for Media and Communications. Dubravka published seven books of poetry and six books. With Biljana D. Obradović she edited *Cat Painters: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry* (New Orleans 2016), with Miško Šuvaković she edited book *Impossible Histories – Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde and Post-Avant-Garde in Yugoslavia 1918–1991* (MIT Press, 2003, 2006). In 2023, Roof Books published her book *The Politics of Hope (After the War): Selected and New Poems*, translated and edited by Biljana D. Obradović, with a foreword by Charles Bernstein. This book won the North American Society for Serbian Studies annual prize for 2024. The same year, she edited an anthology of female post-Yugoslav poets. For her lifetime achievements in feminism, she received the “Anđelka Milić Award” in 2022.

Ana Frangovska (1978) is an art historian and curator from Skopje. She graduated in Art History and Archaeology at the University “St. Cyril and Methodius”, Faculty of Philosophy, Skopje (2001), earned her MA at the same faculty (2017), and completed her PhD in Contemporary Arts and Media at the Faculty of Arts and

Media, Belgrade (2023) under the mentorships of professors Angelina Milosavljevic and Miško Šuvaković. Ana curated the National Pavilion of North Macedonia at the 60th Venice Biennale (2024), presenting INTER SPEM ET METUM by Slavica Janeshlieva, and co-curated the Macedonian Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale (2022), presenting Landscape Experience by Robert Jankuloski and Monika Moteska. She also curated the 55th Venice Biennale Pavilion (2013) with *Silentio Pathologia* by Elpida Hadzi-Vasileva. Over her career, Ana has curated more than 300 retrospectives, solo and group exhibitions of Macedonian and international artists in North Macedonia, participated in numerous local and international symposia and conferences, and is the founder and director of the international art residency in Galichnik, western Macedonia, which has already held 37 editions. She is the current president of the Macedonian section of AICA (International Association of Art Critics).

Limei Gou (1977) is a professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University of Arts and Science, and a PhD candidate at the Communication University of China. She has been a visiting scholar at the Imperial College London and the University of Oklahoma. Her research focuses on art criticism and translation studies, particularly the role of translation in modern Chinese literature and media. Limei has published extensively in these areas and has led several provincial and university-level research projects.

Tamara Koneska (1997, Skopje) is a Research and Teaching Associate and PhD candidate at the University of Belgrade—Faculty of Architecture. Her work explores how ideology, political power, and collective memory are expressed through architectural form, with a focus on (post)Yugoslav architecture. She investigates the evolving meanings of architectural and spatial palimpsests in post-socialist transitional cities and the theoretical frameworks used to critically interpret such conditions. Tamara is active in the local architectural and urban design practice and has participated in international exhibitions, competitions, and visual art projects, including the Venice Architecture Biennale, the Biennale of Stage Design in Novi Sad, and the Salons of Architecture in Belgrade and Novi Sad.

Paula Rem (1995, Osijek) graduated from the University of Vienna and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Mass Media and Communication Sciences, as well as Jewish Studies and Hebrew language. At the University of Vienna, she was a teaching assistant (2017–2019) to Prof. Ph. D. Homero Gil de Zuniga for various subjects related to theories, methods, and processes of scientific research, and a tutor to Prof. Ph. D. Roland Burkart for Introduction to Theories of Media and Communication Sciences. Currently a doctoral student, Paula is an assistant at The Academy of Arts and Culture in Osijek, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University Osijek. Her research focuses on theories of media and communication sciences, the semiotics of mass media, interpersonal and intercultural communication in media content, religious and philosophical elements in mass media, and the role of media in shaping collective identities.

Tajana Reznić Brenko is a doctoral candidate in Transdisciplinary Studies of Contemporary Art and Media at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade, where she is completing a dissertation entitled “Transdisciplinary Theories and Practices of Alternative Art Education: Between Media and the Body”. Her research examines transdisciplinarity as an approach, a methodology, and an educational movement, and analyzes practices of alternative art education as sites of the creation of transdisciplinary knowledge — moving toward a proto-model of transdisciplinary education grounded in the dialogue of art and science, embodied and enactive knowing, and the equilibrium of analytic intelligence, feelings, and the body. Tajana is an external member of the LEAP research group (Leading Epistemic Advances for Paradigm Transitions) at the Centre Leo Apostel (CLEA), Vrije Universiteit Brussels, and the author of “Prema transdisciplinarnom znanju – teorijski temelji transdisciplinarne metodologije u viđenju Basaraba Nicolescu” (Filozofska istraživanja, 2024).

Tram Thi Trach Oanh (1992) is a researcher at the University of Science and Education, The University of Da Nang, Da Nang, Vietnam. Her research focuses on the Vietnamese contemporary art, visual language, and spatial installation practice.

Fu Qilin is a Doctor of Literature and Professor at the College of Chinese Language and Literature in Sichuan University of China, Chief Expert of a key project of the China Social Science Fund “Bibliography and Research of Eastern European Marxist Aesthetics” (15ZDB022) and the China Ministry of Education key project of philosophy and social sciences “Chinese Marxist Aesthetics for a Hundred Years and its Theoretical Construction” (2025JZD006). Fu Qilin’s published books include: *A Study of Agnes Heller’s Thoughts on Aesthetic Modernity* (2006), *An Anthropological Interpretation of Aesthetic Ideology* (2008), and *The Critique of Grand Narrative and the Construction of Pluralist Aesthetics: A Study of Reconstructing Aesthetics of Budapest School* (2011), *A Study of basic issues of Eastern European Neo-Marxist Literary and Artistic Theory* (2017), *Janus Face: selected works of Agnes Heller’s aesthetics* (2020), *The Normative Foundation of the Contemporary Literary Theory* (2024); *Marxist Aesthetics on Eastern Europe*(2025), etc.

Jinyao Zhang (1972) is a Vice President of Northwest Normal University, a Professor, and a Doctoral Supervisor. He received his PhD in Literature from the Communication University of China and has been a visiting scholar at the University of Maryland and the University of the Pacific. His research focuses on art criticism as well as on film and television studies. He has published widely in these fields and authored several books on Chinese film and television history and criticism.

Caishu Zhou (1985) is an associate professor at Nankai University (Tianjin, China). Her research interests include film and media studies, aesthetics, and literary

theory. She has published monographs *The Cultural Capital of Contemporary Chinese Film Industry* (China Social Sciences Press, 2016) and *The Aesthetic Experiences of New Media Literature* (Hubei People Press, 2024), and more than 50 papers in both Chinese and English. Homepage: <https://my.nankai.edu.cn/wxy/zcs/list.htm>

Joshua Wodak, PhD (1979, London) is a writer, artist, and Senior Lecturer at the School of Arts, Western Sydney University, Australia. His lyrical, playful, and deadly serious work explores ideas about the unfolding rupture of life on Earth (climate crisis, Anthropocene, Sixth Extinction Event) in the context of this planet's propensity to constantly unleash its own crises, time, and time again. That is: how to live on an inherently unstable Earth, and in an inherently catastrophic cosmos. His first book, *Petrified: Living During a Rupture of Life on Earth*, was published in the Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Studies series by Heidelberg University (De Gruyter, 2025). <https://researchers.westernsydney.edu.au/en/persons/joshua-wodak;www.coesb.com.au>

Simona Žikić is a communicologist and Assistant Professor and Vice Dean at the Faculty of Media and Communications. She is also a Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, where she is affiliated with the DigiLab—Digital Society Lab. Her research focuses on communication theory, intercultural communication, and the impact of digital technologies and artificial intelligence on contemporary society, with a particular interest in empathy, media, and affect. She has published scientific papers and contributed to academic volumes in the fields of communication, public relations, leadership, and digital society. In addition to her academic work, she is engaged in applied communication through research projects, training, and consultancy. She is also actively involved in social and inclusion initiatives.

Zhang Chenghua, PhD, Associate Professor at the School of Chinese Language and Literature, South China Normal University, and Director of the Editorial Department of *Aesthetic Cultural Studies*, has published books including *Australian Cultural Studies: Issues, Dimensions, and Reflections* (2022), and *Research on Yugoslav Marxist Literary and Artistic Theory* (2025).

Author Guidelines

Please note: Following the journal categorization of the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, only original scholarly articles that adhere to the highest academic standards are accepted for submission. Upon submission, the Editorial Team performs an initial screening and selection of manuscripts, subsequently forwarding the chosen submissions for double-blind peer review. The ultimate decision regarding the acceptance of a manuscript is contingent upon the outcomes of the peer review process.

Manuscripts and accompanying material must be submitted through the on-line manuscript submission system or sent by e-mail to: amjournal@outlook.com.

By submitting a manuscript authors warrant that their contribution to the Journal is their original work, that it has not been published before, that it is not under consideration for publication elsewhere, and that its publication has been approved by all co-authors, if any, and tacitly or explicitly by the responsible authorities at the institution where the work was carried out.

Authors are exclusively responsible for the contents of their submissions and must make sure that they have permission from all parties involved to make the data public.

Authors wishing to include figures that have already been published elsewhere are required to obtain permission from the copyright holder(s) and to include evidence that such permission has been granted when submitting their papers. Any material received without such evidence will be assumed to originate from the authors.

Authors must make sure that only contributors who have significantly contributed to the submission are listed as authors and, conversely, that all contributors who have significantly contributed to the submission are listed as authors.

Manuscripts are pre-evaluated at the Editorial to check whether they meet the basic publishing requirements and quality standards. Only those contributions which conform to the following instructions can be accepted for peer review. Otherwise, the manuscripts shall be returned to the authors with observations, comments, and annotations.

Manuscript preparation

Authors must follow the instructions for authors strictly, failing which the manuscripts would be rejected without review.

The manuscript should be written in MS Word in .doc or .doc.x format, in Times New Roman font, font size 12 with 1.5 line-spaced texts.

Original scholarly papers should be between 3,000 and 5,000 words (section Main Topic and Beyond the Main Topic). Book review articles should be about 1,000 words. Artist Portfolio should contain 4 to 6 illustrations and 1,500 words of text.

The manuscript (sections Main Topic and Beyond the Main Topic) should contain the title, keywords (5 to 8 words or phrases) and abstract (between 100 and 250 words) and list of references. Do not include citations in the abstract. Keywords should be relevant to the topic and content of the paper. An accurate list of keywords will ensure correct indexing of the paper in referential periodicals and databases.

All manuscripts should be also provided with: authors' names, affiliations (city and state of the workplace) and e-mail addresses of the corresponding author.

The authors should send their short biography (up to 150 words per author) with information about profession, career, workplace and year of birth.

Photos, drawings and other illustrations should be of good quality. Please, do not include photos, tables and other illustrations in the manuscript. They should be submitted as separate files. Visual examples must have permission from the author, photographer or owner of the rights. Visual examples must be technically prepared so as not to require additional interventions: format .jpg or .tiff; resolution higher than 300 dpi. Visual examples are additions to the main text and need to be clearly marked: example 1, etc. Please do not supply files that are too low in resolution as well as files that are optimized for screen use (e.g., GIF, BMP, PICT, WPG), these typically have a low number of pixels and limited set of colors.

Footnotes and References

Use *The Chicago Manual of Style*, notes and bibliography documentation systems. Footnotes should be marked in the text at a point of punctuation and listed at the bottom of each relevant page. References should be cited in the language in which they were published. The list of references (bibliography) shall only include works that are cited in the text. The references should be listed at the end of the article, in alphabetic order by the authors' surnames.

In footnotes:

Book:

Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 10–11.

Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, 23.

Book – two or more authors (for four or more authors, list only the first author, followed by et al.):

Max Horkheimer and Teodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford University Press, 2002), 15.

Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18.

Editor, translator, or compiler instead of the author:

Philip Alperson, ed., *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 110–11.

Alperson, *What is Music?*, 83.

Editor, translator, or compiler in addition to the author:

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Indiana University Press, 2010), 18.

Martin, *Being and Truth*, 25.

Chapter or another part of a book:

Richard Leppert, “Seeing Music,” in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, ed. Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 9.

Leppert, “Seeing Music,” 9.

Article in a print journal (after page numbers include a DOI if the article lists one):

Pauline Maclaran and Stephen Brown, “The Center Cannot Hold: Consuming the Utopian Marketplace,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, no. 2 (September 2005): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1086/432240>.

Maclaran and Brown, “The Center Cannot Hold,” 322.

Article in an online journal (after page numbers include a URL, preferably one based on a DOI):

Gueorgi Kossinets and Duncan J. Watts, “Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network,” *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2009): 411, <https://doi.org/10.1086/599247>.

Kossinets and Watts, “Origins of Homophily,” 439.

Thesis and dissertation:

Mihwa Choi, “Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2008).

Choi, “Contesting *Imaginaires*.”

In References:

Book:

Bloch, Ernst. *The Spirit of Utopia*. Stanford University Press, 2000.

Book – two or more authors (for four or more authors, list all the author):

Horkheimer, Max, and Teodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford University Press, 2002.

Editor, translator, or compiler instead of the author:

Alperson, Philip, ed. *What is Music? An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010.

Editor, translator, or compiler in addition to the author:

Martin Heidegger. *Being and Truth*. Translated by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. Indiana University Press, 2010.

Chapter or other parts of a book:

Leppert, Richard. “Seeing Music.” In *The Routledge Companion to Music and Visual Culture*, edited by Tim Shephard and Anne Leonard. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

Article in a print journal (after page numbers include a DOI if the article lists one):

Maclaran, Pauline and Stephen Brown. “The Center Cannot Hold: Consuming the Utopian Marketplace.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 32, no. 2 (September 2005): 311–23. <https://doi.org/10.1086/432240>.

Article in an online journal (after page numbers include a URL, preferably one based on a DOI):

Kossinets, Gueorgi, and Duncan J. Watts. “Origins of Homophily in an Evolving Social Network.” *American Journal of Sociology* 115 (2009): 405–50. <https://doi.org/10.1086/599247>.

Thesis and dissertation:

Choi, Mihwa. “Contesting *Imaginaires* in Death Rituals during the Northern Song Dynasty.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2008.

For the complete guide to notes and bibliography documentation systems please follow *The Chicago Manual of Style Notes and Bibliography: Sample Citations*.

Other remarks:

Em dash is used in years, page numbers or as a continuation of the sentence: 112–35. 1995–2003. **En dash** is used in compound nouns: *mail-art*.

Double opening (“) and double closing (”) quotation marks and regular font are used in citing.

Single opening and closing quotation marks (‘) are used in citing words, syntagms or sentences of existing citation (cit.cit).

If one or more parts of a sentence is under quotation marks order of punctuation marks is: ”¹,

If the whole sentence is under quotation marks order of punctuation marks is: ”²

Italic is used in 1) work title (books, compositions, paintings, sculptures, etchings, installations, photography); when citing translated and original work title in brackets: “The Hand of Fate” (*Die Glückliche Hand*); 2) emphasizing specific word, concept, syntagm, or sentence: *heterotopy*; 3) using words from foreign language; 4) using figures of speech and stylistic devices: *silence* of consciousness. For *releasing* a concept from essentialism or tradition please use single opening and closing quotation marks: ‘being in the world’.

When submitting an article, either through an online interface or by e-mail, each author should sign the Copyright Transfer Agreement.

AM Journal of Art and Media Studies does not charge for manuscript processing and/or publishing.

Contributions not conforming to style may be returned by the Editors.

Editorial Board

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

7.01:316.774

AM : Art + Media : journal of Art and Media Studies / editor-in-chief
Miodrag Šuvaković. - [Štampano izd.]. - 2012, br. 1- . - Belgrade : Faculty of
Media and Communications, 2012- (Belgrade : 3D+). - 24 cm

Tri puta godišnje.

Drugo izdanje na drugom medijumu:

AM. Art + Media (Online) = ISSN 2406-1654

ISSN 2217-9666 = AM. Art + Media

COBISS.SR-ID 192045324