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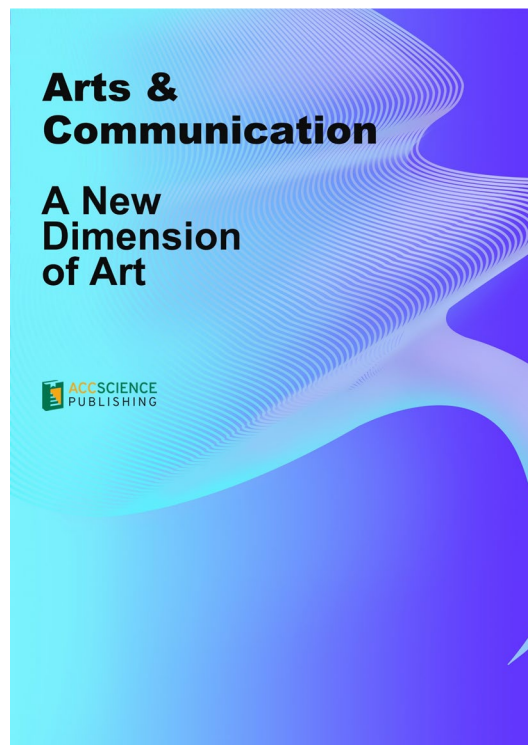
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PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

Synthetic kinesthetic education

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Abstract

Our wor(l)ds perception and interpretation can be diverse. An individual approach in education systems may prove more valuable, especially in enhancing creative and analytical thinking. The author hereby introduces the concept of synthetic kinesthetic education (SKE). It combines acquired information, linguistics, and artistic activities/facilitators to synthesize a piece of new knowledge. Therefore, the SKE may evolve as an advanced learning/teaching method standardly integrated into education systems. Various artistic activities (facilitators) involved within the SKE are chosen intentionally, but a free art choice should be given the preference. The arts and/or linguistics find their place as professions, free time activities, and advanced education methods in keeping and improving health (heart rates, cognitive skills/memory – possibly impaired in cerebrovascular pathologies, consciousness) and well-being. The SKE may further drive the applied research in respective fields.

Keywords: Learning; Arts; Linguistics; Perception; Cognition***Corresponding author:**Andrea Staršichová
(starsichova.andrea@gmail.com)**Citation:** Staršichová A. Synthetic kinesthetic education. *Arts & Communication*. 2025;3(4):7654. doi: 10.36922/ac.7654**Received:** December 16, 2024**Revised:** January 20, 2025**Accepted:** March 28, 2025**Published online:** April 15, 2025**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNoncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**Publisher's Note:** AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

Learning by doing (for example, through play) is a common educational method applied to preschool children. Obviously, even advanced students in their teenage years and adults tend to enhance and/or broaden their learning capacity through the use of various abbreviations, metaphors, and/or sketches – tools that can be considered learning facilitators. On the one hand, these tools can help foster imagination; on the other hand, truly effective facilitators should be chosen to fulfill their long-term purpose (if necessary or desired). Such facilitators are often chosen intuitively, without thinking about what will happen next. However, when paired with relevant subjects, these facilitators can become memorable for a lifetime. Still, certain facilitators – especially those selected in the most challenging situations – tend to be easily forgotten or are difficult to recall. Objectively, every subject can evoke various responses among heterogeneous individuals. The effectiveness of a learning method and its associated facilitator depends on an individual's cognitive skills, existing associations, and the surrounding environment.¹ Naturally, common and specific education systems already benefit from standardized and periodically adjusted teaching/learning plans, which incorporate various activities and facilitators.

2. Synthetic kinesthetic education (SKE)

Here, the author introduces the concept of SKE, which may evolve as an individualized (and/or targeted group) advanced education method. It combines acquired knowledge/information (memorized and/or to be memorized), linguistics, and artistic/relaxing activities to synthesize new knowledge. Facilitators – various artistic activities involved within SKE – are chosen intentionally, but the free choice of facilitators should be given preference.

2.1. SKE: Learning examples

Within the frame of SKE, various artistic activities can be involved. For example, painting/drawing can be combined with poetic writing. Such complex artistic activity often induces deeper questioning by me, the author, leading to a broader perception of the subunits within the complex image. Taking the more meaningful paintings within a single image (as shown in [Figure 1](#)) – such as hearts, leaves, apples, and hidden butterflies – one should acknowledge the various perceptions of the same image at first sight. We can learn by following homo- and heterogeneous (sub) images, and we can learn by perceiving the whole image.

Author's task for readers: Use your imagination and knowledge to see many butterflies from various angles.

We can also learn by analyzing image-related words. Linguistically, we can go to a deeper meaning: why hidden butterflies are called “butterflies.” One would say it has something to do with butter and flies if taken literally. Knowing that some carcinogens – such as a butter yellow (p-dimethylaminoazobenzene) – exist, we can be partially right. For example, butter yellow can cause



Figure 1. Synthetic kinesthetic education: Painting. A freestyle image is presented. The composition combines the author's imagination, thematic knowledge (adapted to fit the image), and creative intuition. This abstract image can evoke various responses among heterogeneous individuals. Source: Photograph by the author.

genotoxic/mutagenic effects in flies,² but these consequences differ from the symbolic meanings presented in the paintings.

Author's task for readers: Try to find other reasonable explanations as well as proper linguistic origins of the word butterfly and compare it.

The “butterfly effect” is also an expression commonly referenced in systems biology and chaos theory. It can be simply phrased as: “When something small can lead to significant consequences.” This concept (the term butterfly effect used in systems biology and other fields) – as well as the examples that follow – shows how synthetic research can be found/seen/discussed/created behind the biology. Various arts/free time activities can be combined to stimulate overall creativity, mediate the various word meanings, and finally acquire knowledge from different perspectives.

Poetic or prosaic writing can be chosen to subjectively arrange the words depending on the writer's mood, thoughts, knowledge, and writing purpose. For example, one can write similar and still different poems, as you can see in [Table 1](#).

Author's comment: Poetic and prosaic or other forms of creative writing are facilitating artistic activities. The involvement of linguistics in SKE is meant for the structure of words, origins of words, meaning of words, etc. Such linguistic tasks can be naturally involved in creative writing as well.

Taking photographs in natural surroundings can be another common approach within the applied SKE (as well as for various scientific purposes, as described further). Physical activity helps to maintain our health by contributing to cardiovascular fitness, cerebrovascular health, and cognition/memory/executive functioning.^{3,4} During her walks, the author was lucky enough to take several relevant photographs (Figures S1-S5) that relate to the SKE example presented here.

Table 1. Synthetic kinesthetic education: Poetic writing

When?	After
When sun is shining through the trees, when there is rain falling in peace, when hearty apples turn to grow, then lovely life comes with all joy.	When two hearts believe in one and enjoy time in the sun, when they walk in wind and rain, still touching each other hand, then these gentle souls are fair to values they truly share.

Note: Poem No. 1 (left column) and Poem No. 2 (right column) illustrate similarities and differences found in creative writing itself as well as when compared to another artistic activity (e.g., the painting in [Figure 1](#)) within the frame of SKE. The aim is to stimulate thinking, analytical skills, and creativity while encouraging the acquisition of knowledge from different perspectives.

Author's comment: Non-intentionally taken photos are shown in Figures S1, S2, S4, and S5; intentionally taken photos are shown in Figure S3.

These images and/or music pieces (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5EKHvfnHEs>) can be used in the next-level SKE applications involving analytic and associative thinking, perceptive/sensory, and neuroscientific tasks.

Author's comment and tasks for readers: The educational and/or research purposes of these materials are both dependent on the level of SKE's users. SKE learning examples, presented as pedagogical tasks, can be found in Table S1.

Several questions related to known and unknown aspects of neuroscience research came to the author's mind during the preparation of this manuscript. It is possible that – without knowing it before – the author's painting (Figure 1) was “intuitively” driven by similar images (exemplarily by a specific scenery in nature: flowers, trees, and birds) the author had seen in the past (Figures S1, S2, and S4). However, the truth is that the author realized these similarities afterward, just after she had looked at specific photographs/images and/or after she had created some writing pieces. Moreover, vice versa, although it might be just a coincidence, it looks like the author's thoughts surrounding the SKE concept led – through neural networks – to certain experiences (Figure S3). The author was unable to determine whether those specific situations (creative activities originated from various sources or nature itself) did or did not precede her specific thoughts as they both (activities and thoughts) had probably been caused by and interacted with multiple underlying stimuli. This ambiguity may potentially be explained using the diffusion decision model and/or other cognitive models.^{5,6} Taken together, one should involve multilevel interactive simulations when analyzing such neuroscientific tasks. Furthermore, respective neuroscientific tasks should be clearly defined at the beginning with a detailed characterization of all inputs involving hypothetical ones.

The SKE learning examples described in this section have superficially touched on various education/research areas to demonstrate a broad learning/teaching application of the SKE method. Since the SKE depends on the subject(s) to be learned, proper hypotheses and objectives for research studies on individuals and/or targeted population(s) should be given specifically.

2.2. SKE versus specific educational methods and art therapies

In agreement with the SKE concept, there is a growing tendency to standardly (re)integrate the humanities and arts into natural sciences and medical education,

treating them as branches of the same tree (see <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24988/the-integration-of-the-humanities-and-arts-with-sciences-engineering-and-medicine-in-higher-education>). Exemplarily, scientific images are chosen. These images can be the abstract ones presenting scientific fiction as well as non-abstract ones based on experimental data. Therefore, scientific imagery – in addition to its role in gaining new knowledge – should also foster effective communication skills, especially among students and researchers.⁷ Such communication skills are usually developed through classical descriptive and discussion-based approaches, often using simple language. Introducing linguistics in the educational process(es) distinguishes the SKE from other current integrative education methods.

Naturally, the arts (such as painting or writing) are not merely relaxing activities or educational tools. Various art forms, mainly music, have already been successfully incorporated into health-care settings.⁸⁻¹⁰ Patients may profit from improved physiological and psychological outcomes, such as pain management, reduced heart and respiratory rates, increased social interaction, and – when shared with family – an enhanced experience during end-of-life care. Notably, patients should be granted the freedom to choose the style or interpretation of music/art forms. Allowing them to select a familiar or preferred style can enhance responsiveness or prevent undesirable effects associated with less-liked styles.^{11,12} However, some investigators in these studies tended to favor slow-tempo music for all patients, which the author thinks might be contradictory. As an experienced and educated artist/musician, the author knows that responses can vary significantly depending on the interpretation – even within the same music style. It should be emphasized that patients should truly be given a choice (arts/music style/interpretation), as long as they are conscious. Using various types of arts for specific therapeutic purposes – such as employing music to awaken patients in a coma – remains a debatable approach, as both good and bad associations with a certain type of music may lead to desired tasks – to awaken the patients. Art drawing therapy or learning a foreign language (as well as combinations of at least three such activities⁸) has also been employed in treating various pathologies and improving patients' cognitive skills. However, the number of studies on these topics is limited, possibly due to the more demanding nature of these activities for patients. The positive impact of the arts on developing resilience and mental well-being in young populations has also been reviewed.¹³

3. Conclusion

SKE represents an innovative method that stimulates thinking skills and creativity and may improve memory as

well as other cognitive skills. In her own example of SKE, the author presented various art activities that fostered creative thinking and the generation of new knowledge. Specifically, the author – a research scientist – was particularly fascinated by her newly developed hypothesis: an integrated communication through neural networks across species.

For instance, the painting patterns (Figure 1) may have been inspired by previously seen visual patterns, such as moving ducks (Figure S4), and bore a resemblance to patterns created by moving geese in different locations (Figures S1 and S5). Alternatively, the act of painting (and the associated complex neural processing) might have influenced the emergence of moving bird (goose) patterns in the author's regular walking and sensory area (Aasee and its surroundings). In summary, communication across species may be multidirectional.

This hypothesis was partially supported by the author's additional observations of freely moving animals and the ones accompanying humans. The animals included various kinds of walking and flying birds; dogs of different breeds, including one that was walking/running and a barking dog; one cat that was sleeping/lying, walking, or sitting; and one resting/slowly moving mouse. These animals were noticed spontaneously in the author's sensory environment (Mönschberg and its surroundings) and were consistently connected with other neuronal inputs. Observations included interactions between the author's simulated movement/sensory tasks and the animals' subsequent behavior, as well as interactions among the animals themselves. Some of these interactions appeared to involve responses that extended beyond immediate perception – suggesting cross-species responses triggered by certain informational stimuli (e.g., naturally occurring movement/sensory stimuli). Scientific studies provide clarification on some of these analogous facts.¹⁴⁻¹⁷

The arts and/or linguistics (both involved in the SKE method) find their place as professions, free time activities, and advanced educational methods, as well as in promoting and improving health and well-being. The concept of SKE may further drive the applied research in respective fields. Many scientists have an affinity for the arts, which complement and enhance the creative aspect of their professions (within human and/or natural sciences) as well as life. Because science and wordplay tend to appeal to the “ordinary” people – including scholars and students – such an original approach may be appreciated and enjoyed during the education process or as a recreational activity in dedicated linguistic-arts courses (more comprehensive books can be written).

Pedagogical professionals interested in new educational methodologies – and who have access to representative

populations – may help assess the practical application of SKE. Their involvement, evaluations, and feedback from both learners and teachers will be essential in validating whether SKE will stand the test of time.

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The author declares she has no competing interests.

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This is a single-authored article.

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Not applicable.

Availability of data

All data generated or analyzed during the research are included in the manuscript. Methods used in this study included painting (watercolors), taking photographs (smartphones and digital cameras), creative writing (poems and manuscript text), real-world observation, and analytical thinking.

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ARTICLE

Mathematics and art: Ideas to use in teacher education

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(This article belongs to the *Special Issue: Mathematics Meets the Arts: Implications for teacher education*)

Abstract

Throughout history, there have always been connections between mathematics and various forms of art, such as music, dance, painting, sculpture, and architecture, which can be effectively used in mathematics classes with highly positive implications for students' learning. In particular, geometry emerges as a central field in this relationship. These connections not only motivate students and promote mathematical learning but also foster creative thinking and an esthetic sense, both of which are intrinsic to many mathematical concepts. Furthermore, they enable students to recognize and understand the mathematics embedded in numerous visual artistic works. While art provides an esthetic experience for those who study mathematics, it also establishes a connection between thought and emotion, giving deeper meaning to what we perceive. However, this relationship is not always immediately visible. Therefore, both mathematics and art teachers need to use various connections to develop both the student's "geometric eye" and "artistic eye". This manuscript aims to discuss ideas about this connection between mathematics/geometry and art. In addition, it presents examples of tasks implemented during the initial training of elementary school teachers, along with some of the works produced by these future teachers.

Keywords: Connections; Elementary teacher education; Visual arts; Mathematics education; Geometry

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1. Introduction

There is a mutual benefit for both mathematics and art when we explore interesting connections between the two fields. This begins with understanding that mathematics does not just involve formulas but also encompasses patterns, symmetry, structure, form, numbers, and beauty – concepts that are accessible to everyone. Mathematics generates and inspires art, and connecting the two allows for a more intuitive, engaging, and playful approach to mathematics. The perception of school mathematics is often that it is difficult, uninteresting, and serves primarily as a filter for selecting individuals wishing to pursue further studies. This negative image of mathematics must be challenged in schools. Mathematics is accepted when it is understood,

and one effective way to achieve this understanding is through art. Students should be exposed to the full potential, beauty, power, and usefulness of mathematics. By teaching it as a living science relevant to the individual across various fields of societal domains, students can become educated, active, critical, and adaptable members of society. On the other hand, mathematics has played a pivotal role in shaping modern culture, as well as a vital element of that culture, as Morris Kline pointed out back in 1953. The mathematician stated that it is undeniable that mathematics has shaped the course of modern history, even if sometimes imperceptibly. It is more than just a method, an art, or a language; it constitutes a body of knowledge that is useful to scientists of different specialties – from physicists to artists – and shapes diverse fields, from politics to theology. In addition, mathematics satisfies the curiosity of those who scrutinize the heavens, reflect on the harmony of musical sounds, or ponder the simplicity of daily actions.¹

In this manuscript, we will discuss some of the relationships between mathematics and art, as recommended in the European educational guidelines,² through selected mathematical concepts and artistic productions. These connections can have a positive impact on learning, by fostering creative thinking and an esthetic sense of mathematical concepts while also helping students recognize the mathematics embedded in many artistic expressions. This text focuses on some mathematical concepts found in artistic productions related to visual arts, including painting and architecture. This choice is justified from a curricular perspective, where connections between mathematics and other subjects are advocated.³ We will also present examples of tasks used in elementary school mathematics, during initial teacher training. These examples illustrate the connections between mathematics, art, and real life.²⁻⁵

2. The intersection of mathematics and art

Since ancient times, mathematics has been an essential tool for artistic creation, both with concepts and tools – from the compass to the most sophisticated dynamic geometry programs. Until the Renaissance, the separation between art and mathematics made little sense, as exemplified by the universal genius, Leonardo de Vinci. Throughout history, mathematics, particularly geometry, and art, have been linked, developing and complementing each other as interconnected fields of knowledge.² Mathematical concepts such as golden numbers, symmetry, spatial orientation, proportions, geometric elements, projections, and fractals demonstrate the vital role mathematics has played in artistic productions. There are, therefore, numerous human productions in which this link has been

established, illustrating the intentional and often intuitive and naïve use of mathematical concepts by artists and craftsmen in the search for esthetic balance when creating their works.²

Qualities such as creativity, beauty, universality, symmetry, dynamism, and precision are frequently attributed to both art and mathematics. Mathematics has a remarkable potential to reveal structures and patterns, enabling us to better understand the world around us. It fosters the ability to generate ideas, create, and dream! It allows us to imagine different worlds, and it also gives us the chance to communicate these ideas clearly and unambiguously. This unique ability to enrich the imagination in a structured way has long attracted artists. History has shown that mathematics has often evolved for esthetic reasons.¹

Aristotle argued that philosophers who dismiss the connection between mathematics and esthetics are mistaken, as beauty is a fundamental focus of mathematical reasoning and demonstrations. For instance, Hardy⁶ translated this idea, stating that the mathematician, like the painter or the poet, is a creator of patterns. A painter makes patterns with shapes and colors, a poet with words, and a mathematician with ideas. All patterns are inherently beautiful. Ideas, like colors, words, or sounds, must fit together perfectly and harmoniously. In this way, Hardy and other mathematicians describe mathematics as a form of art or a creative activity, with its beauty arising both from their work and from mathematics itself. There is, therefore, an indisputable relationship between art and mathematics. While the two domains seem to depend on different patterns of thought, their structures are strikingly similar. There is no question about the relationship between science and mathematics, where the scientific process is clearly subordinate to mathematics. But the link with art, although seemingly less obvious, has existed since time immemorial – not only with mathematics but, more recently, with technology. This connection, particularly between mathematics and technology, is exemplified through Mandelbrot's fractals, which are discussed later in this article.⁷

Mathematics and art share many common attributes, and teaching and learning both can significantly benefit students. Engaging art in its broader and inclusive sense, across its different dimensions (e.g., visual art, drawing, painting, architecture, music, dance, poetry), offers a more intuitive and playful way to approach mathematics. This process also highlights the esthetic dimension of the mathematical edifice as a whole, i.e., as the science of patterns – a facet that is not traditionally emphasized in teaching. Unfortunately, mathematics is often presented to

students in ways that focus on its least engaging aspects. To address this, students should be given the chance to see mathematics as more than just a collection of techniques, algorithms, formulas, and rigid, indecipherable concepts.⁵

Art, mathematics, and creativity can form powerful partnerships in the classroom, benefiting both students and teachers. Students appreciate opportunities to create a poem, formulate a problem, design a foldable, craft a geometric composition, or build an eye-catching box of chocolates in response to assigned challenges. The results of these efforts are both positive and rewarding. Teachers, in turn, face the challenge of addressing students with different abilities and varying ways of processing information. These divergent learning processes can significantly enhance students' curiosity and performance, meeting their different learning styles and interests. The diversity of tasks and teaching strategies, which reinforce connections and incorporate various forms of languages, can contribute to the proficiency we strive to achieve.

3. An encounter between mathematics and art: A few flashes

The works of various artists, such as Klee, Kandinsky, Vasarely, Escher, and Corbusier, showcase the profound influence of mathematics. These artists drew inspiration from mathematical concepts, exploring new optical possibilities, creating algorithms, and geometries (e.g., non-Euclidean and fractal), further enhanced by advancements in computing, sound, and other technologies.⁸ Among the countless relationships that can be established, explored, and analyzed in various artistic productions, mathematics has played a vital role in artistic creation from antiquity to the present day. Certain mathematical concepts, which hold significant relevance in art, can be effectively incorporated into teaching through artistic contexts. These include geometric elements, the notion of pattern, the golden rectangle, proportion, symmetry, and fractals.

The question "What is mathematics?" has inspired extensive discussion over the years, as the concept is dynamic and continuously evolves. The understanding of mathematics in ancient times differed from that of the Renaissance, in the last century, and will certainly continue to evolve in the future. However, a definition attributed to Sawyer,⁹ which has gained widespread acceptance among mathematicians and educators due to its simplicity and timeless relevance, states: "Mathematics is the science of patterns," a definition with which we are comfortable. This idea aligns with Steen's¹⁰ assertion that "What mathematicians do best is discover and reveal hidden patterns". Hardy⁶ compares the mathematician to the painter or poet, stating that "The mathematician,

like the painter or the poet, is a master of patterns," thus harmoniously establishing connections between ideas.

One of the most emblematic works by the Renaissance master Albrecht Dürer (1471 – 1528) is the engraving *Melancholia I* (1514) (Figure 1). This work integrates numerous mathematical elements and has been the subject of extensive academic discussion. It prominently features a polyhedron, specifically a truncated rhombohedron, which has sparked debates and is often referred to as the "Dürer Solid".¹¹ In addition, the engraving includes a numerical figure, a magic square, whose formation obeys a pattern, presenting a challenge for those who wish to build one. A magic square is a grid divided into smaller squares, denoted as an $n \times n$ square, with an arrangement of integers in rows and columns such that the sum of the numbers in each row, each column, and both diagonals is always the same, known as the magic sum. The magic square in question is a 4×4 grid, with a magic sum of 34. Another numerical detail appears on the last line of this magic square, in the central squares, indicating the year it was created – 1514. This magic square is believed to be the first to appear in Europe after a 250-year gap following its origins in China. This example, like many others, highlights the fascination artists have had with mathematics (e.g., why is the magic square featured in this work?). It also demonstrates their extensive mathematical knowledge, which allowed them to create a harmonious piece.

Many of the works by various artists throughout history, created using simple geometric elements, such as lines, polygons, solids, and angles, can be effectively incorporated into mathematics classes. These works will not only help students develop their "geometric eye" but also foster their creativity and artistic sensibility (Figure 2).

Other, more complex works can be explored by students at higher levels. Some artists often use geometric figures and basic mathematical concepts to create works that depict seemingly impossible constructions. One of the most creative artists in this field was the Dutch artist Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898 – 1972), who can be considered a mathematical artist due to his exceptional esthetic sense and vivid imagination, combined with a profound understanding of mathematics. This allowed him to create pieces that not only conveyed his unique perspective on the world but also challenged our senses. Many of his works exemplify these ideas (Figure 3).

Symmetry was extensively explored by Escher and other artists and can be considered one of the most powerful concepts that spans various themes in mathematics. However, we must clarify the term "symmetry", which was used for many years in mathematics curricula until the 2007 Basic Education Mathematics Program in a different

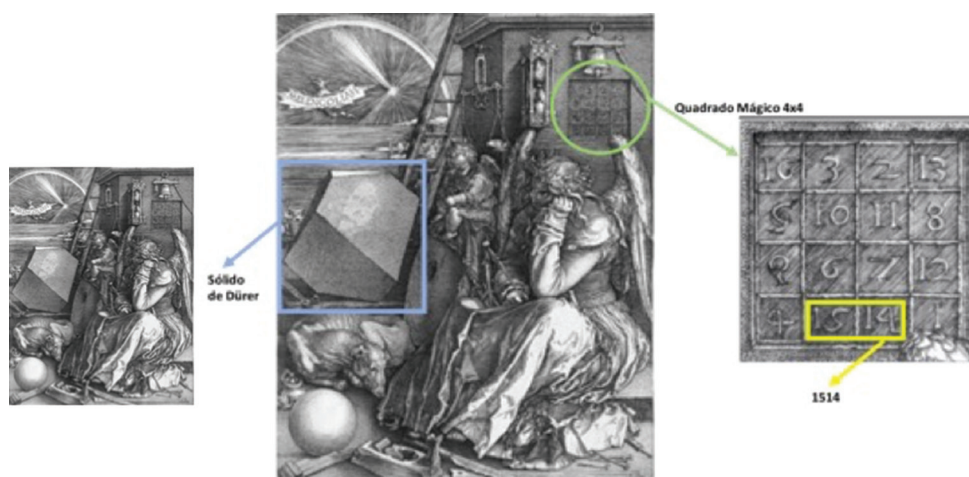


Figure 1. Melancholia I by Albrecht Dürer
Source: Images from Getty Images and the authors.

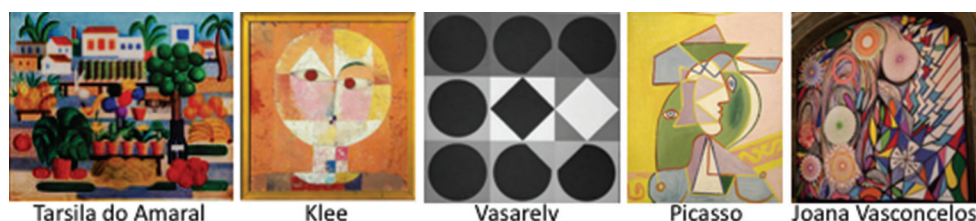


Figure 2. Paintings with basic geometric elements
Source: Images from Getty Images.



Figure 3. A photograph of Escher (A) and some of his masterpieces (B)
Source: Images from Wikipedia (A) and Pixabay (B).

sense. Before 2007, confusion arose from the translation of terms from English, such as axial symmetry and central or point symmetry, which should more accurately be referred to as reflections, half-turns (in the plane), and inversions (in the plane). Thus, when we refer to symmetry, we are talking about the symmetry of a figure, which correlates with various geometric transformations.^{12,13} In geometry, symmetry is defined in terms of isometries. Specifically, when the image of a figure, through an isometry other than identity, coincides with the original figure, the figure is said to possess symmetry.¹⁴ Symmetry is a fundamental geometric characteristic present in both nature and art. It is found throughout the natural world and is also one of the

most prevalent themes in painting, architecture, and design, spanning cultures worldwide and throughout human history. By examining the images in Figure 4 and asking “What do all these images have in common?”, the answer is symmetry.

Symmetry is both beautiful and fascinating, which is why students are often captivated by concrete and tangible examples of it in nature and art. The study of symmetry can range from elementary to highly advanced; for example, one can start by identifying the symmetries in designs and patterns or delve into the use of symmetry groups as an accessible way to introduce the abstract framework of modern mathematics. Furthermore, the principles



Figure 4. Images of objects showing at least one symmetry
Source: Photographs by the authors.

mathematicians apply in the study of symmetry are not exclusive to mathematics and can be found in other areas of human thought. By exploring symmetry in different contexts, students can uncover the connections between mathematics and other branches of knowledge.

Another geometric element that, although relatively recent, can be introduced in elementary school mathematics and is closely related to the arts and sciences – from medicine to economics, and from furniture design to painting – is the concept of fractals. These elements belong to fractal geometry, a field developed in 1975 by the French mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot (1924 – 2010), whose work was greatly facilitated by advances in computer technology. Figure 5 shows the creator alongside one of his fractals.

Mandelbrot was one of the first to use computer graphics to create and display fractal geometric images, leading to his discovery that visual complexity can arise from simple rules. The equations governing these fractals describe phenomena that, while appearing random, follow specific rules and cannot be explained by Euclidean geometry due to their fractional dimension. Fractals possess two main characteristics: self-similarity, where each part of the fractal resembles the whole, and infinite complexity, where zooming in on a detail reveals new intricacies. In this way, fractals contribute to the creation of new shapes and more realistic artificial worlds, as well as the representation of natural elements that Euclidean geometry cannot capture. They are of great importance, for example, in the creation of special effects in films. An example of a fractal in nature is the Romanesco Broccoli, as shown in Figure 6.

The concept of fractal is widely used in different forms of artistic production, including those created through computer animation, as illustrated in Figure 7.

To conclude this journey through the history of artists who used mathematics to create their works – works that

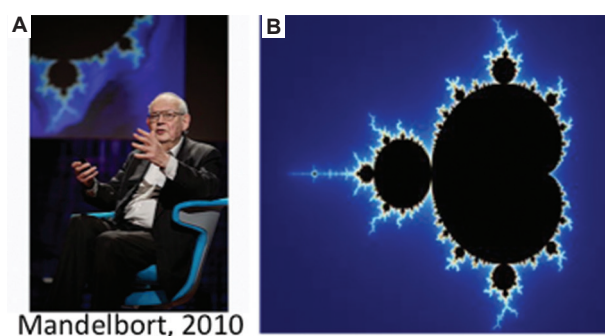


Figure 5. A photograph of Mandelbrot (A) and one of his fractals (B)
Source: Images from Wikipedia.

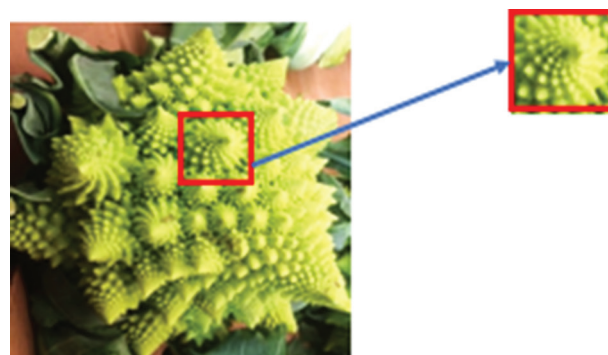


Figure 6. Image of a *Romanesco Broccoli*
Source: Photograph by the authors.

can serve as a powerful resource for mathematics education from elementary school onward – we would like to highlight a concept that goes by several names (e.g., Golden Rectangle, Golden Number, Golden Ratio, Golden Section, Golden Proportion): golden number, whose history is lost in the depths of time. While it was used in ancient Egypt and the Pythagorean tradition, the first formal definition is attributed to Euclid (325 – 265 BC). The first treatise on this topic, entitled “Divina Proportione”, was written by Luca Pacioli (1445 – 1517) and illustrated by Leonardo Da

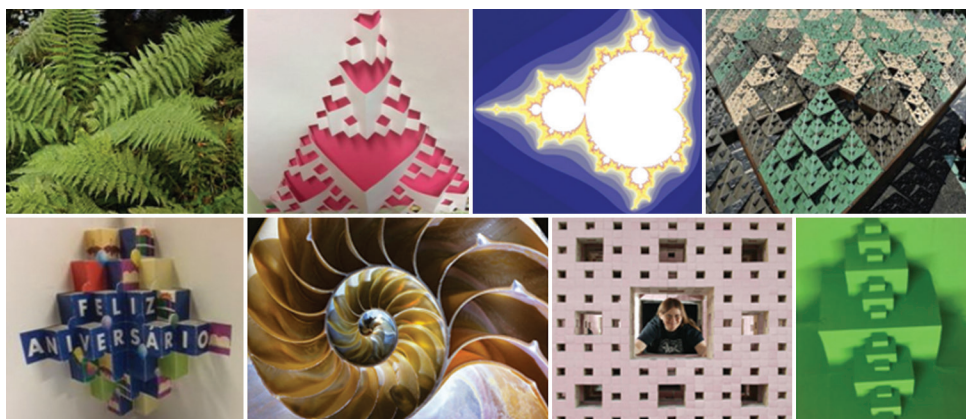


Figure 7. Examples of fractals in various contexts
Source: Images from Getty Images and the authors.

Vinci, to whom, according to tradition, the name Golden Section is credited.⁸

The Italian Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519) was one of the painters most concerned with the use of the golden number, or divine proportion, in his works. Among the most emblematic creations is the Mona Lisa (Figure 8), which contains several examples of these ratios. Another example is the Vitruvian Man, where, for instance, the ratio between the height (side of the square) and the distance from the navel to the tip of the hand (radius of the circle) corresponds to the golden ratio. Another notable figure is Mondrian, who will be discussed in more detail later in this article. Along with da Vinci, Mondrian is among the most famous artists who applied the golden ratio into their works. Georges Seurat (1859 – 1891) is another example, with his painting “A Bath in Asnières”, which shows obvious subdivisions based on the golden rectangle (Figure 8).

This number can be found in works spanning the Renaissance period to 21st-century modern art. The golden number is often regarded as the mathematical representative of perfection in nature, which is why, over 2000 years ago, humanity recognized its potential to enhance art and architecture. Its harmonious proportions are particularly pleasing to the eye. Studied since antiquity, the golden ratio forms the basis of many Greek constructions and artistic creations. The Parthenon in Athens is perhaps the best example of the intersection of mathematics and art. The name adopted for the golden number – capital Phi – is derived from the name of Phidias, the sculptor and architect responsible for the construction of the Parthenon in Athens. In Figure 9, some proportions on the façade of the Parthenon can be seen. However, this ratio can also be found in Egypt on the Pyramid of Giza, as well as in the façade of the Taj Mahal in India.

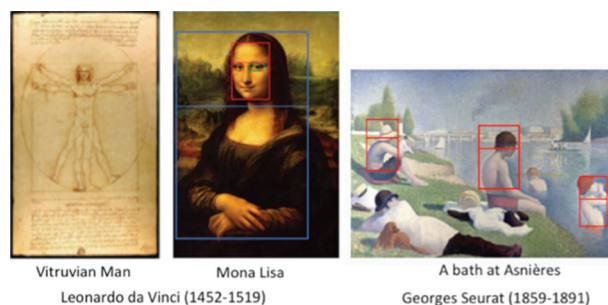


Figure 8. Examples of paintings where the golden rectangle is visible
Source: Illustrations from Pixabay and the authors.

Similarly, the works of the Franco-Swiss architect, urban planner, painter, and sculptor Le Corbusier (1887 – 1965) also make use of the Golden Rectangle or the Golden Number. Figure 10 illustrates some of his creations.

The golden rectangle, known for its visually pleasing proportions, is not only employed in art and architecture but also found in everyday objects such as credit cards, identification cards, playing cards, books, and notepads, among others. A simple method of constructing a golden rectangle is illustrated in Figure 11.

4. Exploring mathematics through artistic productions

In this section, we present examples of tasks designed for future elementary school teachers to foster connections between mathematics and art. These tasks also aim to raise future teachers' awareness of art, thereby broadening their cultural repertoire, which is often limited and not fully appreciated. In other words, the goal is to use artistic works in mathematics classes not just as illustrations or props to support a particular task or piece of information, but as objects for learning mathematics, revealing the



Figure 9. The golden ratio in ancient architecture

Source: Images and illustration from Getty Images (Párthenon) and the authors (the Great Pyramid of Giza and Taj Mahal).

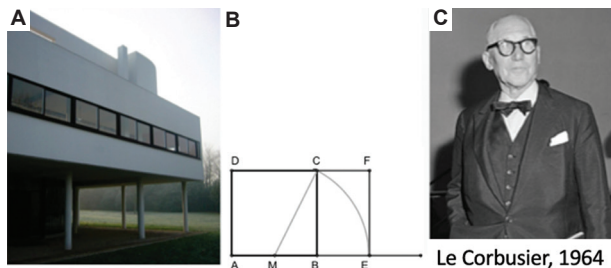


Figure 10. A photograph of the building by the architect Le Corbusier (A), the golden rectangle (B) and a photograph of Le Corbusier (C)

Source: Images and illustration from Roryrory (the building “Le Corbusier-Villa Savoye, 1928-30”; licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0) (A), the authors (B), and Wikipedia (C).

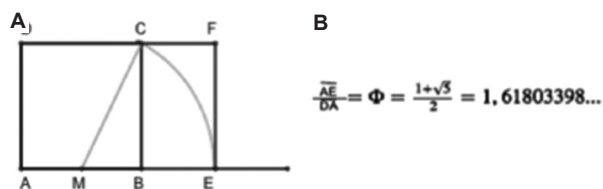


Figure 11. Construction of a golden rectangle. (A) Draw a square ABCD. Extend the segment AB, one side of the square, and find the point of intersection, E, of that segment with the arc of a circle whose radius is the segment MC, and center at M, the midpoint of the side of the square AB. Draw a perpendicular to AE through the point E, obtaining EF. Complete the rectangle by drawing a parallel AE through F. Obtain the constructed rectangle AEFD which is a golden rectangle. (B) The ratio between the dimensions of the constructed rectangle (golden ratio) is equal to the golden number Phi which is an irrational number.

Source: Illustration from the authors.

underlying mathematical principles. Working with shapes involves identifying part-to-whole relationships, which in turn allows us to observe that in a different object, understood as a whole, there is a structure of similarity and transformation.¹⁵ On the other hand, national and international recommendations encourage interdisciplinarity through activities encompassing Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Mathematics (STEAM) education or mathematical connections within (e.g., mathematics, geometry) and beyond mathematics (e.g., real-life applications). This approach seeks to break the compartmentalized and isolated view of mathematics, promoting its integration with other fields.²⁻⁵

These experiences, which underscore the connections between mathematics and art, hold added value from an educational standpoint. In this perspective, we have sought to underscore this potential within the context of initial teacher training by integrating proposals and tasks that future teachers may employ with their own students. The tasks devised for this purpose have been designed to encompass a wide range of dimensions that are not typically addressed in other proposals, including hands-on activities, as well as the artistic and cultural domains. These tasks have been incorporated into training programs for elementary school teachers, specifically prospective teachers for pupils aged 3 – 12, within the domain of didactics of mathematics. They are closely aligned with the respective syllabus, particularly in geometry or algebra modules, as well as more transversal modules, such as those addressing mathematical connections and creativity. As a result, these tasks naturally arise in the classroom and are implemented based on the content covered at the time (e.g., sequences, geometric transformations, properties of polygons, fractions). The tasks are presented in a contextualized manner, thereby reinforcing their intentionality. Then, they are explored and discussed to ensure that future teachers develop a deep understanding of how to implement these strategies in the classroom. The future teachers’ reactions are predominantly positive, acknowledging the value of these approaches, perceiving them as being distinct from conventional methods and as promoting enhanced motivation and meaningful learning.

4.1. Task 1: The fractal carpet

This task¹⁶ is based on a wooden panel (Figure 12A) that uses the properties of a fractal, in particular the Sierpinski triangle (Figure 12B). It serves as a rich example to explore in a mathematics class, providing opportunities to formulate a variety of mathematical problems involving several concepts.

An artistic production, such as a panel, can lead to a rich mathematical exploration. The main mathematical idea is the concept of pattern, which involves identifying its formation that allows it to continue, and to which

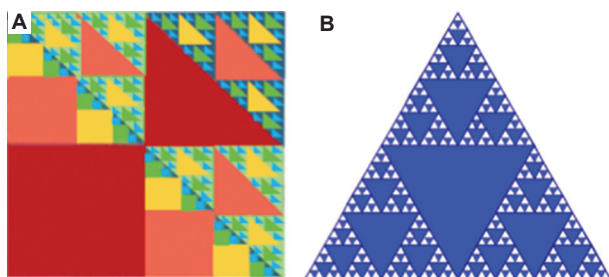


Figure 12. The fractal panel (A) and the Sierpinski triangle (B)
Source: Illustrations from the authors.

Task: The carpet fractal

Inês has the carpet shown in the picture at home.
One day she looked at it closely and discovered how its design was constructed. Can you do it too?

Classify all the polygons you see in the picture. Focus on the yellow squares.
The region formed by these squares, which part of the carpet is it?

Now focus on the triangles. What are the measures of the angles of one of the triangles? What about the others? What is the relationship between the yellow triangle and the orange triangle? What color are the triangles that together make up $3/32$ of the carpet?

What percentage of the carpet is painted in red? What fraction of the original square is represented by the red square? Indicate the area of the red square, taking the original square as the unit area.

Now use the fractal principle identified in the image to make your masterpiece.

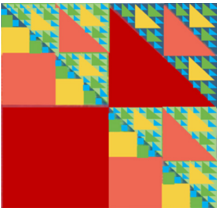


Figure 13. The carpet fractal task
Source: Illustration from the authors.

corresponds a structure translatable by a mathematical law. The discovery of patterns enables the establishment of connections between various mathematical topics in both numerical and geometric contexts. In this case, the first idea is to discover the pattern used in the construction of the carpet design. The visible diagonal of the square that constitutes the carpet divides it into two triangles with two different types of patterns, each obeying the same law of formation. The part formed by the triangles corresponds to the Sierpinski Triangle structure (Figure 13), a geometric figure obtained through a recursive process. This figure belongs to a class of mathematical objects called fractals, characterized by self-similarity, meaning they do not lose their initial definition when they are enlarged (or reduced). Upon closer examination, we can unveil other mathematical concepts that may not be immediately apparent, such as fractions, ratios, proportions, powers, percentages, and areas. Hence, based on Figure 12, we propose the task described in Figure 13, which is suitable for primary education.

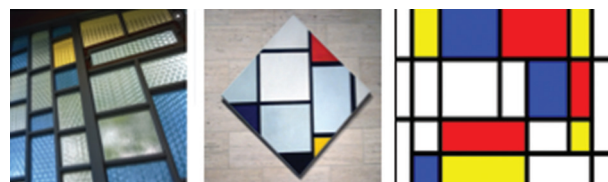


Figure 14. Photographs of Mondrian's paintings
Source: Images from Pixabay.

4.2. Task 2: Now you are the artist Mondrian

The works of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian (1872 – 1944), particularly “Composition with Red,” “Yellow and Blue” (1942), “Composition with Large Red Plane, Yellow, Black, Gray and Blue” (1921), and “Composition A” (1920) (Figure 14), provide a strong link between art and mathematics. This association can be used to formulate mathematical tasks to explore with students from elementary school onward, allowing them to get to know the work of an artist who uniquely incorporates basic elements of geometry.^{17,18}

Mondrian's process involves simplifying forms to achieve a composition governed by ideal mathematical proportions, such as the golden ratio, which dictates the relationships between the forms. According to Mondrian, each thing, whether a house, a tree, or a landscape, has an essence that lies beyond its appearance, and in this essence, all things exist in harmony within the universe. The artist's role, as perceived by Mondrian, is to reveal this hidden essence and its connection to universal harmony. He developed a completely non-objective style known as Neoplasticism. Neoplasticism, also known as the De Stijl Movement (or “The Style”), introduced a transformative esthetic rooted in formal purification. It advocated a total spatial cleansing of painting, reducing it to its purest elements and seeking out its most characteristic features.¹⁷⁻¹⁹

Mondrian believed in a deep connection between mathematics and art. He used the simplest geometric shapes – straight lines, rectangles – and primary colors – blue, red, yellow – in their most saturated, artificial forms, alongside white, black, and gray. These latter tones, absent in nature (with white representing the total presence of light and black the total absence), were used to express reality, nature, and logic from a unique point of view. His lines were always straight, horizontal, or vertical, avoiding angles other than 90° or curved lines. Mondrian's point of view rooted in the idea that any shape can be created with basic geometric forms, just as any color can be created with different combinations of red, blue, and yellow. The golden rectangle is one of the basic shapes that is consistent in Mondrian's art.¹⁹

Figure 15 describes a task proposed by a group of initial teacher training students in the context of creating

mathematical problems. As part of the activity, they were asked to formulate a set of questions inspired by a Mondrian painting that could be applied in early years mathematics class. In addition, the task was contextualized by exploring Mondrian's work and his contribution to the visual arts.

4.3. Task 3: Friezes and rosettes

The tasks involve geometric transformations, and isometries reflection, rotation, translation, and glide reflection – with a particular emphasis on symmetries. These tasks are playful in nature, as they can be explored through concrete situations in decorative art.

The tasks in this area seek to uncover connections between mathematics and art through artistic creations in various forms. These artistic expressions achieve their pinnacle in religious art, especially in convents and churches, whether in tiles, stained glass, or stonework, as well as in handicrafts, such as basketry and embroidery – made by simple craftsmen or more erudite artists. The highlighted mathematical elements are friezes and rosettes, which exhibit patterns that acquire a specific meaning here – different from that considered in the numerical field –

Task: Now you are the artist Mondrian

Observe the given picture based on Mondrian's compositions.

What can you say about the picture?
What types of quadrilaterals can you identify in the picture? Find all the squares.

Cut out all the pieces that make up the picture. Find out which pieces are $\frac{1}{4}$ of the red square.

Which part of the black square is one of the grey rectangles?

Find out which pieces are twice the size of the black rectangle. Which pieces are $\frac{1}{8}$ of the red square? Which pieces are $\frac{1}{2}$ of the yellow square?

The board is approximately 95 cm in length. Estimate the area of the red square. Estimate the perimeter of the black square.

Check whether the rectangle formed by the red board, black square, and two grey rectangles is a golden rectangle. Investigate other rectangles.

Use the pieces you've cut out and build a new picture that has at least one reflection symmetry.

Look at the picture you've built. Can you identify a rotational symmetry?

Now you're the artist. Imagine you're Mondrian and use his technique identified in the painting to make your masterpiece.

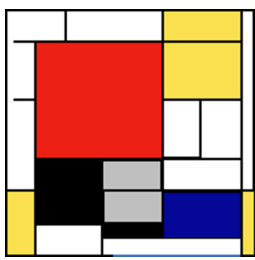


Figure 15. “Now you are the artist Mondrian” task
Source: Illustration from the authors.

as it is characterized by the identification of a repeating motif.¹³ The law of formation underlying the structure of the pattern makes it possible to understand how they were constructed, which allows them to be continued or reproduced mathematically.

The idea behind these geometric elements is the concept of symmetry, a powerful idea not only in geometry but also in art because of the balance and harmony it conveys. Mathematically, symmetry refers to the properties of a figure, which is defined as a subset of points in a plane or space, depending on the context. Hence, we can discuss the symmetry, or symmetries, of various objects, such as a straight line, rectangle, sphere, or even an artistic drawing or sculpture, as long as they are understood as subsets of points within a plane or space.¹² Based on these symmetries, figures can be classified into different types. In this section, we will focus on rose windows and friezes.

The image on the left (Figure 16) does not have an axis of symmetry, as there is no straight line in the plane that acts as the axis of a reflection to leave the figure invariant. In other words, it has no reflection symmetry. However, it does have rotational symmetry, specifically six rotational symmetries; by rotating the figure in the plane around its center (O) at angles of 60° , 120° , 180° , 240° , 300° , and 360° , the figure remains unchanged. The image on the right (Figure 16) has both reflection symmetry (with four axes of reflection) and rotational symmetry (with four rotational symmetries). In both cases, the figures are examples of rosettes, where several geometrically equal modules are identified and repeated.

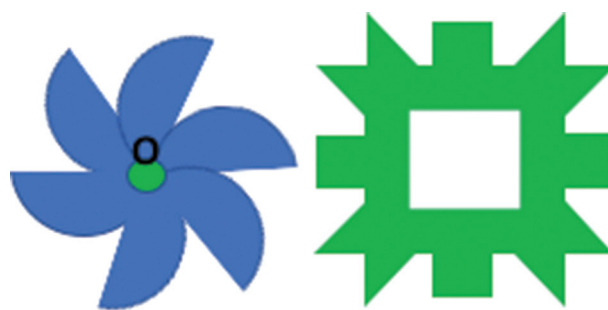


Figure 16. Examples of rosettes
Source: Illustrations from the authors

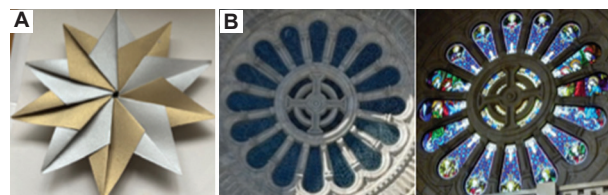


Figure 17. Rosette in a folded paper (A) and in Basilica of Santa Luzia at Viana do Castelo (B)
Source: Photographs from the authors.

Rosette windows were an important element in Gothic architecture, commonly used on the façades of many churches. They were also used in Romanesque architecture, which also made use of these elements, particularly on the sides of buildings. Figure 17 illustrates two types of rosette windows: the one on the left was obtained by folding paper and the ones in the middle and right are part of the Basilica of Santa Luzia at Viana do Castelo, shown from both the exterior and interior of the basilica.

It is important to highlight the nature of mathematical elements, particularly geometric elements, which are typically colorless or monochromatic. Color can have a significant influence in the identification of symmetries.¹² Thus, the mathematical study of symmetry is often conducted with monochromatic figures. However, most artistic objects that captivate us are polychromatic, making their analysis more complex, especially when working with younger students. For example, in the paper rosette in Figure 17, it is not easy to determine whether a rotation centered at O with an amplitude of 360° qualifies as a symmetry of the figure. To address this, such figures should either be avoided or analyzed under specific conditions to simplify their study.

Let us now consider Figure 18, which consists of 18th-century (Baroque) tiles commonly found in many churches and some public buildings, such as the Cloister of N^a Sr^a do Carmo in Viana do Castelo. Imagine that this pattern extends indefinitely in both directions, with a motif identified that repeats endlessly. We say that it has translation symmetry because, by translating the plane according to the vector AB, the entire figure is transformed into itself, although no point in the figure remains invariant under this transformation. A translation according to the vector BA is also a symmetry of the figure, as are all translations along multiple vectors. Tracing paper is a helpful material for identifying such transformations.

In this way, we have a frieze, which is a band with a motif that repeats indefinitely, characterized by translational symmetries in a single direction. It can also possess additional symmetries beyond translation. Depending on the symmetries that the friezes can have, they are classified into seven types. For example, the frieze in Figure 18 not only has translation symmetry but also sliding reflection symmetry. To illustrate, imagine one of the “Cs” (a simple motif) that is reflected by a sliding reflection along a horizontal axis, which crosses the band in the middle, and a horizontal vector equal in length to the distance between the two “Cs”. The initial “C” and the final “C”, obtained by a sliding reflection, make up the composite motif which, by translation, constitutes the frieze.

To solve the following task illustrated in Figure 19, students must apply the concept of symmetry while keeping in mind the properties of geometric figures, such as regular polygons, circumferences, and angles. These tasks encourage creativity and provide an opportunity to relate mathematics to real life.

Figures 20 and 21 illustrate some of the creations of the students, future elementary school teachers, and kindergarten teachers, who were challenged to design a bookmark and a glass coaster as examples of a frieze and a rosette, respectively. Each of the productions, presented by



Figure 18. An example of a frieze (AB is one of the vectors that keep the translation invariant)
Source: Photograph from the authors.

Task: The rosette task

1. The picture on the right represents nine “windows” of various churches.

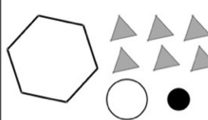
a) Which window rosettes have reflection symmetry?

b) Identify all the rotational symmetries in each of the windows

c) Which regular polygons could you inscribe on each of the circumferences?



2. With all the elements on the left, build a figure that is a rosette, with two reflection symmetries and two rotational symmetries.



Task: The frieze task

Look at the drawing of a frieze in one of the rooms at the University of Alcalá, Spain.

- What can you say about the picture? Summarize your findings. If necessary, use tracing paper to discover/confirm some of your findings.
- What are the symmetries of the frieze that keep it globally invariant?
- What was the minimum motif that generated the frieze?
- How would you classify the geometric figures that make it up?
- Imagine that the given figure is limited. Estimate the percentage of the part painted in green in relation to the whole.



Task: Be the artist

Create a bookmark (frieze) and a glass coaster (rosette). You can use any materials you like. For each of the elements you build, clearly identify the type of frieze and rosette used and their properties.

Figure 19. Rosette and frieze tasks
Source: Images and illustration from the authors.



Figure 20. Bookmarks designed by students, future elementary school teachers, and kindergarten teachers
Source: Images from the authors.



Figure 21. Glass coasters designed by students, future elementary school teachers, and kindergarten teachers
Source: Photographs from the authors.

these students, was accompanied by photographs showing the entire process used to build their productions, as well as the mathematical explanation involved in both the friezes and the rosettes.

5. Conclusion

Learning mathematics in a fragmented and isolated way from grades 1 – 12 will not adequately prepare future citizens for the challenges ahead. Education in the 21st century has to break away from this dominant disciplinary paradigm, emphasizing connections and projects that are meaningful to students and aligned with teaching objectives. Education today needs to do far more than just transmit content; it must foster creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. It should also help students improve their ability to communicate and collaborate effectively while developing their esthetic and artistic sensibilities.²⁰ Mathematics education should be contextualized, integrating knowledge from other domains and languages, allowing students the opportunity to be imaginative, to question, and to be curious. In this way, we contribute to the development of a more informed and cultured future citizen.

When students enter school, they already possess a strong potential, which teachers must recognize and make the most of. By doing so, young learners are more likely to enjoy mathematics and appreciate its usefulness, rather than applying a set of trained mathematical techniques. This approach makes mathematics a powerful tool in the society. In this sense, the teacher must be attentive and use different ways to explore students' potential, ensuring that each student's learning process is supported and understood.¹⁶

The analysis (and construction) of artistic objects through a mathematical lens offers opportunities to

establish connections between mathematics and other domains. This task can serve as a starting point for projects where mathematics in general, and geometry, in particular, play a key role for those who want to learn mathematics and for those who want to develop harmonious artistic projects. Like other sciences, art can play a vital role in this process, with initial and ongoing teacher training programs being essential to its success.

In conclusion, a mathematically competent student, like an artist, can go beyond the use of mathematical elements in their daily work.²¹ Drawing from the findings of our research in teacher training, we have seen that teaching mathematics in connection with visual arts and architecture offers several important benefits that enhance both subjects. This interdisciplinary approach fosters a deeper understanding of both subjects and promotes a more holistic educational experience. Furthermore, it provides future teachers with opportunities to engage with different artists and their creations – experiences they might not otherwise encounter – and to develop an interdisciplinary perspective on mathematics, along with all the benefits this approach offers.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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ARTICLE

Utopian messages from the past: Lessons for today in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* and Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia*

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Abstract

This paper argues that the humanities are ideally situated to respond to fundamental human concerns when approached with an open mind, acknowledging the enduring relevance of older sources alongside contemporary ones. While this may seem like “bringing owls to Athens,” it is of imminent importance today to revisit this issue, especially given the precarious status of pre-modern literature. To illustrate this phenomenon, this paper turns to one of the most influential courtly romances, Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde* (ca. 1210), where the love experience is intensive but greatly painful. The poet ultimately presents a utopia where the two lovers find refuge from societal constraints but ultimately choose to return to courtly society, in other words, other people or human society, hence, honor. The argument advanced here is that the discourse of love, as complex as it has always proven to be, requires us to consider the widest range of literary contributions that illustrate its diverse approaches, options, opportunities, contradictions, and dialectics. Insofar as love can be identified as one of the most important though highly conflictual human emotions, the study of relevant texts (or images, music, and others) constitutes a critical component of education; this is exemplified in Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (ca. 1320), although it is predicated on a different concept. However, even there, the pilgrim Dante experiences his epiphany at the end because his beloved, Beatrice, conducts him toward the highest goal in *Paradiso*.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Literature and the humanities: What do they mean?

As an academic field of investigation in the Western world, the humanities face considerable challenges, with increasingly fewer students willing or able to study the necessary foreign languages in which the relevant sources have been written. The further we look back, the more foreign the linguistic discourse becomes, making the Middle Ages particularly challenging for us today. Modern English-speaking students already struggle with William Shakespeare's works, as his 16th- or 17th-century English is far removed from modern English. Similarly, early modern Spanish (e.g., Cervantes), German

(e.g., Lessing), or French literature (e.g., Molière) appears to be insurmountable for many learners. As a result, they might be cut off from some of the most important lessons developed hundreds of years ago that form the bedrock of Western culture and civilization. The fundamental value system determining contemporary society is already fraying at its margins, with too many competing media trying to appeal to the young generation, often idealizing violence and fascism and promoting anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, for instance. However, studying the history of literature is not futile; rather, it provides a gateway to discover central ideals in ethics and morality.

These observations hold true for many other parts of the world, where literature in ancient Hebrew, Chinese, or Sanskrit remains largely inaccessible to today's youth. Fortunately, academics and other publishers increasingly produce valuable translations, preserving these works while providing access to ideas and concepts from different cultures and times. However, this paper cannot answer the larger question of how to preserve the humanities. Instead, it illustrates one dramatic case above all that should motivate any modern reader/listener/observer (in the case of a movie version) to accept the challenges and to engage with a literary work from the past that has passed the test of time and continues to appeal to us today.¹

We have always dealt with several critical issues, such as love, death, the quest for God, the meaning of life, honor, and dignity. Considering that every generation of writers or poets (including painters and musical composers) revisits these themes, we can be certain there is no final answer to these issues. These enduring questions require an ongoing discourse because they are neither finite nor absolute. Instead, they find their clearest manifestation in ever new efforts in the various literatures throughout time. In short, I argue that we, as a human society, cannot survive without a solid foundation of ethics, moral values, and principles. Those do not come to us through our genes; instead, they must be learned, often through studying great literature, regardless of how we define it. It would be too simplistic to correlate the mindset of mass murderers, for instance, with the ignorance of poetry or drama. However, I suggest here that the literary discourse proves to be highly valuable as a narrative platform for examining human ideals, concerns, concepts of mutual respect, and tolerance. Without exposure to some of the greatest literary contributions, a critically important aspect of all education could be lost.

1.2. Humanities challenged

Every academic discipline faces the regular challenge of justifying its existence. While explaining the necessity of fields, such as medicine or engineering might be easier,

the case for “softer” fields, such as history, philosophy, anthropology, or religious studies, often becomes more fluent, vague, or even ephemeral. Nonetheless, it seems unimaginable that a student could graduate from a university without having at least a modicum of knowledge about intellectual history, art history, or psychology. After all, these are fundamental components of human existence that determine all our lives, whether we know it or not, in terms of ethics, morality, spirituality, and esthetics. However, even without being overly dramatic or biased, we currently witness a catastrophic deterioration in world politics, cultures, and economics, with corruption and violence increasingly permeating many different societies across the globe. This is evident even without addressing the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, and Mali. By almost the same token, the more poets, composers, artists, philosophers, or theologians reflect on the issue of love, the less love seems to be understood and tends to escape our grasp, both in theory and in practice.²

However, I do not wish to indulge in a Jeremiad about the decline of human civilization, which would not help us much in the critical reflections on the role of the humanities and, specifically, the relevance of the literary discourse. Teachers throughout history have lamented their students' lack of interest in older literary texts or their inability to engage with them, especially considering the difficulty for the younger generation to comprehend the language of these works. In addition, there is a terrifying and unabated drumbeat throughout time, with countless texts experiencing a highly variegated destiny. Masterpieces from the past were appreciated or ignored, and major poets were greatly hailed or disregarded. Scholars widely agree on the central importance of the works by Homer, Virgil, Fortunatus Venantius, the *Beowulf* poet, Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, Mechthild of Magdeburg, William Langland, or Christine de Pizan. Even so, how many people today are even familiar with these names?

The history of literature reveals a constant flow and ebb in public appreciation, often due to a change in public tastes, political culture, and ideologies. The presence or absence of a strong religious faith has regularly influenced the rank and esteem of individual secular works. Dominant political regimes have promoted their literary canons, repressing opposing views. Church authorities, both past and present, have tried hard to impose their views on the literary discourse, so poets and writers have always faced a regular shift in their public appeal. Even intellectual giants, such as Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260–1328), who is highly regarded today, almost faced the Inquisition and dire consequences. His “negative theology” and its huge

influence on late medieval mysticism would have likely been unknown.

A recent example would be the work of the Baltic German writer Werner Bergengruen (1892–1964), who received tremendous public appeal well into the 1950s and beyond. Still, the student revolution in 1968 swept him almost completely away from public awareness and acknowledgment.³ Despite enduring persecution by the Nazis, he managed to keep publishing throughout the 1930s and 1940s, choosing to enter internal exile to avoid direct scrutiny. Bergengruen also maintained a strong Catholic and spiritual perspective, drawing heavily from medieval literature. However, the young generation at the end of the 1960s could no longer tolerate his voice. Still, with a recent translation of his short stories into English, he might experience a surprising ‘Renaissance’ again. The same cycle of disappearance and rediscovery may apply to medieval literature. After largely fading from public view since the late 15th and 16th centuries, it was rediscovered in the late 18th century. It has deeply influenced and impacted modern-day literature, the arts, philosophy, and theology. Folk myths of water nixies, such as Melusine, Undine, and the Lorelei, have survived beyond the Middle Ages (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*) and continued to exert deep influence, especially on Romanticism. As seen in Christian Petzold’s film *Undine*, these tales have even found new life in modern cinema.

There are countless examples of poets and writers who enjoyed great popularity, only to be later disregarded. This pattern is evident both in the modern world and throughout history, as the literary canon is far from stable and often turns against its protégés.^{4,5} If the status of contemporary literature is highly fluid, influenced by subjective factors and opinions, it should come as no surprise that older literature fares even worse in this regard.

I would venture to say that, today, German Baroque literature, for instance, is virtually a lost cause in advanced literature classes, let alone the general reading public. Surprisingly, and perhaps significantly, the situation for medieval German literature is often much better, as many philologists have worked tirelessly to produce critical issues, modern translations, and insightful interpretations. Modern research has demonstrated that the appeal of pre-modern literature has proven almost irresistible. There are compelling reasons to look at that corpus of texts as a highly valuable reservoir of human experiences, ideals, values, and concepts that address fundamental concerns, dreams, and notions about the foundation of our existence – issues that may well be timeless and universally applicable. Otherwise, major novels such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* (1973–1949), profoundly predicated on medieval motifs,

narrative themes, figures, notions, and concepts, would not have experienced such a global success in the 20th century and beyond. The basic idea of a quest, as outlined in that novel, strongly appeals to the young generation. However, again, *The Lord of the Rings* was neither the first nor the last literary effort to address this deeply anchored dream of finding one’s path through life and discovering our existence’s true purpose.

2. The primary case study: Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan and Isolde*

For this paper, I am particularly interested in the romance *Tristan and Isolde* by Gottfried von Strassburg (ca. 1210), which contains, almost at the very end, a brief episode that suddenly breaks off, as though the poet intended to leave it as an incomplete fragment. This episode can be identified as a literary utopia⁶ (for an excellent overview and general discussion, see Christoph⁷). Scholarship on Gottfried is vast, as expected for a literary masterpiece.⁸ This “classical” Middle High German literary monument has been analyzed from many different perspectives. Here, I will briefly comment on the episode of the love cave, as it illustrates – maybe more than many other moments in medieval literature – the timeless value of literary discourse on the highly significant, always evanescent topic of love. I cannot engage with the entire romance here, as it would require a whole book-length study. It is sufficient to note that Tristan and Isolde are in love with each other and can never fully stay apart – superficially because they have both consumed a magical love potion; at a deeper level, it is because they are destined to be together as lovers. Tragically, while Tristan is King Mark of Cornwall’s favored nephew, Isolde is Mark’s wife, who does not love her older husband. The love potion, an intriguing but troubling metaphor, binds them together for the rest of their lives. It overcomes Isolde’s initial hatred of Tristan while awakening Tristan’s realization that he loves the Irish princess. Her mother had brewed the potion to help her daughter enjoy a pleasant life of marriage with the older king. However, destiny ultimately brings Tristan and Isolde together, and they must suffer deeply because they cannot fully experience their love for one another.

The narrative describes at length the various efforts by the two characters to meet in secret. Still, rumors soon spread, and King Mark’s suspicions grow that they might be committing adultery right under his nose. Isolde is even forced to undergo an ordeal, swearing her innocence regarding the accusations. The ordeal involves her carrying a red-hot iron on her bare palm; however, she does not burn herself. As the narrator comments, this miraculous event is attributed to Christ Himself, indirectly satirizing

the entire institution of ordeals – where a suspect is put to trial in the hopes that God will provide divine proof of guilt or innocence.

However, Isolde does not lie when she swears that she has never lain in any other man's arms except King Mark and the poor, weak pilgrim who had carried her from the ship to the shore. Once on land, the pilgrim stumbled, causing the two to fall together on the ground. Naturally, Isolde orchestrated this scene, instructing Tristan to disguise himself as a pilgrim and fall at the right moment, giving her the formal justification to swear her ambivalent oath. Ironically, as the narrator comments on the miraculous outcome of the ordeal, Christ is portrayed as acting like a wind-swept sleeve, supporting Isolde despite her manipulation, if not deception, about the poor pilgrim. As Gottfried underscores, the love between Isolde and Tristan is not of this world, as it represents a quasi-religious phenomenon.

Subsequently, having returned home, Isolde continues to suffer from the intense pangs of love. At the same time, Tristan travels to a distant land where he secures a magical dog for his beloved that would soothe her emotional distress. This dog, Petitcreiu, carries a belt around its neck, and the music of that bell creates artificial happiness in the heart of the person who listens to it – working almost like a musical drug. Isolde realizes the strange and unwelcome impact of the mysterious music, so she tears the bell off the dog's collar. Thus, she destroys the music and embraces her internal pain, refusing to forget her lover.⁹ Music is an artistic performance meant to unite people, uniting them through the active creation of melodies and sounds, whether by voice and/or musical instrument or through listening. However, Isolde cannot bear the thought of feeling happiness without Tristan by her side. She would rather feel continuous sorrow from his absence than be content and happy without him.¹⁰

It does not take long for King Mark to become so enraged by the affair between the two lovers that he is forced to expel them from his court. Fortunately, Tristan is aware of a secret love cave, which is the central motif of this paper. That cave is hidden deep in the forest, unknown to anyone else, and it quickly proves to be a mysterious site originally built in ancient times by giants during the heathen period. The space represents an ideal form of architecture, evoking the grandeur of a cathedral or even heaven itself. The narrator comments:

[The *caverne*] was... round, wide, high, and with straight walls that were white as snow, smooth and even. There was a wonderful vaulted ceiling, with a crown sitting atop the headstone. The round interior represents the openness of love. Openness is well suited to love, which should

have no rigid angles. Angles in love represent deception and deceit. Breadth and width represent the strength of love because its strength is boundless. Height represents noble aspiration, which climbs to the clouds and for which nothing is impossible as long as it strives upward, where virtues bring together the vault's keystone. One thing will never change. Virtues will always be bedecked with jewels and adorned with acclaim so that those of us whose ambitions are not stirred, whose desires are suppressed and linger near the ground and neither soar up nor descend, gaze always upward. We look up to the treasure built up by their virtue as it flows down to the glory of those who soar above as in the clouds and shine down upon use. We gaze upon them in wonder (Gottfried von Strassburg, p. 206-07; for a digitized copy of one of the major manuscripts, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cgm 51; see <https://www.bavikon.de/object/bav:BSB-HSS-00000BSB00088332>)

Previous scholars here have already identified a medieval concept of a utopian space where the two lovers can truly live out their deep and intensive feelings for each other without external material needs. They do not need to eat or drink; they hunt only for entertainment, play music for each other, and enjoy their time together in the cave, which ultimately isolates them from human society¹¹ and provides them with complete happiness, so it seems. Gottfried profoundly allegorizes the cave, providing symbolic meaning to all objects, such as walls, windows, colors, and so on. For instance, he states the intricate mechanism of the door: "If someone enters the doors to love without being let in from the inside, then that isn't really love, but either falsehood or violence. This is why there is a bronze door, this gateway to love, so that no one can open it except through love. It is made of bronze so that it can't be forced open by any means, not with might or strength, not by cheating or through skill, not by deception or lies." (p.208). The artificiality of this location is further emphasized by the fact that Tristan has trained his dog, Hiudan, to go hunting with them, deliberately repressing its barking.

However, their stay in that cave did not last. Eventually, they are discovered by one of King Mark's huntsmen, who immediately inform his master of their whereabouts. Having heard the noise of the hunting company, Tristan placed a naked sword between them as they slept. This proves to be a decisive indicator, although false, for when King Mark looks through one of the window holes in the ceiling down to the lovers, he believes, once again, that they are innocent of all charges and should be allowed back

to court. After all, he is deeply in love with his wife and cannot bear being separated from his nephew.

Nevertheless, jealousy still festers in his heart, which torments him greatly. Hence, he instructs them clearly:

“for God’s sake and for his own to maintain some decorum and abstain from tender and amorous glances, and to refrain from their private and overly friendly chats. (p.216).

Tristan and Isolde’s reasons for returning to King Mark’s court are also clear. While they could or should have stayed in the cave, it is not a space meant for eternity. The narrative tells us, “The two lovers were pleased by this; it made them happy, but they were more delighted for the sake of God and their honor than for anything else.” (p.216) In other words, despite their contentment in the cave, they are humans and need social contact; they cannot remain in complete isolation. However, they also cannot continue living in society because they are not allowed to openly express their love for one another, which essentially destroys them.

Unsurprisingly, Mark ultimately caught them *in flagrante delicto*, which forces Tristan to depart. As far as we can tell, he never returns, though the fragmentary conclusion does not allow us to assume anything definite. Subsequent poets such as Ulrich von Tûrheim and Heinrich von Freiberg were dissatisfied with such an open-ended outcome and tried to complete Gottfried’s work. However, their revisions altered the perspective and interpretation of the love relationship between Tristan and Isolde, introducing the element of death into their affair.¹²

3. The utopia and us

As Tomas Tomasek has noted, the ideals of the utopian elements in Gottfried’s romance remain virulent and relevant today. In the prologue and some of the narrator’s theoretical reflections (specifically the *huote* excursion), Gottfried outlined the highest ideal for human beings, which is to find their best conceptualization in the experience of true love, epitomized in the love cave.¹¹ In many ways, we could correlate Gottfried’s *Tristan and Isolde* with the contemporary Grail romance by Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* (ca. 1205), and the vast continuation of Wolfram’s *Titurel* fragment by Albrecht von Scharfenberg (ca.1220–1230). From there, we could turn to Dante Alighieri’s famous *Divina Commedia* (completed around 1320).¹³ All of these medieval poets embraced the concept of quest, whether for love or the divine, an idea that has resonated with readers ever since.

Love is one of the strongest emotional forces in human life, and both ancient and medieval poets understood its

great significance and impact. Throughout the Middle Ages, the discourse on love played a central role in courtly society. Still, posterity has certainly embraced the erotic theme and developed a myriad of adaptations, translations, and imitations.¹⁴

In the 19th century, influenced by the medieval tradition and the contemporary philosophy by Arthur Schopenhauer, Richard Wagner created his opera version (WWV 90) of this medieval tale between 1857 and 1859, which was finally performed in 1865. Numerous modern-day receptions of the *Tristan* material exist, including novels, short stories, paintings, and movies. While there was a long hiatus between the mid-16th century, when the medieval narrative fell into oblivion, and the late 18th century, when it was rediscovered, there is no doubt about the universal relevance of the theme—the infinite love between Isolde and Tristan. However, Gottfried created the most meaningful version, especially because he chose to break off his narrative at the end, leaving the lovers’ fate unresolved. This decision likely reflects his inability to imagine a mundane or trivializing outcome and his desire to stay true to the inner ideal of love he presents. Other poets, in contrast, had Tristan marry a third Isolde while he continued to love his own Isolde, the Irish princess. In some versions, Tristan is mortally wounded in war and can only be healed by the princess Isolde. She arrives to save him, but the other Isolde reveals that she has refused to follow his request, leading to Tristan’s death. Princess Isolde then follows him to death.

As we see most dramatically here, Gottfried’s romance, along with competing versions (Eilhart von Oberg), exerted a huge influence, and the countless manifestations of subsequent versions underscored the great popularity of the love motif. At one point, Tristan and Isolde can enter a utopian space and enjoy their time together. However, like the Garden of Eden, humans cannot remain in such paradise forever. The lovers must eventually leave, with King Mark’s permission, as he is once again deceived into believing that they are not in a romantic relationship. However, their endless suffering continues, leading to their final tragedy, where they are caught in the act by her husband, who is also Tristan’s uncle. Consequently, they must part, and their full and ever-lasting happiness can never be achieved. This represents a literary expression of the human tragedy: the pursuit of an ideal never fully attained (like Sisyphus). While Tristan wanders the world, becoming increasingly confused when he encounters another princess called Isolde (the Whitehand), his beloved must remain behind, enduring the pain of missing him. This pain makes it impossible for her to truly live without him. She thus

demonstrates enormous internal strength, showcasing the noble heart that the narrator had mentioned in the prologue to his text. However, Tristan is lost in this world's intrigues, not knowing what to do. Both of them face an insurmountable dilemma and must contend with the inherent pain that comes with true love.

This is an extreme literary reflection on love, but it functions as a social laboratory in which readers or listeners can confront the foundation of this emotion. It allows them to examine its relevance and significance for human society, the development of values and ideals, and, by extension, all basic ethics and morality. Without these aspects, no self-respecting civilization can survive. However, Gottfried and other poets did not necessarily portray a simplistic path toward erotic satisfaction or political perfection. We cannot predict the future of our society, at least in the West. Still, we can be certain that the idea and concept of love, as outlined in such dramatic terms by Gottfried, continue to intrigue, inspire, and allow us to form our value system based on what this romance portrays.

Reflecting on *Tristan and Isolde*, we realize that studying this medieval romance enables the exploration of the fundamental values that shape people's lives, both in the past and today. While the romance complicates the relationship between the two lovers and their intense desire for each other, it creates a literary platform to explore what it truly means to be human, to embrace values, and to aspire to ideals. We could thus identify Gottfried's romance, very similar to many other works from that period, as an essential narrative platform for the growth of a humanist society deeply determined by ethical principles that lead to the ennoblement of the individual.¹⁵

It is simply not enough to live a material existence devoid of any spirituality or, at the very least, the values of human interaction predicated on communication, community, commitment, compassion, and collaboration. We have always needed ideals, a notion of spirituality, and morals, not to forget a sense of esthetics; otherwise, society collapses into barbarity. Some critics might argue that we are currently already on the edge of such an abyss, with physical and mental violence rampant in many parts of the world. People might celebrate Christmas or observe Ramadan devoutly, but without true values supporting our existence, the fabric of culture and civilization is increasingly at risk of unraveling.

Nevertheless, the universal experience of love has so far guaranteed the continuous growth of civility, courtliness, kindness, and communication among people. This is not to say that Tristan and Isolde are ideal characters, as they are forced to deceive King Mark and the entire Cornish court

to live out their intense love. However, they are presented as lovers who bear the heavy burden of the dialectics of love, thereby becoming role models for all those who experience this profound emotion, with all its accompanying pain, frustration, longing, and disappointment. There is no true happiness in the end; the opposite is true. Still, Gottfried presented a literary model where love's joys and sorrows fully manifest. As we learn from the prologue, the experience of love, according to the poet, becomes the pathway toward the highest ideals in life. We traverse a narrow path throughout our existence, ultimately leading us to acquire ethics and morality in the Ciceronian sense.

4. Dante's *Divina Commedia*

Although I cannot fully do justice to Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (completed ca. 1320), including a few remarks on this late medieval masterpiece is essential. In this work, the protagonist, at first lost on his path through life, soon realizes that Beatrice's love draws him from his earthly existence. However, before he can reach her, the pilgrim must first navigate through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. Only after receiving God's grace can he enter *Paradiso*, where Beatrice awaits to guide him toward the ultimate direction of his existence. As Dante suggests, we humans often find ourselves on a universal quest for meaning, the divine, and love. It is only after Dante has understood the consequences of human sinfulness – guided by Virgil through hell – and after he has comprehended the higher values taught to him by St. Bernard of Clairvaux in purgatory that he can aspire higher and embrace the ideal of love, which ultimately proves both earthly and divine, as shown to him by Beatrice.

The humanities may well be one of the most important academic fields, providing us with guidance, models, ideas, images, narratives, and dreams for a better future within a literary, or at least narrative, medium. It serves as a textual laboratory in which we can study the extremes of human life. While it may be challenging for today's new generation to acquire the necessary tools to explore medieval literature (even if only through modern translations), it offers many intriguing and powerful messages about the essence of all human life. Gottfried's *Tristan and Isolde* and Dante's *Divina Commedia* can be identified as beacons of light in the darkness of our history and the long march toward an uncertain future.

The discussion of these literary masterpieces does not automatically entail that everyone who experiences love must endure the same pains and sorrows or be granted the highest joys of love. Instead, these poems serve as reflections of the extremes of human experiences. Both *Tristan and Isolde* and the *Divina Commedia*, like thousands of other

texts from the Middle Ages, can be identified as narrative experiments. Of course, there are significant differences between the two. Dante the Pilgrim begins his journey at a point where he is truly at the end of his life or caught in a midlife crisis. Traversing *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, he purges his soul, witnessing the full spectrum of human folly, frailty, and sinfulness. Guided first by Virgil, then by St. Bernard of Clairvaux – who in turn was influenced by the *Song of Songs* in the Old Testament – and ultimately by his beloved, Beatrice, Dante can reach *Paradiso*, where his earthly love for her is merged with a spiritual experience of the divine.¹⁶

On the other hand, Tristan is a kind of prodigal son and the perfect artist in music, language, and hunting right from the start. Only when he falls in love does he lose himself, get confused, no longer know what direction to take, and cannot even stay in the love cave, the utopia. This is because he and Isolde need the social context – the world outside – where they can truly live. In other words, while Dante reaches the pinnacle of the human quest for love and happiness, as Beatrice comes to his assistance and elevates the pilgrim into a divinely inspired soul, Tristan and Isolde must return to society and thus, must accept the resulting pain and sorrow for being adulterous lovers. Hence, while two different models are at play, both are framed within the same narrative framework inherited from the Middle Ages.

It is no wonder that the *Divina Commedia* represents one of the most important pieces of pre-modern world literature. However, this does not justify belittling or rejecting Gottfried's work, especially considering that he also projected the notion of utopia, albeit one where the two lovers can only remain briefly. The ultimate sorrow follows their brief happiness, and the central question for them and us – the readers – is how human beings can endure the deep pain that love sometimes entails in exchange for the delight and glory of fulfilled love.

From here, we could also consider the vast field of *troubadour* poetry, the poems by the *trouvères*, the Middle High German *Minnesang*, or the songs by the Sicilian and North Italian representatives of the *stil dolce novo*. All these poets pursued the goal of love. They also reflect countless nuances on how to come to terms with the dilemma of love as the ultimate goal of all human existence. This pursuit often requires figuring out the complex relationship between the genders. In most cases, courtly love poetry does not present a happy outcome, except in the two genres of the dawn song (*alba*) or the *pastourelle*. The latter, however, sometimes involves more violence than we would accept today (for us, in fact, zero tolerance, though some violence can be seen in poems like those found in the *Carmina*

Burana (ca. 1220–1240). By the later Middle Ages, the discourse around love increasingly focused on marriage. This is evident in works such as the laments of the widower in the Bohemian-German dialogue poem by Johannes von Tepl, *Der Ackermann* (ca. 1400), or the many ballads by the French poet Christine de Pizan (also ca. 1400). What connects all those different texts is the constant search for love, happiness, individual fulfillment, meaning, and ultimately the merging of the human soul with the divine. Love itself constantly proves to be the crucial catalyst for achieving that goal or, at the very least, for understanding its profound implications.¹⁷

5. Conclusion

What does all of this mean for the Humanities? As the name implies, all teaching focuses on knowledge, some of which pertains to the natural world and some to the human being in his/her essential existence. The discourse of love, the exploration of the notion of utopia, the quest for divine illumination, and the drive toward finding meaning and relevance have been of central concern for people throughout time and worldwide. Gottfried von Strassburg and Dante Alighieri were not the first, nor the last, poets to address these issues, but their works can certainly be identified as some of the most important and influential masterpieces of world literature, as both posterity and modern scholarship have consistently affirmed. Their global popularity derives from their ability to address the theme of love from a spiritual and erotic perspective, embedding their discourse within the theoretical framework of utopia (secular) and the return to paradise (religious). Neither aspect is significant in Western (or even Eastern?) thought. Hence, if my arguments can be accepted, returning to medieval literature facilitates a rediscovery of the fundamental ideals that constitute the essence of human existence. I would also add that my extensive academic experiences in teaching medieval literature classes have consistently supported this view, as my students have often embraced the notion that older literature can serve as a mirror reflecting human nature, ideals, values, and problems.

Of course, medieval literature is not the panacea of the Humanities. Still, these two case studies clearly illustrate how specific concepts, already developed in the past, continue to resonate in our times, serving as literary beacons for the future. I have chosen both texts as examples of how much the discourse on love can be identified as a crucial component of literature and, consequently, of human culture at large. The quest for fulfilled love has always been of supreme importance for people across time and culture. In these two works, we face uniquely specific models of utopias from the profound desire for love, both erotic-physical and spiritual. From this point, we could

easily explore other literary masterpieces from the past (or the present), where critically relevant issues in human existence are explored and deeply addressed.

Love is a universal ideal, but it does not guarantee happiness. Both Gottfried and Dante outlined various options, directions, dangers, platforms, and notions that have always been a part of the experience of love. Studying their works facilitates a meaningful engagement with humanistic values, ideals, notions, and needs – values developed and outlined long ago. Older narratives can certainly serve the modern or post-modern needs of people in a genius way, often in ways that may be unexpected but still opening up many perspectives that can prove to be profoundly important on a larger scale.

Both the sense of utopia and the quest for love are intimately intertwined, and reading about the conflicts, tensions, sorrow, and pain, as well as the happiness and joy experienced by these lovers, Tristan and Isolde and Dante and Beatrice, brings us closer to understanding the complexities of human existence. This paper does not argue that we ought to disregard contemporary literature; on the contrary, it underscores that some of the most critical aspects of our existence – here and now – constantly need careful reexamination. Without ethics and morality, philosophical and spiritual principles, there is not much worth to the human society, especially when a society devolves into barbarity, engaging in internecine strife and the slaughter of its members, such as the horrifying phenomenon of mass murders in the United States.^{18,19}

Representatives from many different churches or religions constantly talk about love, peace, and hope, but the reality often proves to be quite the opposite – both locally and nationally, as well as internationally. It is, of course, highly unlikely that the study of *Tristan and Isolde* or *Divina Commedia* will change public culture today. Reading medieval literature is not a panacea for the malaise of the present world, which is largely shaped by greed, corruption, and violence. However, we can certainly argue that examining these two literary masterpieces and many other medieval works can establish a platform for a meaningful discourse that remains relevant today.

Studying Isolde's and Beatrice's behavior or thinking may not deter any aggressor today, but it can expose our students to a different concept of human interaction, one that holds the potential to impact society. In its prismatic complexity, the notion of love has not lost any of its values. Given the historical distance, it might be easier today to examine medieval literary examples to gain a deeper understanding of love. At the risk of preaching to the converted, who would not find literary utopias extremely

relevant to us today? We could also turn to young Dante's *Vita Nuovo* (ca. 1300) as another example of what narrative discourse can achieve when driven by love. We could also explore women's poetry, including medieval mysticism, all shaped by the quest for values, ideals, hope, and love.

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ARTICLE

Lived experiences of discrimination among
Global Majority dance students: A qualitative
exploration of racial inequityImogen J. Aujla^{1*}, Stacey Green², and Laura Grant²¹Dance in Mind, Milton Keynes, Bedfordshire, United Kingdom²TIRED Movement, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire, United Kingdom

Abstract

This study represents the second phase of data collection in a larger project, Representation and Equity in Dance (RED), which investigates racial discrimination in dance training. There is a paucity of empirical research examining the impact of racial inequity in dance. Hence, this study aims to explore the experiences, observations, and outcomes of racial inequity, discrimination, and lack of representation among students enrolled in colleges providing professional dance training. Nineteen dance students (eight Global Majority and 11 White, mean age 18.56 ± 0.92 years) from six vocational dance colleges in the United Kingdom volunteered to take part in a series of focus groups. White students were recruited alongside their Global Majority peers in recognition of the fact that tackling racial inequity is a collective responsibility. Despite several reports of positive experiences in dance training, numerous examples of racial discrimination emerged, ranging from subtle microaggressions, such as rumors and gossip, to explicitly racist behaviors, including unfair treatment, social exclusion, and unacceptable language use. Discrimination resulted in increased self-doubt, lower self-confidence, social isolation, and feelings of invalidation among Global Majority students. These feelings extended to Global Majority participants' concerns about the future, particularly in relation to the possibility of being cast in productions due to diversity "quotas" rather than their skills and talents. Taken together, this study suggests that racism persists in dance training, and its impacts on Global Majority dancers' psychological well-being should not be underestimated.

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1. Introduction

Many authors have discussed the ways in which White practices have been positioned as neutral, normative, and universal within dance education.¹⁻³ White Euro-centric principles and practices can be found across most dance programs, reflected in the content and material being taught,⁴⁻⁶ teaching modes and methods,⁷ provision of learning resources,⁸ and approaches to evaluation and assessment.^{9,10} For example, non-Western dance genres, such as those of the Global South, tend to be offered as electives on dance training courses rather than be seen as formal techniques required as a technical foundation for a professional career.^{2,10-12} Simultaneously, the inclusion of genres such as jazz and hip-hop often represents appropriated versions of the original forms.^{3,13} Indeed,

the contributions of Global Majority artists are routinely exploited and appropriated in the studio, but omitted from dance history lectures and textbooks.^{8,14} Studio practice typically follows Western approaches whereby the teacher stands at the front, and the students form lines behind the teacher. At the same time, practical dance assessments involve subjective judgments that may be made in accordance with Western aesthetic priorities.^{7,9}

On graduation, students are likely to encounter the continuation of aesthetic standards centered around Whiteness^{7,15,16} and stereotyping related to genres and roles (e.g., audiences often assume that Black females are more likely to perform hip-hop, while White females are more likely to perform ballet¹⁷). Global Majority dance graduates may face colorism within the industry, as well as “color casting,” whereby dancers are cast for roles due to the color of their skin rather than their technical abilities.¹⁸ They may struggle to identify role models due to the lack of diversity within leadership teams and roles.^{1,2}

It is apparent that inequity exists within both dance training and the profession, but there is a lack of clear understanding of the impacts of such inequity. Some authors have shared personal accounts of their experiences of discrimination in dance.^{4,15} In contrast, others suggest that the context and characteristics of Western dance training may reduce the self-perceptions and ambitions of Global Majority students⁴ or may even lead to them dropping out from dance altogether.¹⁹ However, much of the literature reviewed above represents theoretical analyses of current dance practices. To date, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the experiences of Global Majority dance students who are progressing through the types of training that have been substantially and persuasively critiqued. The few empirical accounts that exist are either focused on a very specific topic (e.g., experiences of harm in competitive dance,³ embodied feminine subjectivities,⁵ or perceptions of diversity²⁰) or reported on issues on racial equity as an unexpected emergent theme within a study with a different focus (socially constructed bodies²¹). As a result, the needs and experiences of Global Majority dance students are not well understood.

Specifically, little is known about the challenges faced by dancers of the Global Majority in their training, the psychosocial impacts of these challenges, and how these challenges are managed. Even less is known about the perspectives of White dance students regarding the experiences of their Global Majority peers, or about the ways in which they act as allies or take useful action that could help those peers when facing inequity or discrimination. Therefore, this study aims to explore experiences, observations, and outcomes of racial inequity,

discrimination, and lack of representation among students enrolled in colleges that provide professional dance training. The study is part of a larger project created by the TIRED Movement, a United Kingdom-based social enterprise that seeks to promote access and inclusion in dance training and the industry, enhance representation across the industry, provide information and education about racial equity, and use research evidence to drive change. The Representation and Equity in Dance (RED) project was designed to address the latter aim by exploring the impact of racial inequity in dance education and using this data to create and pilot an evidence-based framework specifically designed to enhance racial equity and representation in dance training. The first phase of the RED project involved data collection from students enrolled at nine vocational dance colleges regarding the impact of racial inequity through an online survey,²² as well as data collected during focus groups (reported in the present study).

The RED online survey was completed by 150 students, 109 of whom were from any White background, and 40 of whom were from any Global Majority background, including mixed heritage (one participant chose not to identify their ethnicity in the questionnaire). The survey tapped several domains of wellbeing, including overall quality of life, basic need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), body satisfaction, and future competence expectations, alongside a questionnaire assessing experiences of discrimination. Analyses revealed a significant negative correlation between experiences of discrimination and psychological wellbeing among dance students of the Global Majority.²² Subscales pertaining to discrimination at work/college and exclusion/rejection, which encompass perceptions of negative stereotyping, unfair treatment, and social exclusion, appeared particularly influential. It could be speculated that the Global Majority students encountered teacher bias and negative expectations within the college, which reduced their autonomy and competence perceptions. Social exclusion is likely to have impacted on the participants' satisfaction with social relationships.

The first study of the RED project established the relationship between experiences of discrimination and the psychological well-being of Global Majority dance students. To paint a more complete picture, the present study builds on the findings from the survey, expanding on and elucidating the statistics by analyzing the voices of students to provide specific examples of discrimination and the impacts and outcomes of inequity. This study was conducted in accordance with critical race theory, centralizing the voices of Global Majority dance students

to provide different narratives to those that may have been prioritized in the past.²³ Using focus groups and interviews, the perspectives of Global Majority students are captured and presented to make salient their realities in a Eurocentric context.^{23,24} The possibility that these narratives and counter-narratives could influence policies^{25,26} is significant as the TIRED Movement seeks to create change in the wider dance industry.

The study addresses two additional gaps in the dance literature. First, the strategies that Global Majority students adopt to help them manage challenges associated with inequity and discrimination and their perceived efficacy. Second, the opinions, observations, and actions of White students training in these environments alongside Global Majority peers. The TIRED Movement emphasizes collective action because tackling racism is a universal responsibility. As such, the perspectives of White students who act as allies and engage in bystander action are also of interest.²⁷ Finally, any existing strategies that the colleges implemented to enhance inclusion were discussed.

The scope of this study is broad, given the limited existing research. It involves issues relating to racial equity and representation as well as psychological wellbeing and dance pedagogy. As such, the study does not adopt a particular theoretical stance; rather, it should be viewed as an exploratory piece of research that emphasizes the emergence of findings inductively as opposed to imposing an *a priori* theoretical framework. It is hoped that as research in the area grows, suitable theories and models can be examined and tested once there is a better-established rationale.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants consisted of 19 female dance students with a mean age of 18.56 ± 0.92 years, who had started dancing at the mean age of 6 ± 4.61 years. The majority of participants (16) were in the second or third term of their 1st year of college, while three were in their 2nd year. Eight participants were of Global Majority backgrounds. Specifically, five dancers identified themselves as Black (P1, P3, P5, P6, and P11), one as Asian (P8), and two as mixed race. Of the mixed-race students, one identified as Latina and White (P4), and one as Pakistani and White (P19). The remaining 11 participants were White (P2, P7, P9, P10, and P12 – 18).¹ The recruitment of a higher number of White than Global Majority students was unplanned and unexpected, but it was important to include the views of all students who expressed a desire to take part.

¹ ID numbers are given as readers may wish to refer to participants' ethnic backgrounds to inform interpretation of quotes and analyses in the Results and Discussion.

Participants were recruited via email callouts, with dedicated day and evening time slots to which they could sign up over a series of weeks. Due to the students' busy schedules, a total of nine focus groups were required to reach theoretical saturation (the point at which data serves to confirm rather than generate new findings).²⁸ In two of these instances, despite several students having signed up for the time slots, only one student attended and thus took part in an interview rather than a focus group. As it was challenging to schedule focus groups around the students' timetables, these were not rescheduled as the students themselves were comfortable being interviewed individually.

It is also worth noting that the focus groups typically comprised students with a range of ethnic backgrounds. While it is possible that some Global Majority students felt uncomfortable discussing issues related to race with their White peers, most Global Majority students shared their experiences in depth and at length, suggesting that they felt comfortable expressing at least some of their lived experiences among the group. Moreover, while the decision to conduct mixed focus groups was largely predetermined by scheduling, it was in line with the contact hypothesis, which suggests that prejudice and bias are best reduced when mixed groups work collaboratively toward a shared goal.²⁹⁻³¹ Indeed, the benefits of this approach were apparent during the focus groups – some of the White students, who may have grown up with a post-racial narrative about the United Kingdom, were visibly and audibly shocked at times by the experiences of their Global Majority peers. Equally, it was hoped that the Global Majority students felt a sense of support and solidarity when hearing their White peers talk with such passion about their desire to take action and help create positive change.

2.2. Procedure

The study was approved by a Higher Education ethics committee. Once interested participants signed informed consent forms, focus groups were arranged using a secure online video conferencing platform with end-to-end data encryption. A maximum of six participants per focus group were invited to ensure that the group was manageable and that all participants would have ample opportunity to speak.²⁸

An interview guide was created for the focus groups by the first author and reviewed and amended by the second and third authors. The interview guide was designed to address both gaps in existing literature and the RED survey data and to expand on key survey findings.²² Specifically, questions were designed to uncover detailed examples of the types of discrimination that formed some of the subscales

of the discrimination questionnaire (i.e., discrimination at work/college, exclusion/rejection, and stigmatization/devaluation), as well as to expand on some of the responses to open-ended survey questions (e.g., concerns about casting decisions being based on ethnicity). The guide was structured into three sections: (i) introductory questions designed to help participants feel comfortable and to build rapport (e.g., “Tell me what you most enjoy about dance,” “How did you decide which college to attend?”), (ii) questions about the general college experience which began to implicitly address themes relating to racial equity (e.g., “Can you describe whether you feel part of the community at college?”), and (iii) questions explicitly addressing racism, equity, and representation (e.g., “Have you ever felt that you have been treated unfairly in your training because of your ethnicity? If so, what happened? Can you describe how this made you feel?”). This section also included any concerns or challenges the students expected to face in the dance industry after they graduated.

At the beginning of each focus group, the first author explained the process of the group, offered assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, and encouraged students to ask questions where necessary. The first author explained that the focus group was a safe space, free of judgment, where students could be honest about their experiences without concern for right or wrong answers. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw at any time and could abstain from answering any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. While the interview guide was largely adhered to, probe questions were adopted for further clarification and elaboration where required.²⁸ Focus groups and interviews lasted between approximately 22 min (for an individual interview) and 90 min (for a focus group). These were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Analysis

The first author read the transcripts several times to ensure familiarity with the data and begin identifying nascent themes. Thematic analysis was adopted by identifying and describing themes in the data without abstracting them into theory.³² This approach was the most appropriate for inductively generating new understanding in this under-researched area. The first author coded transcripts by identifying relevant meaning units and placing them into categories. The transcription and initial coding were conducted simultaneously as data collection progressed, meaning units could be categorized in an ongoing manner, and new categories could be defined where needed.²⁸ Once all focus groups and interviews had been conducted, the categories were organized into hierarchies representing higher and lower-order themes. The draft of

the final hierarchy was then shared with the second and third authors as part of a peer debriefing process to assess agreement with the themes and interpretations of the data.³³ The final version of the hierarchy was agreed on by all authors and is presented in [Figure 1](#). The results are described and interpreted alongside participant quotes and existing literature to centralize the voice of the participants and contextualize the findings, as per the recommendations of critical race theory.^{23,24}

2.4. Researcher positionality

This study was conducted by two White British females (IA and LG) and one mixed-race female with Jamaican and White British heritage (SG). The first author conducted the focus groups and the preliminary data analysis. There are many potential problems with a White researcher leading a project about race, including misinterpreting participants' meanings, altering their messages, and reinforcing Western ideologies and practices.³⁴ However, it has been suggested that any researcher can conduct any research; they do not have to be of the same race or culture as the participants.^{24,35} This is partly because race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage are not the only characteristics that define people, and there are other points of connection that a researcher might have with participants, such as experience of dance training and knowledge of the dance industry. Moreover, the first author has mixed-race children with her British Asian husband, suggesting that she occupies neither fully an “insider” nor an “outsider” position (if this was even possible³⁵). Indeed, notions of insider and outsider positions have been disputed in recent years, with some authors arguing that such binary definitions can result in overfamiliarity, whereby researchers make assumptions or miss important themes based on their own experiences.^{24,35} On the other hand, they run the risk of assuming homogeneity of a particular racial or ethnic group when, in fact, it is likely that there is significant heterogeneity within that group.³⁶

Nevertheless, power imbalances may still be present within the researcher-participant interaction. Therefore, steps were taken to reduce these wherever possible. These steps included: (i) webinars and other communication (e.g., social media videos) to enable students to have some familiarity with the first author before data collection, (ii) rapport-building by being informal and friendly during all interactions, and (iii) ensuring that the second and third authors reviewed the interview guide and analysis as a form of peer debriefing.³³ Furthermore, the first author engaged in a continual process of reflexivity both during the research process and retrospectively.^{24,37} Being invited to work with the TIRED Movement instinctively facilitated this process, prompting the first author to reflect on her identity as a White female, both in her personal life and

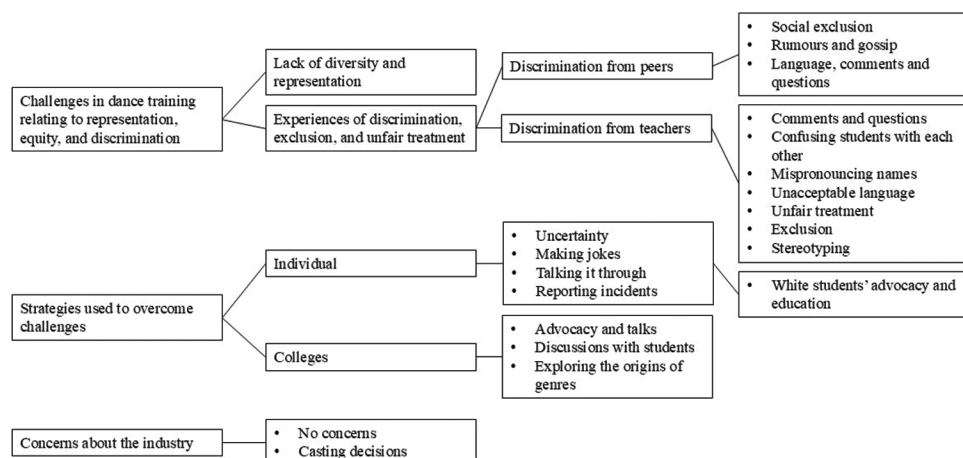


Figure 1. Summary of the key themes from the focus group and interview analyses

in relation to the project and existing research literature. These reflections shaped the types of questions that were asked during focus groups and interviews, the manner in which they were posed, and the approach taken to analyze the responses.

The findings were analyzed in context throughout the research process. Contextualizing findings is important in any study, particularly in studies of race, because the centering of participant voices is key in providing different narratives to those that have been told in the past.²³ The aim of both this paper and the larger project is to contextualize knowledge, which then forms the background for the participants' voices to emerge from the research, rather than researchers' voices or opinions being privileged.²⁴

Ultimately, the extent to which students felt completely comfortable being honest with the first author during the focus groups and interviews cannot be fully determined, nor can the influence of the researchers' racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds be completely minimized during data collection and analysis. However, the participants were eager to share their experiences, and their voices have been honored and prioritized throughout the research process.

3. Results and discussion

For brevity, the participants' responses to the introductory questions are not reported here as they primarily served the purpose of building rapport and establishing common ground within the group. However, it is noteworthy that, when discussing their college application experiences, three participants highlighted the significance of factors related to representation and inclusion. Two students reported that their college's research relationship with the TIRED Movement was an influential factor, as one White

student explained, "The involvement that (college) started to have with TIRED was one of the main reasons why I wanted to audition with them" (P2). A Global Majority participant mentioned that issues relating to diversity were discussed during the interview, "They asked me what my goals were, and I talked about representation for Asian people in musical theater, and we had, like, a nice little chat about that which was really good to see that they, like, saw my vision" (P8). These quotes suggest that representation is at least somewhat important to Global Majority and White students alike when making decisions about their prospective training environment. They serve as a reminder that there is great value in representation and equity for all members of educational institutions, not just those from Global Majority backgrounds.¹⁰

The findings reported in this section focus specifically on the experiences and impacts of the lack of racial equity. A visual summary of the key themes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews is presented in Figure 1. Three key higher-order themes were identified: (i) challenges in dance training relating to representation, equity, and discrimination, (ii) strategies used to overcome challenges, and (iii) concerns about the future.

3.1. Challenges in dance training relating to representation, equity, and discrimination

Participants were asked about the challenges they faced in their dance training relating specifically to lack of representation, equity, and experiences of discrimination. The lower-order themes which emerged from these questions are discussed below.

3.1.1. Lack of diversity and representation

A lack of diversity among both staff and students was reported, both before and during college. Few of the Global

Majority students had trained with a Global Majority teacher to “aspire to be” (P5), and the diversity of the student body across the various colleges appeared limited. For some students, this did not prove particularly surprising, “I’m kind of used to it at this point because even back at primary school, I’m used to it not being very diverse, like, in general” (P1). The lack of diversity in dance education, in terms of both students and teachers, has been noted by several authors as an area that needs to be addressed in recruitment policies and procedures.^{1,3,4,14,15,20,38} However, other participants were surprised by the homogeneity of their college peer group, as one White student noted, “I was expecting maybe a bit more diversity” (P12). Marketing materials used during the application process did not always reflect reality, “They can put all that energy out and say, ‘Oh, we’re so big on diversity’ and all of this, but then it doesn’t actually show. And then, me sitting here as a person of color, that makes me feel like I’ve been lied to in a way” (P10). There is a dichotomy in that colleges may employ Global Majority models in images as a marketing strategy to attract more diverse applicants, yet this does not reflect the actual student body.

A small number of Global Majority students were able to identify advantages to the lack of diversity, for example, “I guess it makes you stand out...in some ways, you can use it to your advantage” (P5). Another dancer was able to use her experience as a motivating factor to be a role model to others, “When I go back home and teach, it makes me so happy that there’s a little girl that looks like me, and she’s doing dance, and I think, ‘you know what, I want to make that difference’” (P19). However, the majority of participants perceived the lack of diversity to be negative and found it difficult to manage. One student explained, “I come from quite a multi-cultural area...so it took me a while to adjust” (P6). Negative effects on Global Majority participants’ self-confidence were reported, for example, “...even though I was in a room full of people, I felt, like, very isolated and alone and to the point where it just translated into my dancing. I just couldn’t go full out, I couldn’t perform. I was holding back all the time” (P1). Belonging to an underrepresented group can limit students’ opportunities to explore their ethnic identity, which, in turn, can undermine their self-confidence and self-esteem.³⁹ Global Majority students often described feeling as though they stood out in class and were unable to “hide” when they made mistakes or were experiencing negative emotions:

“Sometimes, if I’m not feeling my best in the lesson, if something goes wrong or if I make a mistake, I know that whoever’s teaching has seen it because I stand out, so I take criticism quite hard because I know it is obvious if people are seeing it. And I don’t think the (White) girls

in my class recognize that because they haven’t had that experience (P10)”.

This sense of always being noticed may explain the RED survey finding that experiences of discrimination were associated with lower competence perceptions.²² It also highlights the extra scrutiny that the Global Majority students face in learning environments compared to their White peers, which Patton described as “hyper-visibility.”^{5(p165)} This additional scrutiny or attention appears to have detrimental effects on students’ self-perceptions and beliefs about their abilities, especially when they felt they were underperforming.

Effects on body image were also reported as an outcome of the lack of diversity and subsequent feeling of standing out. Factors such as phenotypic hue, height, hair texture, and body hair were cited as examples of visual difference in a majority-White group. For example, a mixed-race student with Pakistani heritage explained, “If my peers were unaware of the hair on my arms, they’d be like ‘ooh’ pointing it out, going, ‘oh why you got that?’ Things like that have built up over time that have kind of affected the way that I view myself in a leotard or in shorts” (P19). While dissatisfaction with body image is common in dance,^{40,41} the present study suggests that there are particular connections between body image, aesthetics, and race. Authors have noted how Western dance training idealizes the slim White body. While body ideals exist for other racial and ethnic groups, these are typically neither discussed nor upheld as aesthetic preferences in dance.^{7,16,21} Dance education still has significant work to do in promoting diverse body types and characteristics to ensure all dancers in the studio feel comfortable and confident.

Unsurprisingly, all participants desired greater diversity in both the student and staff body. For example, a White student commented that having more diverse staff would “ultimately make [college] a more diverse place because people would feel safer to study there” (P18). However, one student noted that attempts to increase recruitment of Global Majority students would require a greater understanding of different cultures and cultural values that influence educational choices, “It’s not very well accepted to be a creative person when you’re someone of an Asian background. You’re expected to be a doctor, or you’re expected to be a lawyer” (P19). Although little has been written about conflicting cultural values in dance, one study documented the case of a Sikh hip-hop dancer who gained parental support for his dancing due to shared values around work ethic rather than his father valuing dance itself.⁴² Taken together, this suggests that cultural understanding and sensitivity are required when recruiting and training students from diverse backgrounds.

3.1.2. Experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and unfair treatment

Before exploring examples of discrimination, it is important to note that most of the students could recount numerous positive experiences within their dance training in general, including supportive relationships with peers and teachers. Furthermore, one Global Majority student (P8) and two White students (P12 and P13) had not experienced or witnessed any form of exclusion, unfair treatment, or discrimination at college. While two Global Majority participants (P5 and P6) initially did not report experiencing discrimination, on further discussion, they recalled specific examples of differential treatment, such as stereotyping, or commented that they lacked role models at college. At times, these were not reported immediately during the focus groups due to uncertainty about what is considered discrimination when individuals are faced with subtle forms of it.^{43,44} It appears that Global Majority students may experience positive relationships with peers and teachers while simultaneously facing infrequent microaggressions from those same peers and teachers, which may be unintentional. As such, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training must focus not only on the explicit racist behaviors of a small number of perpetrators (as was the case in the current study) but also on the biases inherent in educational systems and structures which give rise to more subtle and even unintentional forms of prejudice and discrimination. These nuances provide important context for the findings reported below.

(a) Discrimination from peers

Most of the Global Majority participants had made friends and felt a sense of belonging within their college community, for example: “I haven’t really had any trouble making friends, or I haven’t felt left out, luckily. I do get along quite well with my group” (P6). However, other Global Majority students struggled to form friendships, “It’s just finding someone to hang out with in between classes, or, like, after classes...most times I’ll be by myself because I just can’t find anyone” (P1). In some instances, such challenges with establishing friendships were the result of exclusion from peers, “The first term, I literally had no one, and I was just like that for a very long time. It just made me feel very isolated and very out of place, and even in a class where they might be doing exercises across the floor, I would always have no one to go with because everyone would be avoiding me, and I was unsure kind of why” (P1).

This student went on to discuss explicit experiences of exclusion during group work, saying, “When we’re working with each other, it’s kind of hard when the students aren’t really listening to anything I’m saying. They’re just straight

up ignoring me, just forgetting that I’m there” (P1). Another Global Majority student enrolled at a different college commented, “It’s very disappointing being in such a lovely place, but there’s just so many ignorant people. It’s really hard” (P10). These students reported feeling hurt, awkward, and embarrassed and had even considered changing to a different course because of such experiences. Experiences of discrimination were negatively correlated with satisfaction with social relationships in the previous RED study.²² At the same time, mainstream education literature has established associations between social exclusion, loneliness, social anxiety, and lower social competence.^{45,46} These effects appear to be magnified in environments with limited diversity, such as the dance colleges included in this study. Given that social belonging is a predictor of educational outcomes in mainstream settings,⁴⁷ dance colleges should strive to improve relationships between students and enhance inclusion. Doing so could not only benefit the wellbeing of Global Majority students but also enhance their vocational attainment.

Even where Global Majority students felt part of their college community, they still experienced other forms of discrimination from peers, with rumors and gossip being frequently reported. For example, gossip about students wearing skin tone-matching tights rather than pink ones or rumors about casting, whereby some White students (not those who took part in the current study) had suggested that Global Majority students were cast in competitive roles due to their ethnicity rather than their talent. This was hurtful and caused self-doubt among students who were the target of such rumors, “I felt really invalidated, that I’d worked so hard this whole year, and then went through a really difficult audition process, and made it through, to be told it’s only because you look different, like, it’s nothing to do with your dance abilities” (P4). Microaggressions such as rumors and gossip invalidate Global Majority bodies, technical and creative skills, and self-perceptions.⁷ Furthermore, the notion of casting decisions being made due to “diversity quotas” is reminiscent of what McCarthy-Brown¹⁸ referred to as “color casting,” whereby Global Majority dancers were often cast in roles due to the color of their skin rather than their ability.^{18(p1)} However, as opposed to the lighter-skinned dancers gaining more high-profile roles in McCarthy-Brown’s study,¹⁸ the students were aware that casting could potentially be performative to indicate to the outside world that the colleges were inclusive. This appears to be a new theme in the dance research literature and is worthy of further exploration.

Another example of discrimination from peers was related to language use, comments, and questions that White students posed to their Global Majority peers. For

example, a Global Majority student explained that she had not been treated unfairly or discriminated against. Still, there were “Moments of awareness where maybe [White peers] shouldn’t have used those words” (P3). She gave the example of, “When [White] people are, like, tanning and then they’ll be, like, ‘oh I’m like the same color as you now’” (P3). This participant felt unsure how to deal with such comments as she did not perceive them to be overtly racist, yet they made her feel uncomfortable. It is important to discuss these issues among students, as subtle instances of racism can be difficult to identify and, thus, easy to dismiss or ignore.^{43,44} Finally, more serious instances were reported which could not be mistaken for anything other than overt racism, “There’s been a couple of cases of, like, students using the ‘N’ word” (P4). Not only was this hugely problematic, but the teachers’ response was inadequate, which is discussed further in Section 3.2.

Research suggests that limited exposure to diversity can lead to a lack of understanding, stereotyping, and biases among a majority White peer group.⁴⁸ To tackle problematic questions, language, and comments from White peers, the curriculum should be decolonized to provide culturally relevant teaching, which is discussed in more depth below.⁴⁹ Moreover, according to the contact hypothesis,²⁹⁻³¹ cooperation among different racial and ethnic groups reduces prejudice. Collaborative working is key to this and must be facilitated by educational establishments through purposeful activities and assessments that promote greater contact between students from different backgrounds.⁴⁸

(b) Discrimination from teachers

Before exploring this theme in depth, it is important to highlight that some Global Majority participants felt that they received equitable treatment at college, “I don’t think I’ve been treated unfairly personally. I get treated like I’m equal” (P6). Many students also felt supported and cared for by their teachers, “They’re really lovely and friendly teachers...I think they are good at listening to the students and if something is going on, trying to help them through it” (P5). However, through questions and discussions that arose organically during the focus groups, details of various forms of discrimination that students had encountered from staff – from more subtle microaggressions to explicitly racist words or behaviors – began to emerge. In general, these were attributed to a small number of teachers (some of whom were ‘repeat offenders’) rather than being universal across a college’s faculty.

Similar to experiences with White peers, comments and questions from White teachers that were not explicitly racist but caused discomfort were reported, for example, “I had box braids in, and a ballet teacher was like, ‘How do you turn with all that hair on your head?’

...I think it all just comes down to wording your phrases if are you curious and wanting to know, rather than just making statements like that, which just make you feel a bit uncomfortable in front of the whole class” (P3). This is another example of the additional scrutiny Global Majority students face in White-majority classrooms and the need for greater awareness and discussion among staff on the appropriateness of certain questions and statements. Other, more problematic, comments about hair included, “I’ve heard from other people that they’ve had a ballet class with a certain teacher that likes buns very slick and neat, and if there are baby hairs, makes the comment that she will cut them off...I know that this has happened to one White girl, but I also know that this has happened to a mixed-race girl...does that not violate the Halo Code...it discriminates against certain hair” (P4). The Halo Code is a United Kingdom-based campaign that aims to eradicate hair discrimination in schools and workplaces, specifically focusing on the hairstyles and textures of Black individuals.⁵⁰ An ongoing campaign also highlights stories and case studies of race-based hair discrimination, some of which are reflected in Johnson’s point that her Afro-textured hair could not always “do what a White or Asian girl’s hair can”.⁵¹⁽¹⁾

While some students preferred to view such comments as relatively harmless, other incidents were more difficult to dismiss. There were several reports of teachers confusing Global Majority students with each other, for example, “Last year, I was in a group with a girl who supposedly looked like me. A lot of teachers got us mixed up, but we’re just two people of color with curly hair” (P3). Research suggests that people tend to more accurately recognize the faces of members of their own race than those of another race. However, this is not necessarily due to racial attitudes or bias; it is more related to a lack of exposure to people from different racial and cultural backgrounds.⁵² There were numerous accounts of teachers mispronouncing names, “Even now, a term in, there’s teachers still getting my name wrong...They don’t remember my name, but they remember the White girl’s name next to me” (P19). Similarly, a student recalled her college making a real effort to celebrate Diwali, but many of the staff consistently mispronounced the name of the festival, leading her to comment, “If we’re celebrating this, let’s also educate ourselves” (P18). Taken together, these findings highlight the systemic racism that has facilitated a lack of exposure to, and understanding of, different cultures, emphasizing the need for greater cultural education among White staff and students alike.

More serious incidents were reported relating to communication and language where at least two White teachers from the same college used unacceptable language,

"A teacher brought up the "N" word again and did not even realize during the lesson until, like, the week after when someone had a conversation" (P3). As with peers who had used such language, there did not appear to be serious consequences or even learnings from these incidents. Other examples of explicit discrimination included unfair treatment from teachers, exclusion, and stereotyping. Examples of unfair treatment included being singled out in class and treated more harshly than White peers, "I just, like, feel like they're picking on me a lot, or, like, everyone else will make a mistake, but then when I make a mistake it's like, "Oh, why didn't you practice?"...there were other people around me going wrong but [teacher] didn't say anything about them" (P1). This finding reflects the earlier points about the scrutiny Global Majority students face and supports extensive mainstream education literature, which indicates that White teachers' biases and stereotypes lead them to treat students differently based on their ethnicity and culture.⁵³⁻⁵⁶ For example, White teachers are more likely to underestimate the abilities of Black students and discipline them more harshly than White students.^{4,21}

Another Global Majority student was excluded by her teacher during a discussion about casting, during which he said that it was currently difficult to get roles as a White dancer. The student had to alert him to her presence in the studio, "He's been teaching me for 7 weeks; he knows I'm not White, and it was just so dehumanizing to sit there and sort of have to, like, remind someone of my existence in a difficult conversation about race" (P10). This relates to how Patton describes the Black body in dance as being seen and becoming "hyper-visible," but is then ignored and becomes "invisible".^{15(p165)} Global Majority dancers are faced with both the scrutiny that comes with hypervisibility and the lack of consideration or understanding of their perspectives and needs.

Finally, students faced stereotyping in the learning materials that they were given. For example, a Black student reported being given a musical theatre script that was "very stereotypical ghetto...I don't really feel comfortable doing it" (P6), while a White musical theater student recalled a Black friend who had only been given songs that were by or about Black artists by her teacher, "She was like, 'I have no problem singing them but, like, is that all you see me as?'" (P17). Casting, choreographic choices, and costuming can reinforce stereotypes in dance. Students should be given different options in terms of learning materials and roles to enhance their artistic growth and help reduce stereotypes and biases among White students and audience members.^{3,16,51}

As a result of the above incidents, many participants felt that White staff members needed DEI education

and training, as well as greater awareness and sensitivity toward Global Majority students. It is important to note that such training should be conducted long-term because changing attitudes, assumptions, and biases is a lengthy process and cannot be achieved in a one-off session or workshop.^{57,58} Some students felt that their college was not doing enough to support Global Majority students or encourage awareness. There were also concerns that change would be too slow or would not be long-term in nature, "We're only here for 3 years, which in the grand scheme of things doesn't feel like that much time to see change...we're seeing bits of change, but also I don't know if it's true lasting change rather than just something quick" (P4). These comments reflect some of the students' skepticism toward their college's purported commitment to diversity and inclusion, partially due to how incidents had been dealt with in the past.

3.2. Strategies used to overcome challenges

3.2.1. Individual

The need for greater DEI training and education was further highlighted by the fact that some students felt unsure about how to manage challenges related to discrimination and inequity, "I grew up somewhere where I've never really had to notice it, and now I'm noticing it I'm a bit, like, oh well, I don't really know how to handle it" (P3). One student who never discussed her ethnicity in detail before being interviewed for this study said, "I've never really thought about my ethnicity a lot because I've always sort of classed myself as being White because I've always been in a community where no one, especially in the dance world, I've never met anyone who's half-Pakistani in my groups...my mum's White so that's my home life, my whole family are White on my mum's side. I don't really see my dad's side" (P19). Her involvement with the TIRED Movement and the RED project enabled this student to begin identifying and embracing her ethnicity. From the perspective of ethnic identity development, this student appeared to be in the exploration phase, where she was beginning to learn and explore more about her cultural heritage.³⁹ She enjoyed talking about how it intersected with her experiences both in dance training and in her life in general, and she felt that her college encouraged students to accept themselves, "I feel a lot more accepted to embrace the fact that I'm different and that's kind of been a bit of a safety net now...Embrace who you are. Embrace your differences. The teachers have always said you're on your own journey...I've come to accept myself" (P19).

When faced with discrimination, participants mentioned brushing things off or "making a joke out of it" (P4), but sometimes using jokes to highlight an

issue and raise awareness. McCarthy-Brown suggests adopting a protocol to address discriminatory behaviors and language,⁴⁹ which could be formally taught to all students, empowering both the targets of such behaviors and any bystanders to take action.²⁷ There was a universal belief that talking about these issues was helpful. Most participants were able to identify at least one member of staff to whom they could talk or report issues. These were typically group mentors, well-being officers, and teaching staff. As one student explained, “We’ve got one teacher on the well-being team who is our only permanent faculty member that’s of color. So, I feel like if there’s an incident, I would feel very reassured reporting it to her. But then our other two members of the wellbeing team, who are White, are also very educated on race. I’ve had a few very good conversations with them. So I feel like the people that are there do really care” (P10). For this student, knowledge and understanding appeared more important than the ethnicity of staff when it came to seeking support.

Indeed, some attempts to seek support were less successful, often because of a lack of staff with first-hand experience or understanding, “In regards to maybe day-to-day struggles or worries or even the future, I feel like there are staff members that I can speak to about it, but I feel like if they’re specifically in regards to race, then I’ll probably just speak to my friends about it...[teachers] try and reassure me and stuff, which I appreciate, and I’m sure what they’re saying is right but I don’t know, I just feel like they won’t really understand” (P5). This suggests that while students felt supported in regard to their general dance training, they often lacked role models to whom they could relate. Greater diversity would be valuable among both teaching and pastoral members of staff, who may act as role models for marginalized students.^{12,51} When this was lacking, some students sought support outside of college – from Global Majority mentors and teachers from their previous training and friends facing similar challenges. This helped with confidence and self-acceptance; for example, “Just [previous dance teacher] saying that the way you’re feeling, it’s valid, there’s nothing wrong with it” (P1). Given that diverse role models can build motivation, self-efficacy, identity, commitment to education, and aspirations among students,⁵⁹⁻⁶¹ educational environments should consider how they can increase staff diversity through both permanent and temporary contracts.

Furthermore, there were several reports of situations in college remaining unresolved. Students described feeling dismissed, shocked, and disappointed at the lack of action following racist incidents. For example, one participant described having a group meeting with staff to discuss racist language that a White student had used, “We ended

up coming out of that meeting feeling very, very dismissed, a lot of us crying because we got told by teachers that we were angry about the situation because we’re all, like, from different ethnic backgrounds” (P4). Not only did students often feel dismissed and misunderstood but also there often did not appear to be any consequences for the perpetrators; for example, students recounted instances where there were no apparent repercussions for White staff or students who used unacceptable language. While some acknowledged that action might have been taken “behind the scenes,” this was often not made transparent. The lack of apparent response from teachers led Global Majority students to question whether it was worth reporting similar incidents in the future, as there was little evidence of them being dealt with appropriately, “Even if I tell a teacher, will anything ever get done about it?” (P4). Massoa and Fasting⁶² described similar findings in sports, whereby Black athletes hesitated to report racist incidents due to feelings of powerlessness and insecurity as their White coaches were in positions to either accept or dismiss their accounts.⁶² Racist incidents in sports are often minimized or normalized as simple misunderstandings.⁶³ In turn, this can lead Global Majority individuals to view discriminatory behaviors as normative and they may even begin to internalize such beliefs.⁸ Power imbalances within relationships thus serve to fuel racism rather than reduce it.⁶²

Such lack of action appeared to undermine some of the efforts colleges were making to enhance equity and inclusion, and in two instances, had resulted in students deciding not to attend certain classes, “Personally, I’ve not been able to re-enter that space, because my mind just fogs up, because I just think ‘I just can’t deal with you... So disrespectful...I can’t even pull my head round why you’re stood here teaching us’” (P10). As a result, there were numerous impacts to this perceived lack of action, including emotional responses, such as anger and upset, doubts about the authenticity of interactions with staff, and students’ engagement with teaching and learning.

In contrast, many of the White students in this study felt confident that they could report racist incidents and that they would be supported by other staff or senior management, “If anything ever was to happen, like, I know that everyone in the class would call the teacher out because you can feel that comfortable with knowing that all of the other teachers would support you or that, like, the principal would support you” (P18). This could represent an outcome of White privilege whereby White students expect to be listened to and taken seriously due to the existing power structures that prioritize White voices.^{62,64} Ultimately, educational environments must hold dancers

and teachers accountable for discriminatory actions to provide a safe learning experience for Global Majority dancers.¹⁶ They should also provide greater clarity on reporting procedures and more transparency in how racist incidents are managed to assure students that all reports are met with equal levels of concern and action.

(a) White students

White students were invited to participate in this study because tackling racism is a collective effort. Still, collective action cannot be effectively galvanized without learning more about the perspectives and actions of White student allies. The White students participating in the focus groups were passionate about the work of the TIRED Movement, “I’ve grown up in a very White area, like I didn’t really realize all that stuff that was going on. I became quite passionate about everything” (P2). Another White student commented, “No matter who you are, what you do, you should be able to do it without being judged or any restrictions being put on you, and everyone should feel supported and be able to do what they love” (P13).

In terms of their cohort, many White participants felt that their White peers needed to become better educated and aware of issues around representation, equity, and inclusion, “As a White girl, I understand my privileges, and there are two ways you can go about it, you can ignore it, or you can educate yourself” (P11). They noted that some of their White peers became either defensive about or were indifferent to such issues. For example, some of the participants’ White peers had not attended lectures about Black History Month, perceiving them as irrelevant. White individuals in Western contexts do not always recognize that they have an ethnic identity, which can cause indifference toward the experiences of the Global Majority individuals.⁶⁵ The White participants in the present study were shocked and disappointed by the apparent apathy of some of their White peers. They were firm in their belief that educating White students is not the responsibility of Global Majority students, “I know if I were in that place, I would really want my friends to fight for me because it shouldn’t just be the responsibility of the people who are being discriminated against to solve that problem” (P15). Positively, the White students who took part in the focus groups saw themselves as allies and often engaged in bystander actions, such as reporting incidents, seeking assistance, and supporting the targets of racism.²⁷ Other White students could be empowered to act in similar ways by being educated within the colleges, as group efforts tend to be most effective.²⁷ Students should feel empowered to take action, provided that they feel their colleges will support them.

3.2.2. Colleges

Participants identified three key actions that some of the colleges put into place to improve equity and inclusion. First, many of the colleges adopted the Halo Code, advocated for the use of skin tone-matching dancewear, and provided DEI talks or held DEI meetings. Although it was a positive action, the way in which these meetings were delivered may require more sensitivity, as one student noted, “I did feel quite uncomfortable in those meetings, like the only Black student there” (P6). One college had reinstated a People of Color society, while another college tried to group Global Majority students together to reduce feelings of isolation. However, one participant stated, “I don’t really know how to feel about that because... [we] are completely different ethnicities” (P4). Educators must be cautioned against assuming the homogeneity of Global Majority individuals;³⁵ it is prudent to consult with students themselves when designing actions and strategies to enhance representation and equity. For example, students should be involved when creating definitions of terms such as diversity and inclusion and identify shared goals around them.⁴⁸

Although there was some skepticism from students about the extent to which colleges and/or staff were willing and able to change, at least some staff had begun to talk to the student body, “I feel like teachers have the intention to want to change...the Head of Musical Theater came up to me...asking how can we make the curriculum more diverse, and it was really good to hear that” (P4). Building on the above point, students should be involved not only in the development of anti-racist policies but also in curriculum development.¹⁹ A culturally relevant, student-centered curriculum will reflect the student body, thereby giving voice to the experiences of Global Majority students.^{8,20,49}

The core technical training offered by the colleges was typically ballet, tap, jazz, and contemporary dance. A final strategy that White students, in particular, appeared to appreciate was when technique teachers explained and discussed the origins of different dance genres, such as jazz. Not only did this result in gaining “even bigger respect for the styles, like, knowing where they’ve come from and how they developed” (P13) but it also “encourages classmates to discuss between one another, have a conversation, which is so important” (P16). Such discussions are likely to be most effective when they occur during technique classes, as they allow for a deeper understanding of a genre that goes beyond mimicking an aesthetic. This is particularly important for genres with a strong history of oral rather than written transmission.⁶⁶ Technique classes can become powerful forums for discussions of historical

and contemporary racism and the ways in which different histories co-exist.^{67,68} These could then be reinforced during lectures focused on dance history or analysis, provided supporting materials accurately capture the contributions of the Global Majority dance artists in the development of various technical genres and choreographic styles.^{1,8} Most of the colleges interrogated dance history from critical perspectives, which helped the students to broaden their understanding of dance beyond Eurocentric practices.

However, all participants recognized the need for greater diversity in the curriculum (often termed decolonizing the curriculum). One student explained, “One of the first things that we’ve had to go and research is ballet choreographers, classical ballet choreographers. Not current ones that are of color – classical ones, old White men from the 1800s” (P19). Much has been written about the need to decolonize the curriculum in Western dance education, which requires the recognition and incorporation of multiple aesthetic codes, value systems, and cultural capital, where one form or system is not placed hierarchically above others, and where learning materials are suitably representative of a diverse student body.^{7,8,68} Decolonizing the curriculum requires significant investments of time to evaluate each area of a curriculum comprehensively, the way it is taught, how it is assessed, and which kinds of resources are used to support it. Although not easy, the results of this study indicate that it is essential to create a more inclusive educational environment.

3.3. Concerns about the dance industry

A final theme discussed during the interviews was the extent to which Global Majority students were concerned about facing racism or discrimination once they graduated and entered the dance profession. Some participants were not particularly worried as they believed the industry would be more diverse than their college setting: “When I go to some classes outside of here... there are so many different types of people going to different classes, and it’s just such a nice atmosphere and nice environment that I’m not really worried about it outside of college” (P1). There was also a perception from some participants that it would be easier to report discriminatory incidents within professional working environments, “As of now, it’s all very much unprofessional in terms of friendship bonds. It’s sort of, like, ‘Oh, I can’t say this because she’s my friend’ or that kind of thing, but when it gets to a higher level, I know I can be, like, ‘That’s not on, I’m not having that,’ and then just sort of get it dealt with” (P10). The same student also expressed, “At that point, I’ll be as secure in myself as possible to be able to not take things from other people in terms of, like, discrimination... because I’m very sure of myself now, so in the future, I know I’ll be even more equipped to

deal with those sorts of situations” (P10). Although it is positive that this student was so confident about the future, previous literature indicates that racism continues to be a problem in professional dance environments.^{15,18} She was also in the minority with such expectations, as detailed below. Another student was strategically planning to apply for “Workplaces that would probably make my life easier when it comes to those situations. Like, I’d like to be in *Lion King*, *Hamilton*, which is a very diverse sort of place” (P3). Within other shows, however, there was recognition that “There’s more competition because if they do cast a Black person, it’s usually only one, so I feel like there’s a lot more competition there” (P6).

Following this, the majority of participants were worried about the future. Other than competition for roles, there were also concerns about being pigeonholed or stereotyped when it came to casting, “I do not just want to be boxed into being a Latina character” (P4). This reflects the concerns of students both in the RED survey²² and those of other authors.^{3,15,16,51} Furthermore, Global Majority participants expressed multiple concerns about being cast because of their ethnicity rather than their talent, “My fear is that I only get jobs just because of my skin color...I just get, like, a job because I am brown and they needed someone to be brown because it’s performative casting” (P8). Students also felt that their years of hard work and training might be overlooked, “I think that is my fear, like, just getting cast because they need to fill a quota and not because of my actual talent” (P6). The notion of performative casting had an impact on the students’ confidence in both their abilities and their prospects for gaining employment. It led to discussions about representation and so-called “diversity quotas.” Some concerns were that increased representation on stage and film was a trend and that it might not last. There were questions about why casting decisions were made and why greater representation was happening, “I’ve noticed different castings of either dance shows or musicals, and it’s like, are they just too desperate to, like, show representation, is it like a performative thing, or is it, like, genuine?” (P4). This theme was discussed at length during the focus groups and was also reported in the online survey;²² however, it has received surprisingly little attention in the dance research literature to date. Given the depth of the students’ concerns, it certainly warrants more exploration in the future.

Furthermore, the Global Majority students’ concerns regarding performative casting were mirrored in the RED online survey in statements from some White students who believed that greater diversity on stage had significantly reduced their chances of being cast in future professional productions.²² Unfortunately, this falsehood had been perpetuated in some instances by teachers, “We’ve got a

teacher who's...in the industry right now...she basically stood in front of everyone and said the reason she didn't get a role is because she didn't tick these boxes because she's White and straight...She's instigating that into our learning, which I thought was completely inappropriate...it really, really upset me to the point where I'm still not going to her lesson yet" (P11). Participants were concerned that their White peers had begun to internalize such messages. However, they were quick to point out that, "Either way they're [White dancers] still going to get [roles], or they still have a strong chance of getting things, because I feel like a lot of the time, unless it's, like, a completely Black story, then it's only going to be a handful of non-White people that get picked to play certain roles" (P5). Indeed, students generally felt that it would still be more challenging for dancers of the Global Majority to secure roles than their White peers. Open and honest discussions about these issues would be valuable to ensure that White teachers and students avoid perpetuating myths regarding "over-representation."²²

Consequently, there was a desire for greater representation on stage as, ultimately, "It is a reflective of real life" (P3). Indeed, as one student commented, "I've literally never heard so many people talking about, like, 'Oh, they're just so desperate to make representation in everything,' and you think, 'Why are you angry about representation?'" (P4) One Global Majority student summarized her feelings about these issues, "I've spent my whole life not realizing my place on stage, and now I can visually see it in the Black representation...I'm just, like, wait, I'm having my moment" (P3). The challenge for the dance industry is to ensure that rather than being a moment, greater representation becomes an enduring feature of both training and the profession.

4. Conclusion

Although there were many reports of positive experiences in dance training, such as supportive peer and teacher relationships, the participants in this study also gave numerous examples of discrimination and racial inequity. These ranged from subtle microaggressions to overt use of unacceptable language. Some instances of racist behaviors were more general (e.g., mispronouncing names and social exclusion), while others were specific to dance (e.g., stereotyping and concerns about casting). Interestingly, while many students felt well-supported in relation to their technical training, they were often faced with microaggressions from teachers and peers who lacked awareness and education. Even when such behaviors are unintentional, this study demonstrates the impacts they can have on Global Majority students.

Impacts of discrimination on participants' psychological wellbeing included emotional hurt, lower self-confidence, and body image, feelings of invalidation, and insufficient trust or comfort in the environment to report racist incidents. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first time that the collective experiences of dancers in training have been analyzed and documented to enhance understanding of racism in dance, as well as the strategies that individuals (Global Majority and White) and colleges put in place to manage discrimination and enhance inclusion.

This study offers numerous potential practical applications. First, educational environments in dance should strive to enhance the diversity of both the staff and student body to help students feel safer in their settings and ensure they have role models that both inspire and support them. This may involve alterations to audition and recruitment processes, such as expanding the range of dance genres included in auditions, as well as training in unconscious bias for existing staff involved in recruitment decisions. Increased representation should also be reflected in the curriculum to provide both "mirrors" for Global Majority students and "windows" to alternative perspectives for White students.^{20,49} By doing so, it will enable Global Majority students to see themselves in the curriculum while broadening the perspectives and understanding of White students. Teachers should reflect on their language and communication when interacting with students, as well as how they group students for class and assessment activities to encourage collaboration and cooperation among cohorts.¹⁹ Educational environments and staff must be instrumental in facilitating relationships across racial and cultural differences⁴⁸ while encouraging White students to engage in bystander actions.²⁷ For instance, all students could be educated about different forms of discrimination and offered protocols for managing and reporting racist incidents.⁴⁹ Global Majority students, in particular, should be empowered to report discriminatory incidents by ensuring that they are taken seriously and addressed as transparently as possible.⁶²

Moving forward, the final phase of the RED project will involve triangulation of the findings from the focus groups and the online survey.²² Key themes will then inform the creation of a framework designed to enhance equity and inclusion in dance training. Students and staff from the colleges will be consulted throughout the development of the framework to ensure that it is both representative of their needs and capable of meeting them. The colleges will pilot the framework for 6 months, and its efficacy will be evaluated through surveys and focus groups collected from both staff and students. Subsequently, the framework will be refined based on the feedback and observations from the pilot phase. In this way, the legacy of the RED

project will continue. In the meantime, researchers are strongly encouraged to conduct projects in this important but under-researched area in dance. Given the students' concerns about casting, diversity, and representation on stage, researchers should investigate discrimination and its impacts in the profession as well as in educational environments. The dance industry can only benefit from greater representation and inclusion, and research has a key role to play in driving this change.

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Author contributions

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Data curation: Imogen J. Aujla

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bedfordshire (March 22, 2023). Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent to publish this article was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Availability of data

The raw data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy concerns: participants have not given consent for the data to be shared publicly.

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ARTICLE

Traditional ritual musicking as a medium for communicating ideals for social cohesion among the Zezuru communities of Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The paper interrogates how musicking and other ritual activities in traditional ceremonies help mitigate social disparities and discontent among the Zezuru people of Zimbabwe. The paper presents views and constructions on how these ceremonies and their associated musical practices act as sources of social cohesion and contribute to the sustainability of a society's hegemony and social fabric. The discussion is grounded in field notes collected from culture bearers in Chikoma district through a qualitative ethnographic study of performances during the Zezuru traditional ceremonies, such as the ritual for cleansing the deceased's spirit (*kurova guva*), finger millet threshing event (*jakwara*), and the rain-making ceremony (*mukwerera*). Findings indicated that musicking, as an integral part of these rituals, plays a crucial role in instilling the spirit of oneness (*unhu/ubuntu*) among community members. Elements such as dance (*kutamba*), singing (*kuimba*), ululating (*kupururudza*), spirit possession (*kusvikirwa*), and instrument playing (*kuridza*) form a sonic nexus in which participants engage collectively, reinforcing social harmony beyond the ceremonial context. The involvement in musicking during these ceremonies also helps resolve social and political tensions within the community. Community leaders, including spirit mediums, kraal heads, and chiefs, act as gatekeepers for these traditional ceremonies and strive profusely to uphold their significance by enforcing norms, values, and continued reverence for the ceremonies. However, these efforts face challenges from external influences such as Christianity, migration, urbanization, and modern technology, which threaten the continuity of these cultural practices.

Keywords: Traditional ceremonies; Social cohesion; Musicking; Communication; *Mukwerera*; *Jakwara*; *Kurovaguva*

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1. Introduction

Research in anthropology has revealed that humans are inherently social animals who share common socio-economic and political values, making it impossible for them to live in isolation. Unlike other animals, humans exhibit a homogenous nature. Their social nature is evident in various aspects, such as living in groups, working collaboratively, adhering to shared beliefs and practices, using a common language for communication, residing in the same locality, engaging in burial rites, and participating in musical activities. Communities function as cohesive units in which individuals share cultural materials and values. A community encompasses members who inhabit

the same geographical environment and share common norms, ethos, and values. The perspective aligns with Gyekye,¹ who asserts that despite Africa's cultural diversity, threads of underlying affinity do run through the beliefs, customs, values system, and social institutions of various African societies.

Multiple communities combine to form a society. Kaemmer² classifies societies into two categories: stratified and non-stratified. Non-stratified societies include egalitarian and rank-based structures, while stratified societies involve both non-literate and literate communities. The defining characteristic that distinguishes one society from another lies in the social relations among its members. Although the societies identified by Kaemmer² exhibit significant differences, the primary commonality is the shared values that bind their members together, fostering group solidarity and social cohesion. These elements are reinforced through various communal activities, with musicking and ritual enactment serving as particularly effective mechanisms for maintaining social bonds.

This article explores how performance aspects of traditional music and dance can act as sources of social cohesion within the Zezuru cosmology. Social cohesion is defined by Moustakes³ as collective attributes and behaviors characterized by positive social relations, a sense of identification or belonging, and an orientation toward the common good. The concept encompasses elements such as belonging, well-being, tolerance, social participation, and equal opportunities, as well as behaviors such as shared values, common experiences, civic participation, mutual help, trust in others, social networks, social order, acceptance of diversity, well-being, equality, and social mobility.³

The concept of social cohesion is summarized in a model presented in [Figure 1](#), which is adapted from Langer *et al.*⁴

Although members of a society may share common values, differences, and disparities often arise due to different perceptions and social or political conflicts. As a result, every society can be regarded as being unstable and vulnerable to disintegration due to misunderstandings, power dynamics, and political, economic, and social differences. This paper demonstrates how socioeconomic and political cohesion can be fostered by making use of Shona traditional music, performed during traditional ceremonies.

The study presents empirical data collected through an ethnographic investigation of Zezuru ritual performances. Field notes collected through participant observations during Zezuru traditional cleansing ceremony (*kurovaguva*),

communal work (*jakwara*), and rain-making ceremony (*mukwerera*) form the basis of this analysis. The findings indicate that musical elements such as dance, singing, ululation, spirit possession, and instrumental performance play a crucial role in unifying communities.⁵ In addition, power structures – including spirit mediums, chiefs, herdsman kraal heads, and assist – contribute to mitigating socio-economic and political differences within the Shona communities.

The wider cultural context in which the *mukwerera*, *jakwara*, and *kurovaguva* ceremonies – attended by the author – operate is informed by the ontology of *unhu/ubuntu*, which stipulates that members of a society should be guided by principles of respect, dignity, collective effort, obedience, humility, solidarity, care, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism. The term *unhu*, meaning one's character, is a fundamental attribute of the Zezuru ontology of life known as *chivahu*, which refers to the traditional spiritual and cultural practices of Zezuru. The word *unhu* is derived from *chivanhu* or *munhu*. According to one of the interviewed participants, “*Unhu hwakanaka hwemunhu hunobva muchivanhu chake*,” which translates to: “The good character of a person is drawn from their cultural practices.” In essence, *unhu/ubuntu* is a Bantu philosophy that postulates that an individual's relationship with others and the broader community is shaped by their identity in relation to others.⁶ Kamwangamalu⁷ opines that *ubuntu/unhu* is rooted in collective solidarity, wherein individuals are perceived not as independent entities but as fundamentally interdependent. Both Zezuru traditional ceremonies and musicking are fundamental in fostering *unhu* among the Zezuru people.

Traditional music performances transcend ritual contexts and engage individuals across all age groups. The cohesion generated during music performances often acts as a source of empowerment for both the young and the old. Consequently, the experiences during traditional ceremonies inculcate the spirit of *unhu/ubuntu*, with many songs reinforcing this philosophy. These experiences facilitate the transmission of life principles that endure beyond the immediate ritual enactment.

1.1. Background

The Zezuru is a sub-group of the Shona people, primarily inhabiting the Mashonaland East, Mashonaland Central, and Harare provinces of Zimbabwe.⁸ They are agrarian, dedicating much of their time to farming crops such as maize (*chibage*), finger millet (*zviyo*), groundnuts (*nzungu*), round nuts (*nyimo*), and tobacco (*fodya*). They also raise livestock, including cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, and chickens. Like other Shona communities, the

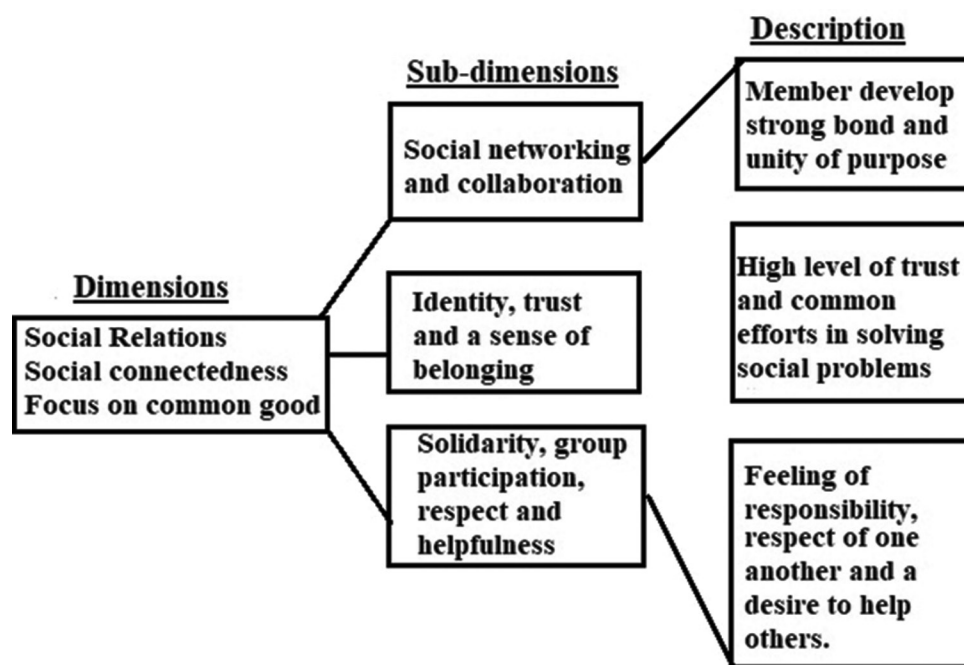


Figure 1. Social cohesion model proposed by Langer *et al.* in 2017

Zezuru adhere to a set of shared values rooted in the African ontology of *unhu*, a philosophy similar to *ubuntu* in South Africa, which emphasizes unity, communalism, love, cooperation, and social cohesion among members of society.

A fundamental principle of *unhu* in the Zezuru ontology of life, according to Maitire⁴, is the belief that everything they do is guided by spiritual forces generated in the spiritual realm (*nyikadzimu*). This perspective is grounded in the conviction that the Zezuru maintain a profound relationship with their ancestors, who influence religious and social practices. These ancestors serve as intermediaries between the living and the supreme ancestral being, commonly referred to as *Mwari* (He who is), *Samasimba* (He who vests power), *Musiki* (The Creator), *Baba* (Father), and *Nyadenga* (Owner of the Universe), with *Mwari* being the most widely used designation. The Zezuru spiritual philosophy is hierarchical, incorporating a dual system based on paternal and maternal lineage. This hierarchy extends from the individual to the Supreme Being through a structured network of ancestral and territorial spirits. Deep respect for this spiritual order is central to Zezuru beliefs, as they regard it as instrumental in shaping their successes or failures.

To maintain the relationship between the living and *Mwari*, the Shona hold some ritualistic traditional institutions (*mapira*), often conducted seasonally. Examples of these religious institutions include *kurovaguva*,

mukwerera, and *doro renyota*. Apart from these religious institutions, the Shona also have secular or economic institutions. One notable institution is *jakwara*, a communal labor system designed to assist in the threshing of finger millet (*zviyo*). Whether religious, secular, or work-related, Shona traditional institutions share a common feature – music. Music permeates almost all the gatherings. More importantly, the interactions and participation during these events, as well as the music performed, during these institutions contribute significantly to fostering unity among community members.

As social beings, members of the Shona society inevitably experience misunderstandings arising from socio-economic or political imbalances. A key objective of this study is to explore the mechanisms that enable the Zezuru to maintain harmony and solidarity. The insights presented in this article draw from both the author's lived experiences as a Zezuru and the findings of an ethnographic study conducted among fellow Zezuru people. Ethnomusicology emphasizes the study of traditional music within its cultural context, and accordingly, the discussion in this article focuses on three key Zezuru institutions: *kurovaguva*, *mukwerera*, and *jakwara*.

2. Methodology

To gather information on Zezuru traditional music performed during cultural institutions and its role in fostering socio-economic cohesion, the author carried

out an ethnographic field study among the culture bearers from Chikomba, Mashonaland East, Zimbabwe. Ethnomusicological studies favor the use of ethnographic methods, a qualitative research approach that involves immersive engagement within a targeted community to observe their behavior and interactions.⁵

Fifteen cultural bearers from Chikomba District, Mashonaland East Province, Zimbabwe were selected purposively. These individuals aged between 70 and 92 years were elders with extensive knowledge of Zezuru traditions. Data concerning the role of three cultural institutions – *mukwerera*, *jakwara*, and *kurovaguva* – were collected through face-to-face interviews with these culture bearers. In addition, the author employed participant observation⁹, documenting field notes during *kurova guva* and *jakwara*. Participant observation is a qualitative research method in which the researcher immerses themselves in the community, not only observing phenomena but also actively participating in the activities to gain deeper insights.¹⁰

As a participant observer, the author took part in the threshing of finger millet, singing, and playing *mbira* during *kurova guva*, while simultaneously observing serendipitous events, such as actions and communication processes.

2.1. Theoretical framework

Human beings are inherently social animals who, by their gregarious nature, live, and work together. They cannot live in isolation but instead form social groups in which interpersonal relationships are fundamental. Mele¹¹ reiterated Aristotle's philosophical statement that humans are social animals who thrive the best in the company of their significant others and an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. These philosophical premises form the theoretical foundation of this study.

A specific focus is placed on the theory of social cohesion, a broad concept that describes how social relationships, shared values, and behaviors contribute to a group's ability to function harmoniously. This theory was introduced in the late nineteenth century by Fonseca *et al.*¹² and has gained prominence in disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and ethnomusicology, emphasizing group solidarity and inclusivity. Maxwell¹³, as cited by Fonseca *et al.*,¹² defines social cohesion as “the building of shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges,

and that they are members of the same community.” The theory of social cohesion is instrumental in unpacking the ultimate outcomes of ritual enactments among the Zezuru, particularly in relation to their social ties and their ontology of life, *unhu*.

In these ritual performances, music plays a central role. It acts as a unifying factor within social cosmology. In support of this role, Arom and Martin¹⁴ opine that music is part and parcel of social life in Africa, functioning as an essential medium of interaction within communities. They further argue that music is a key cultural expression used to mediate social and political differences. In line with the role of music in society, Zhang *et al.*,¹⁵ using the experience sampling method (ESM), established that music has the power to regulate emotions and foster social cohesion. Similarly, Pournasrani and Jafari,¹⁶ drawing on Merriam's theory of functionalism, highlight that one of the fundamental functions of music is to create bonds and solidarity among members of society. These perspectives on the function of music are also evident among the Zezuru people.

2.2. The Zezuru people

The Zezuru is agrarian society whose economy is primarily based on agricultural production. Their commercial crops mainly include maize, while finger millet, tobacco, and cotton are also cultivated for subsistence. Zezuru's economic activities are largely centered around two key sectors: agriculture and mining. Zimbabwe has rich soils categorized into eight types: Regosols, lithosols, vertisols, siallitic, fersialitic, paraferalitic, orthoferalitic, and another classification further divided into red soils, black soils, and gray soils. Each type of soil supports the cultivation of specific crops. For instance, red soils are suitable for growing potatoes, maize, groundnuts, and tobacco. Zezuru agriculture encompasses both horticulture and animal husbandry. In addition, the Zezuru engages in the mining of alluvial gold along big riverbeds and within mountainous regions. Zimbabwe is rich in minerals such as gold, copper, iron, and various other resources, which significantly contribute to the broader Shona economy.

The Zezuru sociocultural system is deeply intertwined with a rich collection of material culture, which plays a vital role in both several religious and secular functions. Material culture refers to tangible materials such as physical objects, resources, and spaces that define a community's way of life and are integral to their heritage. As one participant noted:

“*Nhaka yedu inosanganisa, ruzivo, zviwanikwa zvakaita seivhu, matondo, makomo, zvicherwa nenzizi takaisiirwa nemadzitateguru edu, uye*

tichaisiirawo vana vedu." (Our heritage, which embraces indigenous knowledge systems, and natural resources such as land, forests, mountains, minerals, and rivers, were left for us by our ancestors, and we will also hand it over to our children.)

These sentiments underscore the significance of both tangible and intangible heritage in shaping the Zezuru worldview. The enduring utility of these resources ensures their continuous relevance and transmission across generations, reinforcing the community's understanding of their cosmology.

The enactment of the different social and economic activities within the Zezuru community is facilitated by material culture. This includes physical objects such as domestic utensils, family tools, traditional ritual objects, and musical instruments. These materials are used to authenticate both sacred and secular traditional institutions. They also enable the effective performance of rituals. Among the Shona people, social and religious activities are deeply embedded within rituals, which serve as vital platforms for both social and spiritual communication. Several researchers have documented the ritualistic nature of the Zezuru, a sub-ethnic group of the Shona, confirming their engagement in ceremonies such as *mukwerera*, *kurova guva*, *dira mhambe*, traditional weddings, and *doro renyota*.¹⁷⁻²¹ Others have explored Shona rituals more broadly, focusing either on general practices or specific sub-ethnic traditions. Rutsate²² conducted an ethnographic study on the *karanga mutoro* ritual (similar to *mukwerera* of the Zezuru) and highlighted the significance of *mhande* dance in the rain-making process. Furthermore, Maenzanise²³ provided a comprehensive analysis of Shona rituals and spirituality, covering many of the ceremonies discussed in this paper. The *kurova guva* ritual, which facilitates the reintegration of a deceased ancestor's spirit into the home, has been examined extensively by scholars such as Vambe,²⁴ Kyker,²⁵ Gundani,²⁶ Dodo,²⁷ Rutsate,²² and Matiure.²⁸ From a broader perspective, African rituals are widely recognized as essential for reinforcing cultural identity. Scholars such as Boal,²⁹ Grillo,³⁰ and Norbeck³¹ argue that rituals serve to strengthen group identity, which is a fundamental component of social cohesion – a concept that will be explored in greater detail later in this paper.

2.3. Zezuru ritualism

Fetterman³² defines ritual as "repeated patterns of symbolic behavior that play a part in either religious or secular life." A defining characteristic of rituals is symbolism, which essentially involves some kind of communication.³³ Rituals use symbols to express and convey meaning to actions. At the core of rituals are various modes of communication,

both verbal and non-verbal.³⁴ These communicative elements are what Bourdillon³³ refers to as "performative" statements, where meaning is enacted rather than merely stated. Rituals, especially rites of affliction or rites of passage, involve stages that can be categorized as pre-liminal, liminal, and post-liminal stages.^{33,35} Figure 2 which adapted from Bourdillon³³ illustrates the progression of these ritual stages extracted.

2.3.1. Pre-liminal stage

The term liminal space refers to a virtual and transformative period between what was and what will be.³⁶ In this stage, individuals remain part of their broader social kinship but seek to connect with the spiritual world to address pressing challenges. It is a phase of preparation, characterized by normalcy yet often marked by socio-economic and political difficulties. As social beings, members of a community inevitably face struggles – some beyond their control, others stemming from competition and economic disparities. The exploitation of the less privileged by those who control the means of production can create tensions and misunderstandings. In the context of the Zezuru people, this stage is exemplified by delays in rainfall. When faced with drought or agricultural difficulties, the community unites to seek spiritual intervention from *nyikadzimu*, which they believe holds the power to resolve such crises. One significant ritual performed at this stage is the rainmaking ceremony, *mukwerera* (to be discussed later in this paper). The collective hope is that a successful ritual will bring rainfall, ensuring the growth of crops and animals, thereby strengthening food security and the Zezuru economy. In other words, this is the preparatory stage where all the necessary forces are drawn together for the well-being of the people. One Zezuru culture bearer expressed this sentiment:

"Toti mvura yaramba kunaya, zvipfuwo, nezvirimwa zvavakutambura, svikiro remvuro ratinoti gombwe rinounganidza vakuru vemunharaunda kubiridza neveushe vokurukura nezve kuronga mukwerera. Panobviswa zviyo nevedzimhuri zvorevererwa kumidzimu nesvikiro iroro. Zviyo izvi zvinobikiswa doro nechembere dzaguma ura. Kwaperu mazuva manomwe, mhuri dzese dzinoungana parushanga ngoma nembira zvorira vanhu vachitamba vakadzi vachipururudza. Homwe inosvikirwa kana ngoma yapfumbira yoita matare nevakuru. Apa ndipo

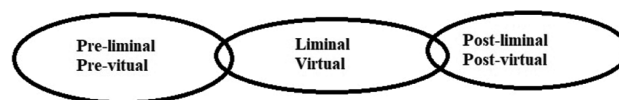


Figure 2. Stages involved in rituals. Adapted from Bourdillon 1990³³

pano tsuurwa kukanganiswa kunotsamwisa midzimu koita kuti mvura isanaye, sekurima musi wechisi, kupomba, kutema miti inoera kana kushaya rukudzo kuchivanhu chedu nenzvimbo dzinoera. Kana mutambo wadairwa vanhu naotopara vachimhanya kutiza mvura. Mukwerera unenge wabudirira." (Let us say there is a drought, and both animals and crops are suffering, the territorial spirit medium called *gombwe* summons the elders and the chief to discuss preparations for the rainmaking ceremony. Finger millet is donated by families and the spirit medium presents them to the ancestors. This millet is used by old women, who no longer bear children, to prepare traditional brew. After 7 days, community members gather at the ritual shrine, where they sing and play drums and mbira, and women ululate. The spirit medium gets possessed after the performance reaches the climax and then a dialog with the ancestral spirits takes place. During this sacred moment, the spirits rebuke behaviors that have angered them and caused the drought. They warn against actions such as working on sacred days (Fridays), committing adultery, cutting down sacred trees, and showing disrespect for spirituality and holy shrines. If the ritual is successful, heavy rain follows almost immediately, forcing people to rush home to escape the downpour. At that moment, the rainmaking ceremony is considered complete.

The participant effectively summarized the process of conducting *mukwerera*. From his explanation, it is evident that the overarching principle is the importance of good behavior and proper communication – both among the members and between the living and their ancestors. This fundamental belief shapes the Zezuru ontology of life, *chiZezuru*. Through *mukwerera*, a communal space is created where members come together, perform rituals, and reinforce shared values that strengthen social cohesion. Conversely, poor communication and misbehavior disrupt harmony, increasing the likelihood of calamities.

2.3.2. Liminal stage

This is the transitional or threshold stage, a passage in which members shed their ego (self) and persona, entering a state of virtual time where self-consciousness fades, and events unfold beyond human cognition. It is the stage of being in between the ordinary and the spiritual realms.³⁵ It is a space of unity, where community members transcend individualism, hatred, mistrust, socioeconomic and political differences, and disrespect through singing, incantations, and dancing. This stage is ordained and

authenticated by music which creates a devotional framework. Music cleanses the social ills of the community. In some rituals, this is the moment of spiritual possession, where communication between the ancestors (*Vadzimu*) and the living takes place. Problems – whether social, economic, health-related, or political – are addressed as the community enters a state of unconscious unity for a shared purpose.³⁷ Participants avoid operating individually and work together with a unit of purpose.

For the Zezuru, this is the most important stage as it is here the real act unfolds. The stage is characterized by deliberate communal enactment which involves musicking, incantations, spirit possession (in some cases), and communication between the Zezuru and the spiritual world. For example, during the ritual of *kurova guva*, the participants engage in the above actions in order to escort the spirit back home from the wilderness. The Zezuru uses music in a contextualized manner to attract both the spirit of the deceased and that of the ancestors. Spirit possession enables dialog between the living and the God (*Mwari*) through the ancestors. It is during this virtual time that the Zezuru presents their problems and solutions are given. The presence of the ancestral spirits creates a threshold in which everyone present – regardless of emotional and political differences – becomes one, allowing the ancestral spirits to address them as a unified, peaceful, and loving people.

2.3.3. Post-liminal stage

The post-liminal stage is the third and last stage, marking the transition back to normalcy. At this point, the liminal experience is reversed, and individuals regain their sense of self and group consciousness. As members repossess their persona, they become reformed and reconstructed, with most of their previous socioeconomic and political differences diminished. This stage can be likened to a baptism in Christian traditions, symbolizing renewal and transformation. Music remains an integral part of this phase, serving as a medium of celebration for the communal rebirth.

The post-liminal stage, in the context of the Zezuru cosmology, represents a virtual space of restoration. It is the reawakening of individual consciousness as the liminal state fades. Spirit mediums regain their consciousness, and all participants return to their everyday lives. The anticipation is that individual and group problems have been solved and the community has been reconstructed in this stage. If the ritual was for rainmaking, the successful performance would result in rainfall, benefitting not just the people but also the animals and crops, marking the renewal of life.

The stages discussed above highlight the critical role of music in fostering socioeconomic and political cohesion

within Zezuru traditional institutions and rituals. However, this ritual cycle is not a 1-time occurrence; rather, it is a continuous, cyclic tradition, and repeated annually to ensure cultural sustainability and communal unity. This was confirmed by a spirit medium:

“Mapira edu, kunyanya mukwerera nenhimbe tinozviita gore ne gore senzira yekuramba takachengetedza chiZezuru chedu nekubatana.” (Our rituals, especially rain making and cooperative work, are done every year as a way of sustaining our spirituality and unity).

2.4. The Zezuru traditional music performance practices

The various rituals and traditional ceremonies conducted by the Zezuru are deeply intertwined with music. Their rich musical heritage encompasses singing, playing musical instruments, poetic songs (*zvirevereve*), and dancing. These musical activities mentioned are part of what Bender³⁸ refers to as “sonic order.” The Zezuru’s sonic order is highly codified and structured. The type of music is determined by the socioeconomic and political context of the people. The Zezuru regards music as a stimulant and a stabilizer for individuals and society. Their songs reflect collective intentionality and symbolism.

Zezuru music is interwoven with other communal activities, culminating in deeply spiritual and socially immersive experiences. Dancing and singing are mutually inclusive for the Zezuru. The different dance styles for the Shona – such as *shangara*, *mhande*, *muchingoyo*, *tsotsa*, *mbira*, *mbakumba*, *chinyamumbera*, *dinhe*, *mapfuwe* – carry strong socioeconomic and political significance. These songs are composed communally, not merely for entertainment but as an essential part of social interactions, whether sacred or secular.³⁷ Sloboda, as cited by Otto,³⁷ emphasizes that “...music perhaps, provides a unique mnemonic framework within which humans can express, by the temporary organization of sound and gestures, the structure of their knowledge, and social relations.” The same is eminent for the Zezuru music practices.

The Zezuru traditional music performed during rituals such as *jakwara*, *mukwerera*, or *kurova guva* fosters a spirit of oneness, essential for maintaining socioeconomic and political cohesion. Music can enhance peace and tranquility, which are necessary for an egalitarian society. The Zezuru performance matrix is characterized by social construction and integration of efforts. Participants are often arranged in circular formations, symbolizing continuity, inclusivity, and the principles of *unhu/ubuntu*. Such an arrangement is conducive to inducing a sense

of belonging to one social accord. The arrangement is highly inclusive and discriminates against all forms of socioeconomic and political differences. By eliminating individualism and amplifying collective resonance, Zezuru musical traditions serve as a unifying force that bridges social divides.

3. *Jakwara* as a source of socioeconomic and political cohesion

As previously mentioned, the Zezuru is agrarian people, with much of their economy centered around agriculture. The region’s climate and soil conditions are well-suited for both farming crops and animal husbandry. Before colonial rule, finger millet was the staple crop for the Zezuru. This crop was used to prepare *sadza*, which was then served with relish. Although maize has largely replaced finger millet as the dominant staple since colonization, some farmers continue to cultivate it. Beyond its nutritional value, finger millet holds cultural significance due to the communal institution known as *jakwara* – a traditional gathering where villagers come together to harvest crops. Maitiure,³⁹ citing the Herald of July 31, 2015, defines *jakwara* as:

“... a season harvest event where all boundaries of decorum were broken and hurt feelings aired out in the open without fear of reprisal. It was the day to let go, to speak of grievances in one’s and to be heard because during the ceremony nothing is sacred in the mouths of the elders. This was the platform to speak one’s mind in the open using song, poetry, dance, and oratory.”

The ceremony is a platform for enhancing unity, love, and togetherness – as reiterated by one participant:

“Jakwara mutambo unopedza nzara mudzimba nekuti vanhu vanoungana kuti vashande pamwechete. Basa guru rinobva raita duku uye kuwirirana kunosimbiswa nokuda kwechihwerure.” (*Jakwara* is an event that eradicates hunger in homes because people gather to work together. The job becomes lighter and social harmony is enhanced through sarcasm).

At the heart of *jakwara* is the practice of *chihwerure* – a form of free-expression speech that is devoid of social boundaries. It serves as a tool for addressing grievances, expressing opinions, and playfully ridiculing individuals whose actions disrupt community harmony. Social misfits, such as thieves, adulterers, or those suspected of witchcraft, may be subtly called out through poetic song and humor. However, *chihwerure* is strictly confined to the ceremony, and participants are expected to neither continue nor take offense at what is said once the event concludes. However,

community member put their efforts together to lessen the job of harvesting finger millet.

The *jakwara* process consists of several stages, beginning with the removal of finger millet from the field. The farmer then organizes a communal threshing ceremony, inviting fellow villagers to assist in processing the crop. This practice embodies the African principles of cooperation and unity. As Mahohoma and Muzambi⁴⁰ note, whenever Zezuru people work together, they share food, drinks, and songs that accompany the labor. During *jakwara*, the music is performed for two main reasons: to provide rhythmic accompaniment to the work and as a medium for social commentary.

The institution of *jakwara* goes a long way in fostering socioeconomic and political solidarity among the Zezuru people. As members come together to assist their colleagues, the action strengthens the spirit of oneness and togetherness, which is not only in line with socialist ideology but also with the Zezuru philosophy of *unhu/ubuntu*. The practice inculcates principles of respect, dignity, shared responsibility, obedience, humility, solidarity, care, hospitality, interdependence, and communalism.

Since members of a village gather to sing, socialize, and thresh finger millet – an essential staple crop that can also be used to prepare intoxicating traditional brew (*hwahwa*), which is later sold for income – it follows that traditional music associated with the ceremony contributes to the socioeconomic development of the village. During the ceremony, members of the community occupy roles with social hierarchical features. Village boys and young men are responsible for threshing the millet, while older men oversee the process, provide songs, and offer advice while sitting nearby. Girls are tasked with fetching water and cooking for everyone, whereas elderly women wait until threshing is complete before winnowing the millet. This distribution of responsibilities illustrates power dynamics and the division of labor within society, reinforcing political structures in a subtle yet profound way. Thus, the *jakwara* ceremony – along with the music performed – serves as a vehicle for political cohesion.

What is peculiar about *jakwara* songs is their use of humor and sarcasm.³⁹ Within this ritualistic, liminal space, the lyrics, and actions of the threshers often incorporate elements of obscenity and social inversion. During *jakwara*, language that would typically be deemed inappropriate – such as explicit words or satirical jabs – is freely used, even in the presence of elders and respected community members. The song *Chihwerure* (Figure 3) exemplifies this, as it includes words like *hure* (meaning prostitute), a term generally considered taboo in public but accepted without

moral judgment in this specific context. *Uri rombe* (Figure 4) is another example of *jakwara* songs.

4. Mukwerera: the rain-making ceremony as a unifier

Mukwerera, the rain-seeking ceremony, is a Shona traditional institution held to request rain from the ancestors through the mediation of a traditional spirit medium, known as *gombwe* or *mhondoro*. The ceremony is held under a special tree called *muchakata*. During *mukwerera*, community members gather and sing sacred rain-invoking songs, such as *Dziva remvura* (a big pool of water) and *Dzinonwa muna Zambezi* (Lions drink water in Zambezi river) (Figure 5). The ceremony binds participants together under a shared purpose – to ask for rain from *Mwari* for the benefit of all.

When the rain eventually comes, it nourishes the crops and animals. The surplus yield and well-fed animals can then be sold to get money. Beyond its agricultural significance, *mukwerera* also plays a key role in fostering social and political harmony. The communal nature of the event encourages participants to temporarily set aside their socioeconomic and political differences, as they engage in a shared experience that transcends individual affiliations. Notably, Zimbabwean communities are often politically divided, with many people aligning themselves with parties such as ZANU-PF and MDC. However, interviews and observations from participants indicate that attending *mukwerera* reduces these political divisions. The reason is that traditional music, by its very nature, is communal and inclusive. People instinctively respond to the collective demands of the ceremony, which benefits everyone equally. Through dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, ululating, cooking, and drinking together, political barriers dissolve, and a spirit of togetherness manifests. In this way, *mukwerera* acts as a platform where socioeconomic and political differences are resolved.

5. The ritual of escorting the spirit (*kurova guva*)

Kurova guva is a significant rite of passage among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, performed to transition the spirit of the deceased from an unsettled state in the wilderness to a stable and honored position as an ancestor. Gennep⁴¹ defines a rite of passage as a ceremony tailor-made to facilitate and mark a person's transition from one stage of existence to another. *Kurova guva* fits this definition, as it marks the deceased's journey from the liminal state of death to full integration into the ancestral realm. Turner³⁵ refers to such transitions as liminal stages – periods of ambiguity



Figure 3. *Chihwerure* song, as transcribed by Matiure.³⁹ The song is about someone cursing himself saying that he is the only vagabond in the village because he rejected his wife, plow, and cattle. This song is a good example of how *jakwara* songs and poetry act as a platform for social commentary.



Figure 4. *Uri rombe* song, as transcribed by Matiure.³⁹ The song is about a man who is lamenting the death of his prostitute. He is pleading with fellow members to console him so that he feels comforted and taken care of. This shows the need to feel for each other.



Figure 5. *Title* song, as transcribed by Matiure.³⁹ The song *Mhondoro dzinomwa* refers to spiritual lions that are believed to be associated with territorial spirits, *makombwe*. These spirits drink water in big rivers such as Zambezi and Save. The contextual meaning of the song is that spiritual lions have the power to protect the progenies if given the respect they deserve.

where the deceased's spirit remains in an in-between state until proper rituals are performed.

Kurova guva serves two primary purposes: Escorting the spirit from the grave to the home so it can look after the siblings and facilitating the spirit's transformation into an ancestor. Rutsate²² gives a clear description of *kurova guva*, stating: "*Kurova guva* literally means to 'strike a grave' implying opening up the grave to allow the deceased to come out of it. *Kurova guva* is a ritual that is held at least 1 year after the deceased's burial...the ceremony is meant for elderly people, particularly husbands and wives who would have left siblings behind."

From this description, it is evident that *kurova guva* is important in initiating the spirit of the dead as an ancestor. Scholars such as Gelfand,⁴² Gundani²⁶, and Vambe²⁴ highlight that *kurova guva* has resisted Western ideological influences but is increasingly being challenged by Christian beliefs. Vambe²⁴ provides a brief outline of the role of songs in the Shona *kurova guva* ceremony: "In ritualistic contexts, songs' energies not only carry the content of ritual-myths, but become mythopoetic narratives naming realities in very subtle and complex ways." It is true that music keeps participants energized during the ceremony in question. However, traditional brew (*hwahwa*) further amplifies this energy, enabling participants to spend the whole night awake. Vambe²⁴ identifies *Yave nyama yekugocha* as one of the key songs performed during the procession to and from the grave. While his analysis focuses on the textual content of the song, it lacks a transcription of the music itself, a gap this study addresses. Other common *kurova guva* songs include *Koromora svingo* and *Tora uta hwako*.

Gundani²⁶ and Gelfand⁴² provide valuable insights into the Shona people's perceptions of funerary rituals, outlining the specific steps leading to *kurova guva*, which typically begins in the early hours after a night of singing, dancing, and drinking *hwahwa*. They concur that the primary objective of the ritual is to guide the spirit safely back to the village.

Traditional music of the Shona involves members in musicking where everyone participates in one way or the other to achieve a common goal. It allows participants to lose personal identity and merge into the communal experience. The same is true for the traditional music performed during *kurova guva* ceremony. The music and ceremony create a unifying atmosphere where individual agendas fade, reinforcing socio-economic and political cohesion. The roles assigned to participants reflect the social hierarchy within the community, while material culture is communally shared for the success of the event. Ultimately, cultural institutions like *kurova guva* preserve Shona heritage by sustaining traditional social structures,

artistic expressions, language, and religious practices. The songs sung during this ceremony not only assist in contextualizing the event but also inspire, unify, and solidify communal ties. Examples of *kurova guva* songs identified by Vambe²⁴ include *Chaminuka*, *Vana vangu vaperera*, *Kuenda mbire*, *Kunatsa muroyi*, and *Ndimambo*.

6. Comparative analysis of Zezuru rituals using Turner's model

The three Zezuru rituals – *jakwara*, *mukwerera*, and *kurova guva* – can be analysed using Turner³⁵ three-phase model of ritual structure. In terms of the pre-liminal stage, all the Zezuru rituals involve extensive preparation, including the brewing of *hwahwa*, which serves to energize the participant. Food is prepared for communal sharing, elders are consulted important people such as uncles and neighbors are invited. The success of each ritual depends on the thorough preparation at this stage.

The three rituals also involve the liminal stage. All the rituals emphasize collective participation and social cohesion. *Mukwerera* and *kurova guva* involve an intersection between the physical and spiritual worlds, often manifested through spirit possession, marking the peak of the ritual experience. *Jakwara* reaches its climax through cooperative work – threshing performed by all the men – which fosters unity and social harmony. Cooperation in these ceremonies reinforces a shared sense of purpose, strengthening the bonds of the community. A community with sound social cohesion is more likely to experience development and stability.

The post-liminal stage for all the rituals involves the conclusion with a return to normalcy, with participants expected to be transformed and rejuvenated. For *mukwerera*, rain is anticipated, and people start plowing their fields. After *kurova guva*, the deceased's spirit is believed to have been successfully integrated into the family, no longer wandering in the wilderness. Spirit mediums return to their everyday lives, musicians retire with enhanced skills, and community members resume their normal activities with renewed social cohesion and loyalty. In all cases, the reversal of liminality marks the successful completion of the ritual, reinforcing cultural heritage, fostering social harmony, and ensuring the continuity of communal traditions.

7. Conclusion

This article has delved into three Shona rituals – *mukwerera*, *kurova guva*, and *jakwara* – highlighting the unifying role of *musicking* within these ceremonies. It provided an overview of the Shona people, their agrarian way of life, and their deep-rooted belief in

ancestry. Their economy depends on farming animals and growing crops.

The discussion also examined Shona ritualism through the framework of pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal stages. Furthermore, the role of traditional music in reinforcing ritual activities was analyzed, particularly in ceremonies such as *mukwerera* and *kurova guva*. The paper emphasized how collective participation in singing during *jakwara*, *kurova guva*, and *mukwerera* fosters social cohesion. The shared musical experience serves as a powerful tool for empowerment, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing the philosophy of *unhu/Ubuntu* – a belief in interconnectedness and mutual support. The article concludes that traditional Shona music binds people together, promotes cooperation during agricultural activities, and breaks social and political barriers, ensuring the continuity of communal values and heritage.

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This is a single-authored article.

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Consent for publication

Informed consent was obtained from every participant by requesting them to sign on consent letter.

Availability of data

Data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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ARTICLE

The functions and symbolic meanings of Bonpo apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals

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Abstract

Bon is one of the earliest forms of Tibetan indigenous belief, playing a significant role in shaping the cultural and spiritual identity of the Tibetan people. While existing studies have primarily focused on the rituals and doctrines of Bon, the functional and symbolic roles of Bon apparel and accessories have received limited attention. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring the functions and symbolic meanings of apparel and accessories in Bonpo ceremonial rituals, specifically the divine dance ritual, exorcism ritual, and sky-worship ritual. Through an extensive literature review and field research, this study analyzed the apparel and accessories worn by key participants, including monks, lamas, shamans, and priests, and investigated how these can reflect Bonpo beliefs, spiritual hierarchy, and societal norms. In addition, this study highlighted the importance of colors, materials, styles, and patterns in conveying the spiritual and cultural significance of Bonpo apparel. There are two contributions to this study. First, through a systematic analysis of Bonpo apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals, this study addresses a gap in the academic understanding of the relationship between religious rituals, apparel, and symbolic practices, offering new insights into the role of apparel in religious ceremonies. Second, by exploring the functions and symbolic meanings of Bonpo apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals, a framework for future studies on the cultural significance of traditional religious garments has formed to support broader efforts in cultural and academic inquiry.

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Keywords: Bon; Bonpo apparel and accessories; Ceremonial ritual; Functions; Symbolic meanings

1. Introduction

Bon, as the indigenous religion of Tibet, has played a significant role in the spiritual and cultural history of the region.¹ Rooted in ancient Tibetan traditions, Bon is a belief system that incorporates elements of nature worship, ancestor reverence, and divine veneration. It emphasizes the importance of rituals, offerings, and spiritual practices to maintain harmony between humans, nature, and the divine.² The rich history of Bon dates back to the pre-Buddhist era, and its practices are believed to have influenced Tibetan Buddhism. Bon incorporates both indigenous traditions and elements of later Buddhist practices, which have led to the development of a unique ritualistic framework. Despite its profound historical significance, Bon has often been marginalized in academic

discussions, with Tibetan Buddhism dominating scholarly discussions on Tibetan spirituality. Bon, however, remains a key aspect of Tibetan cultural identity, especially in rural areas where its practices continue to shape community life and spiritual practices.³

In Bonpo rituals, apparel and accessories are essential elements that symbolize Bonpo's beliefs, spiritual hierarchy, and societal norms.⁴ Bonpo apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals often embody profound spiritual meaning through the use of colors, materials, styles, and patterns.⁵ Different rituals, such as the divine dance ritual, exorcism ritual, and sky-worship ritual, involve unique apparel and accessories that convey specific functions and symbolic messages. For instance, apparel and accessories worn by participants, such as monks, lamas, shamans, and priests, play a crucial role in establishing religious hierarchy, guiding divine intervention, and facilitating the connection between the human and spiritual realms.⁴

The symbolism embedded in Bonpo apparel and accessories extends beyond esthetic value. In the Bonpo worldview, the physical world and the spiritual world are not separate but are deeply interconnected. The apparel and accessories worn by ritual participants act as a conduit for divine energy, allowing them to channel blessings, invoke deities, and perform healing acts. The visual impact of the apparel is often heightened by the use of ritual tools, such as scepters, bells, and ritual implements, which further enhance the spiritual connection and serve to amplify the ritual's power. Thus, apparel and accessories are not only functional but act as a mediator between the sacred and the earthly.

However, scholarly attention to Bonpo apparel and accessories has been relatively sparse, with most existing research focusing on the rituals themselves rather than on the symbolic and functional roles of the apparel and accessories used. For instance, Martin⁶ concentrates on ideas about bookbinding found in early Bon ritual literature on the consecration of icons, which mentions the Bonpo rituals.⁶ Achard⁷ conducted a brief note on the northern treasures of the Bon tradition, including several rituals in Bonpo traditions.⁷ In addition, Des Jardins⁸ analyzed the content of the Tibetan grimoire of miscellaneous spells in Bon rituals that once belonged to a late anonymous Bonpo master from eastern Tibet.⁸ Ramble³ presented a comprehensive description of devices that are used in Bonpo ritual performance.³ Tripathi and Kanojia⁹ explored the historical and cultural significance of the swastika symbol across civilizations, emphasizing its positive connotations in diverse Bonpo rituals.⁹ Scholars have focused on the doctrinal aspects of Bonpo rituals and their role in maintaining social order. However, the material culture surrounding these rituals, the apparel and

accessories, ornaments, and other ritual paraphernalia, has often been overlooked. This omission is significant because apparel and accessories, as well as ritual objects, are fundamental in conveying the sacredness of the event. They are central to how participants experience and interpret the ritual. By focusing on these material elements, we can uncover deeper layers of meaning and practice in Bonpo rituals. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing the functions and symbolic meanings of Bonpo apparel and accessories used in the divine dance ritual, exorcism ritual, and sky worship ritual.

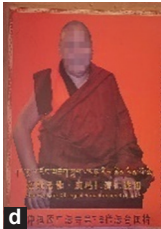
Through an extensive review of existing literature and field research, this study collected extensive images of Bonpo apparel and accessories in different ceremonies from several locations (Table 1). It explored how these apparel and accessories contribute to the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of the rituals. Specifically, it examines how the colors, materials, styles, and patterns of the apparel and accessories not only signify the Bonpo doctrine but also serve as a means of connecting participants to the Bonpo doctrine. This research aims to deepen the understanding of the intersection between Bonpo rituals and their associated apparel and accessories. It highlights the cultural and spiritual functions and significance of religious apparel and accessories in Bonpo traditions. The study also emphasizes the role of apparel and accessories in shaping the participant's identity within the ritual. For example, the transformation of a participant into a deity through the use of specific apparel and accessories is a key component of many Bonpo rituals. This concept of "becoming" a deity through ritual dress and adornments is central to the success of the ritual. Participants often wear elaborate costumes that symbolize the divine beings they embody, and these costumes are meticulously crafted to reflect the attributes of the deity they represent. Through this process of ritual embodiment, the wearer is not only performing a role but is believed to become the deity in Bon, channeling its power and influence during the ceremony.

This research contributes to the growing field of study on material culture in Tibetan religious practices, offering insights into the integral role of apparel in shaping both the esthetic and functional dimensions of Bonpo rituals. By exploring the symbolic meaning and cultural significance of Bonpo apparel and accessories, this study aims to illuminate how apparel and accessories serve as tools for spiritual transformation, bridging the material and spiritual worlds in Bon.

2. The Bonpo ceremonial ritual

Bonpo ceremonial rituals are intricately linked with the spiritual and cultural fabric of the Bon religion, one of

Table 1. Examples of the selected images for different ceremonies

Location	Sky-worship ritual	Divine dance ritual	Exorcism ritual
Yongzhong Lading Changdu Monastery	 a	 b	 c
Yongzhong Zuoqinling Temple	 d	 e	 d
Guangfa Temple	 d	 b	 f
Jiewa Yongzhong Darjeeling Temple	 d	 b	 g
Museum	 h	 d	 d

Notes: ^{a-g}Depict the image sources.
^a<https://vot.org/%E8%97%8F%E4%BA%BA%E8%A1%8C%E6%94%BF%E4%B8%AD%E5%A4%AE%E5%90%91%E8%8B%AF%E6%95%99%E6%B3%95%E7%8E%8B%E4%BE%9B%E5%A5%89%E9%95%BF%E5%AF%BF%E4%BB%AA%E8%BD%A8/>
^bhttps://www.sohu.com/a/442801315_652680
^c<http://xhslink.com/a/MHvHe2iUyE87>
^dTaken by authors.
^e<https://weibo.com/1548403217/JozsSzkQh?type=comment>
^f<https://www.tibetcul.com/zhuanti/whzt/22104.html>
^ghttps://culture.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_03/23/13409104_0.shtml?_from_ralated
^hTaken by authors.

the oldest belief systems in Tibet. These rituals are at the heart of Bonpo practice, serving as a powerful means of communication between humans, deities, and spirits. They not only facilitate interactions with the spiritual world but also play a pivotal role in maintaining harmony and balance in the physical and spiritual realms. Each ritual serves a distinct and vital purpose – ranging from healing and purification to worship and protection – demonstrating the complex relationship between human existence and the divine forces. The Bonpo rituals can broadly be categorized into the divine dance ritual, the exorcism ritual, and the sky worship ritual. This section aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the origins, purposes, and significance of these rituals, setting the stage for a deeper understanding of the relevant apparel and accessories worn during these sacred ceremonies.

2.1. Divine dance ritual

According to historical records in Tibet, before the establishment of the Tubo dynasty, the primitive religion Bon emerged in the Tibetan region. From its content, the belief in the existence of spirits in all things forms the core of Bon, serving as an intermediate medium for communicating the relationship between the people and the divines. This constitutes a prayer for the divines, such as offering sacrifices, prayers, shamanic techniques, and other religious rituals. Monks have become dancers in Bon who perform religious rituals and divination prayers. As society progressed and religion evolved, Tibetan folk art, which emerged during the era of the slave society, continued to develop and improve. The “Lu” folk songs, combined with the dance of shaking drums and making sounds of the Bon, evolved into the divine dance ritual, a performance that entertains the divines, drives away ghosts, and welcomes good fortune. In addition, the Monks in this ritual often wear different masks and long robes to play the diverse roles of the divines.¹⁰

2.2. Exorcism ritual

Tibetan people generally believed that disturbances caused by ghosts, demons, and divines would lead to illness, physical decline, and strange behaviors. When such disturbances occur, a ritual is required to exorcise the demon. In cases where these abnormal events became frequent in a village or region, the community would organize an exorcism ritual to prevent further occurrences. One of the main functions of Bon shamans is to deal with ghosts, demons, and divines, using their witchcraft to guide the spirits of the dead and bring them back to life. As the ceremony unfolds, the shaman pretends to engage with the ghosts, demons, and divines, offering his bones, flesh, and blood to them. He vigorously shakes the magic bell,

strikes the double-sided drum, and wields a knife that has killed people while reciting exorcism spells, performing some strange movements, dancing wildly, and cutting off the connection with the controlled ghosts and monsters with the knife.¹¹

2.3. Sky worship ritual

The sky-worship ritual is one of the central ceremonies in Bonpo practice, aimed at invoking blessings from the celestial realm for prosperity, health, and peace. In Bonpo's belief, the sky is revered as a divine force that governs the natural order and cosmic balance. This ritual serves as a means of communication between humans and the celestial deities, seeking their favor and protection for individuals, communities, and the natural environment. The primary purpose of the sky-worship ritual is to align human intentions with the will of the divine, ensuring a harmonious relationship between the earthly and heavenly realms. This is achieved through a series of symbolic acts, prayers, and offerings, each intended to appease the sky gods and request their blessings. The ritual is typically performed during significant seasonal transitions, agricultural events, or moments of social or communal importance, such as before planting crops or in times of natural disaster. It is seen as a means of ensuring the continuity of life and the well-being of the community.¹²

The Bonpo ceremonial rituals are foundational to the Bon religion, deeply embedded in the spiritual practices and cultural traditions of the Tibetan people. These rituals serve as vital connections between the human world and the divine. The apparel and accessories worn during these ceremonies are not mere decorations but essential components of the rituals themselves. They carry profound spiritual significance, helping to channel divine energy, protect practitioners, and ensure the success of the rituals. Through the careful selection of colors, materials, and designs, Bonpo apparel and accessories facilitate a sacred transformation, allowing the practitioner to embody divine forces and communicate with the spiritual realm. By examining the spiritual and symbolic roles of these garments, we can gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which Bonpo culture integrates the material and spiritual worlds, creating a holistic system of belief and practice that has endured for centuries.

3. Apparel and accessories in ceremonial rituals

3.1. Apparel and accessories in divine dance rituals

The apparel and accessories worn by monks in the divine dance ritual play both functional and symbolic roles in appreciating the Bon. In particular, the masks worn by the

monks can reflect the Bonpo beliefs, spiritual hierarchy, and societal norms from the aspect of color and style. The divine dance ritual is one of the most vibrant and sacred ceremonies in the Bonpo tradition. It is performed to invoke deities and spirits, often in the context of seasonal changes, or to purify a community of negative energies. The apparel and accessories, as well as the masks worn by the participants, are carefully designed to facilitate this spiritual communication. Through the use of specific colors and symbols, the masks visually represent different aspects of the spiritual world, helping to embody the transformative power of the ritual. In this sense, the masks are not merely decorative; they are seen as vessels that channel spiritual energy.

In terms of color, the production of Bonpo masks in divine dance rituals initially used different natural colors of animal fur to represent colors such as white, black, floral, yellow, and blue. The use of colors has a unique meaning, greatly enriching and highlighting the expression of various character personalities. Overall, the colors used in the masks are consistent with those used in Tibetan painting, both emphasizing brilliance, brightness, heaviness, bright chromaticity, strong contrast, and striving for harmony to express the teachings of Bon itself.¹³ In addition to their symbolic meanings, these colors also function as markers of the character's role in the ritual. For example, characters representing anger or wrath are often depicted in red (Figure 1) or dark colors (Figure 2), which are associated with both destructive and protective qualities. These contrasting hues help the audience understand the moral duality at play, where destruction is used to protect and purify. Thus, the color choices in the masks are not only decorative but act as visual cues that communicate the character's moral alignment and role within the ritual.



Figure 1. Red color mask

Source: http://app1.tibet.cn/photo/yszl/content_8791.shtml

In terms of style, it has been divided into peaceful and angry expressions. Peaceful expression is an expression of kindness, generosity, solemnity, and closeness (Figure 3). Masks that were originally dedicated to suppressing evil spirits showed an angry expression (Figure 4), with a ferocious face, angry eyebrows, bared teeth and claws, and a bloodthirsty mouth. Both styles embody people's yearning for goodness and resistance to evil, expressing the teachings of Bon.¹⁴ Through the combination of color and style, these masks reflect the duality of the Bonpo worldview, the need for both benevolence and power in spiritual practice. The juxtaposition of peace and anger within the divine dance ritual highlights the complex relationship between good and evil in Bonpo's belief, emphasizing that both are integral to the process of spiritual purification.



Figure 2. Dark color mask

Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/442801315_652680



Figure 3. Peace expression mask

Source: <https://so.redocn.com/mian/b2d8d7e5c3e6bedf.htm>



Figure 4. Angry expression mask. Image taken by authors

3.2. Apparel and accessories in exorcism rituals

In the Bonpo exorcism ritual, the color and material of the apparel and accessories worn by the shamans reflect both the functional and symbolic roles of channeling spiritual forces, protecting the Tibetan people, and strengthening the efficacy of the exorcism. Exorcism rituals are performed to rid individuals or communities of harmful spirits and negative influences. The apparel worn by shamans during these ceremonies is more than just ceremonial; it acts as an extension of the shaman's spiritual power and authority. The color and material choices are thus deliberately made to invoke divine protection, ground the shaman in their role as a protector, and ensure the success of the ritual.

In terms of color, the black monastic hats worn by the shaman are deeply symbolic (Figure 5). In Bonpo's belief, black represents protection, strength, and the ability to confront malevolent forces. The black hat signifies the shaman's spiritual authority and his role as a protector against evil spirits. Black is also associated with the earth element, which grounds the practitioner and provides stability during the exorcism. The color black, therefore, serves a protective and empowering function, aiding the shaman in his battle against dark forces. In addition, the blue monastic robes worn by the shaman symbolize purity and spiritual strength (Figure 5). Blue is closely associated with the sky, which in Bonpo cosmology is the realm of higher spiritual beings and protective deities. The color blue is thought to create a connection to celestial powers, providing the ritual participants with the divine protection necessary to expel malevolent spirits. The robes' blue color also reflects the water element, which in many spiritual traditions represents purification and cleansing, essential for the process of spiritual exorcism.¹⁵



Figure 5. Shaman wearing a black hat and blue robes

Source: https://culture.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_03/23/13409104_0.shtml?_from_ralated

In terms of material, the monastic robes worn by the shamans are typically made from natural materials, such as wool, cotton, or silk. These fabrics are chosen for their connection to the earth element, symbolizing the shaman's grounding and ability to stay connected with the physical world while performing the ritual.¹⁶ The black monastic hats worn by shamans and other ritual leaders are often made from animal fur and leather. This material serves both practical and symbolic purposes. On a functional level, animal fur provides warmth and protection, especially in harsh weather conditions, ensuring the shaman can maintain focus during the ritual. On a symbolic level, the use of animal fur links the practitioner to the animal realm, which is believed to carry protective spirits. Leather, particularly, symbolizes the earth and nature, connecting the shaman to the grounded, physical world while reinforcing his ability to confront and neutralize spiritual threats.¹⁷

3.3. Apparel and accessories in sky-worship rituals

In the sky-worship ritual of the Bon, the apparel and accessories worn by lamas (Tibetan word for the "venerable one") and priests are not only a marker of spiritual rank but also a key element in communicating with the celestial realm. The patterns incorporated into their apparel and accessories are generally the sun and moon patterns (Figure 6) and the swastika pattern (Figure 7), as they serve to invoke spiritual power, represent celestial forces, and embody the Bonpo teachings. Sky worship is one of the most transcendent rituals in the Bonpo tradition, focusing on invoking blessings from celestial beings. The apparel worn by lamas and priests in this ritual has a profound connection to the heavens, with the patterns



Figure 6. Sun and Moon pattern

Source: <https://www.doc88.com/p-2784893790750.html>



Figure 7. Swastika pattern

Source: <https://www.yipinbowu.com/tuowen/2081.html>

and colors serving as direct symbols of the divine forces they seek to contact. The sun and moon patterns on their robes and accessories are intended to align the practitioner with the cosmic powers, invoking the forces of light and enlightenment.

Given that the sun and moon are central elements in the sky, their patterns, resembling the solar wheel or lunar crescent, are frequently found on the priest's robes and accessories. The solar wheel, often embroidered in gold or red thread, symbolizes the vital energy of the sun, which is believed to provide spiritual nourishment and life force during the ritual. The sun's radiant energy is thought to imbue the participants with strength and vitality, enabling them to endure the hardships of the ritual and receive divine insight. Meanwhile, lunar crescents or patterns of stars represent the moon's nurturing qualities, illuminating the path to spiritual enlightenment and invoking blessings from the heavens. The presence of both solar and lunar motifs in the same ritual apparel and accessories reflects the complementary forces of the Bonpo worldview, which is light and dark, male and female, active and passive. This dualism is central to Bonpo's cosmology, where harmony is achieved through the balance of opposing forces. The sun and moon, as symbols of day and night, represent the cyclical nature of time and the eternal dance of creation and destruction.

In addition, lamas wear headdresses or crowns decorated with swastika patterns. The placement of the

swastika on the headgear reinforces the idea that the lama is the spiritual leader, guiding others toward enlightenment and maintaining divine protection. The headdress serves as a symbol of authority and connection to the celestial realm. At the same time, the swastika further strengthens the ritual's spiritual significance by ensuring that the lama's thoughts and actions are aligned with cosmic forces.¹⁸

4. Conclusion

This study has examined the functions and symbolic meanings of Bonpo apparel and accessories in three key ceremonial rituals, including the divine dance ritual, the exorcism ritual, and the sky-worship ritual. In each of these rituals, the apparel and accessories are not only functional elements but are also powerful symbols that reflect Bonpo's beliefs, spiritual hierarchy, and cultural traditions. The colors, materials, styles, and patterns used in the apparel are integral to the performance of rituals, helping to convey divine messages, establish spiritual authority, and foster connections between humans and the divine.

Bonpo apparel is not merely a superficial element but a crucial component in the execution of these rituals. The colors and patterns used in masks, robes, and headdresses are deeply symbolic and aligned with the spiritual beliefs of the Bonpo tradition. For example, the use of black for protection, blue for celestial connection, and red for vitality reflects the Bonpo cosmology, where material elements act as conduits for spiritual energy, helping practitioners engage with the divine and maintain spiritual balance.

The apparel worn during these rituals helps practitioners embody spiritual figures or forces, thereby enhancing their ability to perform the ritual. In the divine dance ritual, the masks and garments allow monks to visually embody spiritual beings, acting as a bridge between the human and spiritual realms. In the exorcism ritual, the color and material choices in the shaman's apparel and accessories, such as black hats and blue robes, establish spiritual boundaries that protect both practitioners and participants from malevolent forces. In the sky-worship ritual, the sun and moon patterns in the apparel and accessories align

the practitioners with celestial powers, grounding their spiritual authority within the cosmic order.

This study also underscores the integral role of Bonpo apparel and accessories in preserving and transmitting spiritual and cultural practices. These garments connect the physical and spiritual realms, ensuring the continuity of sacred knowledge and cultural identity within the Bonpo community. By focusing on the role of apparel and accessories in these ceremonies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Bonpo cultural practices and the spiritual significance of religious apparel in the context of indigenous Tibetan beliefs.

In conclusion, Bonpo apparel serves as both a functional tool in ritual practice and a symbolic expression of the Bonpo worldview. Future research could further explore the evolution of these garments and their continued role in cultural preservation. In addition, comparative studies with other indigenous traditions could provide further insights into the global significance of religious apparel in spiritual practices.

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ARTICLE

Development path analysis of intangible cultural heritage resources: A qualitative study of Xiangxi Miao folk songs in China

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Abstract

As China's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) faces increasing pressures from modernization and globalization, identifying sustainable pathways for its revitalization has become imperative. This study examines the development pathways of Xiangxi Miao folk songs (XMFS), a representative form of ICH resource in China, through field research and qualitative analysis using NVivo software. The findings reveal a trend toward diversified development, yet challenges persist, including homogenized content, superficial integration with tourism, and selective appropriation of cultural elements. Three focal issues were identified: The current XMFS resource utilization, systemic barriers to their development, and prospective strategies. While culture-tourism integration has expanded the reach of XMFS, it has also exposed critical shortcomings, such as shallow cultural transmission and a disconnect between heritage authenticity and tourist-oriented adaptations. Cultural inheritors often tolerate content distortion, whereas non-inheritors demonstrate limited engagement due to inadequate incentives. To address these gaps, this study proposes enhancing macro-level planning, fostering innovation-driven development, and adopting market-oriented strategies to redefine XMFS's cultural connotations. These approaches aim to deepen the synergy between cultural preservation and tourism while ensuring sustainable inheritance. By offering empirical insights into ICH revitalization, this research contributes practical frameworks for safeguarding China's cultural heritage and advancing the ecological vitality of Miao folk traditions in Xiangxi.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

Technology is a double-edged sword for developing culture and art, as crisis and opportunity coexist. With the globalization of the global economy, the protection of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is facing a survival crisis.¹ Globalization promotes the accelerated flow of modern mass culture and entertainment products in various countries, which inevitably causes some traditional cultures to face crises. ICH has

suffered serious resource loss, and many folk crafts have no successors. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes ICH as practices, expressions, knowledge, or skills that are part of the cultural heritage of a place, as well as tools, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces that are considered cultural heritage. Like natural heritage, ICH is also an important part of the cultural wealth of various countries. As an important carrier of human civilization, ICH embodies human cultural vitality and creativity. The safeguarding of ICH has long been recognized as an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization.

How can we balance the protection of ICH and development within the modern cultural industries? This has become the focal point and a significant challenge for many countries when formulating cultural policies. Since the 1960s, several developed nations have taken the lead in enacting laws and regulations to safeguard their national culture. For instance, Japan has enacted the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties, the United Kingdom has the Civic Amenities Act, and France has the Historical Districts Protection Act (Loi Malraux). The problem of preserving the traditions of academic art and folk culture as part of the ICH of the country is becoming more urgent every year.²

In 2003, to protect and save the world's ICH, the 32nd session of the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH, which was signed by 181 countries or regions. The signing of this treaty marks the expansion of the global heritage protection system from the tangible (i.e., heritage sites and artifacts) to the intangible. This expansion opens a Pandora's Box of challenges marked by difficulties, confusion, and complexity.³ As of December 2023, there are 730 UNESCO ICH items on the list, with China leading the world at 43 items. At present, China boasts approximately 870,000 ICH resources, and the total number of ICH items from four national batches has reached 1,372, making it a veritable powerhouse of ICH resources. In 2018, the merger of China's Ministry of Culture and Tourism Administration marked the beginning of the government's efforts to promote the integrated development of cultural tourism. The sustainable protection and development of ICH resources have thus become a significant research topic.

In the past decade, Chinese governments have actively explored the road to the integrated development of culture and tourism. Famous cities, towns, and villages in ethnic minority areas have become the main battlefields for developing culture and tourism.⁴ ICH has become a key driver in leveraging its unique advantages and shaping

competitive advantages.⁵ In 2008, the Chinese government inscribed the Xiangxi Miao folk songs (XMFS) on the second batch of the national ICH list under the designation II-109.

With an extensive history and a unique social structure, the Miao people living in Xiangxi are essential to the Chinese nation.⁶ Because Miao people have no written expression, their cultural and artistic heritage can only be realized through songs and music.⁷ For this study, XMFS specifically denotes the Miao folk songs disseminated within the Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Xiangxi, Hunan Province, China. Propelled by the convergence of culture and tourism, XMFS and the tourism sector have been progressively integrating and evolving through five fundamental avenues: ICH festivals, tourist attractions, traditional settlements, themed venues, and ICH tourism routes.

1.2. Research question

This study describes XMFS resource development comprehensively, summarizes its development path, and proposes constructive suggestions for the ICH protection development path. This article attempts to answer the following three questions:

- (i) What is the current state of XMFS resource development?
- (ii) What challenges are encountered in the development of XMFS resources?
- (iii) What is the prospective development path of XMFS resources?

2. Literature review

After China acceded to the Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH in 2004, research on ICH started to increase, and numerous achievements have been made in the research, protection, and development of the concept and value of ICH. Different Eastern and Western approaches shape the conservation and interpretation of cultural heritage landscapes.⁸

There is a clear correlation between the distribution of ICH resources and the state of economic development and historical and cultural heritage.⁹ At present, the research on ICH in China is concentrated in two areas: First, the reflection and discussion on the essential characteristics and cultural attributes of ICH, and second, research on the application of ICH protection and communication strategies.¹⁰ The academic viewpoint of resource protection development includes "static" storage protection, "dynamic" development protection, and rigid and soft mechanisms.¹¹

The "static" storage protection refers to the dissemination of ICH through public cultural platforms such as museums

and libraries, focusing on the accurate recording and sorting out the characteristics of ICH. The “dynamic” development protection is more attentive to the economic value of ICH resources and emphasizes the integration of development with tourism, related industries, and digital platforms.¹² Digitalization has changed the creation mechanism and production mode of performing arts.¹³ Government departments should emphasize the need for authority and institutional cooperation and prioritize legal and digital protection mechanisms for ICH.¹⁴ The rigid protection mechanism emphasizes strengthening protection by laws and regulations, and researchers believe that the legal protection of ICH should follow systematic legislation.¹⁵ The soft protection mechanism emphasizes the development, utilization, and personnel training; it guarantees and improves the living conditions and development space of inheritors, thereby enhancing the endogenous competitiveness of ICH. Researchers discuss the system and training mode of ICH inheritors.¹⁶ ICH protection is not only the responsibility of the government or professionals but must also involve local communities and communities of interest.

In the study of applied conservation, tourism seems to be a “life-saving straw” for many endangered ICH resources. Regarding content, research on the relationship between ICH protection and tourism development, research on the development model, and stakeholder research in tourism development are the focus of Chinese academic circles.¹⁷ At present, research in ICH tourism is mainly composed of three themes: resource planning and sustainability, the impact of tourism development, and tourist behavior and destination marketing.¹⁸ Katelieva *et al.*¹⁹ believe that the protection of ICH increases the opportunities for tourism utilization.¹⁹ However, for all countries’ governments, ICH’s tourism development requires a balance between resource protection and tourism development. Trend analysis shows that ICH listing contributes to a long-term positive trend in international tourism in China.²⁰ The perceived appropriateness of ICH for use in tourism and the accessibility of ICH-based tourism products for visitor markets affect related tourism planning.²¹ Scholars have reduced using the official full name of ICH in tourism studies, while the “social practices, rituals, and festive events” category has been the focus since 2010.¹⁸ In addition, using digital technology to protect ICH is a consensus among many scholars.²² Digital protection of ICH is based on digital technology.²³ The development of the art industry in China is largely due to digitization.²⁴ Digital technology and performing arts have been inextricably intertwined, with their synergy yielding potent results.²⁵ In short, although scholars try to find problems and propose possible solutions in the study of ICH conservation and

inheritance, they are always bystanders. The government still plays a leading role in ICH inheritance, and the role of the market and social organizations has not been fully considered. For ICH protection and development, creating a completely consistent template, personalized, localized, creative development path is impossible to ensure sustainable development.

3. Research framework and methods

This study employs qualitative research methodologies, including field investigation, interviews, and NVivo text analysis. Initially, the research team conducted two field trips to Xiangxi in August 2023 and July 2024 to gather data and contextual information, selecting the enigmatic Miao eco-tourism route for their fieldwork. The team investigated the development of XMFS tourism resources in Huaxian, Jishou, Guzhang, and Fenghuang, subsequently organizing and summarizing the collected data. They utilized NVivo (version 14.23.0), a qualitative analysis software, to examine the interview transcripts of communication and protection stakeholders involved in the XMFS development project. The aim was to conduct a grounded analysis, coding the data in a bottom-up approach to derive an authentic depiction of XMFS development. Finally, drawing on the earlier analysis and integrating insights from existing ICH experiences, the study proposes a development path for XMFS resources (Figure 1).

3.1. Overview of XMFS resource development

XMFS can be categorized into five cavities and 10 keys, characterized by their distinctive melodies and unique singing techniques, which hold significant artistic research value. Modern composers frequently draw upon XMFS as inspiration, as is evident in Tan Dun’s work *Map*. Under the growing trend of cultural and tourism integration, the development of XMFS resources is inextricably linked to regional tourism, with numerous tourist sites emerging as bases for the exhibition and dissemination of ICH. Xiangxi is renowned as a “sea of songs,” and within its traditional cultural ecosystem, the Miao inhabitants of Xiangxi have always embraced singing as an integral part of their lives. They converse through songs, express emotions through melodies, and vocalize their aspirations in lyrical form. Over the extensive sweep of history, a vast array of XMFS, rich in variety, has been amassed.

However, few instances have been documented in written records due to the oral and improvisational nature of XMFS creation. Fortunately, the essence of XMFS has remained unbroken, and an increasing number of Miao people in western Hunan continue to inherit and propagate XMFS (Table 1). Although the range of potential resource types for development may appear limited, XMFS integrates the ethnic customs

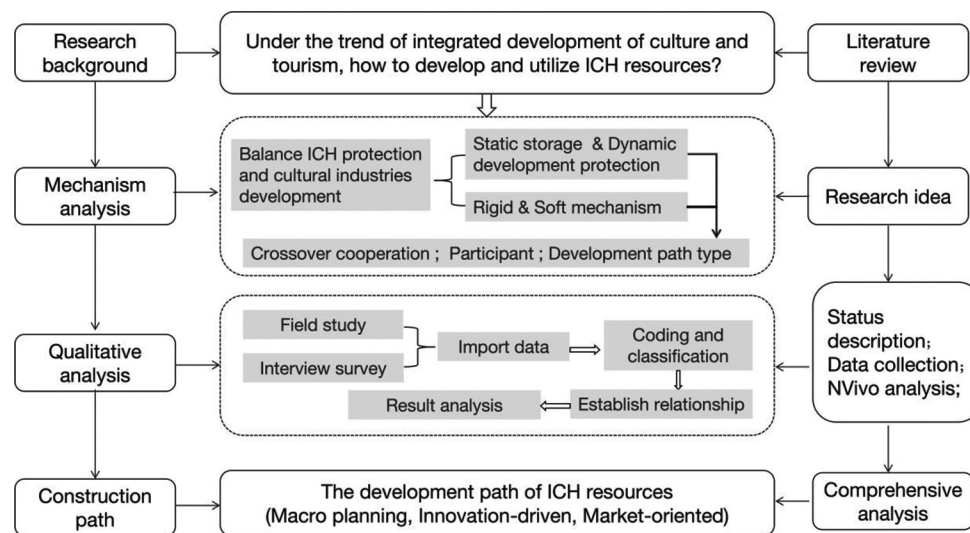


Figure 1. Research framework

Abbreviation: ICH: Intangible cultural heritage.

Table 1. Category and resource orientation of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

Category	Characteristic	Representative song
Labor song	Alleviate fatigue at work	"The lovers work together in the field"
Current political song	Indict the feudal society	"The man-eating demon"
	Praise the communist party of China	"Miao people acknowledge the government"
Ritual song	Reflect the ethnic customs	"The wedding custom song of Miao"
Love song	Praise sweet love	"The well water is sweeter than honey"
Life song	Depict diverse daily life	"Don't let the moss overgrow the road," "singing songs everywhere"
Historical legend song	Reflect on the history of the Miao ethnic group	"The troop training song," "the ancient song of Miao"
Children's song	Enlightening children's songs	"The little sparrow"
Narrative song	Narrate Miao ethnic stories	"The Kingfishers," "Why are Miao people good at singing"

and traditions of the local populace, exhibiting diversity and multi-dimensionality. Tourists can immerse themselves in the lifestyle, history, and culture of the Miao people in Xiangxi, thus highlighting its developmental potential.

At present, the integrated development of ICH and tourism in Xiangxi encompasses three modes: Industrialization, integration, and cooperation (Table 2), summarized from existing ICH projects. The integration of ICH resources and tourism in Xiangxi has reached a preliminary stage of maturity. However, relatively few development initiatives focus on XMFS, with most being live performances. Although primary school music education in the Miao nationality area in western Hunan has received some attention, it still faces many limitations.²⁶ Due to the operational subjects' insufficient recognition and understanding of ICH, the presentation of XMFS is overly bland and lacks innovation for the current audience.

This study investigates the cultural tourism routes of Xiangxi (Mysterious Miao Township) and summarizes the development status of Miao folk song resources in Huayuan, Jishou, Guzhang, and Fenghuang from the conducted field research (Table 3). Regarding the number of tourist sites, six out of nine Miao villages and traditional folk activities involve the development of folk song resources. Regarding the development methods, the folk customs of door-blocking songs and wedding music are primarily utilized. In terms of the types of folk songs, welcome songs are predominantly used as the main resources.

3.2. Analysis of XMFS resource exploitation degree

To describe the development of XMFS resources on a deeper level, this study employs the qualitative research software NVivo (version 14.23.0) to conduct hierarchical coding and text analysis from interviews with broadcast subjects ($n = 9$) and protected subjects ($n = 3$) conducted

Table 2. Types and characteristics of Xiangxi Miao folk songs development modes

Mode types	Specific mode	Characteristic	Case
Industrialization	ICH+performance; ICH+entertainment	High-value economic benefits	<i>The Wedding Dress</i> (microfilm)
Integration	Festival+tourism	Balance economic benefits and cultural values	Ganqiu festival
Cooperative and synergy	Educational trip	Multiple participants	Juvenile study tour

Abbreviation: ICH: Intangible cultural heritage.

Table 3. Resource development status quo of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

Area	Tourist destination	Development mode	Folk song category
Huayuan	Shibadong village	-	-
Jishou	Dehang Miao village	Door-blocking songs+dance	Welcome song
Guzheng	Hangwu village	Door-blocking songs+wedding music	Welcome song+wedding lament song
	Morong village	Door-blocking songs+dance	Welcome song
Fenghuang	Heku town	Open ceremony+song competition	New folk song+traditional folk song
	Fenghuang county	Dance+evening music	High tune
	Zhushan village	Door-blocking songs	Welcome song
	Laojia village	-	-
	Shanjiang village	-	-

during field research. From the perspective of the protection and development of ICH resources, it is evident that two important groups are involved in XMFS protection: The “inheritance subjects” and the “protection subjects.” The “inheritance subjects” are the participants in transmitting and displaying these resources and represent the “living essence” of XMFS. The “protection subjects” are the individuals or organizations that leverage their expertise to protect and disseminate XMFS. These two groups complement each other, facilitating the continued survival and development of XMFS.

3.2.1. First-level coding

Interview data of inheritance subjects, such as staff and performance participants of XMFS resource development projects, are used as first-level coding in this study to obtain the true connotation of resource development (Table 4).

Second, the level 1 code of “protection subject” in this study focuses on the government. It includes interviews with managers of business and civil society groups, aiming to describe the real situation of XMFS resource development from the managers’ perspective (Table 5).

3.2.2. Axial coding

Axial coding is based on open coding, and it analyzes the conceptual category relationships obtained from primary coding, such as the parallel relationship, category induction relationship, and statistical inductive conceptual

logic relationship. This study observed, summarized, and concluded the preliminary labels and concepts obtained from XMFS communication practice and deduced the universal relationship (Table 6).

3.2.3. Core coding

In this study, core coding centered on the inheritance subject further uncovers the development practices of XMFS cultural tourism resources against the backdrop of cultural tourism. This process integrates and condenses the initial two levels of coding by incorporating the core coding of the protection subject. Consequently, the subsequent three-level coding is derived by synthesizing open and axial coding (Table 7).

4. Results

4.1. Diversified development paths consisted of the present integration mode

Combined with the above coding analysis, it is evident that the development path of XMFS resources exhibits a trend toward diversification. This trend is reflected in the specific path distribution map and the path’s different development directions (Figure 2). Diversified development paths help expand the dissemination of XMFS, enabling their flow, sharing, and interaction across time and space while promoting its cross-cultural and cross-regional extension. For example, in villages centered around tourist destinations, many tourists can engage in

Table 4. Open coding of Xiangxi Miao folk songs from the inheritor's perspective

Row data	Open coding	No.
SQ1: Singing love songs during folk performances	Folk performances include love songs	1
SQ2: Non-ecological singing with accompaniment	Creative songs	3
SQ3: Singing toasting songs to the distinguished guests	Toasting song at the feast	1
SQ4: We only have the welcome song as a method	Welcome song in tourist destinations	7
SQ5: Tourists have to engage in song duels when entering the village gate	Folk-custom interaction	6
SQ6: Some performances organized by the government	Tourism performance	3
SQ7: Some employees sing a song at the festival ceremony	Festival singing	2
SQ8: Tourists can only get into the village after they respond to the passionate melody	Singing displaying	4
SQ9: Tourists can construct the cognition of XMFS by the introduction of a tour guide	With the tour guide's introduction	3
SQ10: The tourist destination only uses some simple and brief-phrase	Simple, short, new, and untraditional	11
SQ11: Miao folk song has played a decisive role	Miao folk song work on tourism	1
SQ12: Miao folk songs could be spread to diverse tourists nationwide with the guidance of national policy	Tourism spreading enlarges the receivers	2
SQ13: Miao folk song would be energized strongly by integrated in tourism	Tourism is beneficial to spread	3
SQ14: Different channels work on spreading XMFS with diverse advantages and purposes	All channels are useful	3
SQ15: Touring is a platform to spread XMFS	Tourism is a display platform	3
SQ16: An increasing number of villagers start to sing XMFS	Arouse national awareness	2
SQ17: Tourists feel those songs are authentic	Tourist has inaccurate awareness	1
SQ18: For instance, the wedding songs can expand the scope of development	The connotation of wedding songs could not present	1
SQ19: It is only representative and works barely on Miao folk song spreading	Tourism does not work on spreading XMFS	1
SQ20: The tourist destination and original channel are similar except for slight differences	Similar except for slight differences	3
SQ21: I think XMFS and tourism integrate effectively	Integrate effectively	2
SQ22: Those channels, reliable by the public and relevant in spreading, are official media, mostly	Activities organized by the government are highly reliable and valid.	1
SQ23: The status quo should be promoted	The status quo is dissatisfied	2
SQ24: I prefer traditional singing	Traditionalism	2
SQ25: Some singers ask me what I shout.	Cognitive bias	1
SQ25: The traditional singers dislike the new tones	Disagree with the older generation	1
SQ27: For instance, the Dehang village could be reorganized as a poetic combination of landscape, songs, and people	Integral development	1
SQ28: Integrating the XMFS into tourism with rich connotation	Connotation should be enhanced	1
SQ29: Excepting the profound integration	High-quality development	3

Abbreviation: XMFS: Xiangxi Miao folk song.

high-frequency communication, achieving highly effective “word-of-mouth” promotion. In addition, diversified paths can ensure the continuity of traditional XMFS, such as ICH exhibitions, folk song competitions, and traditional festivals, which can all serve as institutionalized practices for inheritance and dissemination. Performance activities, folk performances, traditional ceremonies, and cultural products will imbue XMFS with a new era of vitality.

4.2. Relatively unsophisticated music content discovered in scene exhibition

The development of XMFS resources within cultural and tourism integration is relatively simplistic, with only a select few songs being utilized in existing settings. Xiangxi, renowned as a land of songs, is characterized by a traditional cultural ecosystem where the Miao residents of Xiangxi perpetually sing. They communicate through

Table 5. Open coding of Xiangxi Miao folk songs from the preserver's perspective

Row data	Open coding	No.
SQa1: Miao folk songs play a significant role in tourism	Significance	3
SQa2: By presenting the traditional national culture	Distinctive culture demonstration	1
SQa3: Festivals of the Miao minority group	Festivals of the Miao minority group	1
SQa4: Activities of Fenghuang county	Activities	1
SQa5: By representations	Demonstration	1
SQa6: Competition of Miao folk songs	Competition of XMFS	1
SQa7: Building the professional team	Building the professional team	1
SQa8: Establishing the Miao folk song training school	Training school	1
SQa9: It is a path of contributing to rural revitalization	Rural revitalization	1
SQa10: Becoming the performing art product in the tourist destination	Performing art product	1
SQa11: A beauty-appreciation combination of historical background and public need	Match public esthetic	1
SQa12: Simple XMFS, the creative category, is what we sing	Creative	1
SQa13: The melody is apparently cantabile compared with the traditional songs	More melodic	1
SQa14: Forming the performing art product that shows the local traits and tourist-found	Inclusiveness	1
SQa15: The old generation have the ambiguity in the creative XMFS	The old generation has ambiguity	1
SQa16: The young generation sings songs in the improper tune	Authenticity missing	1
SQa17: We do not have resources	Resource integration	1
SQa18: So, we need force from outside	Needing leverage from outside	1
SQa19: It gradually became prosperous when investors from Zhangjiajie got involved	Rational administrator	1
SQa20: It is not enough to rely on Miao people only	Needing to break the limits	1

Abbreviation: XMFS: Xiangxi Miao folk song.

Table 6. Axial coding of Xiangxi Miao folk song

Row data	Open coding	Axial coding	No.
I1 – I5	Residents around the tourist destination	Identification of spreader	14
I6 – I9	20 years experience	Spreader work experience	6
I10 – I14	Family inheritance	Learning path of spreader	15
I15 – I17	Only sing some love songs	Variety of Xiangxi Miao folk songs	5
R1 – R3	Rite ceremony	Channel of communication	8
R4 – R5	We only sing welcoming songs	Variety of communication	8
R6 – R7	Based on the schedule of the government	Frequency of communication	5
SQ1 – SQ4	Creative songs	Variety in tourism practice	12
SQ5 – SQ7, SQa1 – SQa10	Tourism performance	Channels in tourism practice	11+12
SQ8 – SQ10, SQa11 – SQa13	With the tour guide's introduction	Traits in tourism practice	18+4
SQ11 – SQ16	Tourism spreading can expand receivers	Positive impacts on tourism practice	14
SQ17 – SQ20	Tourism does not work on spreading	Passive impacts on tourism practice	6
SQ21 – SQ22	Integrate effectively	Positive appearance on tourism practice	3
SQ23 – SQ29, SQa14 – SQa16	Disagree with the older generation	Passive appearance in tourism practice	6+2

songs, express emotions via melodies, and vocalize their aspirations in lyrical form. However, in practical communication scenarios, the repertoire of XMFS, despite its vast diversity, is underutilized, with only welcome songs being predominantly featured in development practices.

For instance, during an interview with a resident of Ramwu Miao Village, it was mentioned that “we generally sing welcome songs” at the scenic spot. Similarly, in the study context, the type of song highlighted was again “welcome songs.” Furthermore, XMFS is represented in the

Table 7. Selective coding of Xiangxi Miao folk song

Row data	Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding	No.
I1 – I5	Residents around the tourist destination	Identification of spreader	Identification and responsibility of spreader	54
I6 – I9	20 years experience	Spreader work experience		
I10 – I14	Family inheritance	Learning path of spreader		
I15 – I17	Only sing some love songs	Variety of Xiangxi Miao folk songs		
R1 – R3	Rite ceremony	Channel of communication	Manifestation of tourism integration	88
R4 – R5	We only sing welcoming songs	Variety of communication		
R6 – R7	Based on the schedule of the government	Frequency of communication		
SQ1 – SQ4	Creative songs	Variety in tourism practice		
SQ5 – SQ7, SQa1 – SQa10	Tourism performance	Channels in tourism practice		
SQ8 – SQ10, SQa11 – SQa13	With the tour guide's introduction	Traits in tourism practice		
SQ11 – SQ16	Tourism spreading can expand receivers	Positive impacts on tourism practice		
SQ17 – SQ20	Tourism does not work on spreading	Passive impacts on tourism practice		
SQ21 – SQ22	Integrate effectively	Positive appearance on tourism practice		
SQ23 – SQ29, SQa14 – SQa16	Disagree with the older generation	Passive appearance in tourism practice		

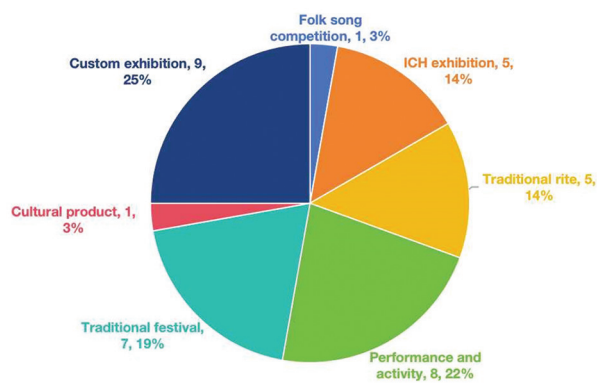


Figure 2. Development path distribution of Xiangxi Miao folk songs

folk performances of Dehang Miao Village, the live scene performance of *Border Town* in Fenghuang County, and the Miao-style evening show *Dream Tuojiang*. In each of these instances, the same song is repeatedly used, consisting of merely two lines, serving solely as an introductory segment for dance music.

4.3. Superficial integration of XMFS and tourism noticed in the development path

The development of XMFS resources remains superficial, focusing merely on the literal meaning of the songs without delving into their cultural connotations or the stories behind them. For instance, in the customary performances of Dehang Miao Village, dancers at the scenic spot depict scenes of young Miao men and women expressing their love through love songs used as background music. Similarly, the gate-blocking ceremony of Zhushan Miao

Village employs the Miao nationality's welcome song from Xiangxi to welcome tourists warmly.

While tourists gain an initial understanding and emotional connection to XMFS through these songs, such practices do not contribute positively to the long-term development of XMFS. Instead, they lead to a superficial selection of cultural elements and a deviation in the coding of cultural information during this singular mode of cultural transmission, thereby hindering the conveyance of deeper cultural meanings. Another example is the real-scene performance of *Border Town*, which features only two lines of lyrics, resulting in significant negative feedback during interviews.

4.4. High tolerance of "content distortion" detected from inheritor participants

Although XMFS faces the issue of "catering to tourists and content distortion" in developing cultural and tourism integration, non-genetic successors maintain an inclusive attitude. These inheritors actively participate in gate-blocking ceremonies, cultural tour-related performance activities, and Miao song volunteer services in Murong Miao Village. The types of communication they engage in include welcome songs and new folk songs. As cultural subjects, they preserve the vitality and cultural characteristics of XMFS, which is the greatest assurance of its authenticity.

For example, Interviewee A, a provincial heritage person, stated, "There are also positive aspects in the scenic spots. For instance, we typically sing XMFS only in local activities, reaching primarily the Miao people. However, in

the scenic spots, under the policy of integrating national culture into tourism, it can be disseminated to tourists from all over the country. With the introduction of guides, others can gain an understanding of XMFS.” Yet, this is not the true essence of XMFS. Although tourists may perceive these songs as authentic, they are, in reality, a distorted version.

Another example is Interviewee B, a state-level inheritor, who believes, “We also place great emphasis on tradition. Usually, I perform in an original ecological style, but today, I wanted to change it because this is a significant cultural event. Here, I believe art should be like a hundred flowers blooming and a hundred schools of thought contending.”

However, some inheritors feel that the current development practices of XMFS have not significantly altered its natural dissemination and even hold a negative attitude. For instance, Interviewee A, an interviewee from Zhushan Miao Village, said, “Singing XMFS in scenic spots is not truly for its dissemination; it is merely a demonstration and is, in fact, ineffective for spreading XMFS. If it could reach a wider audience, that would be ideal, but I look forward to a deeper integration. I do not wish to remain in the current state; instead, I want to integrate the rich connotations of XMFS into tourism.” As Interviewee B mentioned, “More Miao people should be involved to give it a more authentic rural atmosphere.”

4.5. Limited motivation observed from current non-inheritor participants

In contrast to the traditional family-based learning and mentorship inheritance model of XMFS inheritors, who begin their training from a young age, many non-inheritors lack the avenues and incentives to participate in resource development actively. For instance, the acquisition of Miao love songs by non-inheritors is often passive, driven primarily by the demands of performance activities. Interviewee C, a participant from Ramwu Miao Village, noted in an interview, “Generally, I rarely sing outside. Some people sing, such as during Miao festivals or when certain employees perform, but I usually do not go.” In terms of communication attitudes, non-inheritors, as communication subjects, lack the mindset and enthusiasm for engaging in such interactions. An interviewer from Dehang Miao Village stated in response to the question about the future direction of cultural tourism communication practices, “As for what direction to pursue, it is part of our job. If the government and companies demand it, we can implement and collaborate effectively. However, for ourselves, it is not our field of interest.”

In summary, the development of Miao resource folk songs in western Hunan is characterized by extensive yet

shallow and singular content. Taking the hometown village and Shanjiang Miao Village as examples, the proportion of folk song resource development is relatively high, accounting for 71%. However, this mostly pertains to the proliferation of different tourist destinations rather than the depth of development. In the development of XMFS, the welcome song is utilized to localize the scene of Miao tourist destinations in western Hunan, which, to some extent, showcases the regional authenticity of XMFS. Yet, it largely represents a simplistic transfer of traditional scenes and lacks innovation relevant to the contemporary era. Moreover, the development methods of XMFS in traditional village tourism destinations are strikingly similar, with song types becoming homogenized. The songs developed in many places are repetitive, and the homogenization phenomenon is prominent, which can easily lead to experience fatigue among tourists and audiences, affecting the cultural consumption experience.

5. Development path and related suggestions

As a very important intangible heritage resource in western Hunan, XMFS should be fully explored in the development process, and the contradiction between XMFS protection and tourism development should be alleviated on this premise. In fact, in the process of XMFS development, the single cultural information transmission will cause the superficial selection of cultural elements, the deviation of cultural information coding, and the transmission of cultural meanings. Therefore, selecting, presenting, explaining, and arranging XMFS, innovating its product form, and enhancing the market competitiveness of Miao traditional villages in Xiangxi is particularly important. Therefore, the XMFS resource development path is proposed.

5.1. Strengthen macro planning and build a new blueprint for XMFS

As an accompanying literary travel resource, the development of XMFS resources often operates randomly and passively, lacking systematic planning and design. The absence of top-level design restricts participants to merely following tourist attractions for performance activities, leaving little room for proactive innovation. Therefore, it is essential to lead with government initiatives, expand the connotations of XMFS resources based on academic research, and draw on practical experiences and first-hand data from the business community to promote new pathways and high-quality development of intangible heritage resources. Consequently, local government cultural and tourism authorities should introduce phased protection and development plans based on thorough research and discussion.

As the crucial hand of XMFS's protection and development, local government cultural and tourism authorities are the junction and cornerstone that connect XMFS to diverse communities in multiple paths. Specifically speaking, for sustainable development in the future, a well-formed protection and unclassified system of traditional XMFS by researching and documenting is impending stewardship. Particularly, prioritizing the preservation through sound and video provides a foundation for database development and safeguarding existing achievements, enabling the systematic collection, arrangement, and sharing of XMFS. Meanwhile, popularizing the documentary and data resources for society and propelling the utilization of available resources by citizens is also a significant design for the related branch.

As the important force behind XMFS's protection, the academic community safeguards its authenticity and pioneers new content. The in-depth exploration of the rich and diverse content of XMFS is essential for its preservation and creative development, which are closely linked to scholarly involvement. Furthermore, training, lectures, and communication between academia, inheritors, and enthusiasts are crucial for maintaining authenticity and promoting the dissemination of high-quality content. Finally, as a professional adviser, academia increasingly contributes valuable suggestions to public institutions and the business sector, fostering a more refined and sustainable cultural and creative ecosystem.

Eventually, the business community, serving as a bridge between tradition and modernity, acts as a vital platform for showcasing the cultural richness of XMFS. As a conduit for cultural expression, its involvement must be guided by the principle of protective development, which is essential for the distribution of various development paths. Notably, XMFS performances of high authenticity, such as those used in traditional welcome rites, receive strong positive responses, suggesting that enhanced audience experiences rooted in authenticity can lead to more effective development paths. Hence, this paper argues that protective-based protection and development is the foundation for meeting modern needs. Only by preserving the cultural roots of XMFS can we energize the connotation of times and modern development in the new blueprint for XMFS.

5.2. Innovation-driven new connotations for XMFS

Adhering to the right kind of innovation is one of the key principles in the current development of intangible heritage resources. XMFS resource development should be innovation-driven, integrating more contemporary content while respecting the fundamental connotations of

XMFS, making it more relatable to audiences and tourists. In addition to retaining content such as gate songs and toast songs, more new folk songs should be developed around village tourism. Many XMFS inheritors are already engaged in creating new folk songs.

Three vital innovation-driven factors are excellent content, fair-sounding melody, and easy-participant paths. Specifically, the excellent content of XMFS represents the cultural gene of the minority of Miao in Xiangxi. Based on the field research and the qualitative analysis, the current development paths that follow unsophisticated music content and superficial integration are shortcomings. As a result, this paper suggests that innovation-driven needs must be rooted in its long history and ample categories to avoid the evaluation of over-commercialization.

A fair-sounding melody is regarded as the most compelling element driving the dissemination of XMFS, constructed by the receivers' needs. However, distortions in the current development paths of XMFS can largely be attributed to the lack of melodic quality noted by cultural promoters. In Xiangxi, a wide variety of XMFS exists, enriched by diverse rites and regional accents, offering significant potential for differentiated development. Thus, this research assumes that the fair-sounding melody needs to be divided into two dimensions: a traditional dimension, which combines exhibition or tourism site performance to demonstrate the authenticity of XMFS, and a modern dimension, in which melodies are adapted or newly composed by professional musicians to reflect contemporary cultural narratives. Creating accessible and participatory pathways is essential to redefining XMFS with modern meaning. In terms of specific inheritance, more inheritors should be encouraged to use accessible media such as short videos (e.g., TikTok) and social platforms (e.g., RedNote) to reach younger audiences. They should select engaging stories from Miao culture and disseminate them online, attracting more viewers to travel and watch performances.

5.3. Market-oriented new trends for XMFS resources

The market for XMFS resources still has significant room for improvement. Compared to tangible Miao products that can be purchased, folk songs hold more mystery and are more likely to pique the curiosity of tourists. Based on the tourist profiles of the Mysterious Miao Township route in Western Hunan, the development path of XMFS cultural tourism resources can be expanded in three directions: research, new scenes, and immersive creative travel.

Study tour, as one type of research path, is the appropriate method to commercialize XMFS. Along with study tours becoming a new trend in China, a collaborative project

with the local government, XMFS inheritors, academia, and the business community has become a natural and necessary development. For example, a series of art research projects with XMFS, a children's musical theater program with XMFS, and a summer camp with XMFS can be included. As a result, tourists can be encouraged to engage in art research and analysis through the "learning + travel" method.

New experiential settings offer the most market-oriented path for XMFS commercialization. By drawing on the diverse XMFS melodies, categories, and stories behind them, this article considers that developing live performances led by professional art organizations around local resources, including the glorious landscape, beautiful costumes, rites, and XMFS, can rebuild the "dreamland of songs." Consequently, XMFS can draw on the essence of Miao culture to create cultural and creative products that attract tourists and gradually turn into a commercial, cultural brand.

Immersive creative travel offers an upgraded experience by implementing a creative tourism development approach that combines "cultural value and creative empowerment" for XMFS. Tourists can be encouraged to engage in local life or a magnificent performance by being part of it. This paper argues that immersive creative travel will become a popular market-oriented path among young tourists and create a tourism experience that is both participatory and authentic.

The market-oriented path of XMFS is a modern approach that connotes time. However, this new trend is accompanied by numerous challenges. Hence, exploiting these intangible treasures requires prioritizing protection to safeguard authenticity and cooperation with diverse social forces for a promising future.

6. Conclusion

XMFS has progressively become an integral part of traditional Miao village tourism in Western Hunan during its inheritance and development process, emerging as a distinctive landscape and a symbolic element of cultural tourism. While preserving the authenticity and vitality of XMFS, it is presented and disseminated through the integration of culture and tourism. For this study, two field visits were conducted in Western Hunan in August 2023 and July 2024. Qualitative analysis software NVivo was utilized to analyze interviews with communication and protection subjects involved in XMFS resource development projects. Data were coded hierarchically from the ground up using grounded theory, yielding a realistic depiction of XMFS tourism resource development.

The development of XMFS resources mirrors the journey of China's ICH protection efforts. Although resources

are abundant, the challenge of balancing protection with development exists. At present, many regions in China face issues in ICH resource development, such as an aging pool of inheritors, insufficient funding, homogeneous content, similar forms, and low levels of social engagement. ICH practitioners should make decisions about sustainable development within the complex context of their self-interest and social benefits.²⁷

Looking ahead, this study advocates for increased government support to encourage more social organizations and the public to participate in ICH protection. For example, destination marketers and managers should actively coordinate with higher and peer authorities to create a favorable policy context for promoting ICHs through ritualized experiences for visitors and local residents.²⁸ Raising public awareness through education and publicity is essential to engage a broader audience in ICH conservation efforts. In addition, promoting the integration of ICH with tourism and contemporary life can enhance its role in modern society. This dual "static" protection and "dynamic" development approach and strengthened international cooperation will contribute to the global governance of ICH.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

This study received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the Department of Arts Management at the China Conservatory of Music (Approval ID: 20230401). Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees involved in the study.

Consent for publication

All participants in this study were fully informed of the research's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from

each participant before the interviews. They were assured that their identities would be treated with the utmost respect and that their contributions would be accurately represented. We confirm that all participants consented to the publication of the data and information they provided and understood how their responses would be used within the context of this research.

Availability of data

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. Due to the sensitive nature of the data, which primarily consists of participants' personal perspectives and opinions, participants expressed discomfort with making their responses publicly available on an open-access platform. Therefore, to protect their confidentiality and privacy, the data are not publicly accessible.

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ARTICLE

The development of an improvising machine in ubiquitous music environments

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between design choices in improvising machines and the ideological foundations of the ubiquitous music (ubimus) movement practices. To this end, we developed a free/libre open-source interactive system in Pure Data, named “Engenhoca”. The system was initially developed to evaluate the potential for learning free improvisation through interaction with improvising machines during the social distancing period of 2020. It offers various advantages, including ease of use, support for both audio and symbolic output, and network communication possibilities—making this system especially suitable for inclusion in ubimus activities. Beyond its educational role, the system is now envisioned for broader applications, such as electronic music composition, digital instrument extension, and collaborative remote creativity. Its free software license and do-it-yourself orientation may inspire musicians to explore the creative potential of decentralized technological interaction—a perspective that is especially relevant in an era where intelligent tools, often poorly understood and difficult to control, are becoming increasingly pervasive. In conclusion, Engenhoca highlights how open-source tools can support creative, collaborative free improvisation. Its adaptable design and free software license encourage musicians to modify their systems to fit their individual needs and creative experiences, offering an alternative to artificial intelligence solutions. This study provides a preliminary theoretical foundation for the future development of accessible, interactive music systems suitable for diverse creative practices.

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(felippe.bbarros@gmail.com)**Citation:** Barros F and Costalonga L. The development of an improvising machine in ubiquitous music environments. *Arts & Communication*. 2025;3(4):6238. doi: 10.36922/ac.6238**Received:** November 18, 2024**1st revised:** February 27, 2025**2nd revised:** May 5, 2025**3rd revised:** May 12, 2025**Accepted:** May 12, 2025**Published online:** May 27, 2025**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNoncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**Publisher’s Note:** AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.**Keywords:** Computer creativity; Free improvisation; Improvising machines; Interactive music systems; Ubimus

1. Introduction

The ubiquitous music (ubimus) movement emerges from the convergence of musical creativity, ubiquitous computing tools, and the social dynamics of participant interaction, with the goal of promoting new ways in which music is created and experienced.¹ Over time, ubimus has evolved beyond its initial characteristics by incorporating new musical practices and perspectives that may challenge the necessity of technological support.

As a result, its definitions have been revised regularly. Recent studies suggest that a shared understanding has begun to form around the “notion of ubimus as an ecology or ecosystem of stakeholders and resources that support creative endeavors.”²

Although not formally identified as ubimus practices, previous initiatives in this area have been closely related to the genre of free improvisation, particularly in the development of technological tools to support creative practices. Stolfi *et al.*³ describe the development of an online music-making tool that takes advantage of the Freesound library (<https://freesound.org/>) to make real-time selections and combinations of Creative Commons audio samples during live improvisations. In another study, Clemente *et al.*⁴ conducted a series of experiments using information and communication technologies, along with ubiquitous computing, as tools to support the free improvisation practices of a saxophone ensemble. The study reported improvements in the group’s sound quality, as observed by both students and teachers involved in the experiment.

Free improvisation is a musical practice characterized by an anti-formalist approach, in which music is created spontaneously and performers often reject conventional musical structures and techniques in favor of exploring sonic interactions that emerge between musicians. The challenges in studying this practice—evident in the difficulties encountered when attempting to formalize it⁵—suggest that alternative approaches are necessary for its understanding and, ultimately, its apprehension. Although free improvisation resists predetermined structures, performers still require preparation for public performances. Many improvisers consider repeated ensemble performances the most effective way for musicians to explore the world of free improvisation, while solo playing remains a controversial issue.⁶⁻⁹

This scenario highlights a key challenge: when ensemble practice serves as the primary pedagogical model for free improvisation, musicians without access to group settings must find alternative ways to develop proficiency in the genre. The 2020 global pandemic presented significant challenges for musicians seeking to engage in in-person musical activities. However, social distancing also created opportunities for exploring networked forms of musical creation, broadening participation among individuals previously unengaged in such experiences. Technological solutions proposed by commercial companies for online musical collaboration often aim to support a wide range of musical applications within a single product. These solutions frequently reinforce the acoustic-instrumental model of music production and uphold hierarchical structures of

musical interaction—where specific participants, roles, or elements dominate or control the performance—thereby limiting equal contribution and spontaneity. In contrast, Messina *et al.*¹⁰ highlight the ability of ubimus ecosystems, which correspond to local conditions, by leveraging the flexibility of available resources. In this approach, technological tools are not merely passive instruments but are treated as active stakeholders in the creative process.

Tatar and Pasquier¹¹ define musical agents as systems that “explore the notions of autonomy, reactivity, proactivity, adaptability, coordination, and emergence” within environments of musical creativity, ultimately categorizing the creative functions of these agents into 12 categories. This research establishes links between the rationale behind the development of improvising machines—one such category—and the ideological foundations of ubimus practices, by presenting a machine that is both versatile and user-friendly, proposing it as a plausible alternative to traditional ensemble-based practice approaches for learning free improvisation. By offering a form of virtual companionship aligned with the free music paradigm, the system functions both as an educational tool for learning the genre and as an artistic medium adaptable to broader creative contexts. To this end, we outline recent decisions in the design, implementation, and future directions of our improvising machine, named Engenhoca—a free/libre open-source software (FLOSS) project developed in Pure Data (<https://github.com/ofefo/engenhoca>), a graphical programming environment developed by Miller Puckette for real-time audio processing (see: <https://msp.ucsd.edu/software.html>). Since its launch, it has been widely employed by the computer music community.

This study supports future initiatives by addressing the specific challenges involved in designing musical agents for free improvisation and ubimus. By combining a theoretical review of both music-making perspectives with a technical presentation of the implemented system, this study highlights how the system meaningfully engages with the distinctive characteristics of each field. The do-it-yourself philosophy and the open-source license of our system offer musicians the opportunity to develop their creative tools. By sharing insights into the design process of Engenhoca, we aim to empower other musicians to adapt and customize the system to suit their individual artistic needs.

2. Description of the system

Engenhoca is a musical agent originally designed for real-time free improvisation performances, discussed in a previous study¹² as a feasible companion for practicing the genre. This section presents its updated

version, featuring new solutions for each step of the interaction.

Like most musical agents for live performances, interaction with Engenhoca begins with real-time audio analysis of the sounds played by the musician. Each sonic event is analyzed and broken down into various musical parameters. These events are then segmented into “phrases” (lists) that each contain a single parameter, which is classified and stored in memory. To interact with the musician, the system selects phrases from memory, applies mathematical operations to manipulate them, and recombines the parameters into new sonic events to construct new musical discourses. The systems’ response can be delivered either as audio, synthesized in real-time, or as musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) messages that can be sent to any digital instrument. This process is illustrated in the flowchart in Figure 1.

Before starting an improvisation, the musician must press a button to measure the background noise intensity in the room. This measurement enables the system to establish a threshold, distinguishing sounds that exceed this level, which will be interpreted as “events,” from moments of “pauses,” when sound intensity falls below this threshold.

In the context of free improvisation—a musical genre that does not rely on tonal harmony and often employs non-standard melodic and rhythmic phrasing—it can be challenging to assess the end of a musical phrase using

traditional methods of analysis. To address this challenge, an alternative strategy for identifying and segmenting musical phrases was developed. In Engenhoca, the system uses the average pause duration between the last four events as a threshold to identify the beginning and end of a phrase. If the musician pauses for a longer time than this threshold—such as taking a breath—the system interprets this longer pause as a moment of “silence,” grouping the previous sound events into a single phrase. Each musical parameter extracted from a sound event is placed into a separate list. As a result, each phrase analyzed by the system is stored across multiple lists, with each list corresponding to a different musical parameter and containing the same number of items (each item representing a sonic event).

A decision-making system for an improvising machine must not only respond to the music that has just been played but also predict the direction in which the improvisation is heading. To facilitate this process, each parameter of a sound event is classified into predefined clusters. The predominant cluster identified within a phrase is then used to classify the entire phrase based on that particular parameter. This process is carried out using the k-means algorithm—a widely used unsupervised clustering method in data science—aiming to categorize the number of observed data points (n) into the number of clusters (k), where k is predefined by the user. The algorithm identifies the centroid of each group and assigns each data point to the group with the nearest centroid. This process can be repeated over several iterations (as specified by the user),

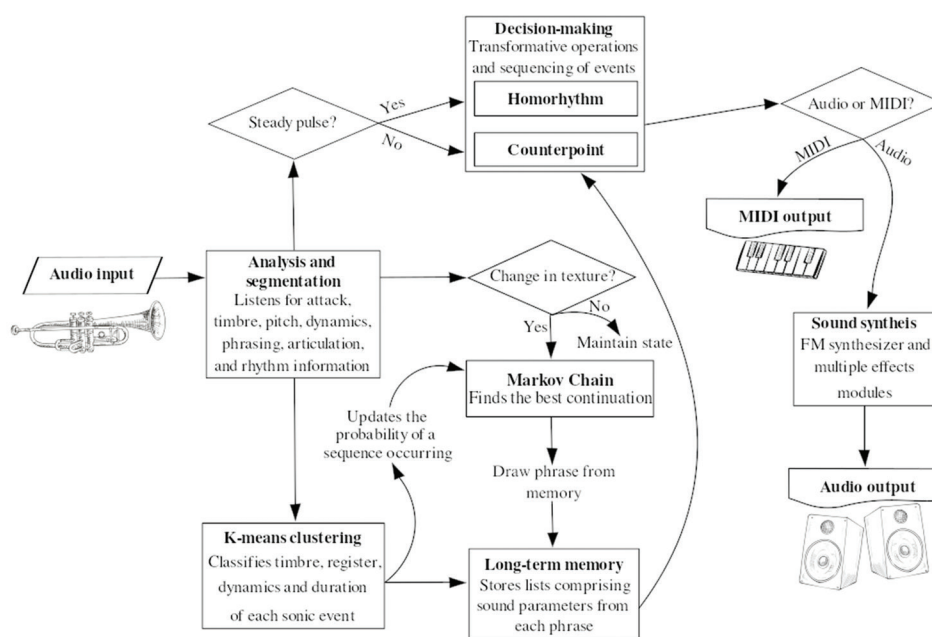


Figure 1. Flowchart depicting the architecture of the implemented system
Abbreviations: FM: Frequency modulation; MIDI: Musical instrument digital interface.

typically resulting in clusters of similar size. In Engenhoca, “training” datasets were provided for each sound parameter, and the algorithm is then used to categorize each new observation into one of the predefined clusters.

The parameters timbre, register, dynamics, and duration are categorized by the k-means algorithm into varying numbers of clusters, which may represent a simplified perception of these musical dimensions as understood by musicians. Each parameter of a sonic event is assigned a numerical value corresponding to its cluster: timbre is classified as (0) unpitched or (1) pitched; register as (0) low, (1) middle, or (2) high; dynamics as (0) piano, (1) mezzo, or (2) forte; and duration as (0) long, (1) moderate, or (2) short. Lists containing the cluster assigned to each sound event are stored in separate datasets, which collectively form a long-term memory of all parameter sequences played by the musician during both past and current improvisation sessions. To match a phrase to a specific dataset, the system uses the statistical mode of the phrase’s parameters, based on the same clustering scheme used for individual sound events. As a result, there are two datasets for timbre and three each for pitch, intensity, and tempo. This strategy reflects how a musician might perceive prevalent aspects of a musical texture. For example, in a sequence composed mostly of short notes with a single long note, the prevailing characteristic would likely be interpreted as one of short durations.

When the identified cluster for a musical parameter changes—indicating that the musician has altered some prevalent aspects of the musical texture—Engenhoca randomly selects a list from a corresponding dataset for that parameter. To determine which dataset to use, the system employs second-order Markov chains to model the likelihood of the next phrase’s cluster. Markov chains are statistical sequencing algorithms used to predict the probability of the next state in a sequence based on the system’s current state—known as a zeroth-order Markov chain. Roads¹³ suggests that musical applications may benefit from incorporating the last state (first-order) or even the last two states (second-order) to create sequences with a more organized sense of structure. As the order increases, the generated material by the algorithm increasingly resembles the original sequence. Markov chains—particularly when designed to account for previous states—have been regularly employed in musical agents performing imitative tasks, where they statistically model the playing style of a specific human performer, typically focusing on rhythmic and melodic characteristics.¹⁴

In contrast, the use of Markov chains in Engenhoca is not intended to imitate the user’s playing at the phrase level, but rather to identify behavioral trends between

each phrase played. For example, if a musician repeatedly alternates between high and low registers, the machine will tend to replicate this behavior with increased probability by selecting a phrase from the corresponding dataset—in this case, the collection of phrases played in the low register. However, the resulting musical texture may differ significantly from the material played by the musician, as each musical parameter of the original phrase is disassociated from the others. Additionally, as discussed in the subsequent sections, each list of parameters used to generate the new phrase is individually modified through transformative mathematical operations. This process aims to produce variations of the original phrase, drawing on composition and improvisation techniques commonly employed across different genres to generate new material from a single source.

Initially programmed with five independent voices, Engenhoca now adopts a monophonic texture, simplifying interaction to a single voice. This shift aims to direct the user’s listening experience to more concise musical content, making it easier to comprehend the machine’s responses. Two processes are employed to transform the musical material drawn from memory and generate new content: homorhythm and counterpoint.

A homorhythmic texture occurs when the machine produces sounds that begin simultaneously with those of the musician it interacts with. This texture is activated when the system detects a low standard deviation in the musician’s recent inter-onset intervals. The system uses k-means clustering to distinguish these low-variance patterns from higher-variance ones. Although sophisticated algorithms for beat identification have been proposed in the literature, this method proves effective in rapidly assessing whether the musician is approaching a precise reproduction of a pulse, thereby enabling the machine to synchronize with the beat. Collins¹⁵ proposed an alternative algorithm capable of performing rhythmic analysis to “differentiate free time playing from steadier metrically established performance,” which inspired the implementation of two modes of texture interaction in Engenhoca. During the homorhythmic texture in Engenhoca, musical parameters for each note are derived not only from memory but also from the most recent phrase played, allowing the machine’s output to more closely reflect the material just played by the musician.

Engenhoca generates a contrapuntal texture when no steady pulse is detected. In this mode, lists of parameters retrieved from memory are manipulated and combined to produce new phrases for the machine to perform. As each sound parameter is treated independently from those in its original phrase, and as transformative operations are

applied to these lists, the resulting texture is unlikely to be perceived as directly related to anything the musician has just played. To manipulate these parameters, the contrapuntal method randomly selects from a set of mathematical functions, which are applied to the numerical values extracted from memory. The functions used to manipulate rhythmic material and their explanations are presented in Table 1.

The system represents notes using pitch classes¹⁶ (PCs), and the functions used to manipulate them are listed in Table 2. A PC refers to a set of all notes with the same name across different octaves—for example, all C notes (e.g., C1, C2, C3, etc.) belong to the same PC, as they share a similar tonal identity regardless of register. In PC theory, each class is assigned a numerical value from 0 to 11, allowing for mathematical operations that correspond to musical transformations. For instance, adding a constant value to a set of PCs results in a pitch transposition. Finally, Table 3 presents the functions used for amplitude manipulations, applying the same manipulation style to the other aspects.

After each list of parameters is transformed by these functions, the contrapuntal method combines them into a new list that defines the parameters for the next note, which is then sent to the synthesizer. Additional parameters—not derived from memory but taken directly from the most recent phrase played—include a legato index and a spectral flatness curve, both of which replicate elements from the musician's recent performance. The term “legato” refers to a playing style where notes are smoothly connected without breaks. In this context, the “legato index” quantifies the smoothness or connectivity between sound events as perceived by the machine. This value is calculated based on the proportion of silence between two

notes that is not classified as a pause. Spectral flatness is a musical information retrieval algorithm that measures the noisiness of a sound spectrum by comparing the geometric mean to the arithmetic mean of its power spectrum. Low spectral flatness values indicate a tonal spectrum, such as a pure sinusoid, while high values indicate a flat, noisy spectrum.¹⁹ Incorporating these additional parameters helps the machine replicate both the articulation and the roughness of the sounds played by the musician in the short term.

The module responsible for audio output in the system is based on a frequency modulation synthesizer, which generates complex sonic textures by modulating the frequency of one waveform (the carrier) with another (the

Table 2. Functions that can be applied to the pitch manipulation of phrases

Function	Explanation
Same	Returns the original list with no modification.
Ascending	Sorts the list of PCs in ascending order.
Descending	Sorts the list of PCs in descending order.
Transpose	Randomly transpose the pitches in the original list (in semitones).
Multiply	Multiplies the PC values by a random factor.
Complement	Replaces the original PC set with its complementary set ^a .
Ascending complement	Sorts the list of the complementary set of PCs in ascending order.
Descending complement	Sorts the list of the complementary set of PCs in descending order.
Transpose complement	Randomly transpose the PC in the complementary set (in semitones).
Multiply complement	Multiplies the PC values of the complementary set by a random factor.
Markov	Selects values from the PC set using a second-order Markov chain.

Note: ^aAs defined by Forte,¹⁸ when given a PC set equivalent to the C major scale (comprising the white keys on the piano), its complementary set is the F-sharp major pentatonic scale (comprising the black keys on the piano). This complementary set contains all PCs not included in the original set, together completing the full set of 12 notes in the octave.

Abbreviation: PC: Pitch class.

Table 3. Functions that can be applied to the amplitude manipulation of phrases

Function	Explanation
Same	Returns the original list with no modification.
Crescendo	Sorts the list of intensities in ascending order.
Decrescendo	Sorts the list of intensities in descending order.
Equal	Repeats a single duration across all items in the list.

Table 1. Functions that can be applied to rhythmic manipulation of phrases

Function	Explanation
Same	Returns the original list with no modification.
Accelerando	Sorts the durations in descending order.
Ritardando	Sorts the durations in ascending order.
Shuffle	Shuffles the original list of durations.
Multiple	Multiplies each duration by a random factor.
Addition	Adds a value rhythm added, as described by Messiaen ¹⁷
Ostinato	Repeats a single chosen duration across the list.
Rotation	Rotates the list a random number of times.
Reversion	Reverses the order of the list.
Random	Creates a new list of random durations within the original range.
Markov	Selects a range using a second-order Markov chain.

modulator). This synthesizer receives a list of parameters for each upcoming sound event—such as timbre, pitch, dynamics, duration, articulation, and spectral flatness curve—and combines these defined aspects with a degree of randomness in the synthesis process to generate subtle variations between each sound played. The output is further shaped by routing it through a randomly selected sound effect, with a new effect chosen for each phrase generated by the machine. The currently implemented effects include ring modulation, pitch shifting, delay lines, real-time granular synthesis, low-pass and high-pass filters, amplitude modulation, and reverberation. The settings for these effects are derived from the same parameter list used by the synthesizer, combined with random values on a per-event basis.

Engenhoca also supports networked improvisation sessions. This functionality allows two geographically distant users, each running their own version of the system, to interact aurally in real time with low latency. It uses Quacktrip (<http://msp.ucsd.edu/tools/quacktrip/doc.htm>), a Pure Data implementation of the JackTrip—a network communication protocol developed by Chris Chafe that enables uncompressed, low-latency audio streaming for remote musical collaboration. Engenhoca uses the default public Quacktrip server hosted by the University of California, San Diego, but the audio is transmitted directly between the two users. A custom server IP address can also be specified if needed. The system currently supports sending the audio input, the machine-synthesized audio, or both, and can receive any of the same combinations from the other user.

Although ubimus initiatives are not necessarily dependent on synchronous musical interaction,¹⁰ Rottondi *et al.*²⁰ suggest that instrumental interaction can tolerate delays between 20 and 50 ms. According to Bosi *et al.*,²¹ JackTrip allows latencies below 200 ms even for connections spanning over 10,000 km, making Engenhoca capable of achieving viable synchronicity between two users when desired. This is particularly relevant in the context of free improvisation, where “synchronicity” is not as strict as in notated music, since strict adherence to a steady pulse is not necessary.

3. Ubiquitous music, improvising machines, and free improvisation

This section explores the similarities between musical perspectives within the ubimus movement and the principles underlying the design of musical agents, particularly those intended for free improvisation. Characteristics of *Engenhoca* and other improvising machines are used to illustrate these relationships.

The ubimus movement aims to integrate musical and sonic materials, challenging the traditional separation often found in classical and electronic music practices.² Similarly, many improvising machines—especially those developed for free improvisation—aim to bring together timbral and symbolic elements as equally relevant aspects in both sound creation and system interaction. For example, systems developed by Hsu²² analyze spectral roughness, intensity, and tempo from audio input to identify different “modes” of playing. Additionally, Collins¹⁵ developed a machine that employs k-means clustering to identify ten different sonic scenarios based on the timbral content of recent audio. Nort *et al.*²³ emphasized gestural and textural recognition in their free improvisation machine, centering sonic characteristics as the musical basis for the interaction.

Furthermore, Lewis²⁴ emphasizes that improvising machines should be regarded as active participants in the music-making process, rather than passive tools merely controlled by composers. This perspective aligns with ubimus principles, which advocate for non-hierarchical musical collaboration. A similar perspective is supported by the ubimus movement, who argue that “a paradigm of musical interaction targeting passive ‘instruments,’ ‘orchestras,’ or enforcing centralized decision-making may ignore key aspects of this ubimus ecosystem.”²⁵ They further stated that “in the context of ubiquitous systems, a device is not a passive object that a musician can play. It is an agent in a dynamical system that adapts itself to the musical activity, local environment, and other agents that interact with it”.¹ Illustrating this idea, Lewis,²⁶ in his early renditions of the Voyager orchestra, allowed each of its 64 voices to make independent decisions, eliminating the need for a central conductor and embracing a multifaceted collective musical production—similar to the collaborative approach of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, of which Lewis was a key member.²⁴

Many improvising machines, including Engenhoca, are designed to analyze and manipulate the symbolic elements of a musician’s performance to shape their own behavior in response. Lewis²⁷ stated that this mode of interaction is “essentially Eurocentric in nature,” as the reintroduction of previously played material can “come into conflict” with the evolving direction of improvisation. In contrast, early versions of the Voyager orchestra used the musician’s input merely as a “filter” for the system’s decision-making, relying only on a short-term memory of the last five notes played by the musician. Another experimental approach is presented by Banerji²⁸ through the development of Maxine, an improvising machine also designed for free improvisation. In Maxine, the resemblance of the material played by the human and the machine is influenced by the

physical proximity of a microphone to the speaker through which the machine produces sound. This feedback-based listening mechanism can “confuse” the algorithm responsible for pitch detection within complex timbres, often leading to misinterpretations of the melodic content. Consequently, the extent to which the machine aligns with the performer varies based on how effectively it listens to itself.

Engenhoca addresses the reintroduction of musical material by separating each parameter of a sonic event and recombining them in new contexts that differ from the original phrase. Additionally, it transforms the material through mathematical operations. Furthermore, the reintroduced musical materials may originate not only from the current improvisation but also from previous sessions stored in the system’s database. The decision-making and synthesis processes are also nondeterministic, incorporating indeterminate techniques such as Markov chains and randomness to navigate the memory of recorded phrases and introduce subtle variations in the sound effects modules. As a result, the recurrence of any musical material goes unnoticed or remains beyond the control of the performers, who function primarily as an influence on the system’s output.

Keller *et al.*²⁹ identify ubimus practices within the methodological framework of sonic ecologies—“habitats where agents and objects interact, producing creative sonic byproducts.” Keller and Lazzarini³⁰ emphasize that ubimus is grounded not only in musical and sonic resources, but also in the relationships formed among peers and with the surrounding environment. Free improvisation—a practice centered on collective performance—involves participants adapting to the audience and the venue’s unique sonic characteristics. Thus, improvising machines developed for free improvisation or other ubimus initiatives could establish creative relationships with the environment—by incorporating non-musical sounds or encouraging audience participation.

Ubiquitous music embraces music-making approaches that are independent of traditional acoustic instrumentation models, commonly associated with physical movement and sometimes regarded as the “only valid strategies for musical interaction.”² According to Keller,³¹ this paradigm tends to impose interaction modes and processes developed and maintained in the European classical music tradition. Although many performers within the free improvisation genre continue to use traditional acoustic instruments,³² their interaction processes and instrumental techniques often challenge classical music conventions, allowing not only the presence of unconventional techniques and sound sources but also fostering the integration of music with

other artistic forms. For example, Keith Rowe, guitarist of the free improvisation group called AMM, abandoned conventional guitar techniques by no longer tuning his guitar and instead manipulating it by placing it on a table and interacting with it with various objects. This approach was inspired by Jackson Pollock’s abandonment of traditional painting techniques in favor of the “drip technique,” reflecting Rowe’s background in visual arts.³³

When working with technological interfaces, Keller³¹ emphasizes that ubimus tools should provide intuitive interfaces that prevent “cognitive overload” for users already focused on maintaining their creative ideas. Reflecting this view, Engenhoca’s design encourages interaction through sound and minimizes setup complexity: starting an improvisation session requires only three mouse clicks, and initiating an online session takes just two additional clicks.

Finally, as discussed by Thomson,³⁴ free improvisation challenges the role of the improviser as a virtuoso, contradicting a historical perspective of European concert and jazz traditions. Likewise, ubimus supports creative approaches grounded in “everyday creativity,” which often lie beyond conventional musical traditions associated with “professional creativity.” This approach questions the dominance of virtuosity in music-making, shifting the focus from the final product to the act of creation itself.²⁹

4. Discussion and future perspectives

This section summarizes the key points addressed in this paper and outlines future prospects for Engenhoca, based on the theoretical relationships between improvising machines and the ubimus movement explored previously.

The system was originally designed as an artificial companion for practicing free improvisation in individual settings. The idea emerged from a practical concern during the 2020 global pandemic, when social distancing measures made it impossible for full ensembles to gather and improvise for extended periods. Interest in instructional applications of musical agents is not new. As noted by Rowe³⁵ and Lewis,³⁶ working with such systems can offer valuable insights into how we perceive and engage with musical interaction. In this context, the original purpose of Engenhoca was to provide musicians without human companions a computer system capable of interacting within free improvisation practice. In previous informal evaluations, experienced improvisers who interacted with the system judged it to be aesthetically effective within the free improvisation genre. To advance this research, plans are underway to implement more formal evaluation methodologies. Banerji³⁷ highlights that evaluating improvising machines is important not only for

developers but also for the improviser community, as the process can reveal crucial insights into their expectations of improvisation—expectations that are often undisclosed when interacting with human partners.

Beyond its instructional value, Engenhoca also demonstrates potential for diverse creative applications—such as incorporating audience participation and/or environmental elements—enabling the emergence of distinct sonic and relational ecosystems that differ from those typical of free improvisation. Future developments should incorporate environmental sonic relationships into the system's audio analysis—for example, by processing and reintroducing sounds that fall below the “event identification” threshold. This perspective—absent in the current design—aligns with *ubimus* perspectives by challenging the binary distinction between “desired” and “undesired” sounds commonly found in music creation.³⁸ Similarly, when the system is employed in a “concert” setting—a context beyond its original intent—alternative interaction modes could be explored through local area network connectivity. These might include audience participation through the exchange of sonic or symbolic data with the machine, thereby influencing the aesthetic outcomes of the interaction. Such developments would further support the *ubimus* perspective by challenging audience passivity and disrupting hierarchical structures in the sonic relationships that shape artistic experience.

Lewis³⁹ highlights that the distinction between “composition” and “improvisation” does not exist within computer software. The difference between these two perspectives can be perceived in how algorithmic composition is framed—not as erratic or unpredictable, but as a process limited to generating only “correct” outcomes. Therefore, the use of Engenhoca in compositional initiatives could also be explored. With a recording feature already available for both the musician's and the machine's sounds, each improvisation session can generate sound material that may be edited, layered, and processed to produce a cohesive electroacoustic composition. Similarly, unexpected outcomes from the interaction may produce unique sonic materials or conceptual ideas, which can be further developed, refined, and incorporated into compositions—whether through traditional instrumental arrangements or by integrating interactive elements that respond to performers or audience members.

While free improvisation typically favors interaction through sound alone—justifying the system's reliance on digital synthesis as its primary response mode—the availability of MIDI output offers possibilities for exploring alternative modes of interaction. For example, instruments that allow both sound reproduction via built-in speakers

and MIDI communication with a computer—such as most commercially available digital keyboards—could be used in works where the system responds through the musician's own instrument. Modifying Engenhoca's response algorithms to support this interaction could foster a perception of the system as an “extended instrument,” in which control is shared rather than fully retained by the performer.

Similar possibilities can be envisioned for other FLOSS musical agents, which allow their users to modify their source code, enabling creative outcomes beyond those anticipated by their original developers. The do-it-yourself nature of the present study serves both as an inspiration and an invitation for interested stakeholders to participate in the development of new creative applications. As commercial solutions employing artificial intelligence become increasingly widespread, it is important to critically consider the impact of the centralized, closed-source systems offered by for-profit companies. Creative proposals distributed under FLOSS licenses provide an alternative path for interacting with intelligent systems—functioning not just as a “one size fits all” tool but also enabling adaptation to diverse social contexts and their specific local resources.

Although free improvisation is often regarded as a “blank canvas”—musically “neutral” and open to endless sonic possibilities—the system's implementation intentionally resists the kind of “neutrality” typically adopted by artificial agents. The decision to implement a system with long-term memory reflects the belief that a musician's choices during improvisation are never made in complete isolation from previous experiences. By rejecting the “blank canvas” ideal, this feature acknowledges how distinctive playing styles develop within the genre. Although users can disable it to limit memory to the current session, recalling past improvisations remains the default behavior of the system.

The use of synthesized timbres, the processing of sound effects, and the mathematical manipulation of musical data within the system all reflect compositional choices aligned with the primary researcher's aesthetic preferences. These preferences reveal an underlying logic that favors a contemporary classical framework, particularly due to the system's reliance on PC theory. To reduce this bias, future versions of the system could incorporate more refined timbral analysis, enabling it to distinguish not only between pitched and unpitched sounds but also across a wider range of timbral categories. This data could then guide the system's decision-making processes, adding new layers to the interaction. Ultimately, it raises the question of whether the aesthetics encoded into the system risk reinforcing a limited perspective on free improvisation.

Therefore, it is crucial to emphasize that, as in any musical practice or appreciation, practitioners should avoid depending exclusively on specific tools or methods, and instead actively engage with the broader community and cultural foundations of the practice.

In contrast to our approach, which uses sound synthesis, interactive systems based on recorded sound manipulation—such as musical mosaicking,⁴⁰ where tiny audio fragments are reassembled in real time to generate new textures—tend to embody a more neutral ideal, as they can theoretically adapt to each musician's timbral palette. However, Gioti *et al.*⁴¹ demonstrate that machine learning algorithms—often regarded as “neutral” in commercial settings—are influenced by the material choices made during the compositional process. Both the fine-tuning of system interactions and the construction of the dataset that trains machine learning models—typically much smaller in artistic projects than in commercial or academic settings—represent compositional decisions that ultimately shape the final musical outcome.

Despite its promising openness and accessibility, FLOSS software often presents hidden barriers that can limit its reach and impact. Complex installation processes and steep technical learning curves may discourage nonspecialist musicians from engaging with specialized musical software. Likewise, implicit assumptions regarding hardware availability—such as the expectation of access to high-performance audio interfaces, instruments, or microphones—can inadvertently exclude practitioners operating in resource-constrained environments. To address these challenges, future investigations involving Engenhoca should consider not only the system's musical interactions but also the users' ability to manage its technical and intellectual components,⁴² thereby contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of its overall accessibility.

In summary, the development and application of interactive systems for free improvisation inevitably engage with a range of ethical considerations—whether through the aesthetic values embedded in the system's design, the cultural frameworks it upholds or challenges, or the practical barriers it may present to equitable access. Rather than assuming technological neutrality, this study acknowledges that every design choice—from timbral selection to algorithmic approach—inevitably reflects cultural, esthetic, and social implications.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the intersection of the ubimus movement and improvising machines by presenting Engenhoca, an interactive system designed for free improvisation. It was originally developed as a creative

companion to support the development of interaction skills essential for acquiring proficiency in the free improvisation genre. The system implements “compositional” choices that invite a reevaluation of classical Western music perspectives through the lens of contemporary improvised music. By examining the theoretical relationships between free improvisation and ubimus, this study highlighted how both areas aim to break down traditional boundaries in music-making, embracing non-hierarchical, adaptive, and collaborative approaches for creative practice. Both ubimus and free improvisation rely on dynamic relationships between agents, peers, and the surrounding environment, fostering ecosystems where interaction and adaptation are central. Therefore, this study suggests that improvising machines hold significant potential for various artistic explorations within both contexts.

Engenhoca, designed to prioritize accessibility and adaptability, is expected to support new approaches to improvisation and other creative musical practices involving artificial agents. Its usefulness extends beyond instructional contexts, offering potential as a compositional tool—ranging from the manipulation of recorded electronic sounds to real-time interaction between human and computer. Although the system was designed as an autonomous agent, its MIDI output enables it to function as an “expanded” instrument—aligning with ubimus perspectives that view instruments not as passive tools but as active participants in musical creation. By taking advantage of network connectivity, the system expands the possibilities for interaction with other ecosystems on the musical internet, allowing geographically distant participants—whether musicians or audience members—to interact with each other.

Future investigations should continue to address the ethical concerns raised in this study. A critical engagement with the cultural, aesthetic, and social implications of interactive systems invites broader reflection on how technological tools can support, rather than prescribe, diverse musical practices. Accordingly, future versions of the system should remain attentive to how they shape musical experience, participation, and accessibility—ultimately contributing to the ongoing development of both ubimus and free improvisation communities.

In conclusion, Engenhoca serves as a model for building adaptive, community-oriented musical environments. Its FLOSS license enhances its potential for adoption and ongoing development, enabling users to modify and evolve the system according to their individual needs and creative experiences, in contrast with the closed, often opaque nature of commercial artificial intelligence solutions that currently dominate the creative technology landscape.

The convergence between ubimus and the development of creative agents for free improvisation proposed in this study offers a preliminary theoretical foundation for future investigations in both domains, supporting the creation of systems that are accessible, modifiable, and suitable for a wide range of creative practices.

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Consent for publication

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Availability of data

Data will be made available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Further disclosure

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ARTICLE

Protection and immersive experience of cultural heritage in the digital age: Technological empowerment, spatial reproduction, and future risks

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Abstract

Cultural heritage serves as a vital foundation for preserving collective memory and shaping social identity, as it embodies the shared history, values, and traditions of a community. Technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and artificial intelligence (AI) are more often used in heritage preservation and tourism in the digital era, thus changing how people engage with and perceive the past. This paper uses the theory of space production to examine how immersive experiences across three interconnected dimensions – physical space, mental space, and social space – reproduce cultural heritage. Drawing on chosen case studies, the study shows that digital technology can enhance the sensory and emotional involvement of visitors, encourage participatory cultural expression, and assist the revival of local culture and urban memory. By connecting historical stories with modern audiences, immersive technologies produce dynamic exchanges between tradition and innovation. The article also discusses the issues facing digital reproduction as well, such as worries about authenticity, cultural uniformity, and possible marginalization of local voices. This paper offers an integrated framework connecting technology mediation, spatial transformation, and cultural sustainability to balance invention with cultural integrity. The framework provides an understanding of how immersive digital practices could be tools for social empowerment and heritage interpretation. In the end, this article underlines the need of striking a balance between technological progress and the preservation of cultural diversity and authenticity by stressing the role of digital media in transforming cultural settings. It also adds to the ongoing discourse on this topic.

Keywords: Cultural heritage; Space production; Immersive experience; Digital technology; Cultural reproduction

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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage protection has gained significant traction among citizens in China. Cultural heritage, as defined by the UNESCO (2003), encompasses “the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes inherited from the past, maintained in the

present, and bestowed for future generations.”¹ Cultural heritage generally encompasses monuments, traditions, and practices that embody collective memory and identity. With the growing enthusiasm among the Chinese people in tourism activities, these factors promote the deep integration of digital technology and physical industries in the Internet era. Using technological innovation to enhance the digital tourism experience of cultural heritage has become a new trend in the cultural and tourism industries. In 2024, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, along with four other central departments, issued the “Smart Tourism Innovation Development Action Plan.” This plan emphasizes supporting cultural and tourism institutions in adopting human-machine collaboration models. It encourages the use of cutting-edge technologies, such as artificial intelligence-generated content (AIGC) to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of tourism marketing.² In this context, immersive cultural tourism projects become a bridge connecting digital technology and cultural heritage. Traditional cultural heritage faces the challenge of “going out” and “staying” in the era of information explosion and global cultural exchange. Young people prefer new cultural tourism methods that are interactive, entertaining, and social, but the traditional static exhibition modes cannot meet their high participation needs. Multi-sensory participation and immersive interaction can enhance emotional engagement and stimulate imagination, creating profound and memorable experiences.

The immersive experience was proposed by American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 1975. It originates from the flow experience in psychology, also known as Flow Theory. This theory suggests that immersion is a highly focused, enjoyable, and time-forgetting psychological state experienced when people are fully engaged in an activity. Researchers divide immersive experiences into two dimensions: Broad and narrow. The broad dimension refers to the psychological aspect, while the narrow dimension refers to the technical aspect. Immersive cultural tourism experience spaces refer to the use of virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and other interactive devices in cultural heritage spaces through physical space design and digital technology to enhance visitors’ experience, interaction, and participation, providing them with an immersive experience.

“The development of technology in the digital age infuses digital media and methods, such as mixed reality applications into cultural heritage, revitalizing and innovating tourism destinations.” The organic combination of digital technology and the digitalization and intelligence of production spaces brings new development momentum to cultural tourism development and heritage protection. Academic research on the application of VR in tourism

began in the 1990s, but its basic principles started forming in the 1930s – 1980s.³ With the advancement of digital technology, VR and AR have become important means of immersive cultural heritage display. These technologies allow for deeper participant engagement and interaction with cultural heritage beyond traditional static displays. The protection of cultural heritage requires the organic integration of culture and technology to expand new spaces for cultural heritage development.⁴ It is important to use digital technology to protect cultural heritage and strengthen the digital development of cultural heritage.⁵ AIGC technology empowering cultural heritage has been an important trend in empowering the preservation of cultural heritage in recent years. It allows tourists to deeply understand cultural heritage content without affecting the original cultural heritage.⁶

The theory of space production provides a theoretical framework for understanding how cultural heritage is continuously reproduced in social practice. Lefebvre proposed that space is a product of social relations.⁷ It is not only a physical existence but also a collection of cultural meanings and social relations. As a unique type of space, cultural heritage carries historical memory and social value. The application of Lefebvre’s triad of space started late in China but is now widely used in many fields.⁸ Researchers believe that the combination of information technology and the experience economy promotes immersive cultural tourism as a new trend. Technology is not an independent display but is closely integrated with theatrical arts and cultural heritage, jointly constructing the core of immersive experiences.⁹ He *et al.*¹⁰ emphasize culture-oriented space production to promote value production, such as economic, cultural, social, and ecological values. Ye *et al.*¹¹ explore the positive impact of digital scene-driven open innovation from the perspective of Lefebvre’s Triad of Space. Lefebvre’s theory provides an important reference value for immersive cultural heritage experiences due to its historical background, critical spirit, starting point from daily life, and theoretical model and research framework. Foreign researchers frequently conducted quantitative studies on the impact of immersive cultural tourism experiences on decision-making and satisfaction. At present, local cultural heritage elements remain underexplored, and existing world cultural heritage resources are not being effectively utilized to foster local tourism development. The integration of new digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI), with the cultural tourism industry represents a growing trend and an important direction for the industry’s development, though the present research still has limitations.

The vulnerability and non-renewability of cultural heritage make it inherently susceptible to degradation

from natural erosion and human factors. Thus, exploring how to effectively excavate and showcase its intrinsic value while ensuring proper preservation has become a core issue that must be addressed. Through literature analysis, researchers have shown that cultural heritage protection and sustainable development are not mutually exclusive.¹² Cultural heritage listed on the World Heritage List can stimulate local tourism development. Static protection and rigid displays of cultural heritage are ineffective methods of safeguarding it.¹³ The present imbalance in regional development and disparities in cultural heritage resources has led to a dual mechanism for protecting and developing both tangible and intangible cultural heritage in China.¹⁴ Therefore, it is essential to develop and utilize cultural heritage responsibly, ensuring scientific protection, sustainable inheritance, and maximizing its value in contemporary society. Existing research seldom explores the relationship between immersive AI experiences and virtual-real spaces from a systematic spatial analysis perspective. This paper aims to integrate Lefebvre's theory of space production – perceived, conceived, and lived spaces – to develop a comprehensive framework for immersive experiences and explore how technologies such as extended reality (XR), AI, internet of things (IoT), and brain-computer interfaces can enhance the expression, identity, and value of cultural heritage in specific applications.

2. Multidimensional reproduction and cultural co-creation of cultural heritage under the theory of space production

Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist philosopher and sociologist, developed his theory of “The Production of Space” (1991) against the backdrop of post-war urbanization, capitalist expansion, and social upheaval. His political commitment to critiquing capitalist modernity and advocating for social justice deeply influenced his spatial theories. Lefebvre argued that space is not a neutral container but a social product shaped by power relations, ideologies, and human practices. His work emerged as a critique of the capitalist commodification of space and aimed to reclaim space for emancipatory social practices.

The theory of space production emphasizes the social and multidimensional attributes of space, providing a new perspective for the study of cultural heritage. In his book “The Production of Space,”¹⁵ Lefebvre proposed the theory of space production, which led to the “spatial turn” in social theory and geography. Lefebvre's concept of “spatial triad” includes spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces, which are the core ideas of his theory of space production.

Spatial practice refers to the production and reproduction of space, including the specific locations and spatial characteristics of each social formation. Representations of space refer to the abstract construction of symbolic space, associated with production relations and the “order” imposed by these relations, thus linked to knowledge, symbols, codes, and “positive” relations. Representational spaces refer to spaces directly experienced through associated images and symbols, emphasizing how residents and users interact within this space and how it is understood. The spatial triad theory provides theoretical support for major issues such as improper institutional management and low social space presence in some cultural heritage sites.

The coupling relationship between social, mental, and physical spaces with people, behavior, and the environment can be understood as a complex dynamic system where various factors influence and interact with each other. People, as the core subjects, live, work, and socialize in physical, mental, and social spaces. These spaces intertwine and collectively influence people's behavior and experiences. Behavior is the manifestation of people's interactions in different spaces, constrained by the physical environment, guided by mental space, and regulated by social space. The environment includes physical, mental, and social types, which together form a complex ecosystem that influences and shapes people's lifestyles and social structures.

Cultural heritage is not static historical relics but a dynamic process that is continuously redefined and reproduced in the flow of space and time. Heritage conveys established historical values and cultural meanings while also creating new experiences and cognitions through modern technology and social practices. Through the multiple interactions of physical, mental, and social spaces, historical culture is innovatively expressed in the contemporary context, gaining new vitality and social significance in modern society. The spatial triad theory divides space into three interrelated parts: physical space, mental space, and social space. These spaces have their own boundaries but are interconnected, interpenetrating, and synergistic. The concept of the “living museum” proposed by Catherine Grenier and André Malraux emphasizes that museums should be organic entities that continuously adapt to social needs. Through new exhibition relationships, the displayed artifacts and artworks become spiritual places for dialogue. Based on the spatial triad theory, a theoretical model for analyzing the activation of cultural heritage, space design, and community development is constructed (Figure 1). The integration of the spatial triad theory and the living museum theory forms a theoretical model of the triadic co-production of immersive cultural

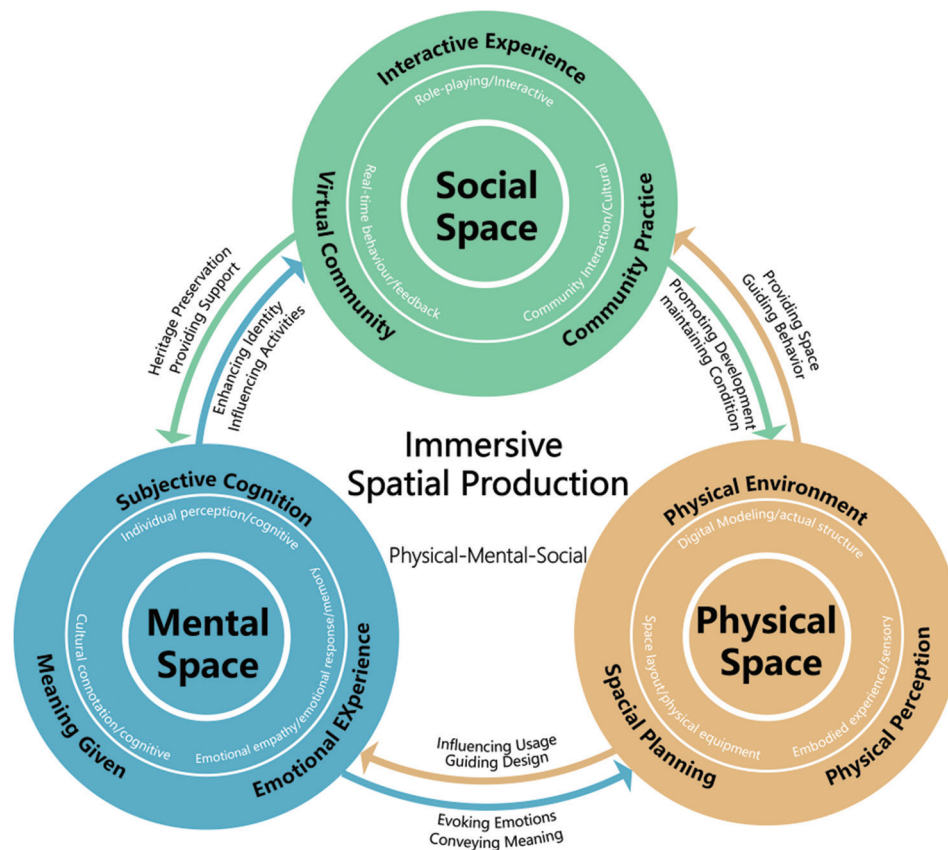


Figure 1. Immersive space production model. Image created by authors.

heritage experiences from the perspective of “physical-mental-social” isomorphism. This model aims to more comprehensively understand how to activate and protect cultural heritage in different spatial dimensions while promoting the development of cultural heritage and enhancing people’s cultural identity.

2.1. Spatial reconstruction: Reconstruction of physical space and historical reproduction

Physical space, or the physical space of perception, refers to the physical environment directly experienced through the senses, including the actual structure, layout, and physical presence of buildings. At this level, the living museum theory focuses on how to transform actual locations in cities into places for displaying and experiencing cultural heritage. The physical space of perception is the foundation of experience. As a physical space of perception, it involves the personal experience of participants and the acceptance by society as a whole, that is, the role mechanism of space in social reproduction. It collectively presents new spatial characteristics such as on-site experience, sensory immersion, and decentralized spatial forms. Traditional architectural cultural heritage, as a living museum, uses

its physical space to display local history and culture. Visitors personally experience it, increasing their sense of interaction and evoking collective memory.

In immersive cultural heritage experiences, the human body, as the basis of perception, is the existence of physical space and the carrier of identity. Through embodied sensory experiences, the body is brought into the scene. In the digital age, the use of immersive technologies such as XR expands the experiential scenes of cultural heritage as a physical space. The integration of multi-sensory immersion and technology allows each participant to gain a unique experience in a space that combines virtual and real elements. Through the application of digital technology, traditional physical spaces are deconstructed and reproduced, promoting the transformation of cultural heritage display forms. For example, Notre-Dame Cathedral uses immersive digital technology to achieve sustainable protection of cultural heritage in its reconstruction project after the 2019 fire. Gaël Hamon and his team at Art Graphique and Patrimoine used advanced technologies such as laser scanning and photogrammetry to create a detailed digital model of the cathedral. This 3D model, constructed from billions of data points, forms the

basis of the digital reconstruction work. The digital model leaves a permanent digital archive for digital cultural tourism development. At the design level, the digital production of physical space involves the integration of multi-sensory stimuli and interactive methods. 3D modeling, interactive design, and user experience optimization are key. Designers need to consider how to realistically restore physical characteristics in virtual space and enhance audience participation through interaction.

The “Vanished Pharaohs” project uses 1:1 high-precision reconstruction to restore the interior and surrounding environment of the Egyptian Pyramid of Khufu. Visitors can explore the core area of the pyramid, climb to the top to enjoy the panoramic view of the Giza Plateau, and “participate” in the mummy-making process by wearing VR devices and freely walking around. This meticulous restoration not only enhances the authenticity of cultural heritage but also makes history more vivid through virtual interaction.

“Entering Tang Dynasty in a Dream” virtually recreates the grandeur of the Tang Dynasty through digital technology. Participants, as “observers,” follow virtual tour guides to visit classic scenes such as the underground palace of Zhaoling Mausoleum, the landscape of Qinling Mountains, and Taiji Palace, experiencing the culture of the Tang Dynasty across time and space. The highlight of this project lies in the grand construction and detailed restoration of the scenes, making the immersion more profound. These large-scale VR projects reconstruct physical spaces through digital technology, breaking the limitations of physical space and enabling cultural heritage to be presented more vividly.

Space is a product of social practice, and the reproduction of physical space is the foundation of immersive cultural heritage experiences. The space of historical heritage is not a closed, fixed existence. With the support of VR, AR, and other technologies, physical space is reactivated as a platform for social and cultural interaction. This “reproduction” gives historical heritage new value dimensions, allowing it to connect with contemporary cultural needs and social practices. This process of “revitalizing” history transforms the “past tense” into a space that generates new meanings through interaction with contemporary audiences. Therefore, the physical space of heritage becomes a field for continuously shaping and updating cultural cognition in modern society.

2.2. Emotional resonance: Deep experience and emotional stimulation of mental space

Mental space, or “conceived space” as proposed by Lefebvre, refers to the process of imbuing physical space

with meaning through subjective cognition and emotional experience. Based on AIGC immersive experiences, mental space achieves a logical transformation from passive acceptance to active participation, from static display to dynamic interaction, and from single-dimensional to multi-dimensional integration. Traditional historical education’s mental space construction involves one-way transmission of information, fixed historical information and scenes, and education relying on text and images, with audiences lacking participation and multi-sensory experiences.

In the “Anne Frank” VR experience, space reproduction focuses on reconstructing historical memory, emotional experience, and cultural significance. This allows the audience to feel Anne Frank and her family’s psychological state and inner world while hiding from the Nazis in the virtual space. They can “walk through” historical street scenes and physical realities, transitioning to dynamic displays that combine virtual and real elements. This effectively brings the audience back to Amsterdam during World War II. The reproduction of mental space allows the audience to gradually explore and understand the deeper meanings behind the immersive experience story in an undisturbed virtual environment. The virtually reconstructed room retains the family’s furniture and personal belongings from 1942 to 1944, fully recreating their living environment. This allows the audience to see their living conditions directly and, through reconstructed details such as furniture placement and daily items, relive the psychological pressure and inner world endured by Anne’s family in a small space. This experience surpasses traditional visiting modes, allowing people to understand and feel individual memories of a significant historical period in a deeper and more intimate way.

The inheritance and innovation of mental space are the core of immersive cultural heritage experiences. The re-“experience” of cultural heritage in the mental cultural world blurs the boundaries between history and the present. Across technological intervention and emotional resonance, it becomes a “living” existence. In this process, the construction of mental space involves cultural reconstruction and emotional interaction and identity construction between individuals and space through immersive experiences. By entering the audience’s perceptual and emotional dimensions, it helps them interactively perceive the emotional significance behind historical events, reshaping the connection between history and the present. “Space is a product of social relations” is reconstructed and recreated through the intertwining of new social needs, cultural cognition, and emotional experiences.

2.3. Interactive empowerment: Reproduction and interactive collaboration of social space

Social space emphasizes the use and interaction of space by people in their daily lives. It involves how cultural heritage influences and is influenced by the social practices of community members. Living museums encourage visitors to interact with community groups, promoting cultural exchange and forming a shared collective memory and social cohesion. The production of social space is continuous and multidimensional. Virtual community platforms can dynamically adjust interactive tasks and scenarios based on participants' real-time behavior and feedback, making the experience space constantly change and adapt.

First, through AIGC technology and immersive experience technology, a virtual community platform is constructed, allowing users to engage in role-playing and interactive tasks in a virtual space. Second, it transforms the experience space, breaking the traditional user tourism model. Users actively participate in historical contexts through interactive tasks and role-playing, becoming part of the story.

In the "ALAB Shanghai Space" project, the A-Station team cleverly integrates the real geographical space of Beijing's 798 and 751 squares with the virtual world, redefining visitors' experiences at this Beijing cultural and artistic landmark. Across Vision Pro devices, visitors exist as observers and become part of the story through interaction. For example, visitors can interact with mythical creatures from the "Classic of Mountains and Seas" in VR. This design makes each visitor's experience unique and social. Each interaction triggers different plot developments, allowing visitors to share and discuss their discoveries, forming a new social bond. In addition, the project has designed a walking area of over 2000 m². When a group of visitors enters a specific area, the system generates specific virtual scenes based on their behavior. Other visitors can also form a special collective experience through active observation or participation, transforming the traditional passive visiting mode into a new social space.

To enhance interactivity, the project also includes photo-taking and social media sharing functions, extending visitors' experiences to a broader social network. Visitors can take photos in virtual scenes and share them on social platforms, forming a collective social interaction. For different age groups, A-Station has designed content meticulously. Young users are attracted by fantasy and novelty elements, while older users focus on the depth of cultural background and historical stories. By customizing content for different user groups, the project enhances the

participation of various users. In addition, visitors can share their discoveries through digital tags or mark points of interest in virtual space, adding a new dimension to social interaction.

In terms of technology and management, the team developed a backend management system to monitor the location of each device in real-time, prevent device loss, and optimize battery management, ensuring a smooth visitor experience and the stability of the virtual social space. Through these design and technological innovations, "ALAB Shanghai Space" effectively realizes the reproduction of social space, enhances the attractiveness of the 798 Art District, and provides a new paradigm for the application of spatial computing in the cultural tourism industry.

The continuation and co-construction of social space is the reproduction process of cultural heritage immersive experiences in the social dimension. In Lefebvre's theory, social space is not an extension of physical space but a field constituted by human social behavior, interaction, and identity. The social space reproduction of cultural heritage reflects how cultural heritage establishes relationships with social members, communities, and collective memory in contemporary society. Across the empowerment of digital technology, these social relationships are continued, strengthened, and recreated.

However, this technological mediation calls important issues regarding authenticity into doubt. According to the UNESCO, authenticity is the "truthful transfer of cultural values" through material, shape, and function. Although digital technologies increase social involvement, they run the danger of replacing the actual and physical ties that support the genuineness of legacy. For example, AI-reconstructed historical conversations can give emotional involvement top priority above factual correctness, hence altering group memory. Lefebvre's dialectical perspective therefore reminds us that the lived social actions anchoring legacy in material and intangible traditions should be complemented, not replaced, by technological replication.

3. Future-oriented innovation in immersive cultural heritage experiences: Reconstructing the production and perception of space

In future immersive cultural heritage experiences, emerging digital technologies will transform cultural heritage into a dynamic, multi-dimensional interactive process that transcends time and space. By re-examining Lefebvre's theory of space production, a more innovative and in-depth theoretical framework can be provided for immersive cultural heritage experiences. Immersive cultural heritage

experiences are not merely the reproduction of physical space; they are a “spatial practice” interwoven with history, emotion, society, and culture.

3.1. Reconstruction of physical space: Beyond static reproduction to embodied perception

Traditional cultural heritage displays often rely on the restoration and static presentation of physical space. Modern technology, however, allows the physical space of cultural heritage to transcend the limitations of time and space, enabling virtual and dynamic reconstruction. Technologies such as laser scanning and photogrammetry can create digital models, ensuring the sustainable preservation and “perpetual” presentation of historical buildings and artifacts. At the same time, wearable devices can simulate tactile feedback, allowing visitors to touch virtual historical relics or artifacts through vibrations and temperature changes, creating a sense of “presence” through the fusion of virtual and real elements. Visitors can even experience the “craftsmanship spirit” of history by simulating ancient handicraft processes. In addition, olfactory simulation technology can recreate the smells of historical sites in virtual environments, creating a more comprehensive immersive experience. The synergy of multiple senses deeply stimulates visitors’ embodied perception of spatial practice. XR technology can further break the limitations of time and space, enabling immersive “roaming.”

3.2. Reproduction of mental space: Emotional and cognitive historical experience

Lefebvre’s concept of mental space emphasizes the cognition and experience of history, culture, and emotions. With the development of AI and affective computing, immersive experiences can adjust and optimize display content in real-time based on visitors’ emotional responses, historical knowledge, and interests. By combining natural language processing, brain-computer interfaces, and affective computing, these experiences can create deep immersion. The content can be adjusted in real-time according to visitors’ knowledge levels and interests, and even generate dynamic historical plots based on their emotional changes. AI can enable visitors to converse with virtual historical figures, feel their emotional decisions, and resonate with historical figures or events on a deeper level. This interaction blends “scenery” and “story,” creating a unique “mental experience” for users.

3.3. Dynamic generation of social space: Cross-temporal interaction and cultural co-creation

Lefebvre’s theory of social space emphasizes the interaction between people, and between people and objects, within

space. Future immersive experiences will not only involve one-way interaction between individuals and heritage but also create a cross-cultural, cross-temporal social co-creation space. Future 6G low-latency networks will effectively support collaborative experiences, allowing visitors from different cultural backgrounds worldwide to become part of the immersive experience. In virtual environments, visitors can communicate, share, and co-create, participating in the virtual reconstruction of historical sites, and discussing and creating new narratives for historical events. Consequently, cultural heritage becomes a dynamic cultural space co-created and shaped by multiple subjects, promoting equal dialogue and mutual learning among diverse cultures and fostering the co-construction and sharing of decolonized narratives.

4. Future-oriented immersive cultural heritage experiences: Innovation and risks

With the advancement of technological innovation, immersive cultural heritage experiences have raised several issues regarding cultural diversity, ethical responsibility, and technological sustainability. Future research and practice need to address these issues while promoting technological innovation to ensure the sustainable development of immersive cultural heritage experiences. Table 1 presents the innovation directions, technological applications, risks, and prospects for future immersive cultural heritage experiences.

4.1. Balancing historical authenticity and entertainment

The application of emerging technologies in cultural heritage protection and dissemination injects new vitality into cultural experiences. However, there needs to be a balance between historical authenticity and entertainment. Immersive technology can restore historical scenes with high presence through AIGC combined with VR technology, but over-reliance on AI may lead to the “entertainmentization” of historical content, even deviating from historical authenticity. For example, virtual reconstruction projects may introduce subjective creation in detail restoration, and this “dramatization” weakens its academic and educational value. It requires the collaboration of interdisciplinary expert teams from archaeology, history, and technology to jointly formulate content production standards to ensure the accurate expression of historical details. Introducing independent social review institutions, and integrating public feedback and professional opinions, can reduce the bias toward entertainment. Technology should not be a commercial gimmick; content review and historical verification are crucial. The authenticity of historical scenes should be reconstructed using multi-dimensional

Table 1. Future immersive cultural heritage experiences

Research direction	Innovation content	Technological application	Risks and prospects	Sources
Decolonization and diversified narratives of digital heritage	Achieving “decolonization” and “co-creation” of historical heritage through global cultural sharing and integration of diverse perspectives	AI, big data, VR	Balancing different cultural perspectives, avoiding cultural hegemony and single narratives	UNESCO 2021 Report on <i>Ethics of Digital Heritage</i> ; ICOMOS Charter on Virtual Archaeology ¹⁶
Ethical risks and social responsibility in immersive experiences	Ensuring that the display of historical heritage meets ethical requirements, avoiding misinterpretation of history and commercialization of culture	Ethical design frameworks, review mechanisms, user emotion analysis	Balancing entertainment with cultural respect, avoiding the virtualization and commercialization of history	IEEE Global Initiative on <i>Ethically Aligned Design</i> ¹⁷ ; EU Project TIME MACHINE ¹⁸
Intelligent immersive experiences and personalized historical cognition	AI emotional computing technology provides personalized, emotion-based historical experience pathways, adjusting content in real-time	AI, affective computing, behavior analysis	Complexity in designing personalized historical experiences and technical implementation challenges	MIT Media Lab’s <i>Affective Computing Research</i> ¹⁹ ; Google Arts & Culture Lab Case Studies ²⁰
Application of quantum computing and big data in immersive cultural heritage	Leveraging quantum computing and big data for the precise digital reconstruction of historical sites, thereby enhancing the authenticity and detail of historical scenes	Quantum computing, big data analysis	Complexity and resource consumption of technical implementation, ensuring historical authenticity	IBM Quantum & Cultural Heritage White Paper ²¹ ; EU’s VERITAS Project on 3D Reconstruction ²²
Virtual anthropology and immersive cultural heritage education	Virtual identities participate in historical events, experiencing the dynamic evolution of historical culture, enhancing the immersion of cultural education	VR, AR, simulation technology	Overcoming the gap between virtual historical education and real perception.	British Museum’s <i>Virtual Reality Tours</i> ²³ ; Stanford University’s <i>Virtual Human Interaction Lab</i> ²⁴
Decentralization and blockchain protection of digital heritage	Blockchain technology ensures the authenticity and immutability of digital cultural heritage content, providing digital heritage certificates	Blockchain, decentralized storage, smart contracts	Legal and ethical issues of technology adoption and application, data security, and privacy protection	World Monuments Fund & Arweave Blockchain Partnership ²⁵ ; UNESCO’s <i>Charter on Digital Preservation</i> ¹⁵

Note: The content is derived from the summary and analysis of recent academic and industrial trends prepared by the author’s team.

Abbreviations: AI: Artificial intelligence; AR: Augmented reality; VR: Virtual reality.

scanning technology to ensure the authenticity of cultural relics, requiring long-term verification and review.

4.2. Technological barriers and digital divide

Although digital technology enhances participation in cultural experiences, the high cost of equipment and technological barriers hinder its popularization in developing countries and remote areas. Specifically, VR/AR headsets and brain-computer interface devices are expensive and difficult to popularize among all social groups. Remote areas with insufficient network bandwidth find it challenging to achieve equal immersive experiences with central cities.

An effective mechanism for regional development and resource allocation needs to be established. It is recommended that governments and enterprises jointly promote the construction and pilot of “immersive cultural” infrastructure, such as building “public digital cultural spaces” or mobile experience devices, to provide low-cost immersive experiences for underdeveloped areas. Developing low-tech, more compatible immersive technologies can also help achieve cultural equity by

targeting underdeveloped areas and niche cultural heritage, avoiding new cultural inequalities.

4.3. Data security and privacy protection

The core of immersive technology is the real-time tracking and recording of user behavior and physiological data. If these sensitive data are leaked or misused without regulation, they may be commercially exploited or hacked, posing threats to personal privacy and security.

Some researchers propose using blockchain to trace and confirm the rights of digital heritage data, ensuring data immutability and traceability, and establishing a reliable mechanism for the digital protection of cultural heritage. However, in practice, legal and regulatory support and industry standards need to be established to clarify the boundaries and uses of data collection, limiting the abuse of rights from legal and ethical perspectives.

4.4. Sustainable and interdisciplinary future

Future immersive cultural experiences require not only technological breakthroughs but also multidisciplinary

collaboration and participation from all sectors of society. By constructing a collaborative network of “technology-academia-society” with multiple stakeholders, and establishing long-term cooperation mechanisms and funding support channels, all parties can jointly promote the scientific and sustainable development of digital cultural heritage protection. While ensuring respect for the cultural heritage itself, it is necessary to pursue technological breakthroughs and artistic creativity continuously, maintaining reverence and rigorous research for the cultural core, enabling cultural heritage to achieve true “activation” in the digital age.

5. Discussion

A monument to the social and historical developments handed down through the years, the cultural heritage reflects substantial riches deserving of continuous protection and worldwide respect. Particularly among younger generations, immersive experiences have grown in popularity and provide great chances to reawaken the public with cultural heritage through creative, interactive approaches. Using Lefebvre’s theory of space production, this study investigates the multidimensional reproduction process of immersive cultural heritage events by providing a reconstruction framework including physical, mental, and social spheres. This framework helps one to see cultural heritage reproduction as both a historical reenactment and a continuous process through which modern technical developments and social activities create new cultural meanings and social values.

The study offers various rational impacts for developers of digital heritage, museum professionals, and legislators. Policymakers can apply the knowledge offered to create sensible plans for the preservation of legacy that combine modern technologies with harmony between authenticity and entertaining. Immersion technologies including XR, AI, and IoT allow museum workers and digital heritage creators to provide enhanced cultural experiences, increase audience participation, and raise public involvement.

However, the incorporation of new technology presents serious ethical and practical difficulties, most notably with relation to historical accuracy, data security, and fair access. Future studies should methodically investigate the effects of using AIGC in digital heritage presentations, therefore answering important issues on authenticity, accuracy, and content interpretation. Moreover, ethical guidelines controlling digital heritage projects must be developed, especially with regard to problems of historical authenticity, cultural sensitivity, and economic exploitation of historical resources.

Comparative studies assessing immersive experiences across many cultural settings, user long-term engagement with digitally mediated legacy, and how changing technologies – such as quantum computing, blockchain, and brain-computer interfaces – might reshape the terrain of heritage protection and interpretation could also be part of future research directions. Dealing with technological, ethical, and cultural issues will ultimately call for multidisciplinary cooperation among specialists in history studies, computer science, ethics, and sociology to guarantee that digital legacy preservation stays both responsible and creative.

6. Conclusion

The involvement of digital technology offers cultural preservation thus far unprecedented opportunities for creative reinterpretation and extensive distribution. Still, continuing critical study of these advances is essential. Future immersive cultural heritage experiences can better satisfy the various requirements of modern society as well as heritage preservation by aggressively tackling issues in ethics, authenticity, technological accessibility, and cooperative governance.

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ARTICLE

Two modern poems with a strong religious message

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Abstract

In this essay, two renowned modernist poems – T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Miyazawa Kenji's *Haru to Shura* (1924) – were explored. Both may include ethical aspects, but their religious component is more prominent. The aim is to discover how this component functions in each text. Eliot's poem needs no introduction, but Miyazawa, though famous in Japan, is much less so in the English-speaking world. To analyze the texts, my expanded version of M. Riffaterre's semiotic theory of the structure of modern poetry was used. According to the theory, a modern poetic text is generated by two underlying 'matricial' propositions, each of which produces a set, or paradigm, of variant images having the same underlying semantic structure. This paradigmatic method of signifying is a characteristic of modern poetry. Each matrix is reconstructed by the reader from a comparison of the images of each set. The matrices are linked syntagmatically in a variety of relations, such as negation or difference of scale. The bimatricial text (subject–sign) has an intertextual counterpart (object–sign) of similar structure but different lexicon. The interpretant of these two complex signs has a sociolectic counterpart of similar lexicon but different structure. The semantic contrast thus established produces innovation, which is the other distinctive feature of modern poetry. This theory will be applied to Eliot's and Miyazawa's poems to investigate the roles of religion in them.

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1. Introduction

Although research into the relation between literature and ethics is apparently increasing, one problem with ethics is that they may vary with the tenets (and folk beliefs) of a given society.^a This would require a comprehensive knowledge of the society from which the literary work derived. Even if we are dealing with a contemporary society, the moral system on which ethics are based can vary with the extent of the society concerned — one thinks of the differences between Japanese and American society, for example, when it comes to same-sex marriage. Currently, the Japanese government's position is that such marriages are unethical, and therefore illegal, though this situation seems on the brink of change.

We may say that Japan is an example of a society in which a strong ethical system exists mostly without religion. That would be to assume that Japanese Confucianism

^a Refer to the link: <https://archive.pagecentertraining.psu.edu/public-relations-ethics/ethical-decision-making/et-another-test-page/the-difference-between-ethics-and-religion/>³

is basically not a religion, but rather a system of rules for social behavior (Confucianism is “built in” to Japanese society, but hardly ever discussed openly in this day and age. It should be noted that the ethical system of Mahayana Buddhism is taught to some extent in high schools).

Religion, on the other hand, although it usually has an ethical component, is of much broader application, the major religions retaining the same values across national and cultural boundaries. A deeply religious person may be unethical in some ways, for example, in their treatment of small children. However, their religion – whether Pure Land Buddhism or Christianity – may remain the same or very similar across geographically wide areas. One thinks of Pure Land in Japan and in Vietnam, for instance, and Roman Catholicism in the same two nations. While on the religious level, similarities abound, once again, when it comes to ethics, there is likely to be strong influence from national folk and other traditions.

In this essay, two renowned modernist poems — T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922)¹ and Miyazawa Kenji’s *Haru to Shura* (Spring and the Shura, 1924)²—are explored. There may be ethical aspects in both, but both also share a strong religious component, which is, moreover, part of their semiotic structure. The aim is to discover how this component functions in each text. Eliot’s long poem needs little introduction, but Miyazawa, although famous in Japan, is much less well known in the English-speaking world. His poem is quite syncretic, in combining Christian and Buddhist aspects, in a less superficial way than Eliot’s combination of Hinduism and Christianity.

1.1. Note on Eliot and *The Waste Land*

This section occasionally refers to a previous article, “A semiotic key to *The Waste Land*.”^a The poem is long, at 433 lines—unfortunately, too long to quote in this article.^b

Commentaries on Eliot’s poem, like that of Loughborough University, tend to characterize the text as a depressing depiction of England post-World War I (cf. link to undated website <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/english/undergraduate/study-guides/the-waste-land/#>). For example, most commentaries seem to take a cue from the title. This is, in fact, quite unnecessary when we consider that one of Eliot’s earlier titles was *He Do the Police in Different Voices*, which reflected the different vignettes of English society found in the first two sections of the text.^c True, most of these are downbeat in tone, if not quite depressing. But Eliot was a deeply religious man

(whose interests were not confined to Christianity), and many of his poems have an explicitly religious subject—cf. *Choruses From “The Rock.”* *The Waste Land* is no exception: Clearly Christian images or vignettes are scattered throughout the text. The conclusion from a previous article⁴ is that the text is built on two overarching propositions, like Miyazawa’s. One of these, certainly, involves the depressing lives of faithless protagonists, who are mostly taken from English society, from the lowest level to royalty. However, the other proposition involves the rehabilitative power of the Christian message; the resurrected Christ himself appears in lines 359 – 365. This duality of topic, in fact, recalls the *Choruses* mentioned above.

1.2. Note on Miyazawa and *Haru to Shura*

Miyazawa Kenji (1896 – 1933) was a Japanese novelist, poet, and children’s literature writer who lived mostly in Iwate Prefecture, quite far northeast of Tokyo. He was a school teacher in agricultural science, a vegetarian, cellist, devout Buddhist, and utopian social activist. A poet from an early age, he wrote both tanka and free-form modern verse. Little published during his short lifetime, his self-published collection of modern poems under the title of *Haru to Shura* became well-known later in the 20th century. The poem treated here is 52 lines of free verse with the same title as the collection, of which it is the keynote text. Its dual overarching theme subverts the normal sociolectic role of Spring (the season of burgeoning nature), as well as that of the Shura (a negatively marked minor Buddhist deity). Miyazawa’s Spring is a dark, depressing season; by the same token, the poem’s Shura – though a lesser deity of the world above – is a positive character compared to the humans in the text.

2. Indirection and modernism

2.1. Symbolism, indirection, and modernism in Eliot’s poem

According to the semiotic theory of the structure of modern poetry detailed in many previously published articles and books (and treated here in Section 3), each of the above-mentioned overarching propositions generates a paradigm, or set, of images, which in *The Waste Land* often expand into vignettes occupying a considerable number of lines. (The time-honored term “image” was used partly because it is used by Riffaterre in more recent work. There, he is dealing with imagery in modern poetry, where it is non-literal but figurative, and refers to other images in a paradigm generated by an overarching proposition, or ‘matrix’, which may operate text-wide).

To quote Eliot himself, from his 1921 essay on *The Metaphysical Poets*, “poets in our civilization... must

^b Readers can refer to the website (<http://www.bartleby.com/201/1.html>) for the text.

^c Eliot is quoting from Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*. Cf. Booth, 2001.

be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity.... The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.”⁵(l.164, 287, &289) This is plainly a programmatic statement regarding modern poetry. Indirection certainly has not been the foundation of much of the postmodern verse written since the 1970s. The latter typically uses direct signification, each text often being a virtual mini-narrative, making direct reference to events in the extra-textual world. Eliot’s text, by contrast, does nothing of the sort on the level of the individual image.

The mimetic identities of Marie in Part I, “staying at the arch-duke’s” as a child, that of Tiresias in Part III, or Phlebas the Phoenician in Part IV, are immaterial to the underlying signification of the text as a whole. Eliot himself notes that Mr Eugenides, the currant seller, “melts into the Phoenician sailor”, and, regarding the feminine characters, “all the women are one woman” (line 218). Although there is indirection (symbolism) on the level of the individual image, each image generated by one of the overarching matricial propositions (MPs), in a semiotic sense, may function as the subject-sign of any other “object-image” in the same paradigm, or set. On the level of a given paradigm of images, its generating proposition often makes a mimetic (i.e., non-symbolic) statement, which is linked by a syntagmatic relation to the other proposition.

The critic Cleanth Brooks used the term “parallelism” instead of “paradigm” over 80 years ago, but in any case, expressed surprise that this structural aspect of Eliot’s poem so often went unnoticed (cf. Brooks 1939).⁶ More recently, Seamus Perry, in his small book devoted to *The Waste Land*, does not mention either of these terms. His criticism stems from the lit-crit tradition, after all. But he does briefly refer to the body of the poem as “a wilderness of individualities”—which would apply to our MP no. 1, adding that “it glimpsed the transformative power of a ‘surrender’ to something greater,” which would apply to our MP no. 2.⁷(l. 120) These ideas will be developed further in Sections 3 and 4.1 below, on semiotic theory.

Modernism in European poetry has its roots in the work of mid-late 19th-century French poets such as Baudelaire⁸ and Rimbaud,⁹ with Victor Hugo being an important precursor, as Michael Riffaterre has shown (cf. Riffaterre 1970).¹⁰ Eliot was profoundly influenced by Arthur Symonds’ *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1895), which he discovered in 1908 while at Harvard.

2.2. Modernism and Miyazawa Kenji

As mentioned in Section 1.2, the Spring depicted in many images in *Haru to Shura* is a dark, negative Spring.

Likewise, the Shura himself, normally a negative minor Buddhist deity, is at least more positive than the peasants he spies below from his dwelling in the clouds. This kind of subversion of the sociolect is inherently modernist.

Issue no. 18 of the Kamakura poetry journal *Shi to Fantasy* (Poetry and Fantasy) featured *Haru to Shura* as its main topic. This visually interesting journal printed the full text of the poem in color with illustrations, and three essays by commentators more or less associated with Miyazawa. Unfortunately, these short essays pay little attention to the poem itself, preferring to relate details of Miyazawa’s brief and rather tragic life. One mentioned his beloved fairytale, *Ginga Tetsudô no Yoru* (Night on the Galactic Railway), which is mostly irrelevant to our poem. None mentioned modernism, let alone the kind of subversion noted above.

Umehara Takeshi’s notes¹¹ are among the most recent specific treatments of at least parts of this poem. His approach to Miyazawa’s poetry in general evinces a refreshing disenchantment with most past readings, quite justifiably, in the light of the autobiographical kind of approach mentioned above. He insists that “No one has yet known how to read correctly these poems of Miyazawa’s.”¹¹(p.207)

3. Bimatricial theory of the semiotic structure of modern poetry

3.1. Two matrices

The semiotic theory of the structure of modern poetry employed in this essay will be a considerably modified version of the theory of Michael Riffaterre, as described in *Semiotics of Poetry*¹² and elsewhere. Contrary to Riffaterre, the process of interpreting a modernist poem will entail a search for two underlying propositions that generate the whole text. These are what he calls “matricial” concepts, each of which underlies a set of images which run throughout the text, or which sometimes occupy only a part of the text. These images, therefore, share a propositional structure, which generally does not appear on the textual surface. The “ungrammaticality” (or catachresis) of the surface structure of these images signals that they are generated by an underlying proposition that represents the matrix. Their surface structure may seem to refer to disparate sociolectic phenomena, but this kind of reference is fallacious. The matrix is found by the reader’s comparison of images in order to put together their common semantic features. On the intra-textual level, if we take two images, one is the subject—sign of the other, its object; their interpretant is the matrix.

To hark back to Eliot’s term (cf. Section 2.1), the semantic “indirection” of these images can take several forms, which are classified as follows: (i) Metaphor, or

lexical collocations that are “ungrammatical” (catachrestic) in terms of sociolectic conventions, (ii) prosodic features of verse, which are often absent from prose poetry or *vers libre*, and (iii) syntactic and other formal parallelism.

3.2. The intertext

In seeking to reconstruct the matrix, the reader may appeal to the authority of an “intertext,” a structural model that may be found in other—usually pre-existing—texts or works of art. In Riffaterrian terminology, the term “structure” always has the sense of the semantic structure of an image or matrix, which gives it its character as a poetic sign. To take a Riffaterrian example of two variants of a shared text/intertext matrix, the first may involve a camel “crossing the trackless sands of the desert,” the second involving a ship “furrowing the briny deep.” Both variants are built on the common MP that “a trusty conveyance bears human beings across a large and dangerous expanse.”^{13(L. 142)}

3.3. The interpretant

On the supra-textual level, the primary text is the subject-sign of the Peircean triad, the intertext as its object, and these two signs yield an interpretant, which is an amalgam of the features of both subject and object. In his mature theory, Riffaterre retains the classic Peircean definition of the interpretant: It is a mediating proposition given rise to in the mind of the reader by a comparison of text and intertext.^{14,15}

It is important to note that the semiotic structure of the text, according to Riffaterre’s theory, is impervious to any influence brought to bear by the reader. The latter’s contribution to the interpretive process begins with the considerable effort involved in reconstituting their common underlying structure from a comparison of the images of the textual surface. Riffaterre terms this “retro-reading,” since only after all the ungrammatical figures of the text have been taken into account, regardless of their linear order, can their underlying structure be discerned.

In stressing the invulnerability of the text to any input by the individual reader, Riffaterre is only fitting his theory to the kind of material he is dealing with: the modernist text does not lay itself open to modification by the reader. Instead, though Riffaterre is far from making this point, it sets out to change the reader’s preconceptions regarding reality. The role of the intertext as a model is important in this regard, since it overdetermines the semiotic structure of the primary text. The originality of the latter consists in its having a unique vocabulary, set into a propositional framework that is generally homologous with that of an intertextual model. Thus, the reader of modernist texts requires a certain degree of intertextual background

knowledge, in addition to an alertness to the existence of textual and other literary or sociolectic vocabulary that will influence his lexical choice as he seeks to formulate a matrix.

3.4. Intertext and sociolectic context

Even while acknowledging the notion that the intertext detailed in Section 1.2 may constitute a sort of ‘literary context,’ in its role as structural model, it is an important part of the theory that a text also possesses a context in the narrower sense mentioned above, i.e., a proposition homologous with the matricial structure of the text on the level of vocabulary. The proposal rests on the assumption that poetry communicates, not only in relation to other texts, but also in relation to that sociolectic background – or sociolectic context (SC), which the reader brings to it. For example, if the primary text compares the power of human intelligence unfavorably to the power of nature, the SC of this message includes these same lexical elements, which, however, are not related in the same way as in the primary text. Thus, we have similarity on the lexical level and contrast, or change, on the structural level. This notion that the modernist text is able to effect a change in the preconceptions of the reader is underscored by the work of Juri Lotman¹⁶ and Umberto Eco.^{17,18}

The primary reason for proposing the existence of an SC is the notion that, for the reader to be able to adequately interpret the semiotic structure of the modernist literary work, he must first set it against the familiar structures of the semiotic framework of the sociolect within which he normally communicates.

4. The Waste Land

4.1. Background of the poem

It will not be necessary to add to the notes in Section 2.1 regarding the tendency among critics to take a cue to the poem’s meaning from its title. The catachresis of the first line (“April is the cruellest month...”) immediately puts the reader on notice that this is going to be a modernist text. Not only will there be catachresis/ungrammaticality, but images will be arranged paradigmatically into sets, one generated by MP1 and the other by MP2. The protagonists of vignettes generated by MP1 will be not only be disappointing, but spiritually impoverished. Those of MP2 will be associated with the rehabilitative power of Christianity.

Even though in line 2, lilacs bloom, there is still a reason why April is called “cruel”. As we map the images/vignettes onto each other in order to find their common semantic features, we begin to realize that the darkness, aridity, and disappointing nature of these vignettes have

a spiritual cause. Even in the Marie image (lines 13 ff.), what matters is the mental/spiritual attitude of the protagonist. In this case, Marie has to forget her fright and hold on tight to the sled. At the same time, she is a bored aristocrat.

There is no space to catalogue each and every image and literary allusion in the text. Instead, certain key images or vignettes in order to search out their common significance in the case of each matrix.

As for the way ethics are treated in the poem, the treatment of this will involve only a few line references, as it soon becomes evident that questions of spirituality/religion are much more important.

4.2. Images or vignettes generated by MP 1

Lines 10 – 18: In the Marie episode, the aristocratic German girl talks about a sled ride with her cousin, the archduke. This activity seems to be simply a symbol for the life of bored aristocrats with no particular occupation. Line 18: “I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter” is typical.

Lines 35 – 42: The Hyacinth girl episode; things have changed over a year between her and her beau:

–Yet when we came back, late, from the hyacinth garden,
Your arms full, and your hair wet, I could not
Speak, and my eyes failed, I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing...

Here, there is no direct reference to any particular girl or to any particular flowers; what is referred to *indirectly* be other images of the same set involving a disappointed, disillusioned women.

For example, in the immediately following vignette, Mme Sosostri is the untrustworthy clairvoyant, “forbidden to see” (line 54) the content of certain cards, and who herself does not trust contemporary society (lines 58 – 59).

Lines 60 ff.: The lines present a dreamlike sequence in which the crowd of people flowing over London Bridge are either already dead or virtually dead. The fact that they sigh every so often indicates the latter: these are the spiritually dead.

Lines 77 – 106: This is a royal vignette from Roman and Egyptian history (The opening lines, “The chair she sat in, like a burnished throne/glowed on the marble,” apparently recalls a scene from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*.) The opulent scene, the description of which carries on for many lines, cannot disguise the fact that, in the world of such protagonists exists the rape of a princess by a king.

Another such vignette is in lines 107 – 138, about

which there are conjectures that this is a scene from Eliot’s unhappy marriage. Once again, the woman featured is disappointed. She accuses her husband of “knowing nothing” (lines 121 – 123).

Lines 139 – 173: No longer so young working-class women chatting in a neighborhood pub, as related by Lil’s friend. Her advice to Lil is to “make yourself a bit smart” because her husband is coming back from the army. This whole scene is rather sordid; Eliot seems to have included it to symbolize the spiritually bereft lives of the lower classes (this is just after World War I, after all).

Lines 182 – 186: The first line of this section refers rather directly to Eliot’s treatment for depression in Lausanne, where he was also writing this poem. The repeated “Sweet Thames” seems to be a desperate call to something familiar for psychological sustenance. The end of this section (“but at my back I hear/The rattle of the bones...”) seems like a premonition of death. In any case, there is no spiritual life here.

Line 189: An occurrence of the “Fisher King” legend, where the king’s wound causes his lands to become desolate. This situation is perhaps closest in the poem to its title.

Lines 196 – 201: This facetious reference to a “Mrs Porter” is nothing more than a small vignette about prostitution.

The following section about Mr Eugenides and his invitation to a homosexual weekend is just the second installation in a series of vignettes about irregular/unconstructive sex. As views on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender society change, this vignette may no longer seem negative, but it was so at the time of publication.

“The typist home at teatime...,” lines 222 – 256: This section, already mentioned, is another in the same set.

Lines 279 – 305: The Elizabeth and Leicester episode: In these four sections, Eliot is showing us how sex without love is ultimately self-defeating and disappointing.

Lines 308 – 310: Coming at the end of the poem’s Fire Sermon chapter, line 308 (“Burning burning burning burning”) recalls the Buddha’s view of the eternally renewed lower world of Samsara.

Lines 311 – 321: Section IV of the poem; this is about death from hazardous occupations (in the days of sailing ships, there were many fatal shipwrecks).

Lines 322 – 328: This section, properly generated by MP2, is about the Crucifixion. The following two lines are generated by MP1 (lines 329 – 330). The rest of this page and the following page down to line 375 symbolically depict a dry, rocky landscape reminiscent of Israel. Let us

note the cities enumerated in line 374: “Jerusalem Athens Alexandria”.

It is in this landscape that we have the dramatic “Road to Emmaus” section that is generated by MP2 (lines 359 – 365). This sort of natural environment is the opposite of well-watered England or Japan. If this is a psychological landscape, water is a symbol of spiritual nourishment, which is lacking.

Lines 385 – 389: The “empty chapel” in line 388, which has no windows, symbolizes the way deserted churches are increasing in number throughout Europe.

Line 426: Amid a section generated by MP2, this is a sudden standout line from MP1, possibly symbolizing the vanity of the financial center of London (the City).

4.3. Images/vignettes generated by MP 2 (those having a religious or spiritual component)

The reader has the impression that these images are fewer in number than those generated by MP1. This has no doubt underscored the conclusion that MP1 rules the overall significance of the poem. However, their number is in fact almost the same: 19 images to matrix no. 1 and 18 to matrix no. 2. Because Eliot no doubt wished to avoid all semblance of preachifying, religion-related images are made especially indirect, and quite difficult to identify. Some of them appear suddenly in the midst of an MP1-generated section.

Many critics, waylaid by the many allusions of Eliot’s text, tend to look for a “protagonist” in the various vignettes. In fact, there is only one protagonist in the images generated by each matrix: that of MP1 is a plural human protagonist in that “faithless humanity in general” is the subject; that of MP2, by contrast, is a divine protagonist, one capable of rehabilitating humanity from its situation of spiritual “drouth.” The use of the last term represents the aridity of the negative landscape towards the end of the text (lines 322–374).

First, the reference to Ezekiel 2:6 in line 20 (“Son of man”) points us to the MP2-generated lines 27 and 28 (“your shadow at morning...”). Lines 21 – 24 are in the same symbolic setting as the arid landscape of MP1 later in the text; yet lines 25 – 26, which are taken from Isaiah 32:2, represent a spiritual call. Isaiah has the expression “rivers of water in a dry place.” Eliot’s “Red Rock” recalls Isaiah’s “great rock in a weary land.”

Lines 100 – 103: This is about Philomel’s change into a nightingale after being raped by her sister’s royal husband. Yet the part “yet there the nightingale/filled all the desert with inviolable voice/and still she cried” represents a positive turn of events, and so is generated by MP2.

Line 182: “by the waters of Leman I sat down and wept...” could be a divine moment of humility in the midst of the poet’s rehabilitation, or it could be just the depression talking. Either way, it is a sudden appearance of a quite different scene from the preceding and following ones.

Line 263: (“Where fishmen lounge at noon...”); I doubt whether this is an allusion to the ‘Fisher King’ myth. It seems more a reflection of the symbol of Christ (a fish), coming as it does immediately before the line about Magnus Martyr, which Eliot called “one of Wren’s most beautiful church interiors.” It is worth adding that St Magnus is the guild church of the Worshipful Company of Fishmongers.

Lines 322 – 328: There is a contrast between Christ’s passion, Crucifixion (symbols of the night in the Garden of Gethsemane; cf. Matt. 26: 36 – 46), and death, and ordinary faithless Man (“We who were living are now dying...”).

Lines 331, 338, 346, and 349: “Here is no water...” and “If there were water...” express a longing for spiritual nourishment. (Line numbering is confusing around lines 348 – 349.) The longing for “water” continues to line 358, interspersing the “liquid” notes of the hermit-thrush (line 357).

Lines 359 – 365: Here is perhaps the major Christian vignette in the poem, where the risen Christ is walking along the road to Emmaus beside two disciples (not members of the 11): “There is always another one walking beside you....”

Lines 390 – 394: The cock standing on the roof tree recalls the night before Jesus’s capture, symbolizing the passion and the way Peter denied any association with Christ three times until the cock crew. Lines 393 – 394: Finally, the lightning and thunder bring rain, symbolic of spiritual nourishment. Himavant (line 397) is a Hindu God, a personification of the Himalayas.

Line 398: “The jungle crouched, humped in silence.” This is no longer the arid landscape of previous sections. The reader may wonder at the close proximity of “the jungle” to the Himalayas, but tropical rainforest grows in the foothills of the eastern and central Himalayas.

Line 400: The thunder speaks in the word “DA,” which is the root of the verb “to give.” This is reflected in the immediately following *Datta*. The question “what have we given?” is tantamount to “How unselfish have we been in giving of our talents (in the monetary sense also) to the world at large?”

The “moment’s surrender” of line 403 implies a surrender of the self to love, to God. The prudence in the next line is a worldly prudence, which tends to argue

against such giving. This sort of giving is certainly not the kind of action that is “found in our obituaries.” (line 406)

Line 410: The next time the Thunder reverberates “DA”, it speaks the word “*Dayadhvam*”, which means something like “sympathise with, have compassion on”. There are so many events in our world of death involving genocide—e.g., among Palestinians in Gaza, among the Rohingya in Myanmar, and elsewhere that we become used to turning a blind eye. To have compassion on the victims means to trouble your heart on a daily basis. But this is something which true sympathy cannot avoid—perhaps at the cost of personal mental well-being.

Lines 416 – 422: Coriolanus is here to remind us of the importance of contrition, which he famously showed in giving in to his mother’s pleas not to attack Rome, allied with the Volscians.⁷(lines 112–113) There is, thus, an echo of Psalm 51:17: “a broken and a contrite heart” is the key (line 411 ff.) to divine forgiveness in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Lines 417 – 422: “DA”—*Damyata* (control). Eliot harks back to his sailing days, and to the married couple section, thinking wistfully that if only he could manage his wife the way he used to manage a boat, her heart would have been “beating obedient/to controlling hands.” The notion of control extends to self-control and a certain asceticism, which is very important to the main religions.

The next three lines, referring to the Fisher King, virtually encapsulate the whole poem. The question the protagonist asks himself is: “Shall I at least set my lands in order?” (l. 425). It is assumed that with divine help, his life and his world in general can be “set in order.” Line 427: The Italian, translated, means “And then he stepped back into the fire which refines,” where Arnaut Daniel gladly returns into the fire of Purgatory. The following words in line 428 mean “when shall I be as the swallow?” In other words, “when shall I be able to fly free as easily as a swallow?”. The reference to “Le Prince d’Aquitaine” recalls the poet Nerval, who is described as a swallow by Gautier, a bird who was “all wings and no feet.”

Line 426: The protagonist reminds himself that the familiar world around him (“London Bridge is falling down...”) is, after all, going downhill.

Lines 430 – 431: “These fragments” refers to positive qualities and possessions which the protagonist has been able to retain. The world’s reaction may be to think that he is mad, but this does not concern him. As far as the world in general is concerned, it’s mad to be enlightened.

The final line (“*Shantih*”) chanted three times means “great peace”—peace in body, mind, and soul, being the formal closing to an Upanishad.

4.4. MPs 1 and 2: Faith and contrition

MP 2 reminds us that the key to forgiveness is contrition. How does ‘contrition as the key’ require us to modify our MPs? It appears that what is in need of modification is not MP2, but rather MP1. If the Voices of society suffer from a lack of faith, it is surely because, unlike Coriolanus, they are not sufficiently contrite. In his taking pity on Rome, Coriolanus is the model of contrition, which is the key element enabling the Voices of society to recognize the salvific action of Christ, the divine teacher (cf. lines 411 ff.). To summarize the structure of both matrices: MP1 represents a great range of secular Voices of society who lack contrition for their sins, while MP2 represents the rehabilitating power of divine compassion, which (intermatricial relation) can act on society. This compassion — acting because of personal contrition — is none other than the Creator’s love for His creation.

4.5. Intertext of *The Waste Land*

The intertext, as object-sign of the primary text (Eliot’s poem), is indicated fairly clearly in the text. In Section 4.4, it is noted that, as early as line 20, Eliot uses the term “Son of man,” which recalls God’s call to Ezekiel, whom He wishes to send to deter the Israelites from their rebellious ways. It might be added that Cleanth Brooks and others, as early as 1939, noted that “Israel,” standing for the world in general, had become “thoroughly secularized.” As the Jews of the Old Testament are repeatedly called to order by the prophets for their ungodly ways, “Israel” may indeed be an intertextual equivalent of the many “Voices” of MP1 of the text, and so we have an Old Testament counterpart for our first matrix.

As far as the second matrix is concerned, the expression “Son of man” immediately recalls Christ’s characterization of himself. The intertextual counterpart of the poem’s MP2 is thus clear, supported by Eliot’s references to the Passion and Christ’s post-resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus. This combination gives us a two-part biblical counterpart of the primary text. I.e., the Jews of the Old Testament, who are repeatedly called to order by the prophets for their ungodly ways, are the intertextual counterpart of the Voices of Parts I to IV of Eliot’s text (MP1). By the same token, in the New Testament, God sends His son as a spiritual teacher whose ultimate sacrifice has the power to set humankind, in general, back on the straight and narrow path to *Life* (MP2). The two intertextual propositions are linked by the New Testament Gospel message’s potential to ‘reset’ humankind from the spiritually error-prone world of the Old Testament in line with the order of the New Covenant.

It is worth pointing out an essential difference between the Biblical intertext and Eliot’s poem. In the latter, the

rehabilitation of mankind is only potential. The current contentious state of our world bears witness to the great difficulty of attaining that rehabilitation. In the Biblical intertext, by contrast, rehabilitation has already taken place, although mankind often does not realise it.

4.6. Interpretant

On the supra-textual level, the interpretant is the mediating compound proposition that is abducted by the reader through the comparison of text (subject–sign) and intertext (object–sign). It constitutes the third sign that completes the triad of signification.^{15: Writings, Vol. 2: 223}

The relation between the primary text and intertext evidently has the character of Greimas' semiotic square (A is to B as A' is to B').^{19(p.138)} For example, the relationship between MP1 and MP2 of the text is analogous to that between the corresponding matrices of the intertext. This relation is, once again, that the divine protagonist (subject of MP2) acts with compassion (predicate), on (linking preposition) the secular subjects suffering from a lack of faith, in such a way as to restore to them a rehabilitating faith (predicate of MP1). Thus, in the interpretant, faith takes the place of contrition in MP2 of our text, though with the implication that contrition is a precondition for faith.

4.7. Sociolectic context and perceptual change

That many of the poem's readers may have been irreligious would explain the many interpretations which have steered clear of its Christian and Hindu content. Reluctance to recognize its profound religiosity is only to be expected in the overwhelmingly secular world which Eliot depicts, with such rich humor and irony.

The majority of his readers themselves, therefore, supply the SC of the poem. Those who are unwilling to acknowledge the presence of Eliot's chosen divine protagonist — the Christ figure, the lone pilgrim who appears and disappears at will, both before and after death — are evidently willing to cling to the multifarious secular world of the first four parts of the poem. If human life is indeed a pilgrimage, many pilgrims focus rather on the journey, losing sight of its end. These are the kind of pilgrims one finds in Chaucer: cynical, salacious, and thoroughly worldly. Chaucer, in fact, turns the idea of the pilgrimage on its head, colorfully reflecting the way many people choose to live. These pilgrims are, in fact, closer to Eliot's many Voices of society; a much-married "wife", a priest who can tell a risqué tale, a hypocritical friar, are, after all, more sympathetic characters to people in general than their ascetic, other-worldly counterparts could ever be. The difficulty of a truly religious life renders it uncongenial to many. Thus, the many voices of society

are generally unconcerned with religion, just as they are in MP1 of Eliot's poem.

They have plenty of substitutes for God or Brahman, as the case may be. At the high end of the market, the plethora of beautiful but highly extravagant luxury goods is nothing short of amazing. Thus, our SC will be one in which these goods — which so many people spend so much time lusting after and enjoying — take the place of Eliot's divine protagonist. These goods are, of course, quite unable to act on human society with compassion, although they may provide temporary solace and reassurance. Not to be discounted is the aesthetic enjoyment and exercise afforded by, for example, a high-quality bicycle. A racing canoe or racing yacht would also be candidates. Unfortunately, when human beings are in need of spiritual solace, such beautiful objects are of little use. When depression strikes (as it seems to have struck both Eliot and first wife Vivienne), those worldly goods are revealed as, literally, in-animate, i.e., they have no soul. As such, they are incapable of acting on us (the Voices of society) with compassion. The operative concept which distinguishes our interpretant from the SC is thus soul. If we admit that we have an immortal soul, then Eliot's linked MPs carry a powerful, highly constructive message. But when we are feeling soulless, bereft, depressed, the beloved mock-divine objects which surround us, like worldly ambitions, are, once again, unable to act on our souls with compassion.

In this way, the SC is seen to have virtually the same lexical content as the interpretant of text and intertext, but the syntagmatic relation linking its two MPs differs clearly from that of the interpretant. It is this negative difference which has the power to effect a change in our preconceptions concerning the relative roles of protagonists like Eliot's, and of our lives in human society, and their many bells and whistles. One possible result of this perceptual change might be to cause us to re-evaluate the lifestyle of communities like the Amish. This is no more than a suggestion. Yet, the various movements in Western society since the early 20th century, in the direction of a simpler life in closer contact with the forces of nature, testify to the strength of Eliot's message.

5. Haru to Shura

5.1. Background to the poem

Haru to Shura is the ninth poem among 19 with the same general title in the second volume of the Collected Works (*Zen-Shû*, 1988 [1973]). It was self-published in 1924, and is unquestionably Miyazawa's most published poetic work since. In this section, the mechanism which makes this poem thoroughly modernist in the innovative nature of its propositions and in the surface opacity (or

“ungrammaticality”) of its images is discussed. The word *shura* in the title needs some explanation. First, Miyazawa was a devout Buddhist. According to the traditional Buddhist theory of reincarnation, all living things are bound to be reborn into one of six realms of existence; The *ashura* represents the realm of contentiousness, selfish desires. For this reason, in its normal Japanese sociolectic usage, the word *shura*—without the “a”—means “fighting,” or “struggle,” etc. These sociolectic meanings of *ashura* and *shura* notwithstanding, Miyazawa’s *Shura* is, rather, an observer of the human scene from on high whose disappointment at the lack of response from humankind causes him to self-sacrifice (voluntarily disintegrate) at the poem’s end.

The translated text is based on the Japanese original in Miyazawa ² (pp. 20–22). The Japanese-character text is given in the Appendix (A1) at the end of the article. The bracketed subtitle is in English in the original. Line beginnings have been indented in the Appendix in order to represent the wave-like format of the original between lines 13 – 37; certain other lines are indented one space for the same reason.

5.2. Text of *Haru to Shura* in English translation

Spring and the Shura (1922)

(mental sketch modified)

- 1 From the mental image’s grey steel^d
- 2 Tendrils of the akebi-vine wind to the clouds
- 3 Clumps of bramble and rotting swamplands:
- 4 A wide prospect, a flat prospect, of nothing but sanctimoniousness^e
- 5 (It is the time when, denser than the flute music of noon,
- 6 Flecks of amber fall from the sky)
- 7 The bitterness—and the blue—of anger!
- 8 Through the bottom layer of light of the April atmosphere
- 9 Spitting to himself, grinding his teeth, he comes and goes
- 10 “I am a solitary Shura”^f
- 11 (The scenery wobbles through his tears)
- 12 Setting a limit to the visibility of the shattered clouds

^d Miyazawa’s term is a compound, literally ‘heart-forms’ or ‘mental images,’ ‘fantasies.’ The subtitle of the whole ‘*Haru to Shura*’ collection is ‘Shinshō Sketches’: ‘sketches of mental images.’

^e *tengoku*: Also translatable as ‘hypocrisy.’ This reading has a deeply ironic echo of the word for ‘heaven.’

^f I have used a capital S for ‘Shura’ throughout in all cases where it assists in distinguishing the hero of our poem from the concept of ‘shura,’ or ‘shura’—nature in general. Quotation marks have been added for all cases of the Shura’s speech.

- 13 In the sparkling sea of the heavens
- 14 The sacred crystal breeze blows to and fro
- 15 The ZYPRESSEN—Spring in a single row:
- 16 Though they drink in the ether blackly
- 17 And from their dark ranks
- 18 Even the shining snowy ridges of Tian Shan can be seen^g
- 19 (In waves of mirages and white polarized light)
- 20 The True Word has been lost
- 21 The clouds disperse and fly through the sky
- 22 “Aa! thus through the bottom of the shining bowl of April
- 23 Passionately grinding my teeth, I come and go
- 24 I am a solitary shura.”
- 25 (The pearly clouds flow by
- 26 Where, in this Spring, does one bird sing?)
- 27 When the sun’s orb shimmers bluely
- 28 The Shura blends with the trees
- 29 From heaven’s dazzlingly collapsing bowl
- 30 The throng of black trees stretches away
- 31 Their branches sadly proliferating
- 32 From this landscape in which everything is double
- 33 From the treetops of this forest in mourning^h
- 34 Ravens flutter into flight
- 35 (When the atmosphere finally clears
- 36 And the cypresses stand silent against the sky)
- 37 A figure makes its way through the golden grasses
- 38 Unmistakably a human form
- 39 “Wrapped in his straw cloak, the peasant looks at me
- 40 But can he really see me
- 41 In the depths of this blinding atmospheric sea?”
- 42 (The colour of sadness is deep, deep blue)
- 43 The ZYPRESSEN sway quietly
- 44 Birds again cut through the blue sky
- 45 (The True Word is not to be found here
- 46 The Shura’s tears fall to earth)
- 47 Returning to the skies to catch his breath
- 48 His lungs contract palely
- 49 (“May this body be scattered into fragments of the sky”)
- 50 The small branches of the ginkgo glow once more
- 51 The ZYPRESSEN finally blacken
- 52 Sparks of cloud rain down

^g Lit. the ‘heavenly mountains,’ a mountain range west of China across which the famous Tang priest San-zō (in the Japanese reading) journeyed in order to bring back the Buddhist scriptures deemed essential to the development of Mahayana Buddhism in China, and subsequently Korea and Japan.

^h ‘mourning’: *sō-shin* generally has this meaning, but there is a possible paronomasia here: this might also be ‘the [Shura’s] dejected spirit.’

5.3. Religion in *Haru to Shura*: fabula and matricial structure

It seems unlikely that Miyazawa knew *The Waste Land* when writing *Haru to Shura*. That could explain the aspect of a linear story (fabula) which remains in the text. One might say that the first images are scene-setting, in preparation for the appearance of the Shura in lines 7 – 10. Yet, one could also say that the portrayal of the dark scenery of the earthy peasants' springtime habitat (matrix no. 1) alternates with the movement and words of the Shura among the clouds (matrix no. 2). The latter images are assigned to MP2 because they are more surprising and novel in concept. The fact that the Shura's emotions develop, from the anger of his first image (lines 7 – 11) to his disappointment at the failure of the peasant to recognize him (lines 40 – 41), may seem to have aspects of a fabula. Yet if one considers that teeth-grinding and anger are simply normal attributes of an ashura, we may say that the entire text is about a meeting between this spiritual creature and the soil-focused peasants.

Getting away from the fabula view of the text is line 6 ("Flecks of amber fall from the sky"), which seems like a variant of line 52 (the sky in the form of "sparks of cloud"), where the Shura self-destructs. There is thus a strong tendency for the text to be paradigmatically arranged, rather than syntagmatically strung together in linear form.

5.4. Matricial structure

5.4.1. Images generated by MP 1

MP 1 sets the scene in lines 1 – 6: "nothing but sanctimoniousness" is found in the peasants' landscape.

Image no. 2 begins at line 12, continuing to line 20. It is symptomatic of the human society visible to the Shura that "the True Word has been lost." The latter expression recalls the name of the ancient *Shingon* sect of Japanese Buddhism, which literally means "True Word". Even though this may not be Miyazawa's own sect, Nichiren, it is a very powerful statement in Buddhist terms of the state of the agricultural human society where Miyazawa lived. This expression is repeated in line 45 towards the end of the poem, occasioning the Shura's tears.

Lines 47 – 52 blend the two matrices (lines 50 – 51 return to MP1 in portraying the sad landscape), although MP2 predominates, with its depiction of the Shura's self-sacrifice. It is really not necessary to enumerate the remaining images generated by MP1: images of a dark spring proliferate throughout the text. The common content of these images: this is a dark and sad landscape because the humans of the peasants' world will not communicate with the divine.

Miyazawa uses the German word for cypresses three times: *ZYPRESSEN* in capitals. It is surely not by chance that this recalls the English word 'depressing'.

5.4.2. Images generated by MP 2

To return to MP2, let us note line 28: "The Shura blends with the trees". So he has in fact descended into this intermediate world between his cloudy abode and the peasants' muddy fields. In other words, the Shura makes every effort to enter the humans' world. Line 44 is a vivid image characterizing this world: in the ordinary sociolect, blue skies are a metaphor for happiness, but in this peasants' world, blue skies and flying birds have the opposite meaning. These are sad skies, and sad birds who do not sing.

As far as the Shura is concerned, lines 45 – 46 include the final statement of the absence in this environment of the "True Word." The Shura is in tears as a result. Throughout the text, it has been the Shura who one-sidedly attempts to contact humankind. Line 49, his suicidal prayer, is his only possible answer: he becomes "sparks of cloud" which fall to the ground. This is his final, tragic gift to man. According to the True Word, there should be frequent communication between the human world and the divine. This is absent, Miyazawa seems to say, from this agricultural world in a region of Japan far from Tokyo. It may be said that, in the world in general, despite the efforts of the major religions, there is insufficient communication between humanity and the divine. So MP1 and MP2 may be summarised as: the peasants' lack of interest in the divine world (MP1) causes the *Shura* (intermatricial relation) fatal disappointment, and his self-destruction is a final gift to mankind (MP2).

5.4.3. The intertext

If the Shura's sacrifice recalls Christ's Crucifixion and death, it may well be due to the strong influence of a Christian friend of Miyazawa's: Saitô Shûjirô.²⁰ If this is so, it would have a strong link with Eliot's poem and its Christian component. Clearly, the Shura's sacrifice is a religious event. Likewise, the peasant's unwillingness to look upwards diligently is more of a religious failing than a mere ethical one. So *The Waste Land* and *Haru to Shura* are quite similar in regard to MP1 and its link with MP2: there is a human lack of will to make contact with the divine. In *The Waste Land*, there is the rehabilitating Christ figure (the 'road to Emmaus' section, lines 359 – 365) in relation to the great world-focused majority. In that section of the poem, Christ is a shadowy figure who is 'seen but not seen.' This closely parallels the way in which the Shura is not really seen by the peasant below.

This thematic analogy remains as an example of the international nature of semiotic structure in modernist

poetry. Both poets held long-lasting religious convictions—Eliot in Anglo-Catholic Christianity and Miyazawa in Mahayana Buddhism—which strongly influenced the propositional content of their poems. *Haru to Shura* came out just 2 years after the first publication of *The Waste Land* (in English), seeming to make any question of direct influence unlikely (a Japanese translation by Ueda Tamotsu came out in 1938, 5 years after Miyazawa's death).²¹ Yet, in a broad thematic sense, Eliot's poem could be an intertextual model of Miyazawa's.

The countryside on which the Shura looks down is a wasteland of the spirit, being populated by earthy peasants with no interest in spiritual things. If the Shura's action seems more positive than Christ's in Eliot's poem, we must remember that the shadowy figure encountered by the disciples on the road to Emmaus is, after all, the resurrected Christ, who has already willingly 'self-destructed' by death on the Cross.

The essential structure of any intertext must serve as a model for the textual matricial structure of our text: Man (in general) refuses the message of the being who could save him, obstinately clinging to his own mindset, thus causing his would-be savior suffering. The poem's propositional structure implies that, if only mankind would take the trouble to acknowledge the Shura's existence, it would gain access to that higher world consistently symbolized in the text by 'light' imagery. It is as though we have a reminder that, although mankind may be more or less uninterested in higher things, the natural environment is full of signals of their existence. As we have seen, Eliot places such signals from time to time in *The Waste Land*.

5.5. Interpretant and sociolectic context

5.5.1. The interpretant

In both Miyazawa's and Eliot's poems, rather than the compassion of the divine being, what counts is Man's unwillingness to 'hear', to take seriously, the True Word, in the most generalized meaning of that term. It does not necessarily refer to any particular scripture, but in the background lie the sutras of Buddhism and the Christian gospels. The interpretant, then, consists of (MP1), the difficulty that Man finds in recognizing the divine, and of (MP2), the sacrifice, because of this human blindness, of a being linked to Mankind who exists beyond the human world. Let us note that the intermatricial relation remains constant: it is the idea that the unreceptive attitude of Man provokes the sacrifice of the divine being. Given that *The Waste Land* is the intertextual model of *Haru to Shura*, it should be no surprise that their interpretants closely resemble each other.

5.5.2. Sociolectic context and perceptual change

To return to the poem's title, this is an encapsulated version of the text's matricial structure: the Shura is seen to represent something like a hope for human interest in higher things; this particular *Haru* is then the negative Spring of unheeding humanity. A complete reversal of the Japanese sociolect's image of that season.ⁱ

The SC, on the other hand, is precisely the sociolectic reading of the title taken out of the poem's context; this is unfortunately abetted by not a few published Japanese-language commentaries. According to this reading, of course, Spring can only be good, and our Shura has the conventional negative meaning of ashura. It is important to note that, according to convention, "Spring" is read as a figure for the world of mankind (MP1), and the Shura as a figure for a higher form of existence. Thus, the SC retains its character as a kind of 'context' of the interpretant, containing lexically similar expressions which are, however, related in a very different way. The conventional view of the components of the SC is that the Spring/Man's world is morally superior to an ashura-like existence; this is radically reversed by the matricial structure of the poem.

6. Conclusion

If we were concerned with ethics rather than religion, it would not be difficult to see, from a comparison of our two poetic texts, that they constitute a minor part of both poems. *The Waste Land*, being longer, has more scope for developing ethical commentary. This can be observed in (i) line 71: "That corpse you planted..." (ii) lines 99 – 102, echoed in lines 203 – 206: the rape of Philomel, (iii) lines 201 – 214: The homosexual Mr Eugenides' surreptitious invitation to the poet would have been unethical in Eliot's time, (iv) lines 222 ff.: The sexual assignation of "the typist home at teatime" with "the young man carbuncular" (line 231) is unethical according to stricter moral tenets, (v) lines 279 – 299: The Queen consort and her unethical tryst with the Earl of Leicester, and (vi) line 307: "to Carthage then I came" is the first part of a quotation from the *Confessions of St Augustine*, which continues: "where a cauldron of unholy loves sang all about my ears".

In this case, each of the "unethical" sections contributes a negative marking to the image in question, and therefore also to the main matricial structure of the text. The "typist home at teatime" section (lines 222 ff.) is a case in point: the callous attitude of the "young man carbuncular" to the typist adds to the negative marking of the entire vignette.

ⁱ Cf. the depressing Spring of other poems in the series, e.g., the short poem *Shunkô Juso / Spring Curse* (lit. 'Curse of the Spring Light'): 'Spring is disgusted with its grasses and ears / Beauty disappears' (Miyazawa 1988: 23, lines 6 and 7).

In *Haru to Shura*, on the other hand, the image of the Shura “Spitting to himself, grinding his teeth”, is not ethically negative, as it simply adds to the image of the Shura under emotional duress. The latter has to be extreme in order to cause him to self-destruct at the end of the text.

When it comes to the ratio of MP1-generated images to MP2 images, the two poems are similar. With eighteen/nineteen of each in *The Waste Land*, we find about six of each in *Haru to Shura*. (I say “about” because images generated by both matrices are combined in some cases.) Each image can be ‘mapped onto’ other images generated by the same matrix. All images share quite a lot in common. For example, if the first four lines of *Haru to Shura* are generated by MP1, then this image packs a lot of information relative to that matrix: not only is this a spacious landscape, but “tendrils of the akebi-vine wind to the clouds.” This last statement is clearly ungrammatical, but it does indicate to the reader that the peasants’ landscape, though basically negative in all other images, is to some extent connected to the world in the clouds above.

6.1. The challenge of accepting innovation

The word “modern” features often at the beginning of this essay. Why I chose Eliot’s and Miyazawa’s texts is because both are modernist, displaying the paradigmatic arrangement of images/vignettes that is characteristic of modernism in poetry. The other characteristic, of course, is innovation, which derives from the contrast between the SC and the interpretant of the text and its intertext. Innovation in Miyazawa’s poem is perhaps easier to spot than in Eliot’s text. That is because the roles of the Shura and the peasant are quite plainly reversed early in the poem. The SC only serves to emphasize their normal sociolectic roles. Without a theory such as ours, however, it is surprising how many critics managed to stay on the sociolectic level. This means they somehow missed the self-destruction of the Shura at the end of the text. It is interesting how images involving the Shura act as preludes to that self-sacrifice. Whether he is spitting and grinding his teeth as a matter of habit, or simply very anxious that the peasant should be able to spy him among the clouds, his whole being is deeply tied up with the need to make contact with humanity in the world below.

This need inevitably recalls that of Christ, who was often deeply disturbed by the lack of understanding and faith of his compatriots, sometimes including his own disciples. In the end, his ultimate sacrifice was made because of a misunderstanding of the majority of Jewish people around him, in particular the Pharisees of the Temple.

It seems that the influence of Miyazawa’s Christian friend, Saitô Shûjirô, was deeper than most critics notice.

One could even call *Haru to Shura* a decidedly syncretic poem, blending Buddhist and Christian ideas. This blend by itself is innovative and therefore modernist, but of course, the overarching matricial structure is highly innovative also. To reverse the ordinary sociolectic roles of *Spring and the Shura* is apparently too innovative for many readers: this reversal prevents them from getting to grips with the poem.

6.2. Self-sacrifice

It is possible to say that MP2 in the *Shura* has more dramatic action, at least within the much shorter confines of its text, than in *The Waste Land*. Self-destruction is more striking than simply being a presence walking alongside two disciples. But, of course, the Passion, Death, and Resurrection are implicit in the road to Emmaus scene (ll. 369 ff.). And, in fact, the last lines of *The Waste Land* do have some drama, in (the outstanding 12th century troubadour) Arnaut Daniel’s stepping back into the fire that refines (line 427: “*Poi s’ascose nel foco che gli affina*”). Certainly, the Shura’s sacrifice happens in the text, although it’s a gift that is not received by mankind. In *The Waste Land* we have the resurrected Christ, which reminds us that the divine gift to mankind is always with us.

6.3. The message of each poem is conveyed differently

We noted in Section 5.5.1 that, “in both Miyazawa’s and Eliot’s poems, the interpretant consists of (MP1) the difficulty Man finds in recognizing the divine, and (MP2) the sacrifice (an intermatricial relation) because of this human blindness, of a being linked to Mankind who exists beyond the human world.” But in each poem, the sacrifice of the divine being is conveyed differently.

In *Haru to Shura*, the sacrifice occurs actually in the text, and is dramatic and quickly over. It is as though there is an abrupt collision between the divine and humanity, with man’s unreceptive attitude provoking the sacrifice of the divine being. *The Waste Land* treats the relationship between the divine and humanity rather differently. Since Christ has been resurrected, he remains always with us if we will only seek him. Contrition is after all the ‘key’ (cf. lines 411, 413, and 414). Near the end of the text, Arnaut Daniel’s stepping back into the refining fire suggests that there are ways of atoning for man’s sins. Like Arnaut, we have to be prepared for a stint in Purgatory.

Line 429, near the end of the poem, is problematic in this context: “*Le Prince d’Aquitaine à la tour abolie*”. Is this simply an example of “fragments I have shored against my ruins” (line 430)?

I.e., to summarize: (l. 426) the City of London will come to a bad end;

There is always the opportunity of Purgatory (recalling Arnaut) as atonement;
When will I be able to fly free as a swallow?
Nerval's problematic poem (poet trying to reconstruct his identity threatened by madness?).

To take the last line first, it is worth remarking that Nerval's poem is a sonnet, perfectly rhymed and in almost perfect alexandrine metre. If this is the work of a convalescing madman, he has not lost his touch as a versifier. In the same vein, Arnaut Daniel was a poet praised by Dante, and, incidentally, by Ezra Pound. It should be mentioned that Dante called him "*il miglior fabbro*,"²²(*purgatorio*, C. XXVI: 117) as this accolade is borrowed by Eliot for his dedication of the poem to Pound. The lack of an overt Christian reference in these final "fragments" and its ceding of that place to Arnaut illustrate how Eliot takes a more modernist approach to a paradigmatic order of images in the text. The leading Christian reference instead takes place in lines 359 ff. The images—of either matrix—may theoretically be read in any order. This explains why the expression "Son of man" comes in line 20, and another important religious reference in lines 359 ff. In this sense, Miyazawa does take a more fabula-biased approach, in giving his poem a dramatic ending. Thus, Eliot's is structurally the more modern poem, although Miyazawa's is more intensely religious.

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1909 – 1962. 1983 [1963]; London: Faber and Faber, and (ii) Miyazawa Kenji. 宮澤賢治全集 (Collected Works of Miyazawa Kenji), 1988 [1973]; Vol. 2. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobô.

Further disclosure

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Appendix

A1. Original Japanese text of Miyazawa's *Haru to Shura*, 1924 (formatted horizontally)

春と修羅

(mental sketch modified)

心象のはいろいろはがねから

あけびのつるはくもにからまり

のばらのやぶや腐植の湿地

いちめんのいちめんの詔曲模様

(正午の管樂よりもしげく

琥珀のかけらがそそぐとき)

いかりのにがさまた青き

四月の気層のひかりの底を

唾し はぎりしりゆききする

おれはひとりの修羅なのだ

(風景はなみだにゆすれ)

砕ける雲の眼路をかぎり

れいらうの天の海には

聖玻璃の風が行き交ひ

ZYPRESSEN 春のいちれつ

くろぐろと光素を吸ひ

その暗い脚並からは

天山の雪の稜さへひかるのに

(かげらふの波と白い偏光)

まことのことはうしなはれ

雲はちぎれてそらをとぶ

ああかがやきの四月の底を

はぎりしり燃えてゆききする

おれはひとりの修羅なのだ

(玉髓の雲ながれて

どこで鳴くその春の鳥)

日輪青くかげろえば

修羅は樹林に交響し

降りくらむ天の椀から

黒い木の群落が延び

その枝はかなしくしげり

すべて二重の風景を

喪神の森の梢から

ひらめいてとびたつからず

(気層いよいよみわたり

ひのにもしんと天にたつころ)

草地の黄金をすぎてくるもの

ことなくひとのかたちのもの

けらをまとひおれを見るその農夫

ほんたうにおれが見えるのか

まばゆい気圏の海のそこに

(かなしみは青々ふかく)

ZYPRESSEN しずかにゆすれ鳥はまた青ぞらを截る

(まことのことばはここになく

修羅のなみだはつちにふる)

あたらしくそらに息つけば

ほの白く肺はちじまり

(このからだそらのみじんにちらばれ)

いてうのこずえまたひかり

ZYPRESSEN いよいよ黒く

雲の火ばなは降りそそぐ

ARTICLE

Uncovering ordinary life in early modern Europe/Germany through the lens of 16th-century German jest narratives in Georg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*Albrecht Classen* 

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Abstract

Sixteenth-century literature witnessed a remarkable shift from the courtly sphere to the lives of burghers, innkeepers, lansquenets, peasants, and workers. In the countless *Schwänke* (jest narratives) published during this period, we are both entertained and instructed by listening to what ordinary people said to each other, what they fought over, and what mistakes they might have made in their social relationships, often leading to facetious situations meant to provoke our laughter. One of the most popular authors of this genre was Georg/Jörg Wickram, who effectively created the model collection with his *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), a work that runs almost parallel—but in prose—to Chaucer's much earlier *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400). Wickram's text primarily addressed the typical representatives of early modern society who were well-educated and wealthy city dwellers. Many other writers later followed Wickram's literary concept in crafting their jest narratives. This study closely examines the broad spectrum of individuals who appeared in the literary framework and served as the butt of the jokes. Such an approach makes it possible to understand how the reading audience viewed foolish peasants, clerics, aristocrats, prostitutes, merchants, physicians, or craftsmen who populated early modern cities and the countryside. In this sense, the *Rollwagenbüchlein* acts as a literary mirror of early modern society. While Sebastian Brant, in his famous *Narrenschiff* (1494), had ridiculed virtually everyone, Wickram offered satirical narratives on the individuals populating his world (primarily Southwestern Germany).

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Keywords: *Schwänke*; Jest narratives; Everyday life; Georg/Jörg Wickram; *Rollwagenbüchlein*; Literary entertainment; Travelers; Lansquenets

1. Introduction

The field of medieval and early modern studies has shifted radically in the last several decades. Historically, scholars have concentrated on the history of the social elites (i.e., the nobility, clergy, and merchant classes). Today, we have realized the great need to pursue a more inclusive line of inquiry, which requires a shift from using narrow and hierarchical concepts in analyzing pre-modern and early modern culture. This change has led to the discovery of a vast body of invaluable texts, paintings, chronicles, and other

documents often reflecting on numerous marginalized individuals—women, the poor, Jews, Muslims, the disabled, children, older adults, and others (many of whom remain in the shadow of contemporary literary and cultural studies). However, we can gain excellent access to the broad discourse on and representation of these often-ignored groups by examining the so-called *Schwankliteratur*—collections of jest narratives in which the poets reflect on ordinary situations in rural communities, taverns, private lives, churches, and along the roads. Since Georg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555) achieved an enormous success in the early modern book market, offering entertainment and instructions, it lends itself well to a close analysis of everyday life during that period. While we cannot equate these often-hilarious prose texts with historical chronicle literature, understanding whom the contemporary audiences laughed at provides a good insight into the mental conditions, social and emotional aspects, and the common value system.

2. Previous research

Scholars such as Ariès *et al.*¹ laid the foundation for this critically important reorientation in pre-modern studies, primarily through their book series, *A History of Private Life* (1985; in English translation 1987 – 1991). Their focus rests primarily on ideals, values, patterns of behavior, social attitudes, the tension between the public and the private, the role of families, and similar instances. About a decade later, the Austrian historian Dinzelbacher² built on this work, as well as on the pioneering scholarship of Marc Bloch and the French *Annales* School, to create a theme-based collection of studies characterizing various aspects of the history of European mentalities.² Dinzelbacher took up a host of quotidian yet fundamental topics, such as the role of the individual in society, sexuality and love, religiosity, the body, soul, and illness, the various ages in human life, labor, festivals, nature and the social environment, space and time, and others. Here, we gain deeper insights into human attitudes toward these issues, as reflected in various sources. The latest research is leading to new theoretical and methodological approaches, from medieval anthropology, historical-cultural studies, and social and economic histories of the middle ages, to exciting hybrid fields such as medieval psychology,³ determined by the attempt to penetrate more deeply into the mindsets of people in the middle ages and the early modern age. However, such an approach has remained highly problematic until today because it is predicated on too many assumptions concerning the validity of literary texts or images. To these, we can add the innovative fields addressing gender studies, intertextuality, mediality, performativity, the history of emotions, as well as the

spatial and linguistic turns (for theoretical reflections on these topics, refer to Ackermann and Egerding,⁴ who offer more abstract reflections).

Suppose we want to develop more accurate and profound analyses and understandings of pre-modern cultures in depth, we must try—following Geertz's⁵ concept of “thick description”—to be involved and engage with the widest possible range of narrative, artistic, political, archeological, textile, culinary, and architectural sources.⁵ Outstanding examples of this approach are the studies collected by Kühnel,⁶ Arno Borst's essential monograph *Lebensformen im Mittelalter* (1973)⁷ and his later *Alltagsleben im Mittelalter* (1983),⁸ Hans-Werner Goetz's *Life in the Middle Ages* (translated (1986/1993)),⁹ Christopher Dyer's *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (1994/2000),¹⁰ Arnold Esch's *Die Lebenswelten des europäischen Spätmittelalters* (2014),¹¹ and the contributions of *Festivities, Ceremonies, and Rituals in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown in the Late Middle Ages* by František Šmahel, Martin Nodl, and Václav Žůrek (2022).¹² The common feature of all these studies, as valuable as they certainly are, consists of the attempt to present specific tableaux of everyday life in the village, city, at court, and within the Church, but mostly not viewed through a literary-historical lens. A very impressive example of such an approach, valid by itself, is the recent study by Goliński,¹³ who presents a rich panoply of ordinary events in late medieval and early modern Czech cities, involving crimes, worship of relics, famine, the relationships between Jews and Christians, linguistic aspects, indulgences, pilgrimages, and the work of many different craftsmen. The history of private life for specific groups has also been usefully covered by the contributors to the fundamental volume *Passions of the Renaissance*, by Chartier (translated 1986/1989).¹⁴ Here, issues such as civility, intimacy, childhood, friends and neighbors, habitation and cohabitation, and family are of primary importance. Dülmen has also treated many different aspects of everyday life in the early modern period (1990 – 1994),¹⁵ but as a historian, he mostly disregarded or neglected to consult literary evidence and examined mostly chronicles, letters, last wills, and paintings. In addition to those cultural-historical analyses, we must closely examine common opinions, thought patterns, ideals, values, or fears of foreigners, death, or God.

These prior studies make it possible (even imperative) to widen our perspective by including more source materials, addressing deeper semantic layers, and enabling the people whose stories have been long forgotten to come forward and have their lives known, at least refracted through a literary lens. Social and cultural historians have made significant progress, often by considering so-called ego-documents (see van Dülmen,¹⁶ volumes 1 – 3; 1990 – 1994).

Fortunately, this research is possible—at least for figures in and around the 16th century—given the abundance of primary source material from this era, especially when we widen the perspective and include literary material. Today, perhaps more than ever, public culture is emerging in more precise detail, as many urban and clerical authors sought to entertain their audiences by drawing from their own experiences in the city, the countryside, during travels, in wars, in churches, and occasionally even at court.

The broadly defined genre of *Schwänke* (entertaining and didactic jest narratives) invites us to pursue a social-historical analysis of these literary texts, especially as they draw from a direct interaction between the author and his audience, gaining direct inspiration from oral accounts and lived experiences, as some of the authors repeatedly confirm. The literary quality of these jest-narratives might not be the most sophisticated, but we can use them very well for a careful analysis of how individuals representing social groups or genders were viewed and reflected in public discourse. Economic conflicts, excessive consumption of alcohol, violent exchanges, and aggressive husbands or wives are a few of the common topics covered in these jest narratives. We are regularly invited to laugh at individual misbehavior and foolish actions and words, which, in turn, offers a more detailed understanding of the general discourse of the time.

3. Jest narratives as an unexplored corpus of relevant sources for everyday culture

An important foundation for this study of 16th-century jest narratives is the vast genre of pre-modern short verse and prose narratives originating in 13th-century French *fabliaux*, Middle High German *mæren*, the Italian *novelle*, and similar literary forms. These narratives elicit their comedic effects by drawing from a diverse palette of real-life experiences, poking fun at the victims of life's infinite surprises and thus revealing to modern readers the assumptions and perceptions of medieval Europeans. Boccaccio, Chaucer, Kaufringer, Franco Sacchetti, and Poggio Bracciolini were among the sharpest and most influential jest narrative writers. Boccaccio was one of the crucial authors far into the early modern age, as many translations and adaptations of his tales in his *Decameron* formed the basis for English tales and German *Schwänke*.¹⁷

In the early 16th century, the early modern German jest narrative quickly became immensely popular, beginning with Herman Bote's *Till Eulenspiegel* (1510/1511), continuing with Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522), Jörg Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* (1555), Hans-Wilhelm Kirchhof's *Wendunmuth* (1563), Bartholomäus Krüger's *Hans Clawert* (1587), and reaching its apogee

(in this century at least) with the anonymous *Lalebuch* (1597).¹⁸ Most of this literature relies on a certain degree of familiarity with the subjects' lives, as can be seen in light of the contemporary Shrovetide plays by the famous Nuremberg cobbler poet Hans Sachs (1494 – 1576), often dealing with ordinary conflicts in marriage that concerned many people among his audiences. These jest narratives will allow scholars to gain deeper insight into early modern everyday life.¹⁹ Here, we recognize what people laughed about during the early modern age, how they reflected on social conflicts, and how the more educated class felt about peasants, Jews, and clerics, as well as about children, older adults, pious individuals, or outsiders, criminals, homeless, fools, and simpletons.

Georg/Jörg Wickram has not been entirely ignored by modern scholarship since he was one of the major 16th-century German authors, having published novels, didactic narratives, and jest narratives. However, the focus has rested so far on aspects such as his intellectual background (Humanism and the Protestant Reformation), didactic intentions, dramatic writing, family roles, ontology, the typology of the figures in his works, the mixing of genres, love and truth, and the like.²⁰ He left a rather voluminous opus which includes strongly didactic texts (*Der Jungen Knaben Spiegel*, 1554; *Von guten und bösen Nachbarn*, 1556; *Die sieben Hauptlaster*, 1556/57), an early modern novel (*Historie von Reinhart und Gabriotto*, 1551; *Der Goldtfaden*, 1557), and even *Shrovetide Plays* (*Spiel von den zehn Altern*, 1531). Many works would lend themselves well to the same methodological approach, drawing from entertaining narratives to gain insight into the common popular culture. However, the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, much less studied until today, is ideal for a literary-sociological approach as many characters appear on the stage and are exposed in ignorance, foolishness, violence, or simplicity. In other studies, the topic has been the social interactions, the role of the neighbor within the urban context, God's plan for the world, craftsmanship, and the social position of this writer.²¹ Most recently, the concepts of love and marriage have gained some traction, as discussed in Wickram's *Der Goldtfaden*,²² which is not surprising at all, as the early modern period had witnessed a major paradigm shift in those regards with a more intensive discourse on marital issues.

4. The new focus on the ordinary people and situations in everyday life

This study will examine the various personal types appearing in the vast corpus of 16th-century jest narratives, especially in Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*. Those would be, for instance, the rich and poor peasants, foolish medical

doctors, lusty and witty housewives, prostitutes, waggoners (coachmen), mercenaries, ignorant councilmen, prankster and rogue, craftsmen, unlearned (if not stupid) priest or monk, innkeeper, merchant, lawyer, housemaid, and the old wife. The intention is to create a projection of everyday life in the early modern world drawn from highly popular narratives.

Relevant studies by social historians have already addressed, for instance, the world of peasants, mostly using chronicle accounts or other non-fictional material. Combining the critical review of this vast corpus of jest narratives with the examination of non-literary material, including contemporary art works (such as books of hours), will make it possible for us to gain deeper insights into social, economic, and political conditions during the 16th century, at least as perceived by the average citizens, and hence, the authors of jest narratives. The results will also allow us to reflect backward to the 15th century and forward to the 17th century. When laughter is intended, the audience—both then and today—has to recognize itself, at least somewhat, in the figures who are the butts of the joke.^{23,24} By examining the sorts of assumptions, beliefs, and practices allowing this communal entertainment and laughter, we can enrich our understanding of *Alltagsgeschichte* and create meaningful connections between social-historical and literary analysis.

Many, so far mostly ignored, marginalized voices representing various classes, genders, religious minorities, and age groups will thus emerge and become visible again as they are identified as foolish speakers, ignorant individuals, or bumbling persons who make silly mistakes. As this analysis will show, laughter was a pervasive feature of the period, predicated on ordinary people's lives, statements, ideas, and behavior. The literary lens will make it possible to uncover heretofore ignored, yet essential, aspects of everyday life in the village, the city, on the road, and also at court as reflected in the fictional texts (for historical aspects, see the contributions of Kohler & Lutz,²⁵ van Dülmen,²⁶ and Schubert²⁷). We can learn a great deal about early modern mercenaries, impoverished students, prostitutes, foolish peasants, and rich innkeepers, for instance, or at least about the popular attitude and mode of thinking about those groups.²⁸ This study thus promises to build much-needed epistemological bridges between the social sciences and the humanities by studying these fictional narratives that were very popular in the 16th century (for historical perspectives, see Roeck²⁹).

When Wickram, Kirchhof, Lindener, Frey, or Krüger offered their entertaining tales, they also aimed at instruction, which was only possible if the audiences recognized themselves at least somewhat

in the presented scenes, protagonists, or events. The literary evidence thus mirrors social, economic, gender, and religious issues during the 16th century. We could embrace the same concept when studying Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the anonymous *Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles*, or Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron*. Similarly, Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein* is predicated on the appearance of protagonists from many different social classes—men and women and Jews and Christians—so we are in a convenient situation to grasp more or less the public discourse in the countryside, the city, at court, and elsewhere since we are invited to laugh about the ordinary people in their foolishness or smartness (for a parallel approach, drawing from a different set of narratives, see Lundin³⁰).

5. The example of *Rollwagenbüchlein*

Wickram offers a large number of entertaining stories that commonly deal with people spending time on the road, but he did not fully develop a narrative framework as Boccaccio in his *Decameron* (ca. 1350) and Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1400) had done.³¹ As the print history demonstrates, his collection sold well in the early modern book market and could be identified as a bestseller.³² Specifically, it was reprinted in 15 new editions until the end of the 16th century, and then at least four more times in the 17th century (1602, 1607, 1654, and 1665) (see the online bibliographies VD16 and VD17 for a comprehensive listing of all publications during the 16th and 17th centuries, respectively).

Wickram formulated explicitly that he intended to entertain his audience, and, by the same token, to offer instructions through his stories where the common reader within the urban class could be confronted with astounding, surprising, unusual, or extraordinary situations in which people from all social classes operate. When we include the stories contained additionally in the Frankfurt reprint from 1565, the *Rollwagenbüchlein* consists of 111 narratives (for convenience, this analysis primarily references the 1968 edition of Wickram,³³ which offers numerous helpful explanations. However, the critical edition by Roloff³⁴ has also been consistently consulted. The older edition by Kurz³⁵ is available online). Each time, the author focuses on different individuals who belong to specific social classes. Although there is no indication that Wickram might have embraced any populist ideals, he invites the audience to laugh about virtually everyone since he observes ignorance, foolishness, and stupidity in all corners of his society (for a recent study of Wickram in biographical and literary-historical terms, see Classen³⁶).

The first story has revealed this new perspective, far removed from the courtly world, which still dominated

15th-century literature (Elisabeth von Nassau-Saarbrücken, Eleanore of Austria, the anonymous *Malagis*, and to some extent, the anonymous *Fortunatus*). Here, by contrast, we are taken to the world of peasants in the vicinity of Strasbourg, one of whom gets seriously ill and pledges a pilgrimage to Saint Vitus if he were to recover soon. Indeed, he gets well again not long thereafter, but his work in the fields and vineyards keeps him so busy that he can never fulfill his own pledge. One day, feeling guilty about his negligence, he hires a man to do a proxy pilgrimage, but despite his best efforts, the other man fails because of his ignorance about the various saints. Saint Vitus is worshipped in a monastery on the top of a mountain, whereas another monastery, at the foot of the mountain, is dedicated to All Saints. The ignorant messenger returns home, claims the rooster that had been intended as an offering for himself, and explains that Saint Vitus did not hand out any pilgrimage certificate. Simple-mindedness, ignorance, and foolishness dominate this story.

The narrator comments in his epimythium that many people follow this model, worshipping and appealing to saints in times of need instead of addressing Christ as the only true savior. He mocks the strong belief in the practice of giving donations to saints who would not eat any of the food granted; instead, the monks or nuns would consume it all. In reality, there would be many true saints, that is, homeless people, suffering from hunger and sickness, and those would really be in need of food donations. According to Matthew 23¹, what people would do for those in need would be concrete service for Christ. Ultimately, Wickram urges his audience to quit all pilgrimages as useless and to accept one's social responsibility for the poor and miserable people at home, instead of spending money on the veneration of saints or relics, which would require an expensive pilgrimage.¹⁴

The peasant who had charged the other man to carry out the pilgrimage on his behalf is identified as naïve but well-meaning, being thankful and faithful. He does not attract our criticism in the narrow sense of the word, but he still represents the common people's foolishness and ignorance, who continue to practice the traditional Catholic customs of worshipping and believing in saints even long after the Protest Reformation. It is valuable to understand that the peasant owns various types of fields and a vineyard in the vicinity of Strasbourg. He represents, as the narrator emphasizes, "*gar vil guoter, frommer, einfaltiger boursleut*"^{33(p11)} (many good, pious, simple-minded peasants). This man is a hard-working person who

just does not find enough time to live up to his pledge, so he hires his proxy. The latter is as naïve and ignorant as he is, but clever enough to profit from the commission without achieving the goal of doing a pilgrimage on behalf of his master.

Although the peasant does not gain his certificate from the pilgrimage site, he is satisfied with the messenger's explanation and pays him the money agreed upon. The author's ultimate criticism is, of course, directed against people's false and uneducated faith, but the foundation and framework of this narrative sheds valuable light on the social and economic conditions in the countryside. The peasant was, undoubtedly, wealthy enough to hire this proxy pilgrim and stay behind so that he could tend to his farmwork. He displays a considerable degree of ignorance and a simple faith, unaffected by any of the protestant teachings. His representative or proxy proves to be no more intelligent or educated than himself, yet he knows how to profit from his commission in economic terms. Remarkably, there is no harsh condemnation of either person, and not even of the monks who are so foolishly dedicated to their saints, jealously guarding themselves against any criticism. Instead, the poet offered a fairly soft satire and invited his audience to laugh about such simple-minded people.³⁷

As the third story illustrates, the situation in villages was rather crude and underdeveloped, as the local priest indicates, whom the narrator calls "*toller, voller, verlotterter, verspilter, gottloser pfaff*"^{33(p16)} (crazy, drunk, unchaste, gambling, and godless priest). He spends more time in the inn drinking with the members of his parish than in the church.³⁸ The narrator, however, hastens to discriminate between the past and the present since he wants to avoid being criticized for slandering the current clergy. This priest is invited by a colleague to a church festival, where many other respectable clerics have assembled. They enjoyed listening to and watching this drunkard of a priest, but at one point, the protagonist goes beyond all measure in his disruptive behavior, and the host reprimands him, reminding him of his obligation to be a role model for the people in his parish.

Wickram apparently took the side of the Protestants by ridiculing this priest, but he also mellowed this criticism by contrasting him with the other priests attending the feast, who are abhorred by their colleagues. The comedy of this story comes to its gruesome conclusion when the drunkard at the end falls into a deep creek and drowns there.^{33(p18)}

Religious values and ideals regularly became the target of the author's satire, such as in the fifth story, where a young man who has traveled to the pilgrimage site of Einsiedeln for some non-religious business shares with some of the pilgrims that the Virgin Mary is his sister.

¹ Refer the link: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2025%3A40-45&version=NIV;KJV1>

Everyone is deeply shocked by this sacrilegious remark, and the authorities have him immediately apprehended and imprisoned for the night. The next day, when questioned by the city council about the meaning of his claim, he doubles down on it and adds that the devil of Constance and the Lord God of Schaffhausen are his brothers. This horrifies the judges even further, but then they inquired of him as to the meaning of his alleged blasphemy. To all their relief and laughter, he explains that his father was a sculptor and had created all those objects, and had created him as well: “*auch mich; darumb sind wir geschwister*”^{33(p22)} (and me too; hence we are siblings).

As much as Wickram was a Protestant, he did not demonstrate any strong opposition to the Catholics and only commented on the fact that many pilgrims went to Einsiedeln to worship the Virgin Mary. We do not know what kind of business had brought the young man to that pilgrimage site. The heading identifies him as an “*abentheurer*”^{33(p21)} (adventurer), but in the text, we are only told that he attended to his business in Einsiedeln and that he was not a pilgrim. He joined the pilgrims in the inn because that was the main location to get food and drinks, find entertainment, and meet people.³⁹ The subsequent section also introduces the city council that has to judge the alleged culprit, but there are no further details.

In story No. 14, however, where another criminal trial takes place, we gain more insights into that institution. Moreover, here the focus rests on two lansquenets, that is, mercenaries, a typical category of professional soldiers in the early modern age.⁴⁰ They are good friends, “*guot gesellen*”^{33(p30)} (good fellows), but find employment in different military units. After a major battle, the military conflict is settled, and the troops are sent home. These two men then happen to meet again and exchange what they have experienced and profited from the war. One of them has not gained any wealth during the war because he had been content with his salary and pitied the poor peasants. The other one, however, has acquired more money because he has been ruthless, robbing wherever it has been possible. Mocking the first one, he advises him, “*du muoßst es nemmen, wo duos findest, und dir niemants lassen zuo lieb sein*”^{33(p21)} (you must take wherever you can find anything and must not have any pity on anyone out of love). In other words, he urges him to steal wherever possible and to be ruthless, a reflection of the general situation with lansquenets who tended to plunder, kill, and rob to sustain themselves.⁴¹ The first man could have done the same, gambling and pillaging among the peasants,^{33(p31)} but he had observed his ethical principles in obvious contrast to the others in his company and elsewhere.

The subsequent development of the narrative illuminates the life of lansquenets, but now in a surprising

turn of events. The poor man takes to heart what his fellow had advised him and robs the rich man—a robber himself who had been allowed to take from the poor victims whenever an opportunity arose during the war—in the middle of the night since they share the same room in an inn, and immediately leaves the house to get away from the fellow mercenary. The other one realizes his loss the next morning, quickly follows the other, reaches him in Nuremberg, and has him taken prisoner on the charge of theft. As in the previous story, the conflict is settled by the city council, “*ersamer radt*”^{33(p31)} (honorable council). They question the poor lansquenet why he took the money and a valuable necklace from his companion and learn that the rich one had advised him to do so. Indeed, as the poor one can explain, “*er solt kein barmhertzigkeit mit niemant han, sunder solts nemen, wo ers funde*”^{33(p32)} (he should never feel any pity with anyone but should, instead, take wherever he would find it).

In their Solomonic wisdom, the councilmembers or judges decide that the accused should return the chain to its owner but could keep the money so that he would be able to return home without financial difficulties. However, they also instruct the rich lansquenet never to teach anyone how to gain wealth by means of robbery.³² Wickram thus voices considerable criticism of the lawlessness of those mercenaries and questions the entire institution of lansquenets. By contrast, he gives solid credit to the wise city council because they operated in a fair manner, allowed the poor culprit to explain and thus defend himself, and even granted him to keep the money that the rich man had obviously stolen from poor peasants during some military operation. In his typically brilliant strategy, Wickram addressed numerous social issues and topics in the short space of this one jest narrative: the lure of warfare, the terrible consequences of unrestrained mercenaries, the narrow spaces in an inn, the role of a city council, and ethics and morality. We do not learn to what social class the two men belong, but service as lansquenets was obviously a convenient way for them to find employment and gain riches, at least in the case of the second man.

Life as a lansquenet, however, was not necessarily profitable, as story No. 15 illustrates, where an impoverished soldier cannot even feed himself and suffers from hunger. In his desperation, he forces his way into the captain's headquarters, claiming that he can formulate his request by using just three words, “*Gelt oder urlaub*”^{33(p33)} (Money or temporary release from duty). His rhetorical skill in all its brevity achieves the desired goal; everyone laughs about his smart statement, and the captain grants him a month's salary as an advance payment.

6. An aristocrat versus the peasants in a village

Truly revealing proves to be the 18th story in which an impoverished nobleman has taken a loan from a rural community. Contrary to our expectations, the peasants are wealthy; the aristocrat lacks money and pledge in a document to be fully liable for the credit. He even agrees to be subjected to the punishment of imprisonment if he is unable to pay back the loan. The amount of interest grows in the course of time, and the nobleman does not comply with his own promise, although the community sends him repeated messages and threatens him with being thrown into prison.³⁶ Finally, the peasants sent a messenger to him to demand repayment or take him as a prisoner. The messenger finds him at a barber who is shaving his beard. The nobleman promises to repay the loan if the messenger allows him to complete his shaving. Once they have agreed upon that, the nobleman immediately gets up and leaves the shop, with his beard still not yet shaven. The barber helps his customer to escape, so the peasants in the village never see their money again.

The narrator concludes with two recommendations: first, peasants should never loan money to an aristocrat; second, if any money is loaned, then it should come from the latter, *“die edelleüt sollen den bauren leyhen”*^{33(p37)} (the noblemen ought to give loans to the peasants). The story itself sheds valuable light on the economic situation in the countryside, underscoring the peasants' wealth and credit business, whereas the aristocrat is badly impoverished and resorts to deceptive trickery to swindle his creditors out of their money. The barber plays only a secondary role, but he helps the nobleman to get away. Moreover, we also learn a little about the legal and administrative structures prevalent in southwestern Germany, with the city of Rottweil being the center of the regional justice system. There is also a reference to the *“schultheiß”*^{33(p37)} (village mayor) whom the messenger asks for help in arresting the debtor, but once the nobleman has run away, there is no longer any opportunity for the messenger or the peasants to enforce the repayment of the loan. We recognize, thus, a complex portrait of the economic, legal, and political conditions in early modern Germany, where the rural population apparently enjoyed a higher financial status than the lower aristocracy.

7. Friars

This finds a certain confirmation in the 20th story, in which a Franciscan friar frequents a village where he regularly receives many alms from a rich peasant woman (widow?). She is pious and readily hands over cheese to him. He wonders where her daughter might be and learns that she has stepped into a thorn and now lies in bed because

her foot has swollen badly. The monk offers his help, goes upstairs, and immediately overwhelms and rapes the young woman. The mother is naïve and believes in his goodness, and even prepares a soup for him while he tries to treat her daughter's foot. Although she hears her daughter's screaming, she is so innocent that she thinks that the friar works hard on the foot, which causes her pain, *“Leid dich, mein liebs kind! So wirt dir geholfen”*^{33(p39)} (Calm down, my dear child. Then you will receive help).

As soon as the friar has raped the young woman, he gets out of the house as fast as he can, knowing only too well that he had abused the young maid and committed rape. He even declines the soup the mother had prepared for him, now claiming that it is his fasting day. However, the widow, having gone upstairs to her daughter, realizes quickly that a sexual crime has happened. In her resoluteness, the mother grabs a strong cane and tries to ambush the friar, who has continued begging in the villages. She pretends to have an extra cheese for him, but he fully understands the deceptive strategy and gets away, never to return to the village again because he is afraid the mother might not forget the crime he had committed against her daughter.

We can draw several conclusions from this short narrative. First, in the middle of the 16th century, begging by Franciscans continued unabatedly, especially in the countryside. Second, the peasant woman is identified as a rich person, but as naïve regarding the friar, pious in her attitude, and yet also ferocious in protecting her daughter, which she fails to do. The author badly criticizes this friar as voluptuous, immoral, criminal, and deceptive, but the criticism does not automatically extend to the Catholic Church and its clergy at large. Notably, rape was condemned as a severe criminal act, although the peasant woman does not resort to legal measures on behalf of her daughter. Instead, she wants to pursue her revenge with a violent strategy, but cannot achieve her goal of beating up the evil Franciscan.

8. Village life

In story No. 24, we find ourselves once again in a village where a young lansquenet is trying to beg for money from a peasant. At first, the institution of lansquenets is critically viewed, as the protagonist returns from his military service without having gained any riches. The war had not lasted for a long time, so the soldiers were quickly dismissed again, *“alß dann oft geschicht, das iren vil on gelt wider heimgeschickt werden”*^{33(p45)} (it often happens that many of them are sent home again without any money/payment). He is truly impoverished and must beg for food and money. One day, he knocks on the window of a peasant's house who is eating the morning meal with his servants

and family. The peasant, however, claims to have no money available either. Yet, he invites the vagabond in to share their food, “*So wil ich mein armuot die mir gott beschert hatt, gern mitt dir theilen*”^{33(p46)} (I will happily share my poverty with you that God has bestowed upon me).

Although the meal is simple and plain, he is very hungry and gratefully enjoys what he receives. He not only expresses his gratitude to the peasant but also laughs at himself and his foolishness, thinking that he would be wealthy as a lansquenet. He remarks, to himself and others, that he would have to digest the plain food for quite some time before any riches come his way. Wickram offers good insight into the harsh reality of poverty during the period, emphasizing that serving as a mercenary would not guarantee wealth. As much as we are invited to smile about this situation and the former lansquenet's late realization of the true generosity of the peasant, the story reflects powerfully the widespread poverty and economic misery in the countryside and among the vagrants on the road.

This provides a segue to the next story, No. 25, in which we learn about a young married couple; he owns an inn, and she is an innkeeper's daughter. After a short time, her pregnancy becomes visible, indicating that she had slept with another man before their wedding. He forces her to reveal the truth, that is, a waggoner who had stayed at her father's place had had sex with her. Although her husband curses her and her previous lover, he turns it all into a joke and lets it go, thus preserving all their public honor. Addressing the waggoner, he comments, “*Hastu also ein weite straß und muostu eben meiner frauwen, ich weiß nit wohin, faren!*”^{33(p47)} (You have such a long road to travel, and yet you have to drive my wife, I do not know where to!). In the epimythium, the narrator praises the husband for avoiding the spread of the news regarding his wife's dishonor, and he urges other people to follow that example. There would be many who would only hurt themselves by publicizing their wife's transgression before the wedding, “*wann sy ire weiber genuog schenden und in ir eigen nest scheissen, nemmen sy die denn wider zuo inen und sitzen dann beyde ins bad*”^{33(p47)} (there are many who greatly shame their wives and shit into their own nest. Then they accept their wives again, so both thus sit in the bath).

9. Didactic laughter

In general, Wickram intriguingly combines humorous comments, often of a satirical nature, with didactic remarks, offering serious teaching behind the mask of the literary entertainer. In No. 28, for instance, we come across a remarkable example of antisemitism as it was prevalent in the 16th century. A simple-minded peasant enters a church and takes a close look at a crucifix. It shows

the Christ figure covered with streams of blood after His flagellation. The man feels considerable empathy for the Lord's suffering depicted there, and after having prayed his Pater Noster, he urges Christ to pay more attention the next time and stay away from the “*schnoeden boesen juden*” (p. 50; mean and evil Jews). He simply assumes that the Jews killed Christ and believes that he would be smart enough to give Christ advice on how to avoid His suffering in the future. While he demonstrates a good heart, feeling such sympathy with Christ's Passion, he is completely ignorant of the theological background and the historical reasons for the Christ figure being painted in such a brutal manner. For him, Christ appears like a real figure who might have to face the same situation during His Passion sometime in the future. Little wonder that this man reveals apparently common ideas about the reasons for Christ's crucifixion, which make him express strong hatred of Jews (for a useful global overview, see Eriksen *et al.*⁴²; however, the authors do not engage with literary material and are entirely unaware of the testimony of Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*).

Story No. 48 expands on this topic, but it also diversifies the historical perspective considerably and makes us view the phenomenon of antisemitism in a different light. In this case, a group of peasants sits together in a tavern, drinking heavily. Then, a Jew appears and sits down with them after he has taken care of his horse. The peasants invite him to join them in drinking wine, but he refuses because his religious rules would not allow him to do so with Christians. Of course, this irritates the company, although he had agreed to take a large mug of beer. As they claim, due to a great drought, water would be in short supply. Finally, the innkeeper handed him a mug with water, and the Jew gulped down a large quantity. However, this makes him cough badly, which the other guests force him to explain. Foolishly, the Jew pretends that he is coughing up rain since he has kept it in for a long time. A drunken peasant takes it literally, takes hold of him, and drags him through the room as a punishment for his guilt in having caused the great drought. The Jew screams at the top of his lungs to defend himself, but it takes quite some time until the other fellows intervene and rescue him from the bad mistreatment. As soon as he is free, he gets on his horse and rides off.

A number of significant conclusions can be drawn from this at first rather silly story about the Jew and the drunken peasants. Here, we encounter an old Jew who travels across the country^{33(p87)} and is wealthy enough to own a horse. He does not hesitate to enter the inn since he is not aware of the peasants' readiness to exert violence. He is careless in offering this highly metaphorical explanation for his long cough, not being aware that the drunken peasant would

take it verbatim as an explanation for the drought. The others do not join the violent actions against him and actually free him from the grip of the drunken peasant when they assume that the entertainment has reached its limit, “*deß Schimpf wer genuog*”^{33(p88)} (it was enough with this joke).

As soon as he can, the Jew then leaves, being afraid of further violent mistreatment. The narrator does not comment specifically on the bad situation in the inn, but he invites us to laugh about the Jew and his foolish assumption that he could explain his strong cough with a facetious remark as if he had been responsible for the long dry spell that threatens all the fruit, wine, and grain as his attacker claimed. The drunken peasant also constitutes a silly figure because he does not understand metaphorical speech, but since he is stronger than the Jew and has apparently the full support from the other guests in the inn, he remains unscathed and is actually applauded by the others for having staged such a “humorous” scene for their entertainment.

From the start, the entire group of peasants viewed the Jew with some hostility insofar as they angrily responded to his request for water. They seem to know that he would refuse to drink wine with them since they are Christians, and immediately try to put him into a defensive situation. His counteroffer to share beer with them is not accepted, and the innkeeper brings him the desired water, which then leads to the events examined above. However, religious aspects do not surface, whereas the story is clearly predicated on the peasants forming a group of insiders that views the outsider or stranger as a hostile intruder. Hence, they abuse him and threaten to hurt him, making him the butt of their cruel joke. The same could have happened to any other person who would have come from the outside. Yet, his identity as a Jew makes the situation worse, especially because the Jew immediately makes it clear to them that he is different and cannot join them in drinking wine.

10. Violence and crime

In many cases throughout *Rollwagenbüchlein*, violence characterizes the social interactions both in public and in private, which is sometimes accepted as almost ordinary (see above), but more often not condemned outright. A most dramatic case is dealt with in story No. 87, in which we hear of a wedding in Pforzheim (between Karlsruhe and Stuttgart). The priest places himself at the entrance to the church to bless the young bride. He smiles at her happily, and she responds kindly, which immediately provokes her bridegroom to suspect that the two might have had a previous affair. In his rashness and brutality, he hits her face

with his fist, causing her to fall down. All guests viewed this behavior with great discomfort and reported him to the authorities. They quickly determined that he had displayed physical violence without any justification and imprisoned him for several weeks, which the narrator comments with approval, “*sin verdienter lon*”^{33(p153)} (his deserved “reward”).

A most unusual scene with extreme violence is the topic of story No. 74, in which a group of children set up a game where they imitate the world of adults. In particular, they acted as butchers, cooks, and so forth. One of them pretended to be the pig. Once all things were arranged, the butcher approached the “animal” and cut its throat, whereas another child captured the blood, as they had observed their parents or others doing in their village. An adult happened to come by and observe the horrible situation. However, when the “butcher” was taken to the council, they were at a loss for how to approach this case since all the children were only 5 or 6 years old and would not have understood the ethical or moral implications of their actions, which they had simply replicated adult activities. Eventually, an old and wise man advises to offer the “culprit,” on one hand, a delightful apple, and on the other, a valuable coin. Depending on the boy’s choice, he should be declared innocent or executed for murder. He chooses, however, the apple, so he is declared innocent because he had acted only in his childishness and did not really understand the meaning and consequences of his actions.

In story No. 72, a young man commits himself to the life of a hermit, working for a long time voluntarily fixing the country roads. However, one night he has a dream in which a voice—maybe by the devil—tells him that God expects him to commit one of three possible deadly sins: Drunkenness, having a sexual relationship, or murder. We are not told where this dream or voice might come from, but he accepted it as a divine message, although the content seems rather dubious and untrustworthy. After much reflection, he decides to submit under drunkenness as the least dangerous sin and invites his sister to visit him one more time. She brought wine and bread with her, and they both enjoyed a good time together. However, at one point he becomes enflamed and raped his own sister. Once he had committed this crime, he decided to murder her to keep his evil deed a secret, and so he carried out all three sins because he had believed that drunkenness would be the least sinful. The narrator warns his audience to be alert to the danger of alcohol because many other sins could result from it,^{33(p129)} as we have already seen in the story with the Jew and the drunken peasants.⁴³

Apart from violence, Wickram criticizes arrogance, pretentiousness, foolishness, stupidity, and many other

human vices. He does not take on the role of a preacher, and his stories do not serve specifically the purpose of enriching or illuminating a sermon, as was still the case with Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522),⁴⁴ certainly an influential source for Wickram and many of his literary contemporaries. However, in ethical and moral terms, Wickram pursued the same line of argument as his famous predecessor, even if he embedded his stories in a more humorous framework and more specifically targeted fools and other ignorant and vicious individuals, exposing their shortcomings in rather concrete terms.

In story No. 42, for instance, we hear of an arrogant individual who constantly pretends to be more courageous and daring than anyone else. He used to be a lansquenet and now pretends to have accomplished the greatest heroic deeds. However, just that day, an old and weak woman had died, and she was not yet buried in the cemetery, as it was already nighttime. This causes great anxiety among everyone, especially in the braggart, since she is said still to be alive and haunting anyone who might dare to traverse the cemetery without carrying a light. As the narrator emphasizes, when alive, that woman would not have been able to hurt anyone, and yet, now, being dead, her corpse frightens them deeply.⁴⁵ The former lansquenet is finally forced to take up the challenge. He pays his bill and walks home across the cemetery because there is no alternative.

As the narrator emphasizes, the dead woman had been a weak and mute person during her life and could never speak up. Now, being dead, however, she deeply scares the protagonist, who is afraid of her ghostly appearance. Hence, he covers his head with his coat and plugs his ears with his fingers, hoping not to hear the dead woman groaning and wailing. However, the more he tries to walk steadily away from the site where she is placed on a bier—the ossuary, of all places—the more he approaches the scary place and eventually falls down the stairs, breaking his legs, getting no help at all because his drinking companions are still in the inn. He screams and howls for a while, but since this has no effect, he limits himself to loud sighing and crying. Late at night, the others returning home, found him in the ossuary, and took him to the doctor, laughing about the reasons for his accident, that is, his fear of the ghost of the old woman. The narrator hence concludes with the observation that this fool earned an insult to his injury.^{33(p72)}

11. Public life

Many times, however, Wickram did not target specific social or religious (Jewish) groups. Instead, he reflected on ordinary situations in public, at festivities, at home, on the road, and the like. For him, like all other authors of

jest narratives, the normal human shortcomings deserved the most attention, and not major religious or religious concerns. Even though we often hear of peasants and their interactions with others, which invites us to laugh about those foolish and ignorant people, the basic concern for this author of jest narratives was to expose general human shortcomings wherever he could recognize them. In story No. 52, for instance, the author takes us to a festive party following the burial of a craftsman. They ate and drank among a larger group of people, and no one even thought any longer of the dead person.

At one point, however, one of them needs to relieve himself. His friend and neighbor, however, dismisses this request and tells him simply to urinate into his hat, which would make it unnecessary to get up and seek out the toilet. The simpleton does so but he does not know what to do with the soaked and leaking hat. He asked the fellow for advice on what to do with the hat, who wondered aloud why he would not know where the hat belonged. Hence, he places the urine-filled hat on his head and thus soaks himself with all the dirt. The entire company laughs about this terrible joke and urges them to observe peace, especially because the second person had given him the hat and had urged him indirectly to place it back onto his head.

The narrator has nothing to say about the dead person, the funeral, the grief, or the ceremony. All that matters here, which might also reflect practical customs at that time, is the feasting and heavy drinking, all of which resulted in crude and boorish behavior. However, since the entire scene concludes with communal laughter, there is no rancor and aggression; instead, the company urges them to observe peace and to forgive each other because fault would rest on both sides.^{33(p94)} Both here and in many other cases, the focus rests on excessive consumption of alcohol and the subsequent crude behavior, which was, however, not necessarily limited to the social class of peasants.

12. Eating and drinking

The most dominant theme seems to be the consequences of extensive eating and drinking, that is, excessiveness, drunkenness, and also consumption beyond one's financial means. This is impressively illustrated in story No. 53 that deals with the highly respected composer and singer Gruenewaldt, who works at the court of Duke William of Munich and spends some time at the imperial diet in Augsburg. The artist spends most of his time enjoying social company and soon faces an enormous debt to his innkeeper, who demands to be paid when Gruenewaldt's patron is about to return home. The poor man does not know what to do and faces the danger that the innkeeper might take his valuable coat in lieu of money. In his

desperation, the singer quickly composes a song and presents it to the wealthiest man in town, the famous merchant Fugger. In this song, he describes his financial woes and his fear that the innkeeper might take his coat as payment for his debt. The rich patron enjoys the song, understands Gruenewaldt's predicament, pays the debt, and gives him extra money, which solves the situation.

In contrast to many other stories contained in the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, here we are situated both at court and the inn, both within the city and in the world of the literary and musical arts. Gruenewaldt manages to get out of his emergency because of his creativity, which uniquely sheds light on the actual situation for singers, composers, and other artists at that time. The protagonist reveals a tendency to eat and drink too much, enjoying the company of other drunkards and gluttons. As we observe here and throughout, much of public life took place in the inn where people assembled to eat and drink excessively. Gruenewaldt managed to pay his debts because of his artistic skills and because he did not display crude behavior or a bad character. Instead, we are invited to smile about him and enjoy the situation as a beautiful new song resulted from it.⁴⁶

13. Conclusion

Wickram was one of the most influential authors of jest narratives (*Schwänke*), and his literary models influenced many other successors in early modern Germany. Of course, the interest in entertaining and didactic narratives also existed in other cultures, such as Marguerite de Navarre's *Heptaméron* (1558/1559) or Gian Francesco Straparola's *Le piacevoli notti* (1555). Our study of *Rollwagenbüchlein* gains more global perspectives, so we can firmly argue that the literary discourse in the late 16th century allows us to reflect on the social and cultural conditions of that period.

Anticlericalism, ridicule of peasants, antisemitism, comments about gluttony and alcoholism, conflicts between representatives of the various social classes, reflections on childhood, comments on poverty, remarks on the situation of lansquenets, especially after they had been dismissed from service, observations about crude language (cursing), bragging, superstition, married life, adultery, premarital sex, and even about the legal system occupy this volume. We commonly observe a specific interest in entertaining the audience with accounts about stupid or smart remarks, actions, or behavior.

A final example might suffice to illustrate the complexity of the thematic range of Wickram's rich volume of jest narratives. In story No. 36, a man is brought to court and fears that he might lose his case unless he hires an attorney. They agree on a certain amount of payment, and then

the protagonist learns that he should say nothing but the word "blee" when asked by the judges. This turns out to be successful because he is soon identified as a fool who cannot be regarded as responsible for his actions.

Once the court has dismissed the case, the attorney wants to receive his payment, but the client says nothing to him but "blee" (a nonsensical expression), which badly irritates the former. But when he takes him to court over his payment, the judges remind him that this man had already been identified as being nothing but a fool. The attorney's advice to his client thus makes him a loser as well. The former had basically resorted to a deceptive strategy and lied to the court, so he is now beaten by his own game, as the narrator emphasizes, "*und traff untrew iren eygen herrn*"^{33(p61)} (so disloyalty hurt its own lord). Witticism, or its very opposite, foolishness and ignorance, occupy many of the stories, and the author drew from many different examples in his society, laughing both about clerics (No. 38, No. 47) and waggoners (No. 41), naïve and foolish wives (No. 49), noblemen (No. 50), and innkeepers (No. 54). The poet also included stories about horrible domestic violence leading even to murder (No. 55), smart thieves (No. 56), travelers facing shipwreck (No. 58), lansquenets (No. 61), medical doctors and barbers (Nos. 61, 66), a dentist in Italy (No. 65), fishermen (No. 67), children skilled in bowling but lacking in piety (No. 69), a neglectful bishop (No. 76), the riotous peasants in the Peasant War from 1525 (No. 85), and so forth.

In the majority of cases, peasants, clerics, and lansquenets are the author's targets, but he did not hesitate to include members of the city council, even princes, as objects of his satire and sharp criticism. We face an excellent opportunity to investigate social conditions, everyday life situations, common human interactions, conflicts between the genders, antisemitic sentiments, and concepts of childhood. Undoubtedly, Wickram proves to be a highly skillful writer, presenting unique and yet common cases of miscommunication, aggression, excessive drinking, courtly and urban entertainment, financial problems, domestic violence, and the suffering of lansquenets once they had been dismissed from their military service.

We face here, in other words, an ideal opportunity to examine many different social conflicts, economic topics, and cultural conditions. Social life most commonly took place in the inn, where people tended to drink excessively. But we also encounter many other situations with people on the road, at work (fishermen, waggoners, messengers, peasants, singers, barbers, etc.). Wickram's *Rollwagenbüchlein*, very similar as Johannes Pauli's *Schimpf und Ernst* (1522) and numerous other collections of jest narratives from the late 16th century and beyond, can thus be identified as a first-rate literary source for the

study of early modern everyday life in all its complexity, both in public and in private, regarding the situation in the countryside and the city, and in the church and inn.

Wickram deliberately highlighted human folly, shortcomings, failures, vices, and stupidity so that the audience could laugh about the various protagonists. However, there were also wise councilmen, humble and virtuous peasants, hard-working individuals, creative poets and singers, clever lawyers, and insightful and reasonable mayors. In short, *Rollwagenbüchlein* represents an extraordinarily rich mirror of early modern life in all its complexity, taking us from the lowest social level to the highest, from the countryside to the city, from children to old people, from men to women, from Jews to Christians, from rogues to virtuous peasants, from intelligent medical doctors and foolish messengers.

Studying Wickram's collection of stories invites us to apply many different analytic perspectives, both literary and sociological, religious and cultural, historical and anthropological. Other works by him, such as *Von guten und bösen Nachbarn* (1556), would also lend themselves to the critical investigation of ethical and economic concerns.⁴⁷ The world of the peasantry emerges as much in front of our eyes as that of the clergy, the medical and legal profession, public entertainment (inns, drinking, feasts), and the military (post-war, lansquenets). Altogether, this fully confirms the claim that the *Rollwagenbüchlein*, like many of its successors, serves exceedingly well as a narrative source for the study of everyday culture in 16th-century Germany and elsewhere. While most other scholars dedicated to that period have focused on the theological debates—Catholics versus Protestants—and hence on the relevant textual evidence,⁴⁸ here we can identify a secular source highly appreciated by the reading audience, which found its own world well mirrored in it. Of course, we have always had to consider the narrative filters between literary fiction and the social reality on the ground, but the enormous popularity of this genre at large allows us to grasp more specifically what people laughed about and were concerned with.⁴⁹

If we then widened our perspectives and included contemporary entertaining literature such as Giovan Francesco Straparola (*Le piacevoli notti*, 1550), we could easily gain strong support for the argument developed here.⁵⁰

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ARTICLE

Reframing heritage management: The role of marketing education through cultural products and direct investment in culture

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Abstract

Cultural heritage professionals increasingly face the challenge of combining preservation with innovation, engagement, and sustainability in fast-changing contexts. This study explores how marketing education can support heritage professionals in aligning cultural preservation with economic and social sustainability. As public funding diminishes and audience expectations evolve, the need for strategic competencies in communication, audience development, and partnership-building becomes increasingly urgent. The study adopts a conceptual review methodology, integrating a structured thematic analysis of international literature and comparative case studies. Sources were selected based on their relevance to cultural products (CPs), direct investment in culture (DIC), and professional training within the heritage sector. Recent literature highlights the growing interdependence between cultural heritage, digital innovation, and sustainable development. However, few studies have systematically explored how marketing education contributes to this nexus – particularly through capacity-building for heritage professionals. This study identifies strategic marketing as a critical skill set for professionals managing CPs and DIC frameworks. Five key competency domains are outlined: audience engagement, digital literacy, strategic planning, ethical communication, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Case studies illustrate that institutions equipped with marketing expertise consistently outperform others in audience outreach, funding diversification, and community impact. To address this need, marketing education should be embedded in heritage curricula and institutional policy to strengthen professional capacity. The study proposes a phased implementation framework that emphasizes partnerships with academic institutions, hybrid learning models, and inclusive access. It offers a structured synthesis of how marketing education can serve as a lever for institutional resilience and stakeholder alignment in heritage management, providing actionable recommendations across geographic and governance contexts.

Keywords: Cultural heritage management; Cultural products; Direct investment in culture; Marketing education; Public–private partnerships; Strategic competencies

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1. Introduction

Cultural heritage serves as a dynamic link between the past and the present, encompassing both the tangible and intangible legacies that shape human civilization and cultural

identity. Beyond preservation, heritage promotes global solidarity by fostering intercultural dialog and a shared historical consciousness. However, contemporary challenges – ranging from financial constraints and climate change to changing audience expectations – demand adaptive, forward-looking management strategies.¹

Conventionally, heritage management has focused on conservation and academic study. However, as stated by Trivyzadakis,² a shift is needed – cultural heritage must become an active contributor to societal development, moving beyond static representation to a more engaging and sustainable use. In this context, there is a growing need for integrative strategies that address both cultural and economic sustainability.

The present study explores two such frameworks – cultural products (CPs) and direct investment in culture (DIC) – as tools for innovating heritage management strategies. CPs transform cultural assets into participatory experiences, while DIC offers long-term financial models through public–private partnerships and innovation-oriented funding. Central to their effectiveness is marketing education, which enables heritage professionals to engage audiences, attract investment, and align preservation with evolving societal needs.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a conceptual review methodology, integrating a thematic analysis of literature with illustrative case synthesis. Sources were selected based on their relevance to marketing education, cultural heritage management, CPs, and DIC. The review focused on peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and institutional case studies published between 2010 and 2024, identified through targeted keyword searches in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Case studies were included to reflect a diversity of geographic contexts and implementation models, highlighting how marketing competencies intersect with heritage sustainability objectives. Although no empirical data collection was conducted, the selection, analysis, and comparison of literature aimed to identify strategic patterns, competency gaps, and transferable frameworks. This methodological approach is intended to support policy and curriculum development by offering a structured synthesis of current research and practice.

3. Understanding cultural heritage: Concepts, values, and implications

3.1. Material and immaterial dimensions of cultural heritage

Cultural heritage, as conceptualized by Raj *et al.*,³ encompasses the historical, artistic, and social

accomplishments of societies, serving as a repository of collective identity and memory. It is traditionally divided into two interrelated categories: tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible cultural heritage refers to material assets – such as monuments, tools, manuscripts, and artworks – that physically represent the ingenuity, rituals, and values of past civilizations.

Lenzerini⁴ offers a complementary view, emphasizing that intangible cultural heritage consists of non-physical forms of cultural expression, including oral traditions, spiritual practices, festivals, music, and traditional knowledge systems. These elements do not merely coexist with physical artifacts – they actively contextualize and animate them.

This study adopts an integrative understanding of cultural heritage, recognizing that both dimensions are essential for safeguarding the continuity of cultural identity. As Blakely⁵ affirms, their interplay constructs a multidimensional historical narrative, ensuring that heritage preservation encompasses both physical conservation and the transmission of living traditions to future generations.

3.2. Cultural heritage as hyper-value: Beyond symbolism to economic impact

Labadi⁶ introduces the concept of “hyper-value” to describe cultural heritage’s multidimensional significance – symbolic, historical, and economic – extending beyond its physical attributes. This framework underpins the present analysis by highlighting heritage’s ability to shape collective memory, foster social cohesion, and drive development. Symbolically, heritage forges a tangible connection between the present and the past, anchoring community identity. Historically, it offers interpretive tools for understanding societal evolution.

Economically, cultural heritage plays an increasingly strategic role. Du Cros and McKercher⁷ emphasize that cultural tourism has become a high-yield sector, invigorating local economies by generating employment and stimulating service industries. The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites are pivotal in regional growth.⁸ Nilson and Thorell⁹ further argue that cultural heritage is a foundational asset for creative industries – such as design, fashion, and media – by inspiring contemporary innovation through historic narratives.

This study supports the view that cultural heritage enriches lifelong learning and public engagement, with economic returns amplified through effective public–private partnerships. These partnerships align investment with preservation through adaptive reuse and restoration.

As suggested by Shabani *et al.*,¹⁰ the symbolic and economic functions of heritage intersect in promoting intercultural dialog. When effectively leveraged, heritage can serve as a dynamic force for sustainable development and global cooperation.

3.3. Theoretical foundations for strategic heritage management

This article is informed by three interrelated theoretical frameworks that structure and guide the analysis: Strategic marketing theory,¹¹ stakeholder theory,¹² and public value theory within cultural policy.¹³ Together, these frameworks provide critical insights into how heritage institutions navigate external pressures while maintaining cultural integrity.

Strategic marketing theory provides the conceptual basis for aligning institutional missions with audience expectations and market dynamics. It emphasizes segmentation, positioning, and campaign design as tools not only for outreach but also for ensuring institutional sustainability. Stakeholder theory contributes an ethical and operational lens by focusing on how cultural institutions balance the often-competing expectations of funders, local communities, tourists, scholars, and government bodies. Public value theory reframes heritage as a co-created societal good – one that must continuously demonstrate relevance, inclusivity, and long-term impact to justify ongoing investment and attention.

Within this framework, the integration of marketing competencies is understood not as a commercial deviation, but as a strategic necessity. It enables heritage professionals to mediate between preservation imperatives and stakeholder value creation, thereby positioning marketing education as a core instrument of sustainable cultural governance.

3.4. The evolution of heritage management: From humanism to digitalization

The evolution of cultural heritage management reflects changing philosophical, political, and technological paradigms over centuries. Rooted in the Renaissance, the early conceptualization of heritage was driven by humanism and the rediscovery of classical antiquity. As observed by Sam and Chukwujekwu,¹⁴ this period marked the emergence of systematic preservation as an intellectual pursuit, laying the foundation for scholarly conservation methods that framed artifacts as vehicles of historical and artistic insight.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, heritage was increasingly linked to nation-building. According to Simmons,¹⁵ national museums – such as the British Museum and

the Louvre – embodied a shift toward institutionalized heritage stewardship. These institutions democratized access to curated histories, fostering a sense of collective identity through curated material culture. Heritage became instrumentalized as a means to assert cultural sovereignty and continuity.

The 20th century marked the formalization of international heritage norms. According to Tucker and Carnegie,¹⁶ this period was transformative due to the emergence of multilateral frameworks that introduced global standards. The 1964 Venice Charter, highlighted by Szmygin and Skoczylas,¹⁷ repositioned monuments within their cultural and contextual significance, redefining restoration practices beyond esthetics. At the same time, UNESCO's 2003 Convention brought intangible heritage – such as rituals, knowledge systems, and traditions – to the forefront, recognizing it as equally vital to safeguarding cultural continuity.¹⁸

Technological advancements have further reshaped heritage practice. Trivyriadakis¹⁹ highlights the impact of three-dimensional (3D) scanning, virtual reality (VR), and digital archiving in expanding preservation frontiers. Underhill²⁰ cites initiatives like CyArk that virtually document threatened sites, while Pansoni *et al.*²¹ demonstrate artificial intelligence (AI)'s emerging role in analyzing structural vulnerabilities and enabling immersive engagement with cultural materials.

Nonetheless, heritage management continues to face pressures in an increasingly globalized context. As noted by Siliutina *et al.*,²² institutions such as UNESCO promote collaborative frameworks to mediate tensions between preservation and accessibility. This study adopts the view that understanding this historical trajectory is essential for designing contemporary approaches that integrate both classical conservation ethics and the demands of an interconnected digital society.

4. From tradition to transformation: Evolving heritage management models

4.1. Research–protection–prominence (RPP): Classical foundations and limitations

The RPP model represents a foundational framework in cultural heritage management, structuring the field around the interconnected functions of academic inquiry, physical safeguarding, and public visibility.²³ According to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe,²⁴ the model comprises three core pillars:

- (i) Research: This involves the systematic examination of heritage assets to reveal their historical, artistic, and cultural dimensions. It establishes the evidence base

necessary for credible heritage interpretation and planning

- (ii) Protection: This focuses on mitigating threats such as environmental degradation, conflict, and neglect, aiming to ensure the long-term preservation of material culture
- (iii) Prominence: This includes strategies for raising awareness and fostering public engagement through exhibitions, media campaigns, and educational outreach.²⁵

While the RPP model has historically guided institutional practice, it has been increasingly criticized for its reactive orientation and limited adaptability. It often prioritizes conservation over innovation, leaving gaps in its ability to anticipate or respond to current global dynamics. Omayio *et al.*²⁶ argue that the model underperforms in addressing contemporary challenges such as mass tourism, urban encroachment, and climate volatility.

This study supports the view that the RPP model, while valuable, requires significant reconfiguration. In particular, the absence of integrated approaches to digital technology, audience inclusivity, and sustainability undermines its capacity to function as a forward-looking model in today's rapidly changing heritage landscape.

4.2. Rethinking priorities: Accessibility, technology, and sustainability in heritage management

To meet contemporary demands, cultural heritage management must evolve beyond conventional models by incorporating three interdependent dimensions: accessibility, technology, and sustainability. These dimensions are not supplementary – they are foundational to repositioning heritage as a socially inclusive, digitally engaged, and environmentally responsible field.

- (i) Accessibility: As stated by Bellanca *et al.*,²⁷ ensuring both physical and digital access is essential for equity in cultural participation. They support this principle, noting that initiatives such as multilingual virtual tours, inclusive exhibition design, and mobile learning tools are vital to democratizing heritage and reaching underrepresented audiences.
- (ii) Technology: Pouloupoulos and Wallace²⁸ illustrate how digital innovation transforms heritage engagement. From AI-powered artifact restoration to 3D scanning and immersive VR, these tools enable new forms of interaction while supporting conservation, reinforcing the view that technological integration is no longer optional but essential to relevance
- (iii) Sustainability: Pisolkar²⁹ underscores that long-term viability depends on aligning heritage management with ecological and economic goals. Green restoration

methods, sustainable tourism models, and public-private financing mechanisms are presented as viable pathways for ensuring responsible stewardship.

Together, these dimensions form the basis for a more resilient, inclusive, and future-ready heritage management paradigm.

4.3. Toward a holistic, participatory, and future-oriented model

A holistic approach to heritage management builds on the RPP model while incorporating accessibility, technological engagement, and environmental sustainability as co-equal priorities. This integrated strategy, advocated in this study, reflects a shift from reactive conservation to proactive cultural stewardship aligned with broader societal goals.

Rather than compartmentalizing heritage work, this model promotes synergies among researchers, technologists, policymakers, and designers. Mendoni³⁰ emphasizes that cross-disciplinary collaboration enhances institutional capacity to interpret, preserve, and communicate heritage without compromising authenticity. This study supports this perspective, framing such partnerships as essential for sustained relevance.

Public engagement is another critical axis. Trivyzadakis² illustrates how participatory decision-making strengthens cultural legitimacy by ensuring that heritage management reflects community values. A participatory ethos is thus supported, positioning community co-ownership as a driver of both resilience and policy responsiveness.

Sustainability acts as the strategic underpinning. Previous studies by Hayat and Ibrahim³¹ and Madime³² highlight that green technologies, ethical tourism, and innovative financial models are reshaping the field. These developments are interpreted not merely as trends but as necessary structural adjustments for heritage institutions navigating global pressures, economic volatility, and cultural fragmentation.

5. CPs: Bridging heritage and society

5.1. Defining CPs: Functions, formats, and strategic value

CPs represent a strategic innovation in heritage management, designed to reconcile the goals of preservation, public engagement, and sustainable development. Parkhomenko and Berezovska³³ define CPs as outputs derived from cultural assets that repackage heritage into experiential or consumable formats – ranging from immersive tours and digital reconstructions to interactive tools, reinterpretive art, and heritage-inspired merchandise. They adopt a functionalist view of CPs, emphasizing their capacity to recontextualize heritage in accessible, pluralistic forms.

Apostolakis and Dimou³⁴ argue that CPs serve as dynamic mediators, adapting heritage narratives for diverse audiences. Through formats such as VR tours, CPs transcend physical constraints, enabling global engagement with sites otherwise inaccessible. Locally produced replicas and creative merchandise offer tangible links to heritage, fostering both emotional and cognitive connections.

Beyond cultural engagement, CPs contribute to heritage sustainability by generating financial resources. As noted by Aiello and Cacia,³⁵ income streams from CP sales, tourism, and educational programs reinforce conservation efforts and support local economies. This perspective underscores the potential for CPs to align cultural value with economic viability, helping to reframe heritage management as an ecosystem of interaction, rather than a static domain of preservation.

5.2. Case studies of CPs: Digital innovation and community impact

Strategic CP initiatives illustrate how innovation and preservation can reinforce one another. These examples, selected for their scalability and multidimensional impact, reflect how CPs can foster global access, economic resilience, and cultural continuity:

- (i) The Smithsonian Institution provides a leading model for the digitalization of cultural heritage. As reported by Rogala *et al.*,³⁶ its interactive online exhibitions have expanded global access while reducing physical wear on collections. This case highlights how virtual tools support conservation, broaden outreach, and generate revenue – positioning digital CPs as long-term assets rather than as supplementary tools
- (ii) The Timbuktu Manuscripts Digitization Project in Mali successfully preserves fragile manuscripts through digitization. Funded through public–private partnerships, this initiative demonstrates the potential of CPs to combine scholarly access, public education, and financial viability – particularly in high-risk environments^{37,38}
- (iii) In Greece, the Acropolis Museum and Museum of Cycladic Art employ digital reconstructions and virtual tours to reframe ancient artifacts for contemporary audiences. As noted by Zhang,³⁹ these CPs integrate educational storytelling with immersive technologies, exemplifying how museums can broaden impact without compromising authenticity
- (iv) The Terracotta Army Digitization and VR Project in China, as analyzed by Ma *et al.*,⁴⁰ utilizes 3D scanning and VR to make an iconic site accessible worldwide. The project's funding model, based on licensing and sponsorships, supports ongoing preservation – reinforcing CPs as tools for both cultural diplomacy and financial sustainability.

Zhang³⁹ further emphasizes that collaborations with tech firms – particularly those involving augmented reality – can animate historical narratives in real-world contexts. These partnerships illustrate how CPs not only preserve heritage but also reintroduce it into daily life, expanding its relevance across generations.

5.3. Designing, developing, and disseminating CPs

The development of CPs requires a systematic, multi-stage approach that combines cultural insights with creative and technological development. This structured process is essential for ensuring that CPs preserve cultural authenticity while resonating with modern audiences.⁴¹

- (i) Research and conceptualization: The process begins with identifying culturally significant elements that can be translated into meaningful products. Barlie and Saviano⁴² emphasize that this phase requires rigorous analysis of the symbolic, historical, and artistic dimensions of heritage assets. Strategic selection is key, as not all artifacts lend themselves to transformation. Rovuma⁴³ supports the view that only culturally resonant elements should be advanced into production formats such as replicas, apps, or digital exhibits
- (ii) Design and development: Interdisciplinary collaboration is central to this phase. Wróblewski⁴⁴ emphasizes the value of combining heritage expertise with creative design and technology. In addition, Pasikowska-Schnass and Lim⁴⁵ note that AI-driven modeling and algorithmic generation allow for high-fidelity reproductions and immersive digital experiences, enabling cultural storytelling at new levels of accuracy and scale.
- (iii) Marketing and promotion: Effective dissemination is vital for impact. Chen⁴⁶ notes that marketing strategies must bridge emotional resonance and information. Katifori *et al.*⁴⁷ highlight how emotional storytelling, supported by data analytics and social media, expands CP accessibility and customizes content for diverse demographic groups
- (iv) Evaluation and adaptation: CP development does not end at launch. Li *et al.*⁴⁸ advocate for iterative design informed by user data. Audience feedback, engagement analytics, and digital usage metrics are continuously assessed to refine both the product and its outreach strategy, ensuring long-term impact and sustainability.

5.4. Marketing education as an enabler of CP innovation

Marketing education plays a pivotal role in equipping heritage professionals with the skills needed to transform

cultural assets into accessible, engaging, and economically sustainable CPs. These competencies are increasingly recognized as foundational – rather than optional – for enabling cultural institutions to navigate the intersection of preservation, audience demand, and financial viability. As Mandal⁴⁹ notes, marketing skills empower professionals to strategically engage with the dynamics of culture, commerce, and technology.

Audience engagement is a critical learning domain. Petousi *et al.*⁵⁰ argue that training in storytelling enhances emotional connectivity with diverse publics. Building on this, the present study asserts that narrative-based approaches do more than entertain – they personalize heritage, making it relevant to audiences across generational and geographic divides. Furthermore, marketing education in data analytics enables heritage professionals to segment audiences, tailor messaging, and maintain both cultural authenticity and responsiveness to public interests.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is another domain where marketing education yields a significant impact. Wróblewski⁴⁴ emphasizes the role of cross-sector partnerships between cultural experts, designers, and technologists in fostering innovation. Building on this perspective, such collaborations can be seen not merely as beneficial but as essential for the co-creation of high-quality CPs – such as educational games, immersive mobile apps, or interactive museum installations.

Digital fluency also emerges as a non-negotiable competency. Liang *et al.*⁵¹ demonstrate that social media platforms – such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube – function as both promotional tools and narrative ecosystems.⁵¹ Accordingly, marketing education must equip professionals to leverage these platforms strategically – not only to increase visibility but also to democratize access and foster inclusive participation in heritage discourse.

Taken together, these competencies reflect a broader shift in cultural heritage management – from preservation-centered to public-centered logic. This study suggests that embedding marketing education in professional development frameworks is critical for producing CPs that are both culturally respectful and strategically impactful.

6. DIC: A sustainable approach

6.1. Defining DIC: Preservation, profit, and strategic investment

DIC represents a funding mechanism that combines cultural stewardship with financial sustainability. Unlike traditional models based on subsidies or donations, DIC encourages institutional and private investments that yield both cultural and economic returns. Rather than

serving solely as an alternative financing option, DIC is increasingly understood as a strategic redefinition of how cultural heritage is preserved, governed, and mobilized.

Direct investments in culture funds are typically channeled into restoration projects, digital infrastructure, and workforce development, enhancing both resilience and institutional capacity. The European Observation Network for Territorial Development⁵² and Pickerill⁵³ describe DIC as a “catalytic strategy” capable of rebalancing policy frameworks by aligning investment logic with cultural goals.

To maximize effectiveness, DIC requires data-driven decision-making. Loseva *et al.*⁵⁴ emphasize the role of metrics such as visitor engagement, return on investment, and community participation in assessing performance. Building on this, analytics platforms (e.g., Tableau, Google Analytics) can be employed to refine messaging, monitor impact, and optimize stakeholder alignment.

Policy support further amplifies DIC’s value. Donelli *et al.*⁵⁵ cite Italy’s “Art Bonus” as a case in which fiscal incentives mobilized private contributions to heritage. From a policy perspective, integrating marketing education and digital competency into DIC strategies ensures not only capital input but also the internal capacity to manage it effectively.

6.2. Reframing cultural funding: Why DIC matters today

In an era of austerity and budgetary fragmentation, DIC offers a proactive, sustainable approach to heritage financing. Pickerill⁵³ notes that DIC repositions cultural institutions as active economic agents, reducing dependency on static public funding streams. Building on this premise, DIC can be understood not merely as a tool of financial necessity, but as a catalyst for institutional transformation.

By enabling investment in digitization, infrastructure renewal, and outreach, DIC addresses systemic capacity gaps. Paul and Feliciano-Cestero⁵⁶ highlight how DIC contributes to community regeneration and cultural entrepreneurship. These social and economic externalities may be considered not secondary benefits, but central indicators of success in DIC – enabled projects.

Moreover, DIC enhances governance through stakeholder alignment. Boniotti⁵⁷ emphasizes that public-private-community partnerships create participatory decision-making processes and shared accountability. Reinforcing this view, such alignment not only attracts resources but also strengthens the legitimacy and adaptability of heritage institutions in a fast-changing landscape.

In sum, DIC shifts the role of heritage actors from passive custodians to dynamic innovators capable of linking identity formation, economic activation, and public legitimacy under a shared strategic framework.

6.3. Evaluating DIC: Opportunities, risks, and global practices

DIC has emerged as a structured solution to the financial and operational challenges facing the heritage sector. DIC is framed as a forward-looking model involving cross-sectoral capital engagement through public–private partnerships, philanthropic channels, and cultural venture funds. While this article supports this evolution, it emphasizes that successful implementation depends on a clear value narrative, professional competencies, and ethical governance.

Key opportunities presented by DIC include:

- (i) Sustainable financing: DIC generates recurring revenue streams, enabling institutions to pursue long-term planning and effective risk management
- (ii) Economic stimulation: Investments activate adjacent sectors such as tourism, crafts, and the creative industries. This study underscores the importance of this multiplier effect for embedding culture within inclusive and resilient development
- (iii) Inclusive access: Digital infrastructure supported through DIC can broaden outreach to underserved communities, advancing social equity alongside conservation.

However, there are several risks associated with DIC, such as:

- (i) Over-commercialization: Market-driven logic may erode authenticity. Without ethical safeguards, there is a risk that financial interests will overshadow cultural missions
- (ii) Stakeholder tensions: Balancing investor expectations with public interest requires strong governance frameworks and transparent negotiation protocols
- (iii) Distributional inequity: As warned by Siliutina *et al.*,²² communities closest to heritage sites may be excluded from the benefits unless equity is built into DIC design.

Illustrative cases support this duality, including:

- (i) The Colosseum Restoration in Italy, co-funded by luxury brand Tod's, demonstrates a combination of corporate social responsibility and authentic conservation⁵⁸
- (ii) Adaptive reuse of heritage buildings in the Netherlands illustrates how DIC can preserve identity while generating economic utility⁵⁹

- (iii) In Bolivia, Baroque music festivals tied to Jesuit missions sustain both conservation and community income.⁶⁰

These cases confirm that, when ethically managed and contextually adapted, DIC acts as both a development engine and a legitimizing force in heritage policy.

To synthesize these findings, Table 1 contrasts DIC with conventional funding models across key operational, ethical, and impact-related dimensions.

As outlined in Table 1, the shift from traditional funding to DIC reflects a broader evolution in cultural heritage management. DIC fosters sustainable, inclusive growth by aligning economic objectives with conservation ethics. While it introduces new risks – such as over-commercialization – these can be mitigated through strong governance, ethically grounded marketing education, and community-based co-ownership models. Thus, DIC presents not just an alternative funding mechanism, but a scalable, globally adaptable strategy for future-oriented heritage policy.

6.4. Strategic competencies for implementing DIC

Marketing education plays a critical role in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of DIC. This study positions it as a capacity-building tool that empowers heritage professionals to attract, manage, and align investment with

Table 1. Comparative analysis of traditional funding models and direct investment in culture

Aspect	Traditional funding	Direct investment in culture
Funding continuity	Often short-term, project-based, dependent on grants or public budgets.	Long-term, strategic investment supporting sustainability.
Economic contribution	Limited economic ripple effect, indirect returns.	Drives local growth, job creation, and sectoral diversification.
Audience engagement	Restricted by institutional outreach capacity.	Enhanced through digital innovation and market-oriented strategies.
Governance model	Top-down management, bureaucratic structures.	Collaborative governance including public–private–community partnerships.
Risk of Commodification	Lower risk but sometimes culturally disconnected.	Higher risk of commodification if not ethically managed.
Community benefit	Often symbolic or educational.	Direct financial, social, and cultural benefits to local populations.

long-term cultural and financial goals. Effective marketing training bridges the gap between preservation mandates and economic imperatives.⁴⁶

A key competency developed through marketing education is strategic narrative framing. Napolitano and De Nisco⁶¹ highlight that professionals trained in this area can communicate the dual value – intrinsic and economic – of cultural assets. They further emphasize that this skill is central to mobilizing support from investors, policymakers, and communities alike. Effectively demonstrating that a conservation effort both safeguards heritage and generates tourism revenue enhances its appeal to funders.

Stakeholder engagement is another core focus. Hayat and Ibrahim³¹ argue that heritage professionals with marketing expertise are better equipped to form cross-sector alliances. According to them, co-branded campaigns and integrated messaging serve as strategies to advance both cultural awareness and financial viability, thereby strengthening the implementation of DIC.

Digital marketing proficiency strengthens these strategies. Carignani *et al.*⁶² demonstrate that platforms such as Google Ads and social media – combined with analytics tools – enable targeted outreach, campaign optimization, and sustained audience engagement. They further emphasize that predictive analytics can refine DIC messaging in real time, increasing return on investment and enhancing cultural visibility.

Crucially, marketing education also instills ethical reflexivity. Kreuzbauer and Keller⁴¹ argue that training must include sensitivity to cultural authenticity and community representation. They emphasize the importance of balancing commercial success with cultural integrity to ensure that DIC initiatives remain inclusive, credible, and socially responsible.

7. Marketing education: Equipping heritage professionals

7.1. Strategic marketing: A core competency in heritage governance

In the context of shrinking budgets and increasingly fragmented public attention, heritage institutions must adopt new strategic frameworks to remain relevant. Marketing is increasingly regarded as essential – not optional – for bridging cultural preservation with audience engagement and financial sustainability. As Taçon and Baker¹ assert, traditional approaches centered exclusively on conservation cannot respond to current societal dynamics.

The transformation of audience expectations reinforces this need. Hadley⁶³ states that digital fluency

and global exposure have created publics that demand personalized, immersive, and participatory heritage experiences. In response, heritage professionals must develop competencies in audience segmentation, digital storytelling, and interactive outreach through platforms such as social media and virtual events.

Moreover, the operationalization of public-private partnerships and DIC hinges on the ability to communicate heritage's value in economic terms. Hadley¹² notes that failure to articulate this dual value proposition can limit both audience engagement and investment. Data-driven narratives are therefore indispensable for sustainable heritage financing.

Despite its strategic significance, marketing remains largely underrepresented in most heritage training programs. As Cerquetti and Ferrara¹³ argue, curricula tend to prioritize technical conservation over engagement and strategy. This underscores the need to integrate tailored marketing education into professional development frameworks. Such integration represents not merely a skills upgrade – it constitutes a structural reform essential for navigating evolving audience profiles, attracting diversified funding, and sustaining cultural relevance.

7.2. Key competencies for heritage professionals

In response to shifting audience expectations, digital disruption, and a competitive funding landscape, heritage professionals must acquire a multidimensional set of marketing competencies. These skills are essential not only for audience engagement but also for navigating funding models such as DIC. This section draws on current literature and identifies five core skill domains necessary for contemporary heritage governance.

7.2.1. Strategic marketing

Agic *et al.*¹¹ emphasize that strategic planning aligns institutional missions with audience needs and external market conditions. Building on this perspective, campaign design, brand positioning, and priority-based resource allocation can be understood as foundational for translating cultural value into both public relevance and institutional viability. Strategic marketing is thus essential for heritage professionals seeking to communicate value beyond preservation.

7.2.2. Audience analysis and engagement

According to Zins and Abbas Adamu,⁶⁴ audience segmentation and behavioral insights are central to designing resonant narratives. Building on this view, understanding emotional, cultural, and generational differences is key to expanding participation – particularly among marginalized

groups. Competency in this domain ensures that CPs and DIC initiatives reflect pluralistic, inclusive values.

7.2.3. Digital tools and analytics

Studies conducted by Hayat and Ibrahim³¹ and Harisanty *et al.*⁶⁵ highlight the indispensable role of digital platforms and analytics in modern heritage management. Building on this view, training in tools such as Power BI, Google Analytics, and R enables professionals to monitor engagement in real-time, optimize content delivery, and apply predictive modeling to campaign design.

7.2.4. Ethical marketing and cultural sensitivity

Holtorf and Högberg⁶⁶ argue that ethical integrity must guide marketing within the heritage sector. Reinforcing this view, professionals are expected to balance visibility and revenue goals with cultural authenticity, historical responsibility, and community inclusion. Ethical reflexivity should be taught not as a soft skill but as a core competency that safeguards institutional legitimacy.

7.2.5 Collaboration and innovation

According to Daldanise,⁶⁷ cross-sector partnerships increase the impact and resilience of cultural initiatives. Building on this insight, interdisciplinary collaboration is not only valuable but essential for scaling innovation and integrating diverse perspectives into both CP and DIC projects. Joint efforts between cultural managers, technologists, designers, and financial experts create synergies that enhance project longevity and public impact.

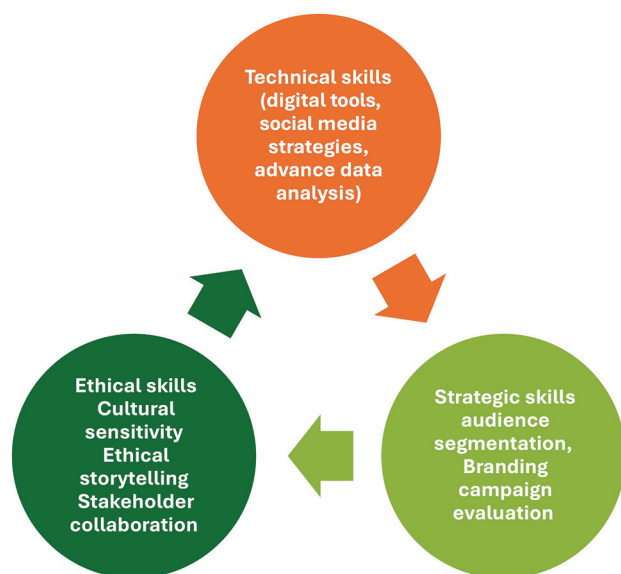


Figure 1. Integrated skill domains in marketing education for heritage professionals

Abbreviations: AR: Augmented reality; VR: Virtual reality.

These competencies, summarized in Figure 1, support the broader goal of the present study: to demonstrate how marketing education can serve as a catalyst for cultural sustainability. These core competencies provide professionals with both the mindset and the technical skills to manage change, scale impact, and maintain heritage relevance in an increasingly complex global environment.

7.3. Innovative models for teaching marketing to heritage professionals

Delivering marketing education in the context of heritage management requires innovation not only in content but also in format. To be effective, training programs must balance accessibility, relevance, and applicability to empower heritage professionals across diverse institutional and geographic settings. Three delivery approaches – such as digital, cross-disciplinary, and lifelong learning – emerge as particularly effective solutions.

7.3.1. Online and hybrid learning programs

Digital education models address constraints of time, location, and institutional resources. According to Gamage *et al.*,⁶⁸ platforms offering asynchronous modules, live webinars, and virtual workshops create interactive learning environments suited for working professionals. This study supports this model, particularly when courses are tailored to heritage sector needs such as digital engagement, audience analysis, and marketing analytics.

7.3.2. Collaborative workshops and cross-disciplinary training

Training initiatives that integrate heritage professionals with marketing specialists, designers, and technologists foster interdisciplinary fluency. Ahsan⁶⁹ emphasizes the value of problem-based learning through real-world scenarios. Building on this, simulation-based learning – such as investor pitch role-plays or campaign planning for CPs – can serve as a bridge between theory and applied practice.

7.3.3. Lifelong learning and professional development

Marketing education must be understood as a continuous process. Achille and Fiorillo⁷⁰ highlight the importance of micro-credentials, academic–industry partnerships, and open-access resources. They further argue that inclusive models – like the United Kingdom’s “Skills for the Future” program⁷¹ – are crucial for democratizing access. These initiatives not only build individual capacity but also diversify the professional ecosystem, bringing broader cultural perspectives into heritage interpretation and marketing strategies.

Taken together, these approaches offer a flexible and future-oriented framework for capacity building, enabling heritage professionals to remain adaptive, collaborative,

and responsive to the evolving landscape of cultural engagement and investment.

7.4. Impact of marketing education on heritage management

Marketing education significantly reshapes the cultural heritage sector by converting theoretical insights into practical outcomes that benefit preservation, audience engagement, and financial sustainability. It is argued that marketing competencies are not merely supplementary but are also foundational to modern heritage governance, as evidenced by a series of international examples that demonstrate both cultural and economic impact.

In France, the Louvre Museum's digital marketing strategy illustrates how storytelling and platform integration can revitalize audience connections. Corona⁷² documents how behind-the-scenes narratives and curated Instagram content have enhanced visibility, particularly among younger, global demographics. This model presents a scalable approach for engaging new audiences while preserving institutional identity.

In the United Kingdom, the National Gallery's "Artemisia" campaign used audience segmentation and targeted outreach to achieve record attendance.⁷³ This case demonstrates that data-literate professionals can fine-tune heritage messaging, aligning programming with audience interests to amplify impact.

Nigeria's "Reclaiming History" project showcases how digital tools – when guided by culturally sensitive storytelling – can reclaim narratives disrupted by colonialism. Kohol and Adeleke⁷⁴ illustrate that professionals with marketing training can develop 3D and augmented reality content to reconnect displaced artifacts with global publics.

In China, the Terracotta Warriors Virtual Experience highlights the financial benefits of immersive technologies. According to Zhang *et al.*,⁷⁵ this initiative reduced physical strain on heritage sites while increasing revenue. Similarly, Peru's Machu Picchu virtual reconstruction achieved dual goals of educational outreach and commercial licensing, demonstrating the adaptability and scalability of digital CPs.⁷⁶

The Smithsonian Institution's outreach programs further support the case for embedding marketing education into institutional practice. As reported by Rogala *et al.*,³⁶ interactive digital exhibits and webinars enhanced visibility and attracted private sponsorship, reinforcing the connection between audience engagement and diversified funding sources.

These cases reflect broader policy trends. In Australia, digital marketing education has become a mandatory component for recipients of federal heritage funds.⁷⁷

Such policies exemplify how national strategies can institutionalize marketing competencies across the cultural sector. Mandating annual reporting on audience growth and funding diversity would further incentivize marketing integration, ensuring that heritage institutions remain responsive, inclusive, and financially resilient.

8. Practical framework for implementation

8.1. From vision to practice: Embedding marketing in heritage institutions

According to Parowicz,⁷⁸ integrating marketing education into cultural heritage management requires a structured approach that is tailored to the sector's specific operational and institutional contexts. As shown in Figure 2, the process comprises interconnected stages – from identifying training needs to evaluating outcomes – to ensure strategic, adaptive, and impact-driven implementation.

Done and Aitchison⁷⁹ argue that cultural institutions and academic bodies must embed marketing education within broader professional development frameworks. Aligning curricula with sector-specific priorities – such as audience engagement and investment attraction – positions marketing not as a peripheral concern but as a core institutional competency. When integrated into strategic planning processes, this shift fosters long-term capacity building and institutional resilience.

Vegheš⁸⁰ supports the development of tailored modules that address the unique challenges faced by heritage

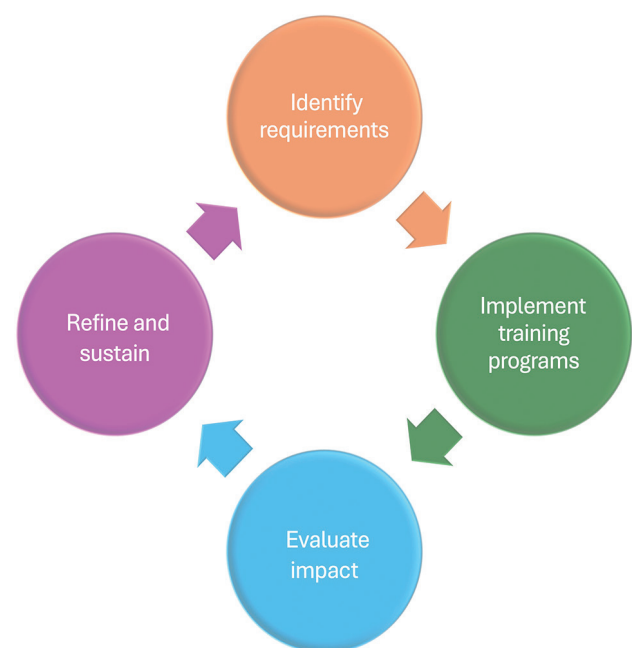


Figure 2. An iterative process for integrating marketing education in cultural heritage management

professionals – such as communicating cultural value to investors or managing branded campaigns within protected sites. Incorporating scenario-based learning and structured certification tracks helps ensure that training aligns with day-to-day responsibilities, making the acquired skills both practically relevant and results-driven.

According to Ziliotto and Holden,⁸¹ leveraging internal mentorship systems can expand the reach and sustainability of formal education. By encouraging experienced staff to guide their peers in marketing practice, institutions cultivate in-house expertise and strengthen a culture of collaborative learning. Peer-led exchanges foster institutional memory, reduce reliance on external training, and create adaptive learning environments rooted in practical experience.

8.2. Building collaborative networks and partnerships

The success of marketing education in the heritage sector is significantly enhanced by the presence of strong, multi-stakeholder partnerships. It is argued that sustainable and impactful training frameworks are most effectively developed through synergies between academic institutions, cultural organizations, government bodies, and private sector actors. These partnerships align with the growing recognition of heritage management as an interdisciplinary field that demands diverse forms of applied expertise.⁷⁰

8.2.1. Joint certification programs

Co-designed certification schemes involving universities and heritage institutions ensure that training remains closely aligned with sectoral needs. Programs such as “Digital Marketing for Cultural Assets,” which combine theoretical instruction with case-based learning from museums and community heritage sites, exemplify this model. Such hybrid structures bridge academic knowledge and practical demands, enhancing both relevance and credibility.⁷⁰

8.2.2. Policy-driven collaboration

Engagement from public authorities is essential for integrating marketing education into broader cultural policy. This study proposes that regulatory frameworks should mandate dedicated budget lines for training and audience development within heritage projects. Embedding education in policy structures supports financial sustainability and reflects a shift from reactive funding to proactive investment in institutional capacity and human capital.⁸²

8.2.3. Internships and mentorship programs

Experiential learning mechanisms – such as internships and structured mentorship schemes – are critical for

meaningful capacity building. Ziliotto and Holden⁸¹ emphasize that immersive experiences within marketing departments help early-career professionals develop strategic thinking and sector-specific expertise. Building on this perspective, this study suggests that such programs also foster long-term institutional knowledge retention, integrating marketing competence into routine professional practice.

8.2.4. Collaborative research and workshops

Cross-sectoral research initiatives and training workshops serve as platforms for both innovation and the transfer of skills. As noted by Daldanise,⁶⁷ collaborative events focused on branding, campaign design, and audience analytics generate not only practical toolkits but also valuable academic insights. This study affirms that structured exchanges among educators, practitioners, and policymakers strengthen the intellectual foundations of marketing education and support its continuous adaptation to sector-specific change.

Taken together, these collaborative strategies transform marketing education from a fragmented activity into an institutionalized, sustainable practice – anchored in collective knowledge production and applied problem-solving.

8.3. Ensuring accessibility and measuring impact in marketing education

Maximizing the effectiveness of marketing education for heritage professionals requires a dual focus: broad accessibility and rigorous impact evaluation. Together, these dimensions help ensure that training programs are not only equitable and inclusive but also responsive to evolving sector-specific needs and audience expectations.

8.3.1. Accessibility and inclusivity

To democratize participation in marketing education, programs must address structural barriers related to geography, language, infrastructure, and socioeconomic inequality. Scalable digital platforms, multilingual content, and targeted scholarships are identified as key mechanisms for reducing participation gaps. Tailoring training to local institutional and cultural contexts further enhances relevance and supports practical uptake across diverse heritage environments.

Eichler⁸³ proposes that accessibility must go beyond availability to become active inclusion. In this view, marketing education should empower marginalized communities not just as learners but also as co-creators of heritage narratives. The “Adopt a Heritage” scheme in India exemplifies this approach – by engaging local

communities in stewardship roles, which generates both socioeconomic benefits and cultural sustainability.⁸⁴ Similarly, outreach programs by the Iziko Museums in South Africa incorporate historically excluded groups into heritage discourse through co-curated exhibitions and participatory workshops. As noted by Ndhlovu and Rassool,⁸⁵ such initiatives foster pluralism, deepen civic engagement, and strengthen the social fabric of cultural institutions.⁸⁵

8.3.2. Measuring impact and adapting frameworks

Robust evaluation mechanisms are essential to ensure that marketing education delivers measurable outcomes. Parowicz⁷⁸ recommends a multidimensional framework combining quantitative and qualitative indicators – such as completion rates, participant feedback, and real-world impact metrics such as increased visitor engagement or improved fundraising results.

Key performance indicators related to skills development, project execution, and stakeholder satisfaction provide actionable insights into program effectiveness.⁸⁶ For example, a museum that launches a digital campaign following staff training could compare visitor analytics and online engagement data before and after implementation to quantify its impact.

Technological infrastructure further strengthens this evaluative process. Learning management systems integrated with real-time analytics dashboards allow institutions to track learner progress, visualize knowledge application, and assess long-term outcomes. The European Observation Network for Territorial Development⁸⁷ notes that such systems facilitate ongoing curriculum adaptation in response to emerging trends, including audience personalization, digital monetization, and the integration of green metrics in cultural management.

By embedding accessibility and evaluation as foundational principles, heritage institutions can ensure that marketing education not only equips professionals with relevant skills but also drives meaningful structural transformation. This integrated approach aligns cultural stewardship with broader goals of equity, accountability, and future-readiness.

9. Conclusion

9.1. Conclusions from the state-of-the-art analysis

This study has reviewed contemporary literature and practice related to two emerging strategies – CPs and DIC – and examined their reliance on marketing competencies for successful implementation. It confirms a growing consensus that cultural heritage institutions must adopt strategic, audience-centered approaches to remain relevant,

accessible, and financially viable. However, it also identifies a gap in structured training and theoretical grounding for these competencies within heritage governance.

9.2. Findings from this study

Based on a comparative analysis of international case studies and policy frameworks, five key skill domains are identified: strategic planning, audience engagement, digital analytics, ethical storytelling, and intersectoral collaboration. These domains are consistently evident in successful heritage initiatives that integrate preservation with economic and social engagement. The analysis further reveals that institutions integrating marketing education – formally or informally – tend to demonstrate stronger stakeholder alignment, diversified funding sources, and enhanced public legitimacy.

9.3. Policy and practice implications

For policymakers, the findings suggest that national cultural strategies should mandate the inclusion of marketing modules within professional development programs. Heritage institutions should regard marketing education not as an ancillary tool but as a structural pillar of governance. Strategic alliances between universities, museums, cultural non-governmental organizations, and the private sector are essential for developing training that is relevant, inclusive, and scalable. A recommended benchmark is the integration of marketing education into 30% of heritage programs by 2030, supported by policy incentives and dedicated funding streams.

9.4. Recommendations for future research

While the present study offers conceptual clarity, further empirical research is needed to assess the direct impact of marketing training on heritage management outcomes. Surveys and pilot programs could evaluate how newly acquired competencies influence audience metrics, fundraising performance, or institutional resilience. In addition, cross-cultural comparisons may help determine which marketing strategies are context-sensitive and which are globally transferable.

9.5. Concluding statement

Marketing education is not a substitute for conservation ethics, but a complementary force that enables cultural heritage institutions to communicate their value, engage diverse publics, and secure sustainable investment. By embedding these competencies into professional training and governance structures, the heritage sector will be better equipped to navigate contemporary challenges – preserving the past, serving the present, and shaping an inclusive cultural future.

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ARTICLE

The hero-villain binary as a queer construct in Stewart Wallace's *Harvey Milk Reimagined*

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Abstract

Stewart Wallace's opera *Harvey Milk Reimagined* depicts the assassination of one of the first openly gay politicians in the United States. The depiction of LGBTQ activists reflects the period of the Stonewall Riots and the earliest demonstrations following the events on Christopher Street. An analysis of Michael Korie's libretto uncovered three important overarching themes: activism, identity, and othering. Wallace's score also engages with each of these themes, primarily through the depiction of Dan White as the villainous homophobe in stark contrast to the predominantly gay cast. The ensemble is given moments of humor, popular culture references, and a variety of musical techniques to position them on the "right side of history." *Harvey Milk Reimagined* occupies a place in the growing operatic repertoire by openly queer composers. While queer theorists reject binary categorization, the opera presents a distinct binary polarization between the queer community and its supporters and the straight community, raising questions of social agenda, heterophobia, and queer discourse.

Keywords: Queer theory; Opera; Gender; Binaries; Queer aesthetics; Activism; Identity

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1. Introduction

The influence of queer and gendered perspectives has particular resonance in the world of opera, serving both as a vehicle for reflecting changing societal values and as an agent for social change. Stewart Wallace's opera *Harvey Milk Reimagined* offers queer theorists a perspective in which a queer protagonist and a homophobic villain are manifested in a musical and creative context. Beginning with the identification of "queer aesthetics" in Wallace's score, we undertook a hermeneutic analysis of larger phenomena related to representations of queerness and social discourse in this opera. Although stylistic and technical assessments of markers of "queer aesthetics" were expected in a work in which both the title character and the composer of the opera embody queer identity, the novelty of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* lies in its reflection of important events and concepts from queer history on a macro-level—both in the libretto and the musical composition—as well as in the carefully crafted operatic characters.

Most importantly, in the context of this work, the librettist and composer subvert the conventional representation of the queer community as "other." In this opera, the queer community represents normality and mainstream culture. Although at first this might sound like an unrealistic and idealized scenario, the gradual increase in public

confidence for queer communities since Stonewall is espoused in the literature. For example, de Kuyper¹ refers to a Freudian theory that homosexuality is not a feature confined to a small minority of the population but instead is a “fundamental aspect” of heterosexuality as well. Wallace presents Milk’s world from a queer perspective, attributing to its queer characters an extensive list of positive traits, including empathy, passion, determination, commitment, and love. Any character not sharing in this value system is portrayed as “other.”

The difficulty that heterosexual individuals experience in acknowledging homosexual desires within themselves may lead to homophobia and the othering of queer individuals and communities, as expressed by Dan White’s aggressive character. It should also be noted that, whereas many other queer-themed operas focus on celebrating queerness or applying specific aesthetic ideals—such as the juxtaposition of Apollonian and Dionysian ideals in Karol Szymanowski’s opera, *King Roger*—or constructing the narrative around a singular hero character and their entourage, *Harvey Milk Reimagined* offers a raw and merciless depiction of a societal conflict. The clash between a white, heterosexual society frightened of an emerging world they do not recognize, and a racially diverse queer community demanding political representation, equality, access, and an end to heteronormative hegemony, is concentrated in the phenomenological manifestations of the two main characters, Dan White and Harvey Milk.

Opera provides a versatile platform for new media research, both from aesthetic and technical perspectives.² Moreover, as fluid gender identities and queerness have become critical constructs in operatic repertoire, this opera represents a new form of queer opera, one in which queer themes are not codified, but are central to the narrative. The proliferation of “queer operas” in the last decade includes, *Before Night Falls* by Jorge Martín (2010); *Two Boys* by Nico Muhly (2011); *Oscar* by Theodore Morrison (2013); *As One* by Laura Kaminsky (2014); *Brokeback Mountain* by Charles Wuorinen (2014); *27* by Ricky Ian Gordon (2014); *Sweets* by Kate by Griffin Candey (2015); *Fellow Travelers* by Gregory Spears (2016);

Pleasure by Mark Simpson (2016); *Not in My Town* by Michael W. Ross (2016); *Les Feluettes* by Kevin March (2016); *Three Way* by Robert Paterson (2017); *Lessons in Love and Violence* by George Benjamin (2018); *Stonewall* by Iain Bell (2019); *The Stonewall Operas* by Bryan Blaskie, Brian Cavanagh-Strong, Kevin Cummines, and TJ Rubin (2019); and *The Life and Death(s) of Alan Turing* by Justine F. Chen (2021).

Harvey Milk Reimagined thus provides an important case study in the changing landscape of sexual

representation in opera, addressing themes of othering, identity, and activism. Moreover, although the framework of this article does not allow for a wider discussion of Milk’s Jewish background and its implications on his identity, we considered this dimension in our coding of the musical material, as his religious background and homosexuality emerge as inseparable aspects of his complex operatic character.

2. Challenging the political status quo

The murder of San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk in 1978 by fellow supervisor Dan White extinguished the visionary leadership of the first openly gay elected official in the United States.³ San Francisco had long served as a haven for social outsiders, in particular members of the increasingly restless queer community.

Groups such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis had already become active in the 1950s, helping to establish the foundation of a burgeoning homophile movement.⁴ Motivated to address the stark social and financial disparities in the rapidly developing city, Milk ran for the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1973. Although unsuccessful, he ran again in 1975, this time with an increased focus on queer issues and a determination to provide a political voice for the queer community.

Milk moved to a San Francisco neighborhood called the Castro with his lover Scott Smith, 2 years after leaving his job as a Wall Street broker. The Castro became one of the first recognizably gay neighborhoods in the United States and remains the center of San Francisco’s gay community, symbolizing queer activism. After a heated exchange with a local business leader, who advocated for a levy on small businesses, Milk earned the nickname “Mayor of Castro Street” after standing on a crate marked “soap” to launch his candidacy.⁵ Noting San Francisco’s shifting demographics—from a primarily white, working-class population to one increasingly characterized by ethnic minorities, young childless couples, queer individuals, singles, and the elderly—Milk vowed to represent this broader constituency. In death, Milk became both an icon and martyr for the struggles of queer Americans in the years following the 1969 Stonewall Riots. Wallace’s operatic score participates in a growing list of artistic offerings that pay deference to his leadership.

3. Queer theory and the binarism of characters

Queer theory continues to evolve through criticism and discourse, deliberately resisting labeling and categorization.⁶ Pioneering theorists such as Sedgwick^{7,8} emphasized notions of fluidity and variation, yet in *Harvey*

Milk Reimagined, such fluidity is reflected primarily in the range of sexual identities represented by the large queer cast. In contrast, the application of delineated labels of “good” and “evil” remains less fluid, reinforcing categories of “queer” (including allies) and “other.” By subverting strong echoes of biblical representations of “good” and “evil,”⁹ the opera introduces an alternative queer perspective to prevailing heteronormative narratives that dominated the twentieth century. Queer theory as a whole promotes discourse that challenges preexisting concepts of gender, sexual normalcy, and deviancy as social constructs.¹⁰ Moreover, as argued by McDonald,¹¹ all knowledge should be subjected to critical interrogation; although queer theory does not operate under a set of shared assumptions, it remains committed to disrupting binaries, destabilizing sexual categorizations, and challenging processes that constrain agency and repress diversity.

The formation of queer theory has been closely connected with activism, which, alongside the institutionalization of gender studies in universities during the late twentieth century, has fueled the broader queer movement as it exists today. The libretto and score of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* are deeply rooted in this tradition, foregrounding queer activism and the demand for representation. Queer theorists such as Halperin¹² emphasize the centrality of subjective experience, rejecting rigid binaries and instead understanding queerness through multiplicity. This approach, however, has been criticized for destabilizing coalition-building and limiting the capacity for collective advocacy on behalf of specific minority groups.¹³

The umbrella term “queer” encompasses a wide variety of gender and sexual identities,¹ but the heterogeneity of the community complicates the pursuit of universal political and societal goals. Edelman¹⁴ reminds us that queer theorists should reject politics altogether, given that politics has always rejected queer communities. Because of the individualistic focus espoused by many queer theorists, such a theoretical framework is useful for a hermeneutic discussion—especially in analyzing the operatic case study of *Harvey Milk Reimagined* and the binaries it reveals.

4. Methodology

The libretto was analyzed using thematic analysis to establish underlying themes.¹⁵ The text was examined for

queer content, such as gender appropriation in discourse, stage directions specific to queer activity, homophobic content, and moments of same-sex desire. These findings were presented in a table. After a process of familiarization with the text, two additional columns were inserted on the right-hand side of the table: the first to identify specific categories and the second to formulate overarching themes. The specific categories were derived by assessing the text and applying concepts from queer theory to form succinct expressions of meaning. These categories were then grouped into broader, sympathetic themes. Three overarching themes emerged: othering, identity, and activism. The second author reviewed the themes, and agreement was reached regarding their organization.

The next phase involved analysis of the musical score. Using the first author’s table of relevant excerpts from the libretto, the second author compared the music and text to illicit a deeper understanding of how queerness is represented in the opera. Descriptions of the corresponding musical events were added to the table, with the aim of observing how the thematic categories identified above manifested in the compositional language of this opera. Techniques such as changes in dynamics, orchestral and vocal texture, and instrumentation were all considered in relation to their impact on the audience’s experience of queerness. To achieve reliable conclusions, the case study was approached as an abstract research object, ensuring that the analysis was not dependent on any particular production. The study was guided by the following research question: how do binary representations of straight versus queer political activism align with notions of non-binary categorization advanced by queer theorists?

5. Results

The three overarching themes to emerge from the thematic analysis were othering, identity, and activism.

5.1. Identity

Queer identity can be fundamentally understood as non-heteronormative identity. The ambiguous, deconstructionist, and individualistic use of the term “queer” complicates assumptions of individual behavior or attraction.^{16,17} Both individual and group queer identity in *Harvey Milk Reimagined* are frequently expressed through self-deprecating humor. The libretto employs stereotypes as a shared language in the community, depicting men as effeminate and women are seen as masculine. In Act One, Part Three, set in Harvey’s Walk-In Closet in the 1960s, the audience is introduced to a group of friends known as the Closet Lovers. When Closet Lover Scott comments about the poor ventilation—remarking, “A girl could suffocate”—Anne the Beard responds, “...half the queens

¹ “Sexuality is performative—that it is understood and enacted through and by the reiterative language and connotative practices that restrict sexuality into certain binarial divisions that rely on gender-object-of-choice rather than any notion of sexual fluidity that displaces gender as the central determinant in which side of the divide a sexual subject can be positioned”²².

207 With a mix of nostalgia, regret and joy $\text{♩} = 60$

Picc 1

Eng Hn

Bb Cl

Hns 1 & 2

Harvey

Vla

Vc

sol

p

sol

p

pp

pp

THE MESSENGER enters.
SUPERVISORS freeze, hands in the air.

wistfully

Good - bye, Ju-dy Gar- land...

207 With a mix of nostalgia, regret and joy $\text{♩} = 60$

rit.

pp

Figure 2. Harvey's Judy reference at city hall (Act Two, Part Two)²⁰

They overlap as I do." Henrietta Wong provides another example when she exclaims, "I am Henrietta Wong of Asians for Affirmative Action. With Gays moving in and whites moving out, now is our chance to build bridges." Her dichotomous labels of "gays" and "whites" suggest that she views minority groups as having a shared opposition to the white, male patriarchy. Ironically, her categorization of people into ideologically opposed groups undermines the very idea of bridge-building. She later remarks, "I liked what he did, and not just for gays," suggesting that Harvey represented minority groups beyond the queer community. Harvey later posits, "Do you think they want their government run by Blacks, women, Asians, Latinos, and gays?," confirming his belief in shared lack of representation among minority groups.

Wallace emphasized the importance of Milk's dual identity: his queerness and his Jewishness. The opera begins with the amplified chorus whispering and making breathing sounds suggestive of secrecy and concealment. This section makes way for accentuated vocal "attacks" in the choral part in Hibrish, referencing Milk's Jewish identity. This dual identity is further expressed in Act One, where relentless excitement and anticipation are conveyed through ritualistic rhythmical pacing, loud dynamics, and faster tempo. Furthermore, the use of bell organ and synthetic voices amplifies the mysterious atmosphere of the scene. In bar 123, the music transforms into a waltz for two men dancing together. Harvey's vocal lines, filled with excitement and curiosity, are expressed concurrently

with Mama's lamentation, referring to the collective tragedy of Jewish history. The orchestral texture alternates between ritualistic rhythmic patterns in the horns, harp, and pizzicato violas and cellos, gradually thickening with additional layers. By contrast, the orchestral accompaniment becomes delicate and subdued during Mama's lines about Jewish persecution. The erotic and mystical qualities of this passage highlight the internal conflict between Harvey's sexuality and his cultural heritage. Wallace also evokes Tibetan-style chant with guttural and nasal vocalizations, employing wordless rolling vowels in the men's chorus to emphasize "otherness." These gradually evolve into Jewish text before being interrupted by Mama.

During social interaction, individuals consciously or subconsciously project their notion of identity, and their behavior becomes a reflection of their identity.^{28,29} Several displays of intimacy between same-sex couples are depicted in the opera, differentiated symbolically from the more sanitized version of heteronormative exhibitions common in opera. Early in Act One, Young Harvey is led outdoors and witnesses public sex. The stage directions state, "*Young Harvey sees Two Men in the bushes, one on his knees.*" This depiction of intimacy is not a polite embrace but an unapologetic representation of queer behavior and identity. It also highlights the need for queer lovers to seek intimacy in hidden places within a society still intolerant of homosexual acts. A ceaseless quaver ostinato marked "relentlessly" communicates Harvey's thoughts and feelings. Piccolo, flute, and oboe share a heterophonic

semiquaver pattern, their flickering texture suggesting anticipation and danger, leading to Harvey's own sexual encounter in Central Park. Sustained string chords are complemented by rhythmic timpani octaves. While the harmonic foundation largely rests on A7, syncopated rhythms evoke jazz and contemporary idioms. The climax emerges in an urgent unison semiquaver figure, culminating in a rapidly repeated cluster that abruptly releases tension at bar 190. The sudden silence that follows is broken by Mama's solemn solo, in stark contrast to the preceding orchestral tutti.

Further examples of behavioral identity include Anne's observation during a street campaign: "people going to movies, shopping, cruising." By listing cruising for sex alongside ordinary activities, she normalizes it as part of queer identity. This is reinforced by the stage backdrop of a Castro Street Theatre sign saying, "Give me your muddled, your oppressed, your horny looking for action."

In Act One, Part Four, Scott's vocal line conveys his passion for Harvey (Figure 3) through wide upward intervallic leaps resolving by a descending minor seconds, a typical technique in romantic opera arias. His tessitura mainly lies in a high register, using long note values against faster ascending orchestral textures, another common feature of the romantic operatic tradition. Moreover, the work contains several references to Harvey's love for bel canto opera, another facet of his musical identity. One such example is Harvey's comment in Act Two, presented in a flamboyant, bel canto style with several ascending intervallic leaps: "I'm number one queen with a big bone in my pocket."

Contrasting techniques are used to depict sexual trauma. During Scott's reflection on being raped in jail, the orchestration becomes sparse, with some measures left empty. A jarring anvil strike punctuates the word "RRRaped," accentuating the horror of the incident. The bitonal harmonies, combining D minor and C major in swelling strings and woodwinds, subtly underline the gravity of Scott's experience: "fourteen times in one (nnn) night."

An important moment occurs towards the end of Act One, when Scott convinces Harvey to change his appearance to be taken seriously as a politician. Scott sings, "It's your image, Harvey. You wanna win? Change

your clothes. Cut your hair. Lose your ponytail." Harvey's resistance is foreshadowed by a monophonic oboe solo in melancholic A-Aeolian mode. Like in many other instrumental passages of the opera, the composer uses orchestral writing to reflect the emotions and thoughts of the main character. Harvey protests, "No! Scott – it's my strength. I grew it when I left the closet." For Harvey, his appearance is far more than a fashion choice; it represents a visual expression of identity. Several scenes earlier, the stage directions state, "Harvey appears, transformed – a hippie with ponytail and moustache, wearing a T-shirt and jeans. He cruises Buff Young Man." Across the opera, Harvey changes his visual identity twice: first to embrace his queerness and join a community of queer activists, and later to symbolically cast off elements of queerness considered unpalatable by mainstream society to join the white male patriarchy.

Unlike White, Milk is provided with musical material that allows the audience to understand and empathize with him. In Act One, when Milk considers the potential consequences of indiscretion, the music is reduced to a broken A minor chord at half tempo. Soon after, he sings, "...as a man who loves men," in an uplifting C major, ending with a broken, sunny C major chord. The moment of Harvey's coming out is supported with the full fortissimo orchestra, a tremolo tam-tam, and the sound of breaking glass amplified through the speakers. The dramatic effect is once again heightened by an abrupt orchestral silence.

5.2. Othering

Puar³⁰ argues that, in the United States, queerness is considered sexually exceptional through a rhetoric of sexual modernization, and that tolerance of a perverse "other" is granted by an imperialist, centralist position that enjoys sexual, racial, and gendered normality. The libretto includes a variety of ways in which othering is expressed. The character most frequently engaged in othering is Dan White, whose overt homophobia frames his role. Terms such as "Faggot!" and "Dyke" contextualize him as a villain. His concise vilification of queer individuals contrasts sharply with the relative celebratory nature of his targets. He is represented as a somewhat one-dimensional character, who seems incapable of uttering anything other than hate speech, with phrases such as "Shut up, faggots! Move it along."



Figure 3. Scott's vocal line showing romantic upward leaps (Act One, Part Four)²⁰

To emphasize queer theory, both the music and text were given a queer reading. For example, the presence of two opposing polarities is constantly manifested in the music, contrasting a light-hearted, humorous worldview (playfully syllabic and natural word setting) with violent, toxic masculinity (brutal, loud rhythmic gestures falling on the beat). White is introduced when the sensual, ritualistic, and delicate orchestral texture is abruptly interrupted by his aggressive outburst, “FAG-GOT-T!,” accompanied by tremolos in horns 1 and 2, and sudden, loud glissandi in the strings (Figure 4). White’s violent and callous character is also reflected in the orchestration: a stark contrast to the previous delicate passage that conveys an erotic, free-flowing atmosphere rich with sonic colors. Wallace reinforces this rupture in the closet scene with a loud buzzer, crash cymbals, tom-toms, and temple blocks, disrupting the playful atmosphere. White’s material, by contrast, is built from rhythmically rigid, accentuated textures, combined with loud dynamics and shrill bursts in the woodwinds. The stark contrasts in musical material and orchestration mark White as the “other,” set against the playfulness of the queer community.

In Act Two, White is marginally more subtle in the formal setting of City Hall, singing, “What we have here is not what it seems. We have people flaunting preferences that the vast majority of us do not approve of.” He then others that Diane Feinstein with the insinuation: “you hosted a Lesbian wedding in your backyard. Isn’t that so, Dianne?,” suggesting such an act requires admission. Feinstein redirects the discussion to the establishment of a halfway house for children, to which White responds, “What do gays care about children?” This phrase further demonizes White, whose lack of interest in child welfare contrasts sharply with the efforts of Feinstein and Harvey.

Despite his bullying, White is not always victorious in verbal sparring. When he retorts, “I don’t put my mouth where it don’t belong, and I don’t swallow,” Harvey replies, “Don’t knock it till you’ve tried it.” Humor is attributed to several queer characters throughout the libretto, but never to White, who is instead depicted as unfriendly.

Wallace consistently characterizes White with a fortississimo glissando, an effect symbolizing terror, first employed when White, in his earlier guise as a policeman, arrests Young Harvey (Figure 4). This technique is sometimes rendered in the strings, but towards the end of Act One, during clashes between police and protesters, Wallace intensifies it with trombones.

Early in Act Two, White’s vocal part contains discernibly more accents than those of any other characters, highlighting his conservatism and obsession with “order,” as well as his penchant for aggressive behavior. Accents on the first beat and during leaps to a higher register make him sound rigid and oppressive. In contrast, Harvey’s material is delicate and lyrically melancholic. The orchestra subtly accompanies his lament with slow time values and sustained chords. Harvey’s lament is placed between White’s brusque monologue, delivered with dry, percussive textures (“We are the people who pay their taxes, go to church faithfully ev’ry Sunday”), and is further distinguished through abrupt changes of tempo, instrumentation, sonic color, accentuation, and dynamics. Later, Harvey’s gentle line “For kids, Dan!” has no orchestral accompaniment, contrasted with White’s explosive response, “What do gays care about children?,” underpinned by a heavily accentuated orchestral background, followed by a rigid, rhythmical, percussive chase scene. Harvey’s mother, Mama, appears only at the beginning and final moments of the opera. She

Figure 4. Entry of Dan White (Act One, Part One)²⁰

advises the 17-year-old Young Harvey to “Watch out for Men who are Different.” This warning, though motivated by concern rather than overt homophobia, illustrates how othering can impair the formation of a positive self-identity in an impressionable teenager. Young Harvey’s curiosity later emerges when he encounters a group of tuxedoed men at the opera, asking, “Who are these Men Without Wives?” His curiosity is shaped by his mother’s earlier caution that they were “different.” Mama’s warning returns in the penultimate scene, seemingly foreshadowing the “different” man Harvey should watch out for—White, who ultimately assassinates him. Mama’s warning phrase is characterized by a tritone interval, a dissonance long associated with evil (Figure 5), which foreshadows the menace of White’s character.

In general, the work is structured around polarities: the queer community is presented as the locus of normality, characterized by love, freedom, and joy, whereas heterosexual society is depicted as the “other,” associated only with coldness, restriction, and hostility. White’s villainous character epitomizes this “otherness.” His statement, “We are the people who pay their taxes, go to church faithfully ev’ry Sunday,” suggests that he represents not only himself but also the customs and values of the broader “other” (heterosexual) society, which disallows individuality or freedom. In contrast, Mama appears as a gentle, idealized dream figure. She does not seem entirely real, appearing only occasionally as a symbolic guardian angel for Harvey. Whereas White’s appearance on stage is usually accompanied by loud, dissonant textures with upward glissandi, Mama’s lines are free-flowing and gentle. Both roles are archetypal: white represents a toxic, brutal father figure, while Mama radiates innocence, purity, and passivity. Like in the myth of Oedipus, anger and tension dominate the relationship between the “father” (White) and the “son” (Harvey), culminating in deadly conflict. As De Kuyper¹ argues, homosexuality is also a fundamental part of heterosexuality: “the other is in himself and around him.” Homophobia stems from the frustration of not being able to be “at the same time the other gender and being ‘total.’”

In Act One, we are introduced to a “hooker.” The stage directions indicate her annoyance at losing a prospective client to a man. She observes, “This used to be a nice, normal

neighborhood. A girl could earn a living.” Although the irony seems to be lost on her, she explains that something has changed. She is irritated that “Now these guys give it away for free.” These comments connect her concerns—having her patch of San Francisco street corners inundated by these “others,” displacing a perceived normalcy with confusing new conventions—with the broader rise of queer visibility in the late 1970s. She concludes, “This place is Halloween all year ‘round,” further othering her new competition by likening them to nightmarish characters.

As the queer community in large cities such as San Francisco became increasingly visible, the media struggled to understand how to reference them. During Harvey’s election campaign, a CBS reporter asked rhetorically, “A ho-mo-sexual running for office?” This extreme form of othering confirmed the perception that existing outside the heteronormative paradigm precluded an individual from pursuing a career in politics. In an attempt at humor, an NBC reporter extended the othering process with deprecation, stating, “Harvey Milk should be running for Dairy Queen.” Appealing to homophobic viewers, the reporter used a pun to belittle the queer candidate.

The most extreme form of othering is given through stage direction rather than sung text. Act Two opens with a violent, homophobic attack. A buff young man and a gay doctor are strolling in the moonlight of a warm fall night. The stage directions state:

“Suddenly, Five Young Bashers with baseball bats spring from a trap door. They surround Buff Young Man and Gay Doctor and start pushing them around. The couple pushes back. Bashers close tighter around them. Buff Young Man and Gay Doctor try to flee. Gay Doctor breaks out of the circle. He is knocked down by two Bashers, pinned down, and made to watch as Bashers taunt Buff Young Man.”

The violence escalates:

“A Basher cracks Buff Young Man with a bat. Another kicks him in the gut, knocking him down. One Basher breaks from the group and leaps on top of him, a knife in each hand. Buff Young Man spits in his face. Alternating hands,

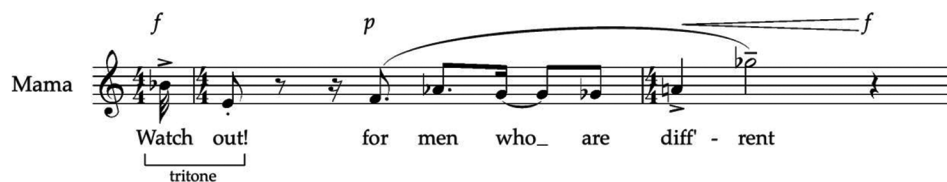


Figure 5. Mama’s foreshadowing of Dan White through the association with the tritone (Act I, Prologue)²⁰

the Basher stabs him repeatedly in the chest. Anne runs on blowing a police whistle. Gays and Lesbians follow, running, blowing police whistles. Basher drops the baseball bat. Bashers run. No Cops. No help. Gay Doctor tries to revive Buff Young Man. It's too late. Dan White rises through the same trap door as the sun rises on an overcast day. Wearing a jacket and tie, he is eerily lit over the body in the grey light of morning. Unconsciously, he picks up the baseball bat."

Although framing such an unprovoked attack in terms of othering may risk minimizing its severity, the scene clearly depicts violent homophobia. The queer community is targeted explicitly for their perceived difference, and the presence of Dan White in this sequence prompts the audience to consider Harvey's assassination as premeditated. Wallace underscores this with the chorus singing the word 'Faggots' in a persistent paired-quaver rhythm, alternating emphasis of each syllable through accents. Such word setting provides a primal, violent context to the unfolding, deadly attack on stage.

Dan White's entry further establishes his character through musical contrast. In contrast to the quiet pizzicato ostinato underpinning Young Harvey's curiosity about the strange men in the park, White is given dissonant minor seconds in the horns and screaming upper strings following a glissando. The tessitura of this outburst is uniformly high: white, a tenor, sings at the upper end of his range, while the instruments are all written uncomfortably high to imitate screaming. There is pure anger in these four bars, providing stark contrast to the calmer material at the opera's opening.

5.3. Activism

The third overarching theme forms an integral part of the narrative. Many queer activists view Stonewall as the beginning of their movement of social reform and human rights, while others consider the events of the early morning of June 28, 1969, as an act of violent opposition to sexual hegemony and resistance to mainstream American values.³¹ Scott introduces activism to Harvey in Act One, singing, "Christopher Street. It's brick-throwing time, Harvey Milk, Midnight at The Stonewall Bar. This time, let's go to jail for us. Is it a date?" Harvey is reluctant, noting that he could lose his job on Wall Street. However, in an indication that he is being persuaded to join the cause, he reflects, "I stand up for myself as a Jew. Why not as a man who loves men?" Soon after, the stage directions indicate the symbolic change in Harvey's position:

"Harvey lifts his hands over his head and snaps his handcuffs apart. Sounds of shattering glass.

Men at the Opera shed tuxedos. Stepping into high heels, they become impoverished Street Drag Queens, applying lipstick and rouge and filling their bras (or not). Drag Queens start a riot that unfolds around Harvey."

What follows is the scene entitled "Christopher Street, The Stonewall Uprising," in which dialogue from various characters encapsulates the unfolding action during the demonstrations. Wallace utilizes rhythmically accentuated ostinato with the full orchestra, highlighting the action with specific percussion instruments such as bullhorn, woodblocks, police whistle, and bass drum. Accents once again fall squarely on the beat, simulating the sound of marching. Anne's shout of "GAY POWER!" (Figure 6), noted only with approximate pitch, evokes the effect of *Sprechstimme* and functions as a demand for society to listen.

Scott then comments, "You think homosexuals are revolting? Bet your sweet ass we are!" A chorus of rioters then adds, "Christopher Street belongs to the queers!" This is followed by a group of drag queens, supported by a chorus of rioters, singing:

"We are the Stonewall Girls!
We wear our hair in curls! We have no underwear!
We show our pubic hair!
We wear our dungarees above our nelly knees!"

The scene finishes with one last chant from the chorus of rioters as they leave the stage, 'Out of the closets and into the streets! Out of the closets and into the streets!' (Figure 7), sung *a capella* by the tenors and basses of the chorus. For the first four bars, the chorus sings in a rhythmic unison on D natural. Pairing this rigidly paced choral part with bass drums gives a vivid impression of a demonstrating crowd. In Act One, Part Two, the tempo marking, "In a groove" and the ostinato of the bell organ signal a change in attitudes of the characters and the introduction of the first activism section. The music is rhythmically constant, following the beat and imitating the cadence of marching protesters.

The next moment of queer activism occurs when Harvey is sworn in as a Supervisor, along with his nemesis, Dan White. He seizes the opportunity to make a clear statement of representing the queer community, saying, "Thank you, Mayor Moscone, and thank you, San Francisco! Thank you to the Castro! My lover, Scott!" His carefully chosen words leave no ambiguity about the community he intends to support. His statement is followed by the Gay Pride Parade. The stage directions state:

"In parade formation, banner-carrying contingents follow: Gray Gays, among them a grandmother

31 Goose it! ♩ = 90

ANNE:
fists in the air

GAY PO-WER!

DYKES:

GAY PO-WER!

GAY PO-WER!

Figure 6. Partially specified pitch in Anne's protest with the chorus of Dykes' response (Act One, Part Three)²⁰

THE MESSENGER enters playing a Big Bass Drum. [ONSTAGE BASS DRUM]

97 Defiant

Tenor

OUT OF THE CLO-SETS AND IN - TO THE STREETS! OUT OF THE CLO-SETS AND IN - TO THE STREETS!

Bass

OUT OF THE CLO-SETS AND IN - TO THE STREETS! OUT OF THE CLO-SETS AND IN - TO THE STREETS!

Figure 7. Defiant protesters singing in a *capella* unison (Act One, Part Three)²⁰

with a sign “I Love My Gay Grandson”; Eureka Valley Gay Bowlers; Gay Rodeo; Lutherans Concerned for Gay People; a lesbian contingent which re-enters twice as Dykes on Bikes and Dykes on Trikes; Anita Sunshine, a drag queen dressed as Anita Bryant with a Miss America banner and orange tree branches for arms; Gays in the Millinery, veterans in uniforms wearing outrageous hats.”

White's line, “Get the Dyke!” is followed by the shrill blast of a police whistle and an ardent crescendo in the strings, horns, and woodwinds. The incessant, rhythmical pulsation on the timpani accompanies the police rushing after Anne. Their struggle is underscored by a sudden silence of the orchestra, leaving only the piercing sound of the whistle. Wallace makes further use of silence in the subsequent scene with the rioters. In Act Two, Part One, a lesbian kazoo marching band joins the procession. The originality of this passage lies in its instrumentation: the kazoo, while not entirely unconventional, is rarely used in orchestral settings. Here, it underlines the liberal, carnivalistic, and nonconforming nature of the protesters.

In the final scene before the epilogue, extracts from Harvey's will are recited. The first extract reads, “I fully realize that a person who stands for what I stand for, an activist, gay activist, becomes the target for a person who

is insecure, terrified, afraid, or very disturbed themselves.” Immediately after, Harvey is shot 3 times by White. The reading of the will continues, “I wish I had time to explain everything I did. Almost everything was done with the eyes of the gay movement. I would hope five, ten, a hundred thousand would rise. I urge them to do that. Urge them. Come out.” Harvey's final moments thus reaffirm both his desire to be remembered as part of the activist struggle and his hope that queer activists would rise up to continue the work he had begun.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Grounded on queer theory, this research has applied a “queer reading” to Wallace's *Harvey Milk Reimagined* by analyzing the musical score and the libretto. The analysis reveals how queerness is manifested through musical and textual strategies. Rather than employing melismatic, Late Romantic operatic gestures, the vocal writing is set in a naturalistic style, resembling spoken language. Emotional intent is signposted not only through conventional Italian musical terminology but also through direct English instructions such as “relentless,” “magisterial,” “Stunned!,” “in a groove,” and “mock patriotic.” These markings ensure that the lyrical message remains at the forefront.

The opera provides an insight into the changing landscape of San Francisco's queer community. While the

events leading to Harvey Milk's murder unfolded in the 1970s, a period of struggle, the opera itself was composed decades later (1995/2019), when the issues relating to queerness had changed dramatically on the West Coast of the United States. In Act One, the queer community is depicted as emerging from the shadows, with Milk as a symbol of legitimacy and unity. Korie's libretto and Wallace's score portray a community strengthened by a focused, common purpose.

Equally driven by his convictions is Dan White's character, portrayed with all the menace of the archetypal villain. From his first utterance to the devastating final act, White is given no redeeming features. There is little backstory, aside from references to low wages and an incessantly crying baby. Musically, his lines lack melodic contour, are rhythmically simple, and largely syllabic—starkly opposed to the rich material given to the queer characters. White is the “other”: a figure isolated by his words, his music, and his opposition to the community around him. He is also emblematic of the broader hostility of the heterosexual majority, glimpsed only in shadows. Read symbolically, White recalls the oedipal “father” figure whose deadly conflict with the (homosexual) “son” can be theorized through the framework of the plicate Oedipus complex.³² According to Lewes,³² the consequences of this conflict emerge in sexual behavior, interpersonal relations, superego functioning, and transference.

This paradigm, in which the straight white man is painted as the frustrated “other,” rejected by the community in which he lives, and the fearless queer community—banded together with Milk as the figurehead—is at odds with reality. It is possible that such a vision of the plight of the queer community is more reflective of contemporary lived experience. Korie and Wallace provide a reversal of the depiction of queer characters in Hollywood under the Hays Code, which operated from 1930 to 1968.³³ Under Hays, queers were depicted as sadists, psychopaths, and nefarious, antisocial villains. In *Harvey Milk Reimagined*, the roles are reversed, and with little subtlety. The opera intervenes in hegemonic perceptions of reality by displacing the marginalized group, demonizing the straight community, and exalting the queer community and its allies.

We sought to understand how binary representations of straight versus queer political activism align with notions of non-binary categorization perpetuated by queer theorists. Without making excuses for or lessening the horror of a homophobic-driven assassination, by disallowing a humanistic portrayal of White and his community, the possibility of allowing constructive dialogue between opposing agendas is diminished.³⁰ To understand White's

social context is not to condone his actions, but to better understand how the queer community can further its notions of representation, equality, and access. As an effective agent for social change, the opera provides a window into the queer experience, and such agency carries the responsibility to be mindful of existing divisions.

Opera narratives told from a queer perspective are a relatively recent phenomenon.³⁴ Although coded representation of queerness in opera has existed almost as long as opera itself, it was not until well after the sexual revolution of the 1960s and Stonewall (1969) that tentative steps appeared, with works such as Tippett's *The Knott Garden* (1970), Harrison's *Young Caesar* (1971), and Bernstein's *A Quiet Place* (1983). Since 2010, operas with distinctly queer narratives have proliferated and continued to challenge historical understandings shaped through the heteronormative lens.

Wallace creates a powerful telling of Milk's story. His murder is as violent as it is visceral, made more poignant by the musical performance of the reading of his will as he lies dying on the stage. He was our captain, whose contribution to the struggle of an oppressed community paved the way for many future queer politicians to champion queer rights. He achieved success in the world of politics that few queers in 1970s America dared to hope for. He is immortalized in opera, his favorite art form, without blemish: the idealized queer hero of the people. This tribute to Milk, along with the 2008 film from Gus Van Sant, preserves his legacy but, more importantly, makes an unambiguous statement about society through the actions of Dan White. Yet, the opera's stark juxtaposition between “righteous queers” and the “villainous straight white man” does not so much elevate Milk's heroism as it condemns the cisheteropatriarchal order. In doing so, it risks reproducing the same dynamics of demonization that queer theory originally sought to dismantle.

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The libretto and music score are available from the corresponding authors upon reasonable request.

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ARTICLE

In search of absence: Creation strategies in scenic works of Heiner Goebbels

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Abstract

The present study examines Heiner Goebbels' intermedial strategies in selected stage works, with particular attention to the role of absence as a central aesthetic and creative principle. From the perspective of intermedial studies, it investigates the creation strategies developed by the composer and theater director Heiner Goebbels (b. 1952, Germany) in his scenic works, and, in particular, in three of them: *Landscape with Distant Relatives* (2002), *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004), and *Stifters Dinge* (2007). Taking absence as an aesthetic premise, as a creative strategy that allows for the emergence of everything that is not seen, heard, or perceived at first instance, the procedures that give rise to Goebbels' scenic realizations are examined, and how his being a composer influences his way of directing the scene, of "composing" the scene.

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doi: 10.36922/AC025120013**Received:** March 19, 2025**1st revised:** August 22, 2025**2nd revised:** August 26, 2025**Accepted:** September 4, 2025**Published online:** September 26, 2025**Copyright:** © 2025 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNoncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**Publisher's Note:** AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

This paper examines the creative strategies employed by Heiner Goebbels (b. 1952, Germany) in his theatrical works. Focusing on three of his productions—*Landscape with Distant Relatives* (2002), *Eraritjaritjaka* (2004), and *Stifters Dinge* (2007)—it investigates how Goebbels, as both composer and theater director, drawing on his background in sociology, transfers compositional strategies typically associated with music to a broader field of creation that extends beyond sound alone.

The study approaches this subject through the lens of production methods and material awareness, which Goebbels himself identifies as central to his work. To this end, it incorporates Goebbels' own reflections from a previously unpublished interview conducted in Giessen in 2017, alongside a comprehensive bibliographical analysis of his writings and existing scholarship on his work.

Goebbels' trajectory situates him within a tradition of contemporary composers who have explored theater as a form of artistic creation, including Mauricio Kagel, Georges Aperghis, and Robert Ashley, among others. While it is common for a composer to contribute music or sound design to a theatrical production, it is less common for such involvement to culminate in a full transition to stage directing, as in the case of Goebbels.

In the early stages of his career, Goebbels actively engaged in the avant-garde theater scene, collaborating with several major figures, including Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson. These experiences eventually led him to direct his own stage productions. Today, he is internationally recognized both as a composer and as a theater director.

Regarding his musical influences, Goebbels notes that alongside classical music—ranging from Bach to Hanns Eisler—popular music, rock, and free jazz have significantly shaped his musical imagination. As he himself explains: “This is how I learned a certain freedom, primarily in the way of performance, non-conducted performance, and definitely the freedom in creating music together as a group, which is really the most important thing about rock music.”^{1(p11)} This openness and eclecticism have become defining traits of his work as both composer and theater director.

Such eclecticism also informs his approach to staging, which often appears “orchestrated,” as if the performance itself were a musical composition: light responding to the rhythm of music, or an actor’s voice treated as a polyphonic element in the manner of a Bach fugue. Goebbels integrates the multimedia dimension radically into his productions, exemplifying what Roesner, in *Composed Theater*, describes as “a shift in activity during the process of making theater, a dramaturgical quality, a new perspective in creation.”^{2(p11)} Central to this paradigm shift is the emphasis on “creation processes that bring the musical notion of composing to the theatrical aspects of performing and staging.”^{2(p11)} Heiner Goebbels’ stage productions challenge the conventional questions of contemporary performing arts: What are we seeing? To which discipline does it belong? What does it mean? Rather than seeking to resolve these questions or articulate explicit statements through his works, Goebbels presents a constellation of elements on stage as devices, creating a space in which the audience can construct their own responses.

The central argument of this paper is that Heiner Goebbels transfers musical compositional strategies—rooted in his training as a composer and his interdisciplinary career—into the theatrical domain, rendering his productions “composed” works in which the creative process, material awareness, and multimedia configuration redefine the notion of staging and generate new modes of audience reception.

2. Distancing, fragmentation, and absence

“Absence can be understood as avoiding the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, and the things that are usually done on stage.”^{3(p5)}

The theatrical work of Heiner Goebbels is part of the theatrical line developed in the 20th century by Bertolt Brecht and continued by Heiner Müller, in which “art is never an end; it is a portal through which ideas must be experienced and combined to stimulate consciousness, promote action, and generate change.”^{4(p62)} Brecht sought to break with what he called dramatic theater to produce a

rupture with the linear Aristotelian characteristic through epic theater. This, whose main characteristic is distancing, removes “the obvious, known, and familiar aspects from the action or character [to] provoke astonishment and curiosity around it.”^{5(p83)} In relation to the spectator, epic theater “no longer seeks to intoxicate, fill with illusions, makes one forget the world, or reconcile with one’s fate. Theater now presents the world to the spectator so that they may take hold of it.”^{5(p85)} Thus, theater becomes a means not only to understand the world but also to transform it. Theater now seeks to empower the spectators, making them social and political actors who, through the tools provided by theater, change their environment and, consequently, the world.

As a continuation of Brecht’s epic theater, the second half of the 20th century gave way to what Hans-Thies Lehmann called “post-dramatic theater.” This does not mean that other forms of theater-making were displaced or replaced, but rather that the term applies to “a theater that operates beyond drama, in a time after the validity of the drama paradigm in theater.”^{6(p17)} Fundamental to this transition is the work of playwright Heiner Müller, who updated Brecht’s distancing concept with the idea of fragmentation:

His texts resemble more the concept of an essay than a play itself. He breaks with dialogues, with action, with connected scenes. His works are constructed rather from quotations, words, ideas, and fragments in the form of a collage, overlaying different stylistic elements, both literary and theatrical, such as anachronisms, analogies, allusions, epigraphs, self-quotations, rhizomes, associations, and theater within theater; among others, always following a logic of images, where he does not impose a single sense and development of action, but leaves open the possibility for the spectators to develop their own interpretation, their own judgment.^{7(p45)}

Both Brecht and Müller, from a strong critical stance toward the role of theater in society and its role in its transformation, are simultaneously making theater and reflecting on it in a passionate artistic quest: “The theater is only interesting when one does what one does not know. Only then does something new emerge.”^{8(p11)} Distancing the action or character and fragmenting the writing of the theatrical text are strategies to achieve a new theater that, in turn, serves as a means of removing the social foundations of the West.

The spectator was no longer allowed to indulge uncritically (and practically without consequences) in experiences simply by identifying with the

dramatic characters. The way they were presented subjected the themes and events to a process of distancing, the distancing necessary for something to be understood. When everything is “obvious,” understanding is simply not possible.^{5(p45)}

Both Brecht and Müller criticize the role of theater as a means of representing reality, surpassing the linearity of dramatic theater, and each, through their particular aesthetics, involves the spectator in the process of creating meaning.

In this context, it is possible to see how Goebbels, situated in the post-dramatic stage of theatrical development, updates the concepts of distancing and fragmentation, giving rise to “absence” as an aesthetic principle. With absence, the author aims to continue the distancing from linearity, a search initiated by Brecht and deepened by Müller, leaving aside the known and the obvious and offering surprise to awaken the spectator’s curiosity.

The aesthetic premise of absence in Goebbels can be understood as a political stance toward artistic creation and the role of art in society. In the author’s words:

When we trust that people in the audience, the spectators, will use this for their own education, not in the sense of education, but even involving a change in their lives. Or when they say: I did not know this was possible, to see the world differently, something in the world that you have not thought was possible. This can already be a political starting point (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

His aesthetics constitute a political stance by focusing not on what happens on stage but on what happens in the audience, by trusting in the autonomy and independence of the spectator, and “by creating art in a socially responsible way.” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). In this sense, we find again a continuity in Goebbels’ work with his predecessors Brecht and Müller, who also took a clear political stance in their respective artistic works, both in terms of content and production methods.

In Goebbels’ work, absence can be understood as the opposite of “intensification,” a concept that refers to the over illustration of a character, action, place, etc., and which he avoids in his works, considering it an element that has already been exhausted in the Western theatrical tradition and that limits the possibilities of interpretation by the spectator. Over-explaining, linearity, and emphasizing are common characteristics of intensification that Goebbels seeks to avoid in his stage works.

The aesthetic principle of absence in Goebbels can be understood as:

- The disappearance of the actor/performer from the center of attention, the stage, and even the theater itself;
- The shifting of the spectator’s focus to a collective protagonist;
- The separation of the voices of actors and musicians from their bodies and instruments, respectively;
- The polyphony/autonomy of elements;
- The abandonment of dramatic expressiveness;
- An empty stage, literally, or the absence of a message or story in the work;
- Not telling a story in a narrative sense, or at least not in the Aristotelian way;
- And, returning to the epigraph of this section, “absence can be understood as avoiding the things we expect, the things we have seen, the things we have heard, the things that are usually done on stage.”^{3(p5)}

In short, we can understand absence as “the presence of the other, as a confrontation with an unseen image or an unheard word or sound, an encounter with forces beyond man’s control, that is, out of our reach.”^{3(p6)}

3. Absence on scene, presence in audience

The aesthetic premises of distancing, fragmentation, and absence, each with its particular characteristics, have in common the goal of leading the viewer from identification and intensification, characteristics of dramatic theater, to participation in a condition of post-dramatic theater. Regarding this point, Brecht asserts that epic theater “turns the spectators into observers but arouses their activity; forces them to make decisions; it provides them with knowledge; the spectators are confronted with an action.”^{5(p46)}

In Rancière’s terms, “this capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations.”^{9(p17)} The spectator is considered a co-creator of the work and is given the task of creating meaning. The drama does not occur on the stage; “the performance only happens through the imaginative power of the audience.”^{3(p42)}

Paradoxically, it is possible to observe that, in multiple and varied ways, in Goebbels’ works, absence is staged while also generating a presence in the audience. This presence can be understood as a space, a realm, a gap through which the spectator can access their own interpretation of the work, without the staged elements dictating what to think about it, but instead providing means that enable a personal reading of the witnessed scenic event:

In all of his works, (...) Goebbels explores a variety of strategies that open up the text for the listener in a fashion that echoes Brecht. The listener is no

longer a consumer but rather an active participant in the creation of meaning.^{10(p225)}

Goebbels takes as an important motivation for his work a phrase by Gertrude Stein, "Anything that is not a story can be a play."^{3(p5)} With this, he seeks to avoid the Aristotelian linearity inherent in dramatic theater, leaving aside the structural formula of introduction, development, climax, and resolution, which has become exhausted in contemporary theater. This idea is materialized in his stage works, in which various material media deliberately coexist, linked carefully, unexpectedly, and surprisingly by the author, "not in a symbolic way, I never use them to mean something else" (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). This statement becomes a manifesto for artistic creation, trusting the spectators and granting them the opportunity to make their own interpretations of what they observe and hear.

It is possible to find in Goebbels' stage works an awareness of the material, focusing attention on the signifiers that compose these elements rather than on the meaning that the material carries. The latter is left to the interpretation of the spectator. His concern is not about telling a story, addressing a specific topic, or giving an opinion about it. Instead, his interest lies in the tensions that arise between the staged elements—resorting to theatrical means, such as light, scenography, text, music, and actors' bodies—and in the gaps that these tensions create. These gaps make it possible for the spectators to access their own interpretation of what the work stages.

In each piece, Goebbels presents a reflection on the creative procedures, addressing a problem specific to contemporary arts: the possibility, if it ever existed, of transmitting content is exhausted. It is not surprising, therefore, that having come from music and a composer's training, Goebbels transfers to the performing arts a problem specific to contemporary music. Much of contemporary music, especially avant-garde music, having surpassed tonality, focuses its attention on the sound itself and begins to listen to it, to use it, not in terms of its capacity for signification, but in terms of its physical qualities, which are staged as compositional material and explored in juxtaposition with other extra-musical elements. The concern is not about what the sounds represent and what is sought to be transmitted through them, but rather in the means of production of the work.

"Music has reached that moment in its history where it aesthetically explores its own structures, systems, and forms of construction, as these are uniquely its own. Music would have arrived, therefore, at the history of self-awareness."^{11(p301)}

This, which could be understood as "music in itself," Goebbels translates to the realm of the stage: "Theater as a 'thing in itself,' not as a representation or a medium to make statements about reality, is exactly what I try to offer."^{3(p2)}

What is absent in his works? The absence we witness in Goebbels goes beyond what is not on stage and even transcends what actually appears in it. Sometimes, it is very evident, as in *Stifters Dinge*, where we are faced with the absence of human actors on stage. The absence of actors, a storyline, a focal point, etc., can be understood as the presence of another and ultimately, as giving rise to the viewer's subjectivity, which is ultimately responsible for interpreting the experience.

Here, we can see the great influence of John Cage on Goebbels' work. The importance of Cage's work for Goebbels was already demonstrated by the staging of *Europerras 1 and 2* for the Ruhrtriennale in 2012, where he was able to bring the original spirit of Cage's work to the stage. Hence, great was the importance of this work that later, in 2018, the scenic materials of *Europerras 1 and 2*, designed by Klaus Grünberg, were reused in *Everything That Happened And Would Happen*, a work by Goebbels that imagines different pasts, presents, and futures of the European continent and its identity.

In 4'33" (1952), Cage proposed the absence of the accustomed "musical" sound in a concert hall, and proposed in the work the absence of the usual "musical" sound in a concert hall, and set a specific listening time. "Of the four characteristics of musical matter, duration, that is, time, is the most fundamental. Silence is not heard in terms of pitch or harmony: it is heard in terms of duration."^{12(p81)} The work makes it possible to listen to silence, and it gives it time and place in the experience of the work. This consequently generates surprise, discomfort, and noise in the audience. It is this noise that finally composes the sound of the work, a work written only by silences. In this case, the listeners will each hear a different work, as they will fix their attention on what moves their subjectivity, motivated by the scenic and musical performance and by the sonorous context.

Later, a similar event happened with Goebbels: in his works, there is no theme, no storyline, and even no actors, but a wide range of theatrical elements put into action, serving as stimuli for the interpretation that each spectator can make of the work. Even for Goebbels, the spectator becomes an object of art, another element that composes the work, treated and considered as another theatrical medium.

A common point between the aesthetics of both creators, Cage and Goebbels, is "to invite the audience to

have new experiences, to travel through a new country, or to get lost in the forest.”¹³ The absence in Cage, such as sound, control over materials, and sonic narrativity, is analogous to the main absence of representation that, despite the contradiction in language, is presented and staged in Goebbels' works. Each absence, by exposing the lack of an element, in turn, makes other materials, other senses, present. Cage, through the absence of sound in *4'33"*, brings into action the extra-musical context of the occurrence of that manifestation. On the other hand, in the case of Goebbels,

When the stage is empty in *Eraritjaritjaka*, or when the center of the stage is empty in *Eislermaterial*, it means that the acoustic presence of the musicians of the music is stronger. It is a relationship between what you see and what you hear (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

Expanding the analogy between music and theater, we can see how the works of Cage and Goebbels, despite the temporal differences, are products of similar and contemporaneous processes in the development of each respective discipline. In the first half of the 20th century, both music and theater underwent a significant shift in their aesthetic tendencies: Music abandoned tonality, focusing on sound as “zero material and object to be treated,”^{14(p30)} and theater on the other hand, moved away from the Aristotelian linearity of dramatic form, giving rise to the post-dramatic, an aesthetic that reinforces “the autonomy of scenic art with respect to drama,”^{16(p17)} and where “the focus is not on the drama but on the restructuring of artistic forms that highlight the scenic media, including music, over the literary media.”^{15(p77)}

These independent processes led to a fundamental break in their respective fields, responding to the concerns of the new century, which saw the exhaustion of Romantic aesthetics and its technical procedures. What was being left behind was not just a way of doing things but also a way of understanding and observing the world. These revolutions, led by Arnold Schoenberg and Bertolt Brecht, respectively, gave rise to new music and new theatrical aesthetics, which, once the tragic events of the first half of the century were overcome, allowed for the emergence, for example, of musical works composed exclusively of silences or theatrical works without actors.

Goebbels' stage works are presented to us not only as theater but also as music, installation, performance, and ultimately as a scenic-sonic event, which “occurs only in the process of execution through the actions of all those who take part in it.”^{16(p75)} These works can be approached from various disciplines. More importantly, they can be

assimilated as taking place between disciplines, occupying those vertices, inhabiting the boundaries between one discipline and another, and giving them concrete presence in their works. Just as Goebbels shows an interest in the tensions that arise between the elements that are part of the work, it is possible to observe that this interest extends to the tension, contradiction, superposition, and juxtaposition between the staged disciplines. It is these tensions, both between elements and between disciplines that give rise to the gaps through which the viewer's subjectivity accesses an interpretation of the work. With no story, at least not in the Aristotelian sense, and no one telling a story, the viewer is called upon. In that sense, Goebbels understands them as objects of art, to actively participate in the work and create a unique and personal interpretation of the experience.

4. Stage polyphony

Exploring the works of Heiner Goebbels means delving into the boundaries of theater, music, performance, and even the limits of art itself. Is a theater piece without actors possible? Can we even consider it? Is music just another actor? Or can we conceive of an actor's body being used on stage as a “theme” in a Bach fugue? These are some of the many questions that Goebbels' stage works generate and that need to be addressed when studying them.

What happens when actors leave the theater for which we paid a fee to see them in person, and yet, through a screen, we witness their departure from the stage, their exit from the theater, getting into a car, driving home, and engaging in domestic activities, just like each of the spectators who are witnesses of that abandonment will likely do after the show? This situation, taken from the work *Eraritjaritjaka*, illustrates one of the many ways in which Goebbels presents absence on stage, in a constellation of elements forming a complex scenic counterpoint that opens up a gap for the viewer's subjectivity to interpret the experience there, both sonically and visually:

I think that when we are on stage as composers, directors, set designers, and costume designers, our role is to create a space where the audience's imagination can flourish. It is not about the quantity of fantasies we possess; rather, it's about establishing a space where imagination can find a place (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017).

The polyphonic texture introduced in Goebbels' work can be understood as a result of his musical background and as a way of thinking about theatrical creation influenced by this condition. His musical essence permeates his stage work, and when he creates a theater piece, he is essentially

composing. The concept of “Composed Theater” refers to the creative process and the performance of works that are determined by compositional strategies and, in a broader sense, by compositional thinking.¹⁷ Here, we can consider a basic musical creative principle: to compose means to make decisions. And when expanding this idea to intermedial arts, composing involves listening, reading, interpreting, observing, and directing. It also involves mediating, which means highlighting and making visible and audible the modifications of the material characteristics of the elements that constitute the work, blurring disciplinary boundaries.

In this compositional approach, one must be attentive and open to the structures of the different media involved in the work. Reading a text, for example, is not merely deciphering its meaning but also understanding its syntax and construction. The same applies to visual, scenic, lighting, and bodily materials. It is about composing and directing while taking into account and analyzing the structures of the media that converge with music in the creation of the work, thus enriching the creative process with the constructional forms of all the media involved.

In the case of Goebbels, his creative process begins with experimental workshops, in which each participant—set designers, lighting designers, costume designers—engages in group brainstorming and improvisation based on the question that gives rise to the work. “Most of the things you see – not hear, but see – are created in the first three or four days of these experimental workshops, where everybody can, “sort of,” do what he or she wants.”^{18(p117)}

I try an open process in which every light technician or wardrobe assistant can easily make suggestions, and everyone in the crew always has a fair chance to make the best out of his field (light, sound, stage, costume, musicians, performers, etc.). It ends up being very precise, of course, because the combination of all these media can only work properly with precision.^{1(p10)}

Based on the ability to decide, listen, read, interpret, observe, and direct, the composer becomes a medium that orchestrates the materials and conceptually transfers between the elements that constitute the work. The composer, along with all those involved in the creative process, its realization, and reception, can be seen as instruments that make visible and manifest the process of convergence and intermedial modification.

An intermedial work refers to an artistic manifestation where different media converge and blend in their creation. The concept of media represents “the material and sensitive dimension of communication,”^{19(p23)} and

“the way we receive a message is conditioned by it.”^{15(p73)} From an intermedial perspective, the concept of media is understood in three dimensions. First, it is seen as a tool:

“Physical media” are the means by which any medium’s complex signs are produced, such as the body; flute and percussion instruments, the Moog synthesizer; oil on canvas, brush and ink on paper, marble, wood, the video camera, voice, typewriter, pen, paper, parchment, skin, etc.^{20(p30)}

Second, as a discipline: music, theater, dance, literature, film, etc. Third, as a cultural context, which refers to “the environment that surrounds artistic manifestations not only at the moment of their expression but also before, during, and after their process of creation.”^{21(p93)} Intermediality is characterized by observing creative processes and the concrete manifestations resulting from these processes through a network logic, in which media as material tools, disciplines, and cultural contexts interact and influence one another in multiple directions.

Understanding intermedial works in this way and considering media in these three dimensions, the previously described approaches to composition make complete sense during the creative process. These processes lead to works that are not conceived as finished products but rather as potentialities in which the process of creation, its manifestation, and its reception by the audience are all integral parts. They are not independent stages but are intimately interconnected, like tension fields that feed back into the process,²² resist each other, and unleash potentiality in the creative exercise.¹ The work, as the material concretization of the creation-production process, offers certain materials, and it is the spectators who are responsible for its interpretation, thereby completing the

¹ In “The Fire and the Tale” (2016), Agamben refers to the tension between potentiality and impotence, between the power to act and the power not to act, when discussing the act of creation. According to the Italian author²², potentiality is a suspension of the act, as it involves the possibility of developing or not developing a certain capacity. The creative act, the poetic act, the production, is the action where the potentiality of not doing is abandoned, and the question arises regarding what emerges from this impotence once the power to act is activated. What is suspended in the creative act? What is abandoned when a potentiality is put into practice? These are the questions that animate the creative processes addressed in this study, enabling us to consider the role of all those involved in the stages of creation, interpretation, and reception as agents who suspend the possibility of not doing when they participate as co-protagonists in the creative process. As Agamben mentions, drawing from Deleuze, they unfold an act of resistance and liberation of a potentiality.

creative potentiality of the work. In the words of Agamben, it is an act of resistance to death that gives rise to the work.²²

The scenic polyphony in Goebbels is structured, in the manner of a Bach fugue, by different voices, many of which may not be evident at first glance but are implicitly present: the members of the artistic team, the elements and disciplines at play, and the presence of the audience.

I also work on the polyphony of the media, their contrapuntal function, and look for the rhythm of a performance, the chords of the colors – since colors also have a very strong acoustic resonance when they come to life.^{18(p114)}

Each constituent part of this counterpoint contributes to the construction of the work as a creative force. It is not limited to what is presented or absent on stage, but it relies on the interpretation of the audience to complete its formation as a voice in this polyphony. “Spectators see, feel, and understand something in as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers, or performers.”^{9(p13)}

The simultaneous presence of scenic voices in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical work can be understood as the author's personal quest for sounds, images, and experiences that he has not previously heard, seen, or lived. In that sense, Goebbels, as a composer, “feels more connected to unheard sounds or approaches that open up his imagination to what music could be, rather than feeling part of the world of new music” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). This concern, stemming from his experience with sound and music, extends to the other media—tools, disciplines, and cultural contexts—that are part of his scenic works, thus experimenting with new possibilities for creating a polyphonic texture. Through this approach, he grants the spectator—as a voice that is part of the contrapuntal construction—the possibility to interpret the experiences within the work.

5. Reading as a form of composition

The creative strategies in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical works are as numerous and varied as his works themselves. Goebbels sees each new piece as a challenge to explore possibilities that he has not experienced, seen, or heard before. In some cases, it may begin with an original idea that serves as the starting point for a new work, while in others; it may be commissioned by a specific ensemble or company. The initial motive can be diverse, but the commitment to innovation in each new work remains constant.

This commitment to innovation is brought to life on stage through a creative strategy closely tied to the

reading behavior. Beyond being a musician and a theater director, Goebbels is an avid reader, and it is evident how his way of composing—encompassing his attitude and the activities he undertakes when directing his theatrical works—is guided by reading the texts that form part of his works. These readings are not solely focused on meaning; Goebbels is also interested in the literary material and syntactic structure of the texts, their construction methods, their rhythms, and how they possess a musical dimension:

I can try to enlarge the view of the architecture of the text; to read the text with a magnifying glass. My interest is to share my observations with the reader or with the listener or, looking behind the authors' way of writing, to show some of their writing strategies, to be able to understand more levels than just the overall semantic one.^{1(pp5-6)}

This strategy of reading as a form of composition is an attempt to “find within the texts – not in their meaning, but in their syntax – indications of how to make musical decisions” (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). Goebbels uses texts—and the voices that bring them to life—as sonic and musical materials. He is interested in the acoustic realization of language. It is common to find different languages in his works, which reflects his interest in the sound of those languages beyond the comprehension of their semantic content. For example, in the work *Stifters Dinge* (2007), there are texts in English, Spanish, French, and in one of the original languages of Papua New Guinea. These texts are acoustically presented: we do not see the source of sound emission; they are pre-recorded and played during the performance, which directs attention to the sound of the voice and the languages themselves beyond their semantic content.

The acousmatic disembodiment of the voice and language aims to concentrate the audience's attention on sound, in contrast to the scenic elements at play. These polyphonic relationships between media can manifest as tensions, contradictions, interpolations, or complementarities. The interpretation of these contrapuntal relationships is left to each member of the audience. The work presents these relationships and connections without closing them off to a precise meaning but rather seeks to open up the audience's perception, listening, and imagination. In Rancière's terms, “this capacity is exercised through irreducible distances; it is exercised by an unpredictable interplay of associations and dissociations.”^{9(p17)} Hence, Goebbels' understanding of the spectator as the creator of the work.

Whether in his purely musical works or his theatrical works, one can observe Goebbels' need for extra-musical elements. Even when he creates “music within music,” “the

strategies of creation draw on elements outside of music to seek musical indications from them" (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017). In this sense, literature is an important extra-musical element in his works, and the act of reading this "human artefact," in Wolf's terms,²³ becomes a transversal strategy that runs through his entire body of work.

Next, we will examine the specific strategies in each of the three works chosen as objects of study: the deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*, the spelling out of elements in *Eraritjaritjaka*, and the decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*. While these strategies are observed as primary in their respective works, they are intertwined with the previously detailed strategy of reading as a form of composition. It is possible to hypothesize that this strategy serves as the main creative approach in Heiner Goebbels' theatrical works and that specific strategies are developed for each work.

6. Creation strategies

6.1. Deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*

Stifters Dinge premiered in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2007. The work was created by a team led by Heiner Goebbels in his role as composer and theater director (Figure 1); Klaus Grünberg was responsible for lighting and set design, Willi Bopp handled the sound, and Hubert Machnik took care of programming. They were joined by a group of collaborators responsible for the installation and technical aspects of the theater.

This work, defined by Goebbels himself as a performative installation, as a composition for five

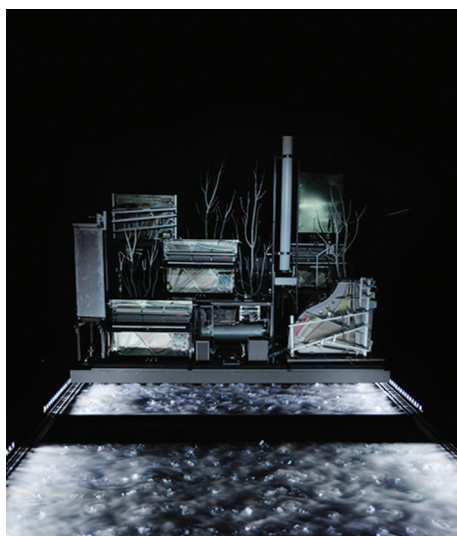


Figure 1. Picture of *Stifters dinge*. Reprinted with permission from <https://www.klausgruenberg.de/stifters.htm>, Klaus Grünberg, 2007.

pianos with no pianists, and as a performance without performers, emerges from the question posed by Goebbels and his team of collaborators as a working premise: "Will the spectator's attention hold even if one of the essential assumptions of theater is suspended—the presence of an actor?"^{23(p5)} This scenic experiment, which pushes the aesthetics of absence to its limits by removing human presence from the stage, gives rise to an installation populated by objects that take on the role of the vacant protagonists left by the absence of actors. Thus, pianos, stones, pools, water, smoke, and so on, become the participants and content generators of the work. "The things on stage, the means of the theater, and the design elements themselves become protagonists as soon as there is an absence of performers."^{23(p28)}

Music and performing arts unfold, take shape, and are constituted in time. The structure and form of each work are determined by how the resources that are part of them are managed temporally. In this sense, it is not surprising to observe how Goebbels, both as a composer and a theater director, employs a temporal element as a creative strategy in *Stifters Dinge*: deceleration. This tool aims to heighten the audience's perception by allowing things to happen without a linear dramatic progression. The work functions as a continuous sonic and visual device that, instead of creating temporal expectations, surprises with unforeseen events. The temporal management of the elements is not aimed at creating a dramatic narrative, which is characteristic of traditional theater, but rather at arranging the elements not only as tools but also as artistic partners and forces,¹⁸ becoming protagonists of the action and generators of visual and sonic content.

This actorless performative installation incorporates literary texts by Adalbert Stifter and William Burroughs, interviews with Claude Lévi-Strauss and Malcolm X, and field recordings of indigenous people from Papua New Guinea and Colombia. The title of the work, *Stifters Dinge* (Stifter's Things), is derived from the texts of Austrian author Adalbert Stifter, a representative of the *Biedermeier narrative movement*², and Goebbels takes elements from Stifter's syntactic construction to derive creative strategies for this particular work. "He slows down, decelerates the narrative tempo, and at the same time heightens our attention."^{23(p27)} Stifter's characteristic of describing the settings where actions take place with great patience and meticulousness is adopted by Goebbels as a creative strategy. Deceleration becomes a translation of this literary

² Artistic and literary style developed in Central Europe in the first half of the 19th century, particularly ornamental, emphasizing the influence of Romanticism and landscape painting.

writing strategy, now functioning as a working tool in the construction of the stage realization.

Stifters Dinge presents self-reflection as a working tool, revisiting the construction methods of each medium: Literature, music, and stage. Stifter's literature pays attention to objects and elements of nature, which are translated on stage through a contemplative attitude of observation. Deceleration is brought to life in *Stifters Dinge* through various actions: the slow ballet of curtains, the filling of pools, and the almost imperceptible color change in a projected painting, accompanied by a meticulous description of an avalanche, among others. Stifter writes his imagery like a landscape painter, and Goebbels does the same on stage.

The aforementioned textual materials are present in the work through archival material. The voices are not performed live but pre-recorded and played through speakers. On the other hand, all musical and object sounds are produced live through mechanical and/or computerized automated processes. This inversion challenges the traditional format of theater, which typically features live voices and recorded sounds. It becomes another way of making absence present on stage by questioning the premises of theater and unsettling its constituent elements.

The rhythms of listening and seeing collide with each other: focusing on one means losing the other. The voices become disembodied, their source unseen, demanding utmost attention to their discourse. Choosing to focus on the voices means missing out on the details of what is happening on stage, and vice versa. The work heightens attention in one medium at the expense of the other, thus turning the audience into active participants by offering various options for their focus of attention. The work is therefore constructed within each spectator, according to the emphasis they have placed on the various elements that make up the piece. In this regard, Goebbels quotes Brecht to affirm the idea of "using theater not to make statements, but to offer experiences."¹³

In *Stifters Dinge*, one can observe Goebbels and his team's quest to invert hierarchies, avoid the familiar, and displace the order and use of theatrical elements. "I wanted to assemble things on stage which remains strange to us."^{3(p32)} A change in light that becomes a sonic event, pianos that play autonomously, the friction of stones creating a continuous sound, a disembodied presence of human voices—all these actions are aimed at redistributing power, hierarchies, and the balance of weight among the elements. By treating all theatrical elements as independent and complementary voices, akin to a polyphonic composition, the realization of a musical conception of stage devices becomes evident.

This is made possible through what Goebbels himself recognizes as a way of working in a musical manner:

A keyboard was used to direct like a composer. Probably, this musical approach represents a way of working; probably all the decisions (when to emphasize a light or when to move something) go through my body as a director as much as they went through my body as a keyboard player in the rehearsals of this piece.^{18(p118)}

In this way of directing through musical action, it is natural for time management to become the primary strategy of creation in this work. Ultimately, it is a search for the time of the other,⁸ embracing a completely different kind of time.

The phrase from Stifter, "I have never seen anything like this before,"¹³ is taken as a working premise by Goebbels in this piece, expanding the aesthetic experience through the various elements brought to the stage. The literary phrase is extrapolated to the scene in a quest to offer spectators previously unexperienced images, sounds, and actions, opening up their imagination and allowing them to interpret what they witness in their own way.

6.2. Spelling out elements in *Erartitjaritjaka. Museum of Phrases*

The title of the work corresponds to a poetic expression of Australian Aboriginals, which can be translated as "full of yearning for something lost."⁸ Goebbels became familiar with this word through the special enthusiasm it aroused in Elias Canetti, the author of the texts that are incorporated in *Erartitjaritjaka*. The subtitle of the work, "Museum of Phrases," helps to approach the treatment that Goebbels gives to Canetti's texts. Rather than a narrative construction, the work presents disconnected quotes from Canetti, mirroring his own approach in his texts. Once again, we observe a literary strategy being translated to the stage.

The work premiered in 2004 in Lausanne, Switzerland. It features texts by Canetti and music for the string quartet by Shostakovich, Mossolov, Lobanov, Scelsi, Bryars, Ravel, Crumb, Bach, and Goebbels. On stage, it involves the participation of actor André Wilms, who has collaborated on numerous works by Goebbels as well as the Mondriaan Quartet. Goebbels serves as the director, Klaus Grünberg handles the set design and lighting, Florence von Gerkan is responsible for the costumes, Bruno Deville oversees the video, and Willi Bopp is in charge of sound.

As already mentioned, motivated by reading and the multiple re-readings of Canetti's notebooks, Goebbels creates this theatrical work with the premise of staging

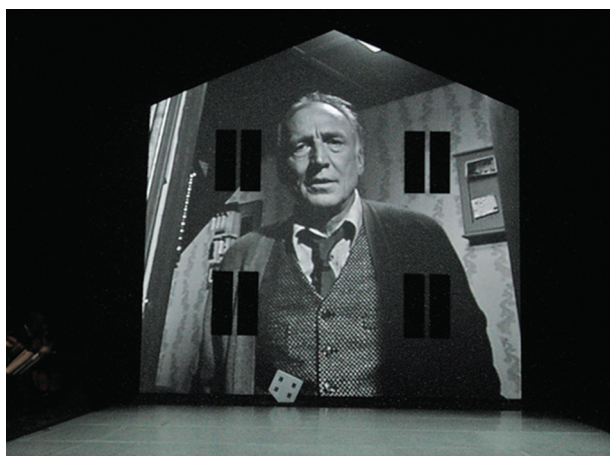


Figure 2. Picture of *Erartitjaritjaka*. Reprinted with permission from <https://www.klausgruenberg.de/erartitjaritjaka.htm>, Klaus Grünberg, 2004.

the possibility of encountering something new each time the play occurs (Figure 2). The intention is to generate a pleasure of the imagination,¹³ just as Goebbels experienced with Canetti's reading. Although Elias Canetti is a German-language author, the play presents his texts in a French translation, firstly because the actor performing the play is French, and secondly, because the production and commission of the play corresponded to the Theater Vidy in Lausanne, in the French-speaking region of Switzerland. This decision also reflects Goebbels' interest in the sound materiality of language beyond its semantic content. While it is important to understand what the text says, it is even more important to put the language into action as a sonic medium tool.

The creation strategy of this particular work involves the independent presentation of each medium that is part of the piece, resembling a spelling out of elements "The music, the string quartet, the lighting, the film, the expansion of space: at first the black space, then a white rectangle, a small house, a big house, the outdoors, the indoors."^{3(p18)} Each of these media tools is introduced one by one, adding up in a counterpoint that will only be completed toward the end of the work. This strategy allows each presented element to be appreciated in detail, focusing attention on its specific characteristics and qualities. "Only later will these individually introduced parameters be interlaced with each other."^{3(p18)}

This creation strategy is Goebbels' way of translating a phrase by Canetti onto the stage: "You notice some things only because they are not connected to anything."^{3(p17)} The disconnection between the media in the work is meant to allow the audience to focus their attention on each element. Gradually, the piece weaves a contrapuntal structure by incorporating the various media on stage, diversifying

attention and expanding the possibilities for interpretation in the audience. Absence is brought into play in this case through the strategy of spelling out elements, avoiding the common forms of superposition and interrelation of media found in dramatic theater. In particular, absence is practiced in *Erartitjaritjaka* when the actor leaves the stage. Through a screen, we see them exiting the theater and driving to an apartment in the city where the work is being presented. There, they read the newspaper of the day and prepare a meal in perfect rhythmic synchronization with the music performed on stage, Maurice Ravel's String Quartet in F Major.

We did not try to find appropriate music afterwards to accompany that; we tried to provide him and his structure of movements and activities a sort of musical energy, and tried to follow the musical form, one which is driven by aesthetic compositional aspects. This also means "directing as a composer" (here, like Maurice Ravel).^{18(p19)}

This represents a precedent and rehearsal of what Goebbels would later accomplish three years later in *Stifters Dinge* by completely subtracting human presence from the stage and delving deeper into directing the scene from a musical conception.

The absence of the actor on stage opens up new forms of perception in the audience. The theatrical space expands to an outside that surpasses the physical limits of the theater. At the same time, the theatrical medium expands as a discipline using real-time video as a scenic tool. The boundaries of physical space and disciplinary space blur, generating new ways of accessing the theatrical event and allowing the audience to question what they are experiencing: when the actor leaves the stage and the theater, does the play continue? Is it really happening, or is it a stage trick? What am I seeing: the mediated image of the actor in real-time or a recording? Goebbels constantly makes us doubt what we are observing.

A clear example of this is when we see the actor preparing food in the apartment, and we witness that the rhythm with which he cuts the onion on a cutting board perfectly matches the tempo of the live music performed by the string quartet on stage. When witnessing this, there is no doubt that both events are happening simultaneously. Toward the end of the play, when the actor appears through one of the windows of the house façade that makes up the set design, Goebbels once again makes the audience doubt the simultaneity of the events. The intention is to constantly play with the audience's perception and generate continuous questioning of what is presented on stage.

In *Erartitjaritjaka*, various media tools (instruments,

scenic elements, video, spaces, etc.) and media disciplines are employed independently and not interconnected, just like in Canetti's texts, which include music, theater, literature, film, and visual arts. Each element is complex in itself; each one communicates and signifies. This combination of media in the play provokes a collapse of meanings in the audience, hence the idea that the drama resides in the audience, not in the play. The multimedia scenic device presents a series of significant materials. Goebbels and his team of collaborators, as creators, trust in the audience's ability to read the elements at work and interpret the intermedial relationships existing between them. The meanings of the play are not determined by those who create it, but by those who construct in the imagination of each spectator based on their particular interests and the focal points on which they have fixated their attention during the presentation of the device.

Unlike other works, in *Erartitjaritjaka*, Goebbels primarily uses music by other composers, all of which are for the instrumental formation of a string quartet, a chamber ensemble representing the tradition of Western written music.

The inclusion of Bach's *Contrapunctus IX* from *The Art of Fugue* responds to a sonic reason. The ascending octave interval that initiates the music is similar in its sonic qualities to the expression *là-bas* (there) being used in the text that, simultaneously, the actor is enacting. There is a phonetic proximity between the sound of language and the sound of the musical work. In German, the original language of Canetti's texts, *là-bas*, corresponds to *Dort*. Here is a clear example of the importance of language sound for Goebbels. The choice of Bach's music would not have been possible if Canetti's text were in German. The translation into French, along with its sonic quality, provides new possibilities for the creation, composition, and direction of the work.

The text is incorporated as an additional voice to Bach's music. The transparent structure of the contrapuntal procedure, which is the fugue, allows for the addition of new voices in the polyphonic construction. In this case, the text in the actor's voice complements the instrumental voices of Bach's fugue, and in turn, the musical work enriches and acquires an unprecedented sonic richness through the addition of a new voice, this time human, to its fugue-like fabric.

The inclusion of Bach's fugue toward the end of the piece serves as a recapitulation of the creative strategy used by Goebbels in *Erartitjaritjaka*. The fugue is characterized by a gradual inclusion of each of the voices that compose it in previously unexplored registers. Only once all the voices have been presented does the first exposition of the

fugue become complete. This is analogous to the process of unveiling elements carried out by Goebbels in the play. Each medium is presented independently, occupying an exclusive and particular space on the stage: sound, lighting, text, body, scene, etc., and in the construction of meaning through the audience's interpretation.

6.3. Decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*

This opera for ensemble, chorus, and soloists—an actor and a baritone—is the oldest of the three works that are part of the subject of study in this research. It was premiered in 2002 in Geneva, Switzerland, featuring musical composition and stage direction by Heiner Goebbels and a group of collaborators, including Klaus Grünberg, who stands out for his set design and lighting (the only member of the team present in all three works studied); Florence von Gerkan in costume design, and Franck Ollu in musical direction, among others. The work was composed for the Ensemble Modern from Frankfurt, Germany, an important contemporary music group with whom Goebbels had previously collaborated on *Black on White* (1996).

While this opera includes texts by various authors such as Giordano Bruno, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Henri Michaux, and Gertrude Stein, as well as references to Nicolas Poussin and Leonardo da Vinci, the initial motivation and the non-musical element that sparked the creation of this work was Poussin's painting *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* (Figure 3). The reading as a form of composition, identified in this research as Goebbels' primary creative strategy in his stage works, is expanded here to encompass the reading and interpretation of the pictorial image. In this case, the creative strategy takes inspiration from Poussin's work, which is characterized by meticulous detail in all planes of the image and a decentralization of the focus of action.



Figure 3. Poussin's painting of *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*. Reprinted from <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/nicolas-poussin-landscape-with-a-man-killed-by-a-snake>, Nicolas Poussin, 1648.

Poussin's artwork does not have a single exclusive focal point; instead, the viewer's gaze is drawn to various stimuli. In fact, the action that gives the work its name, although located in the foreground, is presented in a space and with a luminosity that diminishes its prominence, causing it to share attention with the other actions, landscapes, and elements that make up the image. Goebbels translates Poussin's compositional strategy to the stage, employing decentralization by presenting multiple focal points in the image, meticulous attention to detail and precision in each plane, and treating the landscape as a space with a wide variety of perspectives: left-right, foreground-background, up-down.

The struggle for this balance provokes a variety of perspectives in this opera, which again and again let the onlookers' eyes wander from left to right, from background to the front, from this scene to the next, and so on.^{3(p11)}

The landscape, in this way, appears to have no beginning or end, allowing for various viewpoints and offering the viewer freedom of perception and observation.

The strategy of decentralizing the action is brought to the stage in various ways, for example, by conceiving a collective protagonist instead of an individual one or by presenting the musicians of the ensemble without their instruments, engaging in actions on stage, playing instruments different from their specialty, performing on stage dressed in a hood, ultimately taking them out of their comfort zone. Avoiding the center does not necessarily translate literally to the stage. The action may occupy the center while various media are being employed in other planes and spaces of the scene. This generates a need for the audience to decide where to focus their attention and gaze. The spectator is allowed to choose which of the elements that are part of the scene to use in constructing their own interpretation of the work.

The topic of the opera then – expressed in language, singing, drumming and dancing – is images that refuse to occupy the powerful and often violent center or exclude or shift it; the centering of everything is never staged but only aspired to, implied, and worked toward; eventually, the center is left vacant to be discussed, to be focused on and repossessed by us, the living onlookers.^{3(p12)}

Landscape with Distant Relatives represents another exploration of absence as an aesthetic premise by Goebbels. Absence is made present in this work through the strategy of decentralizing the action, the variety of focal points and planes of attention through multiple media and

simultaneous actions, the omission of a narrative, the idea of a collective protagonist, the reassignment of tasks to the musicians of the ensemble, transforming them into more than just musical performers but also stage performers, and the distance of observation, which provides us with the opportunity to detect proximity, to discover similarities and relations.⁸

7. Coda

On reviewing the background of Heiner Goebbels' theatrical conception, one can see how his aesthetic of absence represents continuity and update of the principles of Brecht's distancing and Müller's fragmentation. Goebbels' aesthetic seeks to provide the spectator with experiences that awaken their imagination through various theatrical means. His works do not tell stories or make statements; they present themselves as scenic events with a series of visual, auditory, and conceptual stimuli, considering and conceptualizing the audience as actors who are part of the work, as they are responsible for its interpretation.

The aesthetic of absence is characterized by avoiding *clichés* and the intensification of dramatic theater, experimenting with new possibilities of seeing, hearing, and experiencing the theatrical act. As a way of translating this aesthetic premise to the stage, Goebbels employs various creation strategies, with reading as a form of composition standing out as the common working methodology in the three works addressed here. This strategy is characterized by extracting compositional and stage direction procedures from the syntactic construction of the texts, which are put into action. In the opera *Landscape with Distant Relatives*, this strategy expands to the pictorial image, extracting creation methods from a visual work to be applied in theater.

On the other hand, the particular creation strategies used by Goebbels in his different works—the deceleration in *Stifters Dinge*, the spelling out of elements in *Eraritaritjaka*, and the decentralization of action in *Landscape with Distant Relatives*—become tools for exploring and experimenting with new possibilities of combining, overlaying, contradicting, avoiding, and juxtaposing the relationships between the media that make up each work. This is always done with the aesthetic premise of absence, that is, attempting to offer on stage unforeseen and unheard-of forms of interaction between the materials being employed. In each work, Goebbels devises specific strategies that translate reading as a form of composition, arranging materials and possibilities for combining elements that open up the viewer's imagination.

As a theatrical director, Goebbels brings his other concerns as a musical composer to the stage. As such, his creation strategies serve to organize the materials, arrange

them in time, and connect the different media that compose the work. When Goebbels states that he feels closer to unheard sounds rather than new music (Goebbels, oral communication, April 26, 2017), he acknowledges how he resorts to musical composition and theatrical direction to create pieces that offer sonic experiences. By extending the field to theater and using composition as the foundation for directing the stage, he renders resources and working strategies available to the audience for their interpretation.

I (...) consider theater as a very musical process. I firmly believe in the musical space of an aesthetics experience and rather think about the rhythm of scenes, the harmonic or contrapuntal relationship of the theatrical elements, and the different levels between a "visual" and an "acoustic" stage.^{18(p114)}

The theatrical works of Heiner Goebbels question the basic foundations of theater by pushing the boundaries of the interdisciplinary media that are part of his works. To achieve this, he employs a musical strategy:

Heiner Goebbels takes this idea of theatrical polyphony even further by extending the musical process of de-hierarchization to virtually all constituent elements of the theater, including lighting, sound design, and video. He also reflects on this approach more explicitly as an attempt to elicit critical awareness, maturity, and self-determination in the audience.^{24(p218)}

8. Conclusion

Goebbels' works constantly explore new sonic and theatrical possibilities. His works consistently seek new sounds and scenic possibilities, making use of unforeseen combinations, exploring the stage, improvising, working collectively, and ultimately, defining in a precise way how the media arranged on stage interact. This is to move away from dramatic expressiveness. As Goebbels himself states, quoting Müller, "The drama doesn't happen on stage."^{3(p5)} The drama is experienced by each spectator and is constructed in their imagination through the interpretation of the theatrical elements that are in tension within the works.

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ARTICLE

The value of art: An analysis of the Chinese art market from a value-driven perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution and distinctiveness of the Chinese art market in the new era from the perspective of the social construction of artistic value. It first reviews the limitations of traditional economic frameworks in analyzing the value of art and highlights the significant role played by the labor force and the uniqueness of labor products in the formation of price and value. The article then analyzes the historical context and temporal characteristics of Chinese art society, especially with the rapid development of the cultural industry, which has placed unprecedented emphasis on the value and price of art. To explain the multiple constructions of artistic value, the article employs a critical constructivist approach, combining Marxist value theory and Pierre Bourdieu's cultural field theory, to explore the interwoven roles of symbolic capital and cultural power in the art market. Finally, the article proposes a new pyramid framework to analyze artistic value from the perspective of Chinese socialist theory, reflecting the complex social and economic relations in the production and market mechanisms of art.

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1. Introduction

The formation of value and price in art market research is a classic issue. This problem has undergone significant changes in China. During the early stages of China's integration into the global art market in the early 21st century, scholars identified several price-related problems, such as the close proximity of transactions, a direct supply-demand relationship, low price levels, and the lack of relevant regulations. They proposed that the art market should accept the elevated market prices of a few renowned artists, due to the unique supply-demand conditions, and move away from the mindset of a planned economy. Furthermore, they suggested that cultural power should transition from administrative departments to the market.¹ Today, these early issues have largely been resolved, and the modern Chinese art market system has aligned, to some extent, with the global art market. Moreover, with the development of the global cultural and creative industries in the 21st century, the Chinese art market now presents a new face.

In the modern era, discussions surrounding the value of art have evolved considerably, spanning both academic research and industry practices. Value is a socially constructed phenomenon, and it has become a consensus that the formation of artistic value cannot be detached from its social context. The conditions determining the value and price of art in contemporary China have undergone significant changes, with the most prominent

being the unprecedented global recognition of cultural and artistic value, driven by the development of the cultural industries in the 21st century. For instance, according to the latest gross domestic product (GDP) data from China, released by the National Bureau of Statistics on January 17, 2024, the GDP for 2023 was RMB 12,605.82 billion,² reflecting a 5.2% increase compared to the previous year at constant prices. The primary sector saw an added value of RMB 897.55 billion, growing by 4.1%, the secondary sector at RMB 4,825.89 billion, up by 4.7%, and the tertiary sector at RMB 6,882.38 billion, growing by 5.8%. From January to November 2023, the revenue of large-scale service enterprises increased by 8.5% year-on-year, with the cultural, sports, and entertainment sector growing by 18.9%. As such, culture and art have emerged as the key drivers of global economic development.³ Therefore, China's art market, as part of the broader art industry, is increasingly integrated into a wider social context, reflecting the growing importance of cultural and artistic sectors.

Inspired by Benjamin Graham's theory of value investing—first proposed in *The Intelligent Investor* (1949)—this article shifts the analytical lens toward the intrinsic value of art and its relationship to market price.⁴ Graham's approach emphasized identifying undervalued assets by analyzing their intrinsic worth, which is grounded in fundamentals such as financial performance and market position. While market price is shaped by the fluctuating supply and demand, intrinsic value reflects a deeper, often more stable measure of worth. In the context of art, this paper argues that the intrinsic value is not purely economic but socially constructed—shaped by cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions.

Building on this foundation, the study adopts a critical constructivist methodology to investigate how the social construction of artistic value influences market pricing. Unlike traditional economic models that focus solely on market forces, this approach considers the complex interplay of cultural institutions, symbolic capital, and ideological structures. The paper proposes a conceptual model to better understand this relationship.

Specifically, the analysis unfolds in three parts: (i) the distinctiveness of art as a commodity and the evolving nature of its production; (ii) the temporality of art value in contemporary China, informed by studies of traditional Chinese art society; and (iii) the construction of a new analytical framework that integrates the uniqueness of art production and the historically contingent nature of its value—situated within broader processes of social construction.

To extend the analysis, the critical-constructivist approach is operationalized as a staged research design anchored in the proposed art-pyramid (actors, distribution systems, and media). The design first maps the field by assembling Chinese market and institutional data relevant to value construction—rosters of artists and intermediaries (curators, galleries, and auction houses), exhibition and award records (including national-level programs), and transaction information—so as to capture how symbolic capital and institutional power shape price and non-price outcomes. It then translates “value” into measurable dimensions—historical/cultural (canon and scholarship), symbolic (exhibitions, prizes, and institutional affiliation), social (intermediary network positions), and esthetic (critical reception)—paired with media and distribution indicators, including emergent digital channels that reconfigure trading mechanisms. Methodologically, the study employs mixed methods: (i) field mapping and network analysis of intermediaries to model the dual state/market value system; (ii) event- and case-based inference (e.g., historically inflected valuations such as the 2016 *Jushi Tie* sale) to trace mechanisms; and (iii) multilevel regressions linking the foregoing indicators to price and institutional outcomes (e.g., public collection and major exhibitions). Validation combines out-of-sample prediction with expert triangulation (interviews with curators, critics, and auction specialists), and results are reported across the pyramid's three sides. In this way, the operational plan directly tests the claim that artistic value in China is historically contingent, socially constructed, and mediated by institutional power.

2. The particularity of artistic value production

Historically, art has often been treated as a commodity within economic theory, but this classification tends to overlook the social and symbolic values it embodies. According to Marx's theory of value, a commodity gains exchange value through the process of production and the labor invested in it. However, applying this theory to art reveals certain limitations. Artworks are not merely labor products; they also carry symbolic capital and represent a form of value that transcends economic exchange.⁵

The modernist tradition of assessing art based on its autonomy upholds the belief that art, as a cultural achievement, possesses universal and intrinsic value. This view once dominated discussions of art as “elite” or “classical” culture. However, since the mid-20th century, this consensus has been increasingly deconstructed. Rather than denying artistic autonomy, this shift reflects the emergence of analytical approaches that replace the notion

of absolute value with more differentiated elements—such as esthetic, spiritual, social, historical, symbolic, and factual values.⁶ The criteria used to assess value depend largely on the subject and context of analysis.

From an art historical perspective, the concept of art has evolved through several phases—from technical craftsmanship to esthetic creation to the genius model of artistry. Rather than tracing this evolution in full, this article focuses on how, since the 18th century, the rise of capitalism and nationalism has redefined the production of artistic value. As capitalism became the dominant mode of production, art too became commodified. With the decline of traditional patronage systems—royal, religious, and aristocratic—art transitioned to being produced for collectors and consumers.

When art transforms into a commodity, it becomes a product of labor designed for exchange, possessing two factors or properties: use-value and value. The art is the amalgamation of the use-value (natural attribute) and value (social attribute). The value of a commodity is the condensed, undifferentiated human labor embodied within the item, and it is defined by the socially necessary labor time. Individual labor time refers to the actual duration expended by individual producers to craft a particular product, whereas socially necessary labor time is the labor duration required to manufacture a certain use-value under the present, standard production conditions given an average level of labor proficiency and intensity. However, within the realm of artistic production, both the individual labor time and socially necessary labor time associated with artistic labor lose their decisive influence in commodity price analysis. The famous Baumol's cost disease theory explains how the production efficiency in art creation will not elevate due to technological advancements.⁷ We notice that the unique nature of artistic production compels us to apply methodologies of market economics in resolving conflicts within the art market.

The analytic framework of art as a labor product in the commodity context fails to function. Under the presumption of the capitalist market, the issue of the separation between the laborer and the product does not seem to hold true in the art world. The phenomenon of the artists themselves being commodified and branded comes after the commodification of artwork. The employment system, as an intrinsic characteristic of capitalist production modes, turns labor power into a commodity, which is a distinctive socio-historical phenomenon. This requires two conditions: firstly, the owner of the labor power must possess personal freedom, allowing them to continually sell their labor power as a commodity; secondly, the owners of labor power must lose all means

of production and livelihood. Marx was among the first to analyze human labor products in "Capital," suggesting that laborers, due to the employment system, achieve a status of freedom. Labor and production under the employment system lead to a separation between them and their manufactured products.⁸ When commodities then enter the market through a monetary structure, they set up the entire modern market system we see today, which marks the origin of modernity. However, consider the example of Duchamp's artwork, "Fountain," which is academically viewed today as an expansion of contemporary art concepts and a critique of museum power. Even so, from an economic perspective obtained through art market studies, one could discern that artistic labor and its products have not diverged but have unprecedentedly converged. To understand this issue, it is imperative to analyze it from a dual perspective of economic relationships and societal transformations, as the social nature of art value surpasses that of any other human production. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural fields and symbolic capital deepens our understanding of how artistic value is constructed. He argues that the value of art is shaped not solely by economic forces, but by its position within a cultural field consisting of various agents—artists, curators, critics, and the institutions that support them.⁹

To specify, under the conditions of the modern market economy, the system of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of material products and their associated labor and employment relationships differs considerably from the production of intellectual products and their employment relations. When artwork as a commodity is no longer delivered directly from the creator to the patron, this looser distribution system provides modern artistic practice and practitioners a more "independent" aspect under market conditions, akin to other laborers. However, unlike other commodities, the freedom of creators benefits from this distribution system. In the production phase of intellectual products, artists do not separate from their creations like laborers under the employment system with physical production. The artist evolves from an anonymous entity to a genius and even becomes the embodiment of artistic production and artistic value itself. Art in capitalist society plays an unprecedented role in social integration—a role obscured under liberal economic logic.

Since the 18th century, the romantic ideal of the artistic genius has been a central element of European culture. As nation-states emerged, art became a vehicle for collective identity and societal unification. Artists and their work came to symbolize national pride and universal values—a legacy that continues to inform the contemporary social value system of art.

For instance, before the mid-19th century, it was quite rare for public institutions or the state to commemorate figures in the world of arts. European city streets and squares overflowed with monuments to monarchs and military heroes, yet statues of national cultural heroes were few. It was not until the 1860s that countries started paying more respect to commemorations of their cultural heroes. Between 1800 and 1840, European countries erected 75 monuments to monarchs, politicians, and military heroes—over 3 times the number of unveiled monuments (23) in honor of renowned figures from the culture, science, and philosophy communities. In the final 40 years of that century, when the rush for public statues peaked, the numbers became more balanced: 512 for the powerful and 401 for thinkers, scientists, and artists. These monuments and sites are nationalist and European in their cultural significance alike. Much of the national pride associated with these figures is based on their “universalistic” concepts—they serve as the nation’s “gifts” to other countries and the world. All European nations increasingly relied on culture for societal coherence. The evolution of mass communication made this reliance on culture possible. Compared to what could have been imagined before the advent of railroads or lithography, a wider audience now recognized writers, artists, and composers; they were national heroes and celebrities.¹⁰ In other words, the value of art today is part of the social value system.

Rather than reducing agency to money, each market actor contributes differently to the production and circulation of symbolic value within the cultural field. Gallerists perform consecration and narrative framing (exhibitions, catalogues, and institutional placements), converting cultural capital into symbolic recognition; collectors supply early patronage and public legitimation (acquisitions, loans, and philanthropy), converting social capital into symbolic prestige; and artists engage in position-taking through esthetic and institutional strategies (prizes, commissions, and collaborations) that accumulate and redistribute symbolic capital. Price formation is thus an outcome of these differentiated conversions and positions in the field, with money acting as one medium of conversion rather than the principle itself. The relationship between art commodities and the system of agents is not one of reification, but a kind of generalized estheticization. In the analysis of general commodities, money, as a universal equivalent, condenses undifferentiated human labor. However, the art market emphasizes differentiated labor and diversified value, rather than the undifferentiated labor found in industrial goods. In different social structures, artworks carry different systems of value.

This diversification does not suggest multiplicity of values inherent in a piece of art, but refers to distinct artworks reflecting diverse values under varied social structures. Marx and Engels, as early as in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), suggested the globalization of capitalist markets imparted a worldly characteristic to “the production and consumption of spiritual and material products” in every nation. The antiquated status of local and national self-sufficiency and self-seclusion has been supplanted by multifaceted interactions and interdependencies among nations. Hence, the value standard of modern art, breaking away from the confines of ancient Greek art and those of the Italian Renaissance, has shaped the norms for assessing all forms of art, fostering an empathetic and objective study of exotic artistry.¹¹

Today, intermediary agents such as curators, critics, galleries, and auction houses play a pivotal role in the construction of artistic value. Charles Smith’s seminal 1989 work, *Auctions: The Social Construction of Value*, laid the empirical foundation for the sociology of auctions. From the perspective of social constructivism, Smith conceptualized auctions as processes through which value is socially constructed. In particular, the “community structures” surrounding the auction and the “dramatic performances” that unfold during the auction itself play a crucial role in legitimizing and establishing the value of artworks.¹² Introducing the auction into sociological inquiry has helped to expand the traditional boundaries of Chinese sociology, offering new topics and directions for research in economic sociology, organizational sociology, art sociology, and cultural sociology. In contexts where a standardized market has yet to fully develop—or under socialist economic systems—the forces that drive the construction of artistic value, especially symbolic value, tend to be more complex and layered.¹³ In the Chinese context, state-led institutions continue to dominate the valuation and exhibition of art, even as private galleries and international auction houses gain influence. This coexistence creates a dual-value system—one shaped by state ideology, the other by market dynamics—making it difficult to establish consistent price indices across the Chinese art market.

3. The locality and temporality of artistic value reception

In the context of Chinese scholarship, the temporality of artistic value has two key dimensions. The first concerns modern academic reinterpretations of artistic value within the traditional Chinese society. The second involves new practices in contemporary China, where artistic value is increasingly embedded from within the art world

networks into the broader cultural infrastructure of social development.

First, understanding the traditional Chinese art world is fundamental to interpreting how artistic value is formed in today's Chinese art market. For example, in 2016, a calligraphy work titled *Jushi Tie* was sold at China Guardian's spring auction for RMB 207 million (including commission). Although the letter was written by Zeng Gong—a 62-year-old scholar-official who was neither a calligrapher by profession nor has produced a literary masterpiece—the artwork achieved a record price due to his esteemed status as a Confucian intellectual and Northern Song statesman. This case exemplifies how cultural and historical factors shape the valuation of art in China.

Hence, understanding the Chinese art market requires a firm grasp of the traditional social structures underpinning artistic production. These studies rely on basic understandings of Chinese social culture, such as relationships and the value orientations of the literati. Insightful works by Western sinologists often stem from their unique sensitivity and ability to perceive the subtleties of Chinese social culture as researchers from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, James Cahill's study on the careers of traditional Chinese painters,¹⁴ Lothar Ledderose's research on traditional Chinese art production models,¹⁵ and Craig Clunas's examination of Wen Zhengming's social art, which explores China's recognition of the value of relationships and gifts, lend credence to this.¹⁶ Martin Powers understands how visual patterns functioned within the institutionalized operations of ancient Chinese society based on its social structure from a political perspective, including Chinese scholar Bai Qianshen's study on Fu Shan,¹⁷ which continues the analytical paradigm of sinology on the Chinese art world. Perhaps influenced by Bai Qianshen, and due to the "readability" of calligraphy and the emphasis on "calligraphy" in Chinese cultural policies, it has spawned a series of studies on the artistic production mechanism of ancient China in the field of calligraphy research today.^{18,19} These studies describe, summarize, and generalize the art production situation in Chinese art society. However, some studies have indicated and misinterpreted Chinese cultural phenomena. For example, Byung Chul Han's "Shanzhai: Chinese Deconstruction,"²⁰ explores how the logic of modern Chinese cultural industries and the traditional Chinese landscape module can be applied to modern Chinese commodities or cultural industries without damaging artistic value, to explain our cultural production. This study misunderstands Chinese culture. Further interpretation and research require a deeper analysis of

Chinese culture. Recent studies include Zhu Tingyu's analysis of the social hierarchy of beauty constructed by Confucian intellectual elites,²¹ and Liu Xuguang's study of ancient Chinese esthetic pleasure through the concept of "qingyue."²² These studies demonstrate the penetrating power of local scholars' research. They explore the esthetics of Chinese art from the perspective of the construction of social esthetics and the production of artistic value by Confucian intellectual elites. In the 1980s and 1990s, how did this esthetic pleasure of "qingyue" contribute to the value of Chinese art?

Second, artistic value plays a significant role at the societal level in the new era of China. On October 18, 2017, Chinese President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, Xi Jinping, made a significant judgment in the 19th National Congress report of the Communist Party of China, stating that "through long-term efforts, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, marking a new historical position for China's development." In terms of the cultural industry, following the British model of creative industries that established culture and art as economic tools for wealth and job creation, under the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, art serves as an important lever for public policy.

The art plays a crucial role in China's urban and rural development. In the practice of art intervening in society, both the rural art festivals and private art galleries in cities have played exemplary roles. Rural revitalization through art integrates rural ecological landscapes, earth art installations and exhibitions, tourism and leisure, cultural dissemination, science popularization education, and other comprehensive developments. Today's rural revitalization movement through art in China is a comprehensive network constructed with art as the starting point, involving multiple actors such as the government, villagers, universities, enterprises, and urban residents, who jointly promote the construction and artistic development of rural China in a unified and vast field. Art renews cities and stimulates urban vitality through the construction of regional art parks and the planning of art activities. For example, the Deji Art Museum in Nanjing, China, and the Tianmuli Art District in Hangzhou, China, are both part of commercial areas. The Deji Art Museum, a non-profit art institution founded by the Deji Group, presents its rich and diverse collection, research, and exhibition system to the audience openly and innovatively from a global perspective, contemporary context, and local cultural reflection. Its model is not like the previous use of artistic elements as an esthetic decoration to empower business, but rather has a broader social value, making it

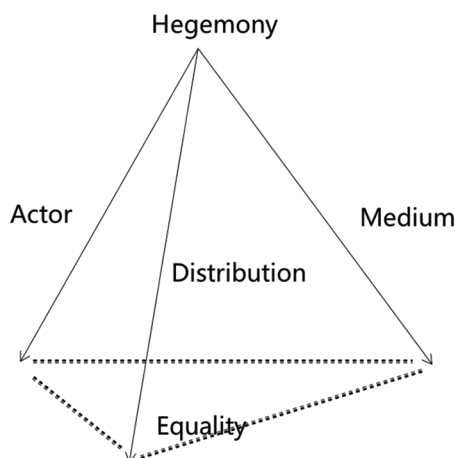


Figure 1. Art pyramid model
Source: Author's illustration.

an organic part. In this organic component, the decorative nature of art is not heavily relied upon but rather creates a value orientation toward commercial artistry.

Understanding the value of Chinese art requires a multi-dimensional approach that integrates economic, symbolic, and cultural considerations. The Chinese art market, shaped by its unique historical, cultural, and political contexts, serves as a prime example of how art's value is constructed through a complex interplay of social and economic forces. The framework for analyzing this value must account for both traditional and modern factors.

4. After the art diamond

By engaging with the constructive theoretical tradition of art, Victoria D. Alexander built upon Wendy Griswold's "cultural diamond" framework from *The Sociology of Art*, which places "artistic products," "creators of art," "consumers of art," and "the wider society" at the four corners of the diamond. He introduced the fifth element—"distributors"—and emphasized that "the intermediary is communication." By linking art creators, artworks, art consumers, and art society through these channels of communication, Alexander developed what he called the "art diamond."²³ Although this framework emphasizes the structural nature of artistic value, it fails to reflect its unique characteristics. According to the previous analysis, the production of artistic value has particularities distinct from other material productions and has been constantly changing in different eras. If we can construct a theoretical model that reflects its production characteristics and the power relationships behind its development, it may be more beneficial for us to understand the value of art in the market, industrial structure, and public policy. Therefore,

this article attempts to propose an art pyramid model, with the cultural power shifting from centralization to equality in the process of era change from top to bottom and simplifies the five elements in the art diamond into three: actor, distribution system, and medium, which are located on the three sides of the pyramid (Figure 1).

In terms of actors, our basic assumption is that artistic production is not a simple chain. The identities of the subjects involved in artistic production, dissemination, and consumption are intertwined and deeply influential. Artistic reception is often a precondition for artistic reproduction, and the concept of artistic autonomy produced by modernism also has profound political and economic factors. Artistic production, appreciation, and collection are integrated, and producers and reproducers are not in a simple production and consumption relationship. Rather, they are jointly producing art and determining the distribution system of artistic value. Therefore, Ernst Hans Gombrich's statement, "There is no art, only artists," and Joseph Beuys's statement, "Everyone is an artist," reflect the differences in the identity of actors in the art world compared to ordinary sociology. On the media side, it includes both creative media, referring to the materials and tools used in artistic creation, which range from mainstream oil painting materials in the current art market to emerging digital art forms, as well as communication media, such as the third-generation internet based on blockchain technology, which has revolutionized traditional art trading methods.

In terms of the distribution system, although we can still use the original artistic diamond model with five points and seven lines to specifically examine certain situations of artistic production and dissemination, the actual situation is more complex. In the process of exploring new research paradigms, it is not about generalizing the art commodity market or blurring its boundaries, but rather acknowledging the essential generalization of today's commodity market. The core of the marketing concept defined by the American Marketing Association focuses on a series of activities, institutions, and processes aimed at creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that provide value to customers, clients, partners, and society at large.²¹ The exchange of valuable offerings, across different fields, leads to various distribution systems formed by the exchange of esthetic value, ideological value, capital value, and social value of art.

Overall, with the development of the times, art has undergone a process of evolving from a relatively closed field to a more open one. At the top of the pyramid, artistic resources and power are relatively concentrated, exhibiting

a high level of institutionalization. For instance, artistic productions such as the National Art Exhibition, the National Art Fund, and commissioned creations, as well as the consolidation of ideological values, often emerge at this level. From top to bottom, actors, distribution systems, and media have gradually shifted from a singular leadership to a more egalitarian approach, incorporating an increasing number of diverse actors, in line with social development and technological changes.

Therefore, the previous frameworks have limited analytical and explanatory capabilities when faced with issues arising in today's art market. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,²⁴ Kuhn suggests from the perspective of natural science research that when a research paradigm produces numerous deviations and unexplained issues when exploring a subject, it may indicate a problem with the paradigm itself. This article aims to use the formation of artistic value as an entry point, considering the particularity and temporality of artistic production, to propose a simpler and more explanatory analytical framework.

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This is a single-authored article.

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Not applicable.

Consent for publication

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Availability of data

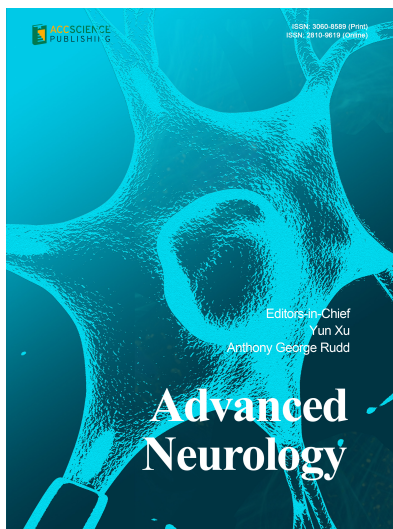
Not applicable.

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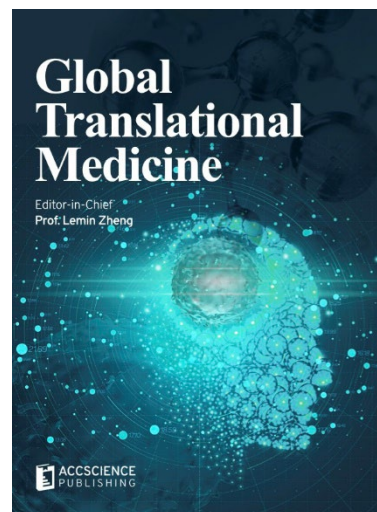
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