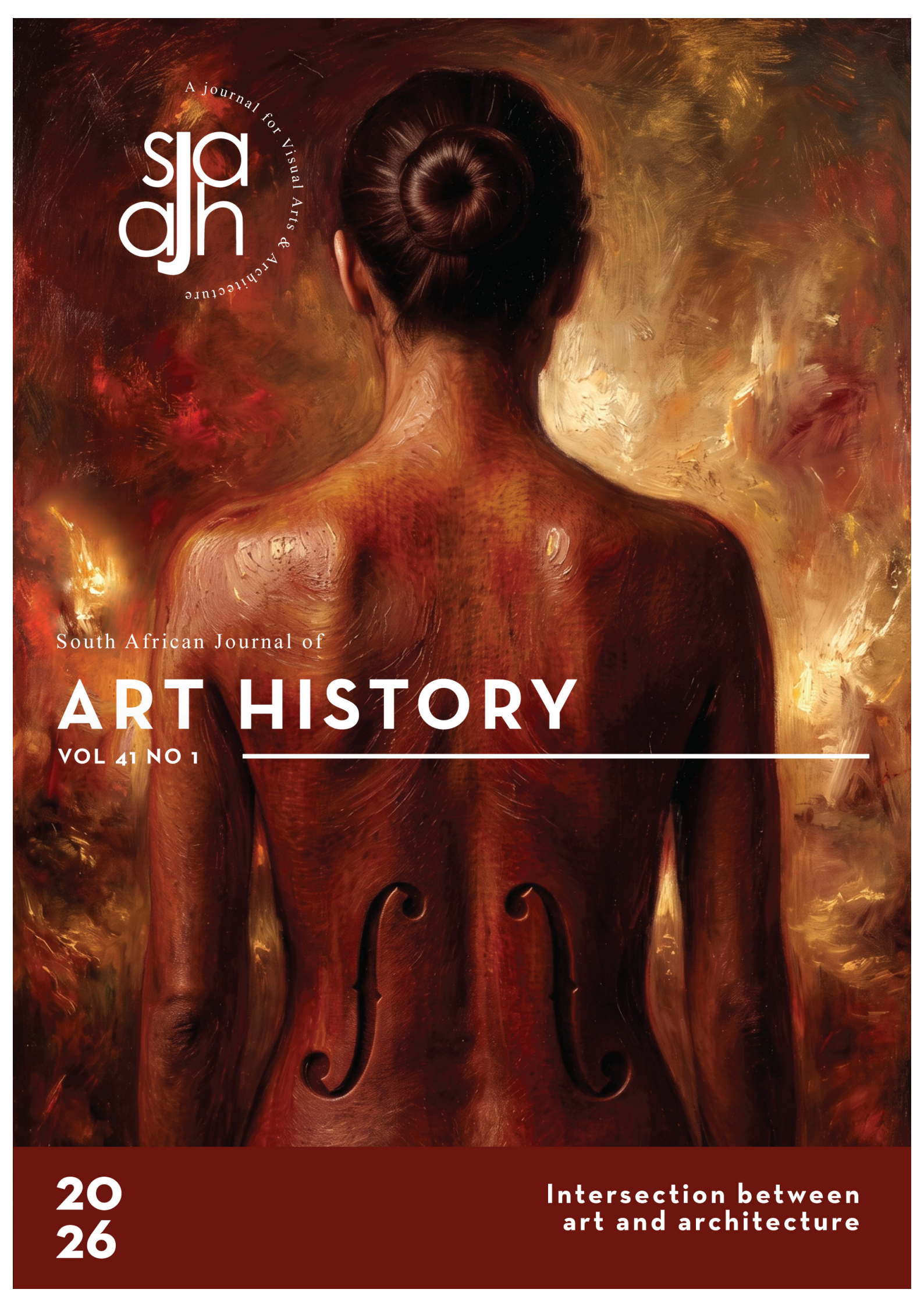




A journal for Visual Arts & Architecture
sja
ajh

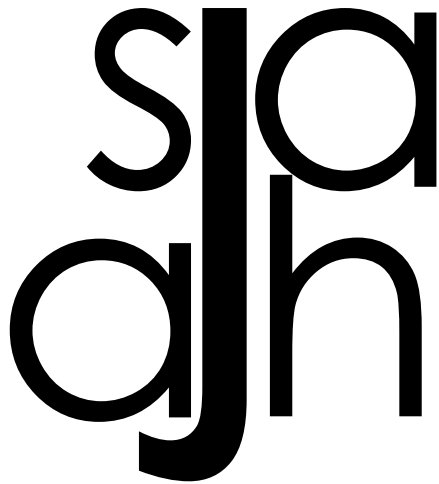
South African Journal of

ART HISTORY

VOL 41 NO 1

20
26

Intersection between
art and architecture



The South African Journal of Art History is a peer reviewed journal publishing articles on the following subjects:

Art and architectural history
Art and architectural theory
Aesthetics and philosophy of art
Visual culture
Art and the environment
Film and photography
History of craft
History of design
Music

ISSN 0258-3542

Available on Sabinet

Website: sajournalofarthistory.org.za

Archive: UP Space

Indexed by Scopus

and

Clarivate Analytics

Included in the database of EBSCOhost, Sub-Sahara Africa

SAJAH
South African Journal of Art History
Volume 41, Number 1, 2026

Editor
Yolanda van der Vyver

Co-editor (art)
Catharina de Klerk

Editorial Board

Arthur Barker, University of Pretoria (regionalism and South African architecture)
Catharina de Klerk, Independent researcher (ecocriticism, materiality, South African art)
Kobus du Preez, University of the Free State (indigenous architecture, conservation)
Adrian Konik, Nelson Mandela University (philosophy, film theory and cultural studies)
Mauritz Naudé, University of Pretoria (South African architecture)
Mbongiseni Nkambule, University of Johannesburg (architectural history and theory)
Jonathan Noble, University of the Free State (architectural history, theory and criticism)
Bert Olivier, University of the Free State (aesthetics and philosophy of art)
Wanda Odendaal, Central University of Technology (museum architecture)
Pfunzo Sidogi, Tshwane University of Technology (visual arts)
Aletta Steenkamp, University of Cape Town (architecture)
Gerald Steyn, Tshwane University of Technology (African and South African architecture)
Jeanne van Eeden, University of Pretoria (visual arts)
Ariana van Heerden, University of Pretoria, (neuroscience of art making)

SAJAH is sponsored by the Art Historical Work Group of South Africa
Chairperson: **Gerald Steyn**
Cover design: **Riaan le Roux**

South African Journal of Art History
Volume 41, number 1, 2026

Contents

Bert Olivier

From architecture to cinema as ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*’ –
The case of *The Red Violin* 1

Beate Maria Jordaan

Feedback loops of attention: art and the potential for intimate
encounters in public 20

Micaela Scholtz and Amberleigh du Plessis

Embodied knowledge as co-design: participatory design practices to
visually represent visible and invisible illness within the public
and private space 34

From architecture to cinema as ‘*Gesamtkunstwerk*’ – The case of *The Red Violin*

Bert Olivier

University of the Free State

E-mail: OlivierG1@ufs.ac.za

Architecture has famously been called a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total artwork”) by Walter Gropius. The same thing could be said, perhaps with more justification, of cinema, particularly insofar as the audial dimension – in the guise of dialogue and music – is added to film. On the other hand, architecture does not only include visibility at different levels, but also tactility or the haptic. Hence, in what sense can architecture be called a *Gesamtkunstwerk*? Obvious architectural examples for informing one’s answer to this question include the Romanesque and Gothic cathedral, where one witnesses the “organic” integration of architecture and other artforms such as painting and sculpture. As this article argues, there are also other examples, such as Wagner’s operas. Concerning cinema, given its very nature as initially (in silent movies) incorporating the visual in black and white format (together with musical accompaniment), and later the chromatic, as well as sound (dialogue and music), it certainly appears to fit the description of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Literally every aspect of human experience accessible through the senses, except the haptic in the *direct* sense (in the indirect sense of *suggesting* touch, it arguably does) appears to be incorporated into cinema. Moreover, there are instances of cinema where other artforms, such as architecture, music and painting, are employed to heighten its narrative meaning by interacting with one another to convey a sense of cultural coherence, or, on the other hand, cultural upheaval, as indicated in this text, or to insert a thread of metaphorical significance. In such cases architecture, as well as other arts such as literature, painting or sculpture, and film meet in an exemplary manner in the latter as *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This paper explores these questions and insights, together with relevant critical commentary, as thoroughly as possible within spatial limits, with reference to representative instances of *Gesamtkunstwerke* from different arts, culminating in a lengthy interpretation of Girard’s film, *The Red Violin*, as exemplary *Gesamtkunstwerk*, together with an analysis of its ontological status as artwork in terms of Deleuze and Guattari’s concepts of “percept” and “affect”.

Keywords: architecture, affect, cinema, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, percept, *The Red Violin*

Van argitektuur tot rolprentkuns as *Gesamtkunstwerk*— die geval van *The Red Violin*

Walter Gropius is daarvoor beroemd dat hy argitektuur ’n *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“totale kunswerk”) genoem het. Dieselfde kan, moontlik met meer regverdiging, van rolprentkuns beweer word, veral omdat die ouditiewe dimensie – in die gewaad van dialoog en musiek – daarby gevoeg word. Aan die ander kant sluit argitektuur nie slegs sigbaarheid in nie, maar ook tasbaarheid. In watter sin kan argitektuur dus ’n *Gesamtkunstwerk* genoem word? Ooglopende voorbeelde aan die hand waarvan hierdie vraag beantwoord kan word, sluit die Romaanse en Gotiese katedraal in, waar die “organiese” integrasie van argitektuur en ander kunsvorme soos skilderkuns en beeldhou waarneembaar is. Daar word ook aangedui dat daar ander voorbeelde van *Gesamtkunstwerke* is, soos onder andere Wagner se operas. Wat rolprentkuns betref, kom dit inderdaad voor asof dit aan die vereistes vir ’n *Gesamtkunstwerk* voldoen, waar dit aanvanklik, in stil rolprente, die visuele in swart en wit geïnkorporeer het (saam met musiekbegeleiding), en later die chromatiese, sowel as klank (dialoog en musiek). Letterlik alle aspekte van menslike ervaring wat sintuiglik toeganklik is, word blykbaar in film aangetref – behalwe die haptiese in *direkte* vorm, ofskoon dit wel gesuggereer kan word. Ander kunsvorme – soos argitektuur, skilderkuns en musiek – resoneer ook soms met mekaar in film om byvoorbeeld narratiewe betekenis te beklemtoon, soos in hierdie artikel aangetoon word. In sodanige gevalle ontmoet verskeie kunste op paradigmatische wyse in film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, soos hierdie artikel so deeglik as moontlik, saam met relevante kritiese kommentaar, met verwysing na verteenwoordigende instansies van *Gesamtkunstwerke* in verskillende kunste argumenteer. Dit kulmineer in ’n deeglike en omvattende interpretasie van Girard se rolprent, *The Red Violin*, as

eksemplariere *Gesamtkunstwerk*, saam met 'n analise van die film se ontologiese status as kunswerk in terme van Deleuze en Guattari se begrippe van “persep” en “affek”.

Slutelwoorde: argitektuur, affek, rolprentkuns, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, persep, *The Red Violin*

In her marvellous biography of Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus in Germany, Fiona MacCarthy (2019: 433) quotes from Gropius's *Bauhaus Manifesto* (1919):¹ “...this great communal work of art, this cathedral of the future, will then shine with the fullness of light into the tiniest things of everyday life”. This captures, as she puts it, “...Gropius's belief in the spiritual power of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total work of art”. Despite the inevitable variations of (this part of) the famous document's translation that one encounters, this belief on Gropius's part is evident in all those I have perused, for example these two instances:

Together let us conceive and create the new building of the future, which will embrace architecture and sculpture and painting in one unity and which will rise one day toward heaven from the hands of a million workers, like the crystal symbol of a new faith.

And this one, which is from an attempt by Jan Eckert (2020), with the help of Zoë Shannon, to come up with an accurate translation of Gropius's manifesto by comparing the many that exist (italics in the original):

Let us create a new guild of craftsmen free of class division that set out to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive and create the new building of the future that will unite everything under one Gestalt: architecture and sculpture and painting, which will one day rise heavenwards from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new belief to come.

What can one gather from Gropius's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as evident from the above, where he articulates his vision as a unity of all the arts under one umbrella, as it were: “architecture and sculpture and painting”, the *Gestalt* that would guide craftspeople-become-artists to create a unifying edifice which ultimately appears to have more than mere artistic significance, as MacCarthy notes, above? Perhaps examining some instances of *Gesamtkunstwerke* may shed light on this issue.

A medieval antecedent

Although, as will be shown below, the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was introduced by Wagner, in practice it appeared centuries before Wagner or Gropius. Examples abound in the era of Romanesque and Gothic architecture, a particularly interesting case being the work of a medieval sculptor who stands out from other individual artists of the time by actually “signing” his work in the French Cathedral of Saint-Lazare at Autun (Yik 2020), namely “Gislebertus”. The intricate sculptural work of Gislebertus is situated in the context of the Romanesque architecture of the Autun cathedral, and when seen and grasped in this context, the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* attains meaning. Kenneth Clark's (1969: 85-7) discussion of Gislebertus's work enables one to come to such an understanding. It has to do with the fact that, as Clark (1969: 86) suggests, Gislebertus evidently “carried out the whole decoration of the cathedral himself” – which seems to militate *against* the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* – but with the

¹ Bauhaus manifesto, 1919: 1. Retrieved from <https://www.artifexbalear.org/etextes/bauhaus.pdf> on 28 September 2025.

astonishing formal and “narrative” versatility and expressive diversity encountered in the images wrought by his hand.

Clark remarks that – judging by his work – Gislebertus clearly loved to tell a story, the details of which vary between the evocation of horror and despair on the part of the sinners he depicted, to tenderness, visible in the touch of a king’s hand by an angel, and even – ahead of his time – the sculptural suggestion of erotic pleasure in the figure of Eve. In short, as a scrupulous visual examination of Gislebertus’s variegated sculptural work will confirm (and this is where the Autun cathedral approximates a *Gesamtkunstwerk*), it is as if, in his hands, sculpture fuses with both literary narrative (or narrative literature, specifically the novel), and painting. The lintel of the temptation of Eve by Gislebertus is a case in point (Yik 2020). It is not difficult to discern in her portrayal the lineaments of suffering and guilt at the thought of having disobeyed God, her expression one of sadness or grief at the thought, and her hand still grasping the forbidden fruit. The sensuous detail of her body, as well as the surrounding vegetation, is so delicately rendered that it is but a step removed from painting.

Although dating from a period later than the western Middle Ages, one could similarly look to the eighteenth century Bavarian Rococo churches, perspicaciously interpreted by Karsten Harries (1983), as intricate examples of *Gesamtkunstwerke*, for instance when one considers the nature of the painting by architect and painter, Cosmas Damian Asam, in the Aldersbach abbey church (Harries 1983: 60-4), formerly a Cistercian monastery. Asam’s fresco reproduced here (Harries 1983: 61) provides a good idea of the ambivalent fusion of, and interaction between, architectural design and painting, as well as sculpture, when scrutinising the ornamentation on the periphery of the fresco. Harries (1983: 62) draws attention to another artistic component which functions in the fresco, namely theatre:

Why did Asam choose to bound the fresco above by the group of angels carrying a reddish-brown drapery? Not only does it provide closure and a parallel to the architecture below, it also serves to emphasize the theatricality of this fresco: as if the curtain had just been raised to permit us to see the sacred spectacle of God in his glory. And yet this angelic theatre is itself part of a theatrical composition. Again: theatre within theatre.

Not only does theatre function in relation to the other artistic components of the fresco and the architecture; it does so at another self-reflexive level that merits the name of “meta-art”, in this way enriching the character of the church as *Gesamtkunstwerk*. There are many more such examples in this splendid book by Harries, too many to discuss here, but the point has been made.

Examples of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: architecture, music, sculpture and design

Returning to Gropius, when one considers the “Scope of Instructions at the Bauhaus”, listed in his *Manifesto*,² it is apparent that more than architecture, sculpture and painting were involved:

Teaching at the Bauhaus embraces all practical and scientific fields of creative production: architecture, painting, sculpture, and related handicrafts.
Students are taught a trade as well as drawing and painting, and also scientific theory.
1. Workshops – be it Bauhaus workshops or others, where students are obligated by contracts – comprise:

² Bauhaus manifesto, 1919: 2. Retrieved from <https://www.artifexbalear.org/etextes/bauhaus.pdf> on 28 September 2025.

- A. Sculptors, stonemasons, stucco workers, wood sculptors, potters, plasterers;
- B. Blacksmiths, locksmiths, founders;
- C. Carpenters;
- D. Scene painters, glass painters, mosaic workers, enamel workers;
- E. Etchers, wood engravers, lithographers, printers of fine art, engravers;
- F. Weavers. The foundation of the Bauhaus teaching is instruction in a trade. Each student has to learn a trade.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the Bauhaus Dessau Building, designed by Gropius himself in 1925, is a major embodiment of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in so far as the architecture, furniture, interior design, and even door handles, were all created as a single, unified, cohesive work of art. This is how he conceived of the “Total Design” approach to building, which aimed at integrating all aspects of modern life into a single work of architecture (Lesso 2023).

From what has been written so far, it should be clear that not only an architectural work may be considered a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Among the five examples of such “total artworks”, mentioned (and pictured) by Rosie Lesso (2023), only two are architectural – Gropius’s Bauhaus and the renowned Arts and Crafts Red House in Southeast London, co-designed by William Morris and Philip Webb, and finished in 1859. As Lesso reminds one, the Red House featured interiors designed by the Pre-Raphaelite artists, Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In addition, Morris designed a matching garden to complement the organic Arts and Crafts style architecture and interiors of the building, to achieve the same pervasive aesthetic, thus attaining the *Gesamtkunstwerk*-effect.

The other three instances of “total works of art” may come as a surprise. They are: the nineteenth century operas of Richard Wagner; the Blue Rider (*Blaue Reiter*) almanac; and John Cage and the Black Mountain College happenings of the 1950s. That Wagner’s operas satisfy the requirements for a “total artwork” makes sense, given that the composer was probably the first person to conceive of it, decades before Gropius. As Lesso (2023) writes:

Gesamtkunstwerk is a German term which translates into the English “total work of art.” The term refers to an immersive art experience in which various forms of art and/or design made by different artists come together to form a single, unified whole. The term was first popularized by the German composer Richard Wagner in the 19th century. In his ground-breaking essay *The Artwork of the Future*, 1849, he argued the case for the “consummate artwork of the future ... [in which] no one rich faculty of the separate arts will remain unused.”

Lesso elaborates by pointing out that, in his famous “Opera Cycles” (such as the four-part *Der Ring des Nibelungen* of 1876), Wagner experimented with the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is evident from the manner in which he integrated elements of poetry, drama and theatrical art with his music.

The Blue Rider (*Blaue Reiter*) almanac, which appeared in 1912 (thus preceding Gropius’s Bauhaus of 1919), stretches the idea of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* even further. An “almanac”? Really? From Lesso’s description it is evident that this publication transcended the previous understanding of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which had hitherto been confined to Wagner’s idea, characterised above, by gathering under one umbrella diverse kinds of art. Lesso (2023) writes:

The Blue Rider Almanac was a published volume produced by the Blue Rider art group of early 20th century Germany. The movement was led by Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, who curated this fascinating volume. They included in their weighty tome multiple art forms, including musical

compositions, art prints, essays and illustrations from throughout the history of art. They proved that the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* could exist beyond performance and architecture.

The final *Gesamtkunstwerk* that Lesso addresses is just as unlikely as the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, if not more so, namely “John Cage and the Black Mountain College happenings” of the 1950s, which may be regarded as a predecessor of “art happenings” and performance art. She provides this description (Lesso 2023):

The experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina [was] built on the legacy of the Bauhaus in Germany, taking a radical and non-traditional approach to art education. Tutors including John Cage and Merce Cunningham encouraged their students to collaborate with staff members and one another in surprising and unexpected ways. One of the most legendary performances to emerge from Black Mountain College was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* organised by John Cage, which later became known as *Theatre Piece No. 1*, 1952. Artists, painters and musicians came together for this riotous interaction. It was a significant moment in the history of art, paving the way for “Happenings” and Performance Art to follow.

From this it appears that one of the key characteristics of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* is that it emerges from a moment of “experimentation” – this is apparent from the pioneering work done by Wagner, Gropius, the creators of the Arts and Crafts Red House, the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, as well as the Black Mountain College happenings, as described above. In each case, something novel was experimentally added to preceding or traditional conceptions of art, resulting in a transformation of the way it is conceived. Interestingly, however, this does not cancel the meaning of the individual components of the “total work of art”; whether these include music, literature, sculpture, painting, or art performances, each of these remains identifiable as such, and yet the totality is not merely a kind of pastiche, but a conglomerate of interacting members of the totality.

One could add a striking contemporary South African embodiment of *Gesamtkunstwerke* to those listed above. I am thinking of the work of Western Cape Jungian psychoanalyst, philosopher, poet, novelist and painter, Louisa Punt-Fouché.³ For anyone not familiar with her work, visiting and exploring her website would furnish a rewarding experience of the reciprocally enriching components of her art, including her writings (invariably enlivened by her own colourful illustrations) and her paintings, where she employs different, unusual media in innovative ways, sometimes interacting conceptually with incorporated (literally) textual elements, engendering surprising insights in the process. Here, too, the different elements of each one of her works combine to form a refulgent totality, and yet, the distinguishable components remain perceptually distinct. More recently the Western Cape *chanteuse*, Petronel Baard – whose songs are freely available online – has composed music for a selection of Louisa’s poems and rendered them lyrically in her resonantly powerful, inimitable voice, in this way adding another art performatively to the already existing components of this singular *Gesamtkünstler’s* work.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is therefore demonstrably *not* characterised by a kind of Hegelian “synthesis” that results from *Aufhebung* (sublation) – simultaneously cancelling, preserving and uplifting or elevating a former set of historical conditions (Olivier 1983) – because in such a synthesis the individual components or antecedents “disappear into” the synthetic totality, while the *Gesamtkunstwerk* “preserves” its component arts in a different manner. They remain recognisable in their “original” form, while interacting in surprising ways, which are closer to

³ Retrieved from <https://louisapuntfouche.com/> on 7 May 2026.

the Heideggerian conception of a work of art, comprising a “life-giving struggle” between what Martin Heidegger (1975; Olivier 2002a) calls “Earth” (that which simultaneously shows itself *and* withdraws in the artwork, for instance the pigments comprising different colours in painting) and “World” (the realm of openness in an artwork which allows it to be linguistically interpreted). In short, the perceptual interactions between these perceptible entities yield unexpected and edifying *aesthetic* experiences, in the etymological sense deriving from the Greek *aisthanesthai*, meaning “to perceive (by the senses or by the mind), to feel”.⁴

The experiences afforded by these “perceptual encounters” are the life-blood of the arts, which ineluctably give rise to various affects or feelings, as memorably conceptualised by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) where they argue that the correlates of (aesthetic) perception on the part of the subject are “percepts” and “affects” as attributes of artworks (more on these concepts below), whether these are paintings, sculptures, architecture, photography, cinema, literature or music. Artworks as *Gesamtkunstwerke* confirm the accuracy of Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of art.

Film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*

While Gropius names the three artforms listed above – architecture, interior design, and furniture – with the advent and development of an art which, perhaps more than any other, would come to dominate the twentieth century, namely cinema, one cannot overlook this newcomer’s claim to the status of *Gesamtkunstwerk* or “total work of art”, particularly considering the divergent instances listed by Lesso (2023), above. Even Gropius himself already incorporated cinema into his evolving notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as shown by the fact that his (unrealised) “Total Theatre Project” (Dilber 2024) – designed in 1927 – which was a project for Erwin Piscator in Berlin, was intended as combining architecture, cinema and theatre into a comprehensive *Gesamtkunstwerk*, emphasising the integration of various kinds of art. The idea was impressively ahead of its time, incorporating a variable theatre space – depending on the performance director’s needs – including the “basic” models of a proscenium stage, an arena arrangement, and a classic depth perspective theatre. Dilber (2024) comments as follows:⁵

...the aim is to create a new model of theater, a kind of total theatre where the synthesis of arts is expressed. This new model is theorized and obviously wished to break with the old classical model, whether by the staging, sound, acting, sets, costumes, or colors. The total theater is notably inspired by the circus and its interactions, by the proximity with the spectator, by its circle stage, and by its playful staging (in opposition to classical performances).

Against this backdrop it is therefore apparent that – on the one hand – it may not be difficult to grasp cinema as an audiovisual art which has managed to create a “synthesis of arts” – after all, all the other arts feature and are explored in cinema, including cinema itself, in the guise of what may be called “meta-cinema” (for example Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso*; 1988⁶), as certain paradigmatic films have demonstrated. Among those, one has to count (to mention only

⁴ Online Etymology Dictionary. Aesthetic. Retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=aesthetic> on 10 October 2025.

⁵ See also <https://www.sensesatlas.com/the-total-theater-of-the-bauhaus/>.

⁶ Tornatore, G. (Dir.) 1988. *Cinema Paradiso*. Italy: Cristaldi Film.

a few) Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927)⁷, a silent film masterpiece which integrates special effects, design (of the film set) and symbolic narrative. These combine to deliver the social critique that the film is known for. Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon* (1975)⁸, in turn, resonates with the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* through its scrupulous attention to, and interaction between, natural light, visual design, historical detail and classical music. This has the effect of occasioning a cinematic experience on the part of audiences where every distinct, but mutually interacting element contributes to the unified totality. Two of Krzysztof Kieślowski's marvellous cinematic trilogy, *Three Colours Blue, White and Red* (1993-1994)⁹ – to wit, *Blue* and *Red* – may also be comprehended as satisfying the criteria for *Gesamtkunstwerke*, in so far as they not only juxtapose, but integrate, cinema, music, musical composition, architecture (mainly interiors) and drama (Olivier 2002b). Then, of course, there is Bob Fosse's *Cabaret* (1972),¹⁰ which is sufficiently paradigmatic as *Gesamtkunstwerk* to deserve a discussion of its own, but one that will have to wait for a future occasion.

On the other hand, turning to critical commentary on cinema as a candidate for *Gesamtkunstwerk*, this has occurred on several – indeed, many – occasions. Well-known film theorist, David Bordwell (1980: 99-100), for instance, already broached it in his doctoral dissertation, where he places this in the context of Impressionism's debates on the question, whether film could, indeed, be granted the status of a distinct kind of art. Bordwell points out that, according to Riccioto Canudo and Elie Faure (in the early twentieth century), cinema is an art "by virtue of its synthesizing powers" – already a clue to cinema's inherent capacity to bring diverse elements together in an encompassing, albeit variegated, unity. Distinguishing between plastic arts and rhythmic arts, Canudo states that film is a synthetic art insofar as it is capable of capturing and fixing rhythm and light. "Thus", Bordwell (1980: 99) avers, "cinema becomes a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and a painter-poet-musician becomes the ideal cinematic creator". His doubt regarding recently "born" cinema's classifiability notwithstanding, Faure similarly highlights its "fusing power" and characterises the distinctness of film's synthesising capacity as being located in the peculiar "mixture" of various aspects of different media (Bordwell 1980: 100). The perspicacity of these impressionist theorists concerning cinema's inalienable properties as a worthy art among the older members of the art-family is striking, particularly given the link they discern between its "synthesising" power and the "Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*".

A highly original example of approaching cinema as *Gesamtkunstwerk* is encountered in the work of David Imhoof. Focusing on the theme of "musical film" and *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the context of mass culture and consumerism – and guided by a quotation from Marcel Duchamp (Imhoof *et al.* 2021: v), to the effect that spectators add to the creative acts of artists through their interpretation of artworks – Imhoof (2021: 228-48) constructs an important argument in terms of what is broadly known as "reception theory". He takes his cue from Theodor Adorno's contention, that there is a direct link between *leitmotifs* of Wagner's "attempted" *Gesamtkunstwerk* and cinema, with an emphasis on music, together with Adorno's insistence that, far from being "anticonmercial", Wagner's music was essentially consumerist,

⁷ Lang, Fritz. (Dir.) 1927. *Metropolis*. Germany: Parufamet.

⁸ Kubrick, Stanley. 1975. (Dir.) *Barry Lyndon*. U.S.A.: Warner Bros.

⁹ Kieślowski, Krzysztof. (Dir.) 1993-1994. *Three Colours Blue, White and Red*. France, Poland and Switzerland: France 3 Cinema.

¹⁰ Fosse, Bob. (Dir.) 1972. *Cabaret*. U.S.A.: Allied Artists.

in this way undermining the putative unified character of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in question. Imhoof proceeds by “unmasking” the *Gesamtkunstwerk* through his analysis of three German films of roughly the first half of the twentieth century – *The Blue Angel* (1930), *La Habanera* (1937), and *The White Horse Inn* (1952). Imhoof (2021: 228) observes that:

In each of these three films, music functions in various important ways. Diegetic music helps define main characters and directs crucial story lines. Nondiegetic music tells viewers what is at stake on the screen and contextualizes the film’s meaning. Cinema has always wed sight and sound, even in the silent era.

Examining the question (evidently inspired by Duchamp’s observation, alluded to earlier), how “consumption” was conducive to cultivating “a sense of unity *outside*” these musical films, Imhoof concludes that, given the manner in which the films are consumed, the “discursive fabric is larger than the individual works themselves” (Imhoof 2021: 244). This is partly due to the music and soundtrack unifying the films’ meaning to consumers, and partly because of the extra-cinematic interconnections between various factors, including the divas’ celebrity status and their ambiguous embodiment of diverse ideologies.

In sum, Imhoof’s (re-)interpretation of the status of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the light of his meticulous analysis of the three “musicals” in question, amounts to a refusal to isolate them from the (history of) environing mass culture in which they are “dialectically” inscribed and integrating them discursively with consumerist practices. Succinctly put: comprehending these films – and arguably any similar cinematic product – as *Gesamtkunstwerke* entails the affirmation that (in accordance with Duchamp’s guiding insight) they are inextricably intertwined with mass culture, and by implication, that no specific limit may be imposed on their hermeneutic history of interpretation. This is a valuable reminder to anyone who wishes to add their ha’penny’s worth to the interpretation of a work of art: it ineluctably becomes an ingredient in an unstoppable, snowballing cultural history.

The work of Carolyn Birdsall (2012: 141-72) on “Cinema as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*?” (Chapter 4 in her book, *Nazi Soundscapes*) should also be mentioned here. Briefly, she scrutinises the historical development of the relations between sound and image, or listening and seeing, from Wagner’s conceptualisation of his opera as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, through the Weimar period in Germany, to that of National Socialism or Nazism. In effect, by means of the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, she delineates a movement from opera to film to politics, by showing how, in the end, the Nazi regime laid claim to cinema as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, utilising sound and image in such a manner as to create an overall impression of ideological unity and harmony, effectively with the aim of gaining “total control” over the “hearts and minds” of the German people by means of cinema, arguably with the intention of constructing the “Volk” (“people”) aesthetically as “total work of art”.

More specifically, Birdsall concentrates interpretively on filmmaker Walter Ruttmann’s masterpiece, *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927) as a key case study of the Weimar period, which she contrasts with his later production under National Socialism, namely *Kleiner Film einer großen Stadt* (1932/33) focusing on Düsseldorf. That is, Birdsall notices a shift from counterpoint to synchronization and harmony in his work. While in *Berlin*, Ruttmann employs rhythmic counterpoint and montage to depict the complex, often chaotic asynchronous rhythms of urban life, including social divides and strikes, by means of a sound-image relationship which is experimental and critical, in his film on Düsseldorf this approach changes fundamentally.

Here Ruttmann abandons this critical counterpoint for a “postcard” aesthetic, where the editing creates a sense of social harmony and cyclical permanence, erasing the chaotic impression created by his earlier film, and instead suggesting the absence of conflict, aligning the cinematic experience with Nazi ideology of national unity and harmony. The darkened theatre and collective listening were designed to amalgamate the audience into a unified *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). Birdsall posits that “synchronization” was a metaphor for totalitarian control: just as sound and image were forced into a seamless, non-conflictual union, so too was the diverse population expected to synchronize with the rhythm of the state, eliminating individual “noise” or dissent. In Birdsall’s (2012: 155) words:

...the Düsseldorf film was clearly in line with Third Reich “lifestyle propaganda” that provided audiences with the visually pleasurable experience of an aestheticised rendering of the city. In other words, although some aspects of *Kleiner Film einer großen Stadt* may have been deemed risky or inappropriate, the overall emphasis of the film is a coherent synthesis of the city’s rhythm or essence, based on historical continuity, spatial control and a unified community (*Volk*).

As critical juxtaposition, Birdsall discusses the German documentary film, *Hitler’s Hit Parade* (2003), directed by Oliver Axer, which is structured around twenty-five songs from the Nazi period. She contrasts Axer’s film with the seamless audio-visual synthesis typical of Nazi propaganda cinema (like Ruttmann’s later works). Instead of blending music and image into a unified *Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Hitler’s Hit Parade* is discontinuous, adopting a “jukebox” structure. It presents twenty-five hit songs from the Nazi period played in their entirety, creating a principle of “sonic continuity” that stands apart from the visual narrative. Moreover, it features “dissonant audiovisions”, an approach where the sound does not merely illustrate or underline the image.

By allowing the songs to play out fully, often against concomitant, contrasting or critical visual contexts, Axer’s film breaks the hypnotic, controlling rhythm of the original propaganda. Birdsall argues that this structural choice serves as a form of “historiophony” (writing history through sound). The film therefore has the effect of “breaking the spell” by disrupting the “retrogression of listening” that the Nazi regime attempted to enforce. By isolating the songs, it forces the contemporary audience to listen critically to the lyrics and musical styles, rather than being passively swept up in a synchronized emotional wave. Furthermore, memory and ambiguity are foregrounded insofar as the documentary reveals the complexity of cultural memory, showing how these songs were embedded in everyday life (dance, romance, leisure) while simultaneously serving the regime. Axer’s film effectively refuses to sanitise or totally demonise the soundscape, instead presenting the ambiguity of how these hits functioned then and how they resonate now.

One is therefore faced by the difficult choice of selecting one or a number of films, to scrutinise their attributes and qualities, which contribute to its, or their, claim of being a *Gesamtkunstwerk(e)*, keeping in mind the cautionary criticisms (above) of such a possibility. Here I shall concentrate on only one such film, namely François Girard’s *The Red Violin* (1998).¹¹

¹¹ Girard, François. (Dir.) 1998. *The Red Violin*. Canada: Odeon Films (see official trailer at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0120802/> - retrieved on 17 October 2025).

An example of film as *Gesamtkunstwerk*: *The Red Violin* (1998)

Francois Girard's *The Red Violin* (1998) may be regarded as the four centuries-long "biography" – as tacitly suggested and prognosticated by the woman, Cesca, who reads the tarot cards in the film – of an enigmatic, blood-red Violin dating back to 1681, when it was created by (fictional) master luthier, Nicolò Bussotti, in Cremona, Italy. The chequered history that befell the violin between that date and 1997 spans not only time, but also variegated cultural spaces, ranging from Italy through Austria, Britain and China to Canada. Its many adventures at the hands of several owners, cinematically narrated in dramatic fashion through image-configurations and dialogue, projects an image of the eponymous "Red Violin" which virtually anthropomorphises the beautifully crafted instrument (for good reason, as will become apparent below) – despite it once being described by a sound engineer in the film as "the ultimate acoustical machine".

An excellent discussion of the film by *The Classical Girl* (2020),¹² includes the following passage, which highlights the extent to which music is the unifying thread in this extraordinary film, holding the other arts that feature in it together, as it were, and making of the film a *Gesamtkunstwerk*:

Though all this I can't believe I haven't mentioned the music, composed by John Corigliano. An acclaimed American composer, his music has been commissioned, performed, and recorded by many of the most prominent orchestras, soloists, and chamber musicians in the world. His work for *The Red Violin* won him the 1999 Academy Award for Best Original Score. One can fully appreciate Corigliano's wide range in a film score like this. There are so many distinct flavors, from Mozart-esque 18th century Vienna, to the raw, sensuous sounds of Gypsy violin, as well as the sweeping, romantic "Anna's Theme" that carries through the entire movie. Kudos, as well, to the sensational performance by violin soloist Joshua Bell, who performed nearly all the violin solos as a body double...with one charming exception [A reference to the astounding 11-year old violinist, Christoph Koncz, who plays and *himself* performs the recitals of the 18th-century prodigy, Kaspar Weiss, in the film; B.O.]...Hats off, as well, to conductor extraordinaire Esa-Pekka Salonen (the new Music Director for San Francisco Symphony...

In what sense is *The Red Violin* a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, then? In the first place it is exquisitely crafted, audiovisual *cinema*, of course, which comprises the "envelope", as it were, within which the other arts are encountered, but secondly this kind of cinema is also the mechanism which activates the other forms of art, among which musical performance is conspicuously preeminent. Then there is the visual presentation of a variety of architectural works, including house and palace architecture, as well as literature in the guise of the novelistic literary work on the part of the character, Victoria, lover and muse of the violinist, Lord Frederick Pope. All of these are anthologically ("mosaically", perhaps) presented in dramatic terms, so that cinematically mediated drama may be said to be another distinguishable art enveloped within the film. I should stress that, in light of the mutually interacting relations among these distinct artistic components enveloped by the film as cinematic art, *The Red Violin* cannot be comprehended as "unified" *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the sense of its constituent elements being subsumed under some homogenising principle. It is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* insofar as these distinguishable components comprise a richly variegated tapestry or collage, functioning together (*zusammen*, which is etymologically related to *Gesamt*) to create a cinematic masterpiece.

In passing I mentioned that Cesca – who is the servant of Anna Rudolphi, wife of the

¹² Revisiting "The Red Violin". 2020. *The Classical Girl* 31 August. Retrieved from <https://www.theclassicalgirl.com/revisiting-the-red-violin/> on 17 October 2025.

luthier, Bussotti – adumbrates the future of the Red Violin when she offers to foretell Anna’s future by means of the Tarot. Cesca draws five cards, with each signifying something different, in the following sequence: first, The Moon, which is understood as an indication that the person in question – here, ostensibly Anna – will enjoy a long life. Secondly, Cesca draws The Hanged Man, which she explains as denoting misery and disease afflicting people who associate with the relevant person (Anna). The third card turns out to be The Devil, signifying – according to Cesca – that Anna will (supposedly) be seduced by a handsome, disingenuous man. This is followed, fourthly, by Justice, a card which augurs difficulties such as persecution and the involvement of “Anna” in a trial, where she would be declared guilty. According to Cesca, the fifth and last card, Death, does not represent what it seems to, but its opposite, namely “rebirth”, given the graphic depiction of the morbid figure in an upside-down position.

However, the audience realises that Anna is not the subject of Cesca’s augury when Anna, as well as her child dies in childbirth, paving the way for the realisation that her foretelling applies to the Red Violin instead. It is only near the end of the film, after appraiser Charles Morritz has received the chemical analysis of the Red Violin’s varnish – which Morritz uses as crucial evidence to authenticate the violin’s legendary history – that he is startled to discover that the “varnish” on the instrument contains human blood. This leads to his (and the audience’s) realisation, that Bussotti mixed his deceased wife’s blood with the varnish. The discovery makes perfect sense, and reveals to viewers the reason why Cesca thought she was foretelling the future events in Anna’s life; in fact, the violin was to “become” Anna through her blood being united with this exquisite instrument, described by the sound engineer at the auction house as “the single most perfect acoustical machine I’ve ever seen”. Here the film-narrative is analogous with that of a detective novel, reflecting another sense of it being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

As the narrative unfolds, one witnesses the successive historical events that correspond with Cesca’s interpretation of the five cards’ meaning, albeit not in a straightforward, linear manner, but rather as a kind of temporal dialogue between the twentieth century present in Montreal, Canada, where the Red Violin becomes the most coveted item at an auction of musical instruments, on the one hand, and the distinct episodes preceding this culminating one – the “rebirth” foreshadowed by Cesca’s fifth tarot card, on the other. In other words, one beholds a temporally significant to-and-fro between the narrated past and the narrated present, where each cutting between these two modes enriches the viewer’s understanding of the Red Violin’s biography. And the rich, although semantically divergent tapestry of every cinematically narrated episode is presented in terms of the constituents of *The Red Violin* as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

The Red Violin as Gesamtkunstwerk

With the successive historical episodes in the biography of the eponymous Red Violin as one’s guide and interpretive framework, one is able to decode the cinematic images as semiotic emblems signalling the distinguishable arts conspiring together to make of this film a paradigmatic *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It should be noted that the film may be described as a novel example of an “anthology drama”, that is, a series of episodes, sequences or segments, in each of which a group of different characters appears, carrying forward the narrative in distinctive terms, although a central theme or motif – in this case the titular Red Violin itself – may feature

as sustaining element. The etymology of the word, “anthology” casts light on its employment regarding a specific genre: The term originates from the Ancient Greek word, *anthologia*, denoting “flower-gathering”¹³ which is used to indicate (among other things) a genre pertaining to different kinds of art, such as a collection of literary or philosophical works, for instance poems, short stories or essays, compiled into a single volume. In the case of *The Red Violin*, “anthology” refers to the distinguishable vignettes comprising the whole, with each contributing a unique glimpse of (as will be shown below) the subtly anthropomorphised string instrument’s historical journey, although – cinematographically speaking – they share stylistic features.

The first of these, corresponding with the tarot card of The Moon, is set in seventeenth century Cremona, Italy, where Bussotti lived – an episode which is not exhaustively constructed when the film opens, but incrementally “completed” through flashbacks as the film narrative unfurls further – and provides an exemplary instance of the overlapping and mutual complementing of different arts, including music, painting and architecture, together with the craft of lutherie, directed by master-luthier Bussotti. The latter is seen crafting the Red Violin in his workshop, alongside his apprentices, in a setting rich with artistic detail and craftsmanship. This is achieved to a large extent by the production design of the film, under the leadership of François Séguin, which was evidently aimed at creating a coherent visual style across the different time periods traversed in the cinematic narrative, in the process successfully presenting the cultural, historical and sometimes – as in the Chinese episode set against the backdrop of Mao’s “cultural revolution” – even the political context of each era’s settings, which are reflected in the props and costumes relating to the time in question. This rich visual depiction of Cremona in 1681 includes detailed attention to architectural elements, as well as artistic artifacts such as sculpture and painting, which are integral to the film’s narrative and atmosphere. The result is that the film’s visual design and presentation reflect Baroque-era Cremona’s artistic heritage authentically, as a city which is renowned for being the birthplace of the modern violin, not to mention having been the home of legendary luthier-craftsmen like Andrea Amati (c. 1505–1577), the inventor of the modern violin, and Antonio Stradivari (1644–1737), possibly the most famous of seventeenth century Italian luthiers. Among the features contributing to a richly detailed portrayal of Cremona, the setting includes artisan workshops adorned with decorative elements, period-accurate architecture, and religious art redolent of the age. Importantly, as far as the question of its *Gesamtkunstwerk*-character is concerned, the design and craftsmanship of the Red Violin itself – its sculptural form, wood inlay, and ornate varnish – blurs the line between musical instrument and fine art, merging the two in the process.

The second episode comprising the “life-story” of the titular Red Violin – set at an Austrian orphanage and in eighteenth century Vienna – corresponds with the tarot card of The Hangman, which pertains to the lamentable heart condition, suffering and premature death of the orphan prodigy violinist, Kaspar Weiss, when he is invited to do a recital for Prince Mannsfeld, an aristocratic patron. Here the film’s set first allows the viewer to set eyes upon the austere, sturdy, almost fortress-like architecture of the orphanage church, before witnessing the cultural setting of 1793 Vienna, where the film audience is invited to imbibe the cultural atmosphere of artistic refinement in this centre of classical music in visual and audial terms. The visual emphasis in this episode is more on architectural interiors than exteriors, which

¹³ Online Etymology Dictionary. Anthology. Retrieved from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/anthology> on 17 October 2025.

nevertheless metonymically suggest the Baroque and classical architecture of the time, as in the building interior where Weiss is expected to perform for the prince. Understandably, the Vienna sequence concentrates more on the cultural significance of music in this era – after all, it was the city where Mozart spent the final decade of his life – and the tragic fate of the gifted Kaspar Weiss, than on visual arts like painting or sculpture.

In the third sequence – previously alluded to by Cesca’s drawing of the Tarot’s The Devil – depicting the passage of the Red Violin through time, one observes the crossing of the ocean to England by the musically talented Romanis (Gypsies), who pilfered it when they robbed Kaspar Weiss’s grave, in which it was buried with the unfortunate boy. It is clear that, in their hands, its capacity for musical entertainment is appreciated, albeit in earthy, almost chthonically sensuous fashion. However, when the Red Violin changes hands from the Romanis to Lord Frederick Pope, who offers them hospitality on his estate in exchange for the exquisite instrument, the latter truly comes into its own again, as it did in Weiss’s hands. Its potential is prodigiously actualised by this flamboyant “devil” of a virtuoso violinist, whose passionate carnal relationship with (appropriately named) novelist Victoria Byrd as his muse, gives rise to scintillating performances at a Victorian symphony hall in Oxford. The interactions between the mercurial Pope playing the eponymous Red Violin, and the literarily gifted novelist, Byrd, conspicuously represent the dynamic structure of this *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Particularly the mutual passion involved in graphically presented erotic exchanges between them, condense the reciprocal enhancement of different arts subsumed under the vitalising (and revitalising) aegis of such a “total” work of art. Perhaps the explosive manner in which Byrd and Pope part, is a metaphor for the negative effects of separating such mutually sustaining arts. The former, having just returned from Russia where she went to research her current novel, finds Frederick “performing” in more than one sense with the female Romani violinist and, having slightly damaged the violin by shooting at it with a revolver and grazing its neck, leaves him in a huff. When Frederick commits suicide, leaving his estate to Victoria, the Red Violin is appropriated by his Chinese servant, who returns to Shanghai, sells it to a dealer in antiques – who repairs the instrument – and in turn sells it to a young Chinese woman during the 1930s.

Hence, the fourth sequence, set in Shanghai in the late 1960s, during the upheavals of Mao’s “cultural revolution” – which resonates with Cesca’s fourth tarot card, to wit, Justice (signifying a consequential trial) – continues tracing the events befalling the time-travelling Red Violin. In this segment the audience is audiovisually confronted with a mishmash of cultural artifacts, as might be expected during an era of sometimes chaotic, revolutionary transition from one socio-political dispensation to another. While one can detect a variety of colonial-historical buildings in the scenes where Lord Pope’s servant sells the Red Violin to the antiques dealer, to which could be added the opulent residence of the wealthy woman who purchases the instrument for her daughter, the stark architectural contrast between these buildings and the austere spaces where the revolution is enacted cannot escape one’s notice. This is nothing less than a dramatic architectural juxtaposition, matched by the events which unfold during this scene sequence, where Xiang Pei – the now adult daughter who received the Red Violin as a present from her mother – finds herself dangerously torn between her duties as political officer of the revolutionary forces, on the one hand, and her nostalgic love of the Red Violin and what it represents. It was carefully hidden by herself, to prevent it from being burnt, like other western musical instruments. When she slips away to retrieve the violin from its hiding place, with the intention of entrusting it to the care of a music teacher, Zhou Yuan, her son, Ming, unexpectedly arrives on the scene. This is where viewers discover Xiang Pei’s love

for the Red Violin as emblem of the best music the West has to offer, learning that she was herself an accomplished violinist before the inception of the cultural revolution. She entreats Ming to keep quiet about the Red Violin and briefly demonstrates its enchanting acoustic qualities by playing the maudlin “Anna’s Theme” on the instrument for him, before sending him off. She hastily dashes through crowded streets to Zhou Yuan’s residence to entrust the violin to him, where he reluctantly agrees to keep it safe from ignorant destruction by zealous revolutionaries. Her frantic flight from her colleagues for the sake of rescuing the iconic musical personification of a seventeenth century Italian woman – or perhaps of her offspring – in this way setting it free to continue its journey through time, instantiates a creative interaction between music and drama, adding to the film’s claim of being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The drama involves Xiang Pei being pursued by revolutionary guards who, having learned of the Red Violin’s existence, raid her home, discovering remnants of broken gramophone records, torn sheet music and other evidence of her affinity for western music – anathema to the fervent drivers of Mao’s cultural revolution – prompting them to try and find her. She, in turn, knows only too well what terrible fate awaits the precious string instrument – and not least, herself – if she should be apprehended with it in her possession. The dramatic series of events culminate in the successful rescue of the Red Violin, paving the way for fleshing out the last sequence – which has appeared intermittently by way of an alternation between flashbacks and flash-forwards – set in Montreal.

The fifth and final vignette of the film narrative is set in 1997 Montreal, Canada, corresponding to Cesca’s tarot card called Death, of which the upside-down depiction suggests to her that, paradoxically, it signifies “rebirth” – something the audience observes happening to the Red Violin in and around the auction house known as “Duval’s”, in this way granting it a new lease of life. The violin is about to be auctioned together with other western instruments shipped there by the present-day Chinese government (which was obviously in need of money), having been discovered in the deceased Zhou Yuan’s house, his corpse surrounded by a large collection of western (string) instruments which he had guarded and preserved. The central cultural artifact in this episode is the Red Violin itself, as suggested by the fact that it is announced by the auctioneer as being the “star” of the show, and corroborated by the consideration, that in this instrument – survivor of many divergent adventures (in the course of which it could easily have perished) – the many paths (and oceans) it has traversed come together. That the auction, and the new path on which it launches the Red Violin, represent the culmination of its preceding history, is further evident from the presence of representatives from previous episodes of the violin’s journey (another “anthology”!), each intent on bidding on the violin, in the hope of appropriating it. They include Xiang Pei’s son, Ming, an agent from the Pope Foundation, and monks from the Austrian monastery where Kaspar Weiss first played on it. Seen in this way, the music associated with the Red Violin, interacting with the converging narrative strands suggested by the representatives of each cardinal stage of the violin’s historical voyage, which can be understood as biographical chapters, amplify the film’s claim to being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Given the attention given to craft in this final sequence (and recalling Gropius’s insistence, that craft cannot be separated from art), one might add it to the perceptible constituents of *The Red Violin* as *Gesamtkunstwerk*. This is suggested specifically by appraiser Morritz’s reliance on the (Duval’s) sound engineer for determining the identifying features of the Red Violin, to be able to affirm that this is in fact the sought-after instrument; the latter comments admiringly on the superb craftsmanship which engendered this inimitable “acoustical machine”.

Heeding the implicit counsel of Birdsall (2012), as well as Imhoof (2021), in their respective contributions to the literature surrounding the “contested” concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, discussed earlier, some observations, which acknowledge the validity of their criticism, should be added here. This is advisable, lest readers are left with the impression that *The Red Violin* has been presented as if it were a self-sufficient, hermetically sealed artifact, with no connection to the cinematic and (more broadly) cultural history within which it is inscribed. First, one can learn from Birdsall’s discussion of Axer’s documentary film, *Hitler’s Hit Parade* (2003), which – unlike Ruttmann’s later works – avoids the seamless audio-visual synthesis associated with Nazi propaganda cinema, aimed at yielding a unified *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Instead, Axer’s discontinuous, “jukebox” structure is designed to shatter the hypnotic, paralysing rhythm of the original propaganda. Similarly, in *The Red Violin* Girard eschews techniques aimed at bestowing on the film a smooth, unifying and – from the audience’s perspective – ideologically reassuring structure. Instead, the “anthological” – or “mosaic” – structure effectively precludes the “totalising” impression of such a grand synthesis. Arguably this is achieved without relinquishing the film’s character of being a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, however, as demonstrated earlier.

Second, in the light of Imhoof’s analysis of three “musicals”, where he comprehends them in relation to the history of mass consumer culture in which they are embedded, one could contextualise *The Red Violin* primarily in relation to the advent of globalisation and the accompanying commercialisation in Canadian cinema. These processes entailed a strategic shift toward international co-productions, necessitated by having to secure funding and global distribution. Directed by Canadian François Girard and co-written with Don McKellar, the film typifies the 1990s tendency of pooling resources through treaties between different countries, in this case Canada, Britain and Italy.¹⁴ Although this structure allowed for higher budgets and access to international talent, it risked resulting in what some critics saw as a “disembedded” narrative, lacking a sense of place or a specific cultural identity.

However, one could argue that the film’s anthological structure, and its use of multiple languages (French, Italian, German, English, Chinese), which were designed to appeal to the global market rather than a local audience, not only succeeded in this commercial respect, but also managed to reflect the multi-cultural context characteristic of a globalised world. In this manner, it overcomes any possible charge of projecting the image of a modernistically isolated artifact, created with aesthetic disinterest. Does it not, then, degenerate into a kind of amorphous cultural mixture, like the desert called “trifle” (to use a culinary metaphor)? Arguably not, given what was already pointed out above with reference to Birdsall’s demonstration of the jukebox-structure of Axer’s film, which avoids the ideological trap of imposing a false sense of unity and harmony through the choice of certain film techniques. In the case of *The Red Violin* such spurious unity is eschewed through the very structure of cinematic juxtaposition – almost a dynamic collage or “assemblage” in the Deleuze-Guattarian (1994) sense – of the main “character” in the film, namely the eponymous Red Violin, in diverse cultural-historical situations. Paradoxically, in each of these it is recognisably the “same” artifact, while simultaneously and unavoidably assuming the “appearance” which the specific cultural-temporal situation “extracts” from it.

¹⁴ The Red Violin (1998 Movie): Summary & Analysis, *Jotted Lines*, 14 February 2020. Retrieved from <https://jottedlines.com/the-red-violin-1998-movie-summary-analysis/>.

Finally, regarding the “cultural identity” of the film, in light of the above it should be clear that it cannot simply be dubbed a product of Canadian cinema, given its imbrication with the production facilities of the other countries involved in depicting the violin’s historical-global journey. In the context of globalisation, of which this international cooperation is symptomatic, it may also be argued that the narrative’s focus on the Red Violin’s epic journey through time and space has the inevitable consequence, that it degenerates into a mere commodity and even an object of fetishism, as metonymy of the film’s own mode of being as a globally traded cultural product. This would be erroneous, however, considering that, strictly speaking, in psychoanalytic terms a “fetish” is an object desired “as such”, in contrast with what Lacan calls an *objet petit a* – the “little other object” or “cause of desire” – from the perspective of which the desire of the subject (in this case those who play the violin) may be comprehended (Evans 1996: 38, 64-65, 128-129). In the film the titular “Red Violin” is not desired as a fetish in this sense; it is desired by performing artists (Caspar Weiss, Lord Pope, and so on) for the marvellously inimitable sound it produces, that is, as an *objet petit a* or “cause of desire”.

The Red Violin of *The Red Violin* as “percept” and “affect”

Employing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1994) notions of “percepts” and “affects” highlights the artistic character of *The Red Violin* and yields rich rewards. The Red Violin itself is, of course, the central “percept”, to which an amalgam of “affects” correspond, which are so rich and divergent that the sensed image of the Red Violin could be described as an “affect of the sublime”. In other words, the concentration of “affects”, corresponding to this “percept” of the Red Violin’s image, is sufficiently complex, given its many countervailing affects, that it cannot be grasped at the level of unitary perception, although it may be understood as a rationally comprehensible idea (Kant 1969: 99-100; Olivier 2021). Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 164) clarify the meaning of these two concepts as follows:

What is preserved – the thing or the work of art – is a *bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*. Percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are *beings* whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects. The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.

As an example, Deleuze and Guattari write further that “Harmonies are affects. Consonance and dissonance, harmonies of tone or color, are affects of music or painting” – an elaboration, brief as it is, which allows one to perceive the many instances of such “affects” encountered in *The Red Violin* as “harmonies” of this kind, as long as the correlation between “percept” and “affect” are firmly kept in mind. The image of the Red Violin itself, taken as “a *bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects*”, illustrates this admirably. In the light of the cinematically accumulating *percepts*, together with their corresponding *affects* – as manifested in the preceding discussion of the different historical-cultural situations in which this eponymous instrument makes its successive appearances – it shows itself as something virtually surpassing the status of “object”, attaining that of an historical “subject” akin to a person. For instance, the feeling of compassion or concern for this instrument, on the part of the audience, resonates with the complex “affect” of the Red Violin – “complex” because of all

the divergent historical “adventures” which successively befall it being condensed in its “percept”.

Nor should this be surprising; after all, both Cesca’s Tarot-oriented prognostications, and the fusion of Anna’s blood with the violin via the varnish, transubstantiate the violin into an historical “subject”, metaphorically speaking. As such, the Red Violin, together with the thoroughgoing melodic motif, or “Anna’s theme” – simultaneously melancholic and uplifting – which surfaces in every historical period (at the hands of the specific violinist in question, such as prodigy Kaspar Weiss and virtuoso Frederick Pope), combined with the specific music that is performed, constitutes the percept from which the varying affects emanate – in the case of the ill-fated Kaspar one of sadness and melancholy, and in that of Pope an affect of erotic exuberance and creativity. The melancholy affect resurfaces in the context of the Chinese cultural-political revolution, attached to the percept of Xiang Pei retrieving the instrument from its hiding place, to rescue it from destruction at the hands of the fanatical red guards – herself having been an outstanding violinist after receiving the Red Violin as a gift from her mother – and reliving memories of her own performances before rushing to entrust it to the music teacher, Zhou Yuan.

Conclusion

What may one conclude from all of this as far as the historical significance of *Gesamtkunstwerke* is concerned? One finds a clue in the preceding interpretation of *The Red Violin* in terms of affects and percepts. In short, reflecting on these constituents of the film as work of art, embodied in the audiovisual “bloc of sensations” comprising the film, one thing becomes clear. Through the affects and percepts presenting all the vicissitudes of its chequered temporal existence (and corresponding with the sensory experiences of the film audience), this charismatic instrument – the Red Violin – has demonstrated that, even under circumstances extremely inimical to its survival – including the chaos of Mao’s cultural revolution, where it faced the real possibility of destruction for the sake of political suppression – it can survive and flourish. Metonymically speaking, the “percept-ually” and “affect-ively” constituted narrative reminds one that, whatever political turbulence might threaten it, short of being physically annihilated, art and its artifacts can prevail.

Moreover, recalling MacCarthy’s remark, at the beginning of this article, concerning Gropius’s belief that a *Gesamtkunstwerk* has more than mere artistic significance – an insight which could be illuminatingly applied to other instances of *Gesamtkunstwerke* referenced in this article, such as Gropius’s Bauhaus itself, and the multilayered medieval sculptural work of Gislebertus – *The Red Violin* amply demonstrates that this is indeed the case, in so far as this is evident in the percepts and especially the affects comprising the image of the Red Violin. These are discernible in every distinct episode of the narrative, and range from sadness or melancholy, through spiritual enthusiasm, erotic desire or passion, fear or anxiety, to covetousness, to mention only some.

Works cited

- Birdsall, Carolyn. 2012. Cinema as a Gesamtkunstwerk?, in *Nazi Soundscapes: Sound, Technology and Urban Space in Germany, 1933-1945*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 141-72.
- Bordwell, David. 1980. *French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style*. New York: Arno Press.
- Clark, Kenneth. 1969. *Civilization*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and John Murray Publishers.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Dilber, A. 2024. Total theatre: Walter Gropius. *History of the theatre*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatre-architecture.eu/en/db/?theatreId=393> on 28 September 2025.
- Eckert, Jan. 2020. Bauhaus Manifesto. Retrieved from <https://janeckert.ch/blog/bauhaus-manifesto/> on 28 September 2025.
- Evans, Dylan. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge.
- Harries, Karsten. 1983. *The Bavarian Rococo Church – Between Faith and Aestheticism*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin. 1975. The origin of the work of art, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Colophon: 17-86.
- Imhoof, David. 2021. Consuming voices – Musical film and the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of mass culture, in *The Total Work of Art: Foundations, Articulations, Inspirations*, edited by David Imhoof, Margaret Eleanor Menninger and Anthony J. Steinhoff. New York: Berghahn Books: 228-48.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1969. *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by J.C. Meredith. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Lesso, Rosie. 2023. What is a ‘Gesamtkunstwerk’? (and 5 key examples), *The Collector* (25 April). Retrieved from <https://www.thecollector.com/what-is-a-gesamtkunstwerk-examples/> on 28 September 2025.
- MacCarthy, Fiona. 2019. *Gropius: The Man who Built the Bauhaus*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press.
- Olivier, Bert. 1983. Contemporary art and Hegel’s thesis of the death of art, *South African Journal of Philosophy* 2(1): 1-7.
- Olivier, Bert. 2002a. Gadamer, Heidegger, play, art and the appropriation of tradition. Invited paper (for commemorative edition of *SAJP* on H-G Gadamer), *South African Journal of Philosophy* 21(4): 242-57.
- Olivier, Bert. 2002b. Kieslowski’s film trilogy: *Three Colours Blue, White and Red*: The colours of life, *South African Journal of Art History* 17(December): 120-39.

- Olivier, Bert. 2021. The Libeskind Jewish Museum in Berlin, the unpresentable and experience, *Acta Academica* 53(1): 23-43. Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S2415-04792021000100002.
- Yik, Peter. 2020. Dissecting the miracles and architectural design of the Cathedral of Saint-Lazare, Autun, *The Pilgrim's Guide*. Retrieved from <https://thepilgrimsguide.com/projects/dissecting-the-miracles-and-architectural-design-of-the-cathedral-of-saint-lazare-autun/> on 4 October 2025.

Bert Olivier's principal position is that of Honorary Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Free State, South Africa. He has published academic articles and books across a wide variety of disciplines, including philosophy, art theory, architecture, literature, psychoanalytic theory, cinema, communication studies and social theory. Bert received the South African Stals Prize for Philosophy in 2004, and a Distinguished Professorship from Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in 2012. He is also an NRF-rated researcher, and has written extensively in popular media on philosophical, cultural and socio-political issues.

Feedback loops of attention: art and the potential for intimate encounters in public

Beate Maria Jordaan

University of the Free State

E-mail: jordanbm@ufs.ac.za

This essay theorises attention as a feedback loop: a recursive structure in which the act of looking returns to and intensifies itself rather than progressing toward narrative or interpretive resolution. It is this feedback loop that forms the essay's central mechanism, in which the loop itself that generates a metaphorical "bubble" of intimate encounter in which beholder and image become momentarily enclosed, intimate yet enacted in public, sustained yet open and recursive rather than effortful or willed. The museum and the cinema serve here as two practical examples through which this mechanism can be traced and observed in action. Both are secularised temples for structured looking whose ritualised spectatorial engagement can sustain the loop of attention long enough for the bubble to form, but neither is the essay's primary object of inquiry. Drawing broad inspiration from Simone Weil's concept of elevated attention and Arthur Schopenhauer's (1909) notion of aesthetic contemplation as a temporary release from the restless "will to live", and in dialogue with Michael Fried's (1980) theory of absorption, Jonathan Crary's (1999) writings on distraction, and Giuliana Bruno's (2014) account of embodied spectatorship, I trace this feedback loop across a series of case studies, including the nineteenth-century miniature eye portrait, video art by Nam June Paik and Bill Viola, and Jean Siméon Chardin's Soap Bubbles. I propose that image studies' most urgent intervention today may lie in attending to this feedback loop of intimate encounter itself, as a radical, absorptive antidote to our current era of image saturation and distraction.

Keywords: feedback loop, intimate encounter, attention, museum and cinema, video art

注意のフィードバック・ループ——芸術と公共空間における親密な出会いの可能性

本稿は、注意 (attention) をフィードバック・ループとして理論化する。すなわち、見るという行為が物語的あるいは解釈的な終結へと進むのではなく、自らへと再帰的に立ち回り、その作用を増幅させる構造として捉える。このフィードバック・ループこそが本稿の中心的な理論的枠組みであり、ループそのものが、鑑賞者とイメージとを一時的に包み込む比喩的な「泡 (bubble)」を生成すると論じる。この泡は、公共空間において成立しながらも親密な出会いを可能にし、持続性を備えつつ、意志的努力によるものではなく、開かれた再帰的運動として維持される。本稿では、このメカニズムが具体的にどのように機能するかを示すための実践的事例として、美術館と映画館を取り上げる。両者はいずれも、構造化された「見る」という行為を支える世俗化された神殿として理解でき、その儀礼化された鑑賞経験は、親密な「泡」が形成されるまで注意のループを持続させる条件を提供する。しかしながら、本稿の主たる研究対象は、美術館や映画館そのものではなく、そこで生起する注意のフィードバック・ループにある。本稿は、シモーヌ・ヴェイユの高次の注意 (elevated attention) の概念、およびアルトゥル・ショーペンハウアーの、美的観照を「生への意志」からの一時的な解放とみなす思想から広く着想を得るとともに、マイケル・フリード (1980) の「没入 (absorption)」論、ジョナサン・クレリー (1999) の注意散漫 (distraction) に関する議論、さらにジュリアーナ・ブルーノ (2014) の身体化されたスペクテイターシップ論との対話を通じて、このフィードバック・ループを複数の事例において検討する。対象には、十九世紀のミニチュール・アイ・ポートレート、ナム・ジュン・パイクおよびビル・ヴィオラのビデオアート、さらにジャン＝シメオン・シャルダンの《シャボン玉》が含まれる。本稿は、今日のイメージ研究において最も重要な理論的介入とは、この親密な出会いを生み出す注意のフィードバック・ループそのものに着目することにあると提案する。それは、イメージの飽和と注意散漫が支配する現代に対する、没入的かつ根源的な対抗可能性として機能しうるのである。

キーワード：フィードバック・ループ、親密な出会い、注意、美術館と映画館、ビデオアート

In an age shaped by informational excess and distracted vision, the practice of sustained, contemplative looking is increasingly rare. The central aim of this paper is to describe the event of image interaction as a feedback loop grounded in intimate, absorptive attention. I call this mechanism a feedback loop because the act of looking returns to and intensifies itself, rather than progressing towards a final resolution. The term is feedback in something close to its literal, cybernetic sense. An output (the beholder's attention) is returned as input (the image's renewed claim on that attention), each pass reinforcing rather than dispersing the encounter, until the bubble of intimate attention either intensifies or breaks. Throughout, I am deliberately theorising a particular and bounded notion of attention: intimate yet enacted in public; sustained and elevated, yet open and recursive rather than effortful or willed. I argue that in the event of a patient image interaction, a metaphysical bubble is created through this mechanism of the feedback loop, wherein only the image and beholder exist momentarily. I argue that the museum and the cinema are unique spaces in that they strive to facilitate an intimate, private attention to art in a public setting. Both institutions stage not only spaces of spectatorship but also the creation of a bubble of attentiveness. The bubble metaphor is inspired by Peter Sloterdijk's *Bubbles: Microspherology* (2007), to describe an intimate image viewing event as a microsphere of equal relation. I propose the term *Intimate Encounter* for a patient and sustained image encounter. The dyadic enclosure of the bubble in these moments of absorbed looking finds both image and beholder in an atemporal being-with where the boundaries between subject and object are dissolved. The intimate encounter is defined by looking to authors such as Michael Fried (1980), who defines absorption as a spectatorial mode in which the viewer becomes fully engrossed in the image, unaware of their own act of looking; Jonathan Crary (1999), whose analysis of modernity and distraction contextualises shifting patterns of attention; and Giuliana Bruno (2014, 2022), who describes museum and cinema spaces as architectures that provoke embodied forms of spectatorship. Beginning with the nineteenth-century miniature eye portrait, I start with a private image viewing setting to describe intimate looking. Moving into the museum and cinema, I consider how these institutions architect attention and facilitate temporal loops. Case studies include Bill Viola's *Nantes Triptych* (1992), Peter Greenaway's *Wedding at Cana* (2009), Nam June Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974, 1989), and Jean Siméon Chardin's *Soap Bubbles* (1733-4). I argue that each of these works functions as a meta picture for the bubble of intimate encounters. A meta picture, as W.J.T. Mitchell (1994: 38) describes it, is a self-aware picture that is able to provide "a second-order discourse that tells us – or at least shows us something about [all] pictures."

Miniature eye portraits as archetypes of intimate encounters

Miniature eye portraits, studied by Hanneke Grootenboer in her 2012 book, *Treasuring the Gaze*, feature a single human eye, isolated from the rest of the face. They were popular especially in nineteenth century Victorian Britain as small gifts among lovers, friends and family members (Grootenboer 2012: 22). Like hair jewellery,¹ which was also popular at the time, they were worn close to the body, in pockets, or worn as brooches, rings or pendants. These objects performed an emotional and symbolic function, offering their owner a site of repeated, private, intimate looking (Grootenboer 2012: 18). The eye portrait in figure 1 measures just 3.2 by 3.8 centimetres, a scale that enforces close, private viewing and so anticipates the intimate mode

¹ Victorian hair jewellery was especially popular in the mid nineteenth century and includes necklaces, earrings, rings, bracelets and watch chains made from the hair of a loved one. Their purpose could be as a reminder of a deceased person, or as a remembrance of a friend, lover, or family member (Yan 2019: 124).

of attention this paper develops.² Cradling the object in one's hands to view it makes the act and event of beholding literal. The owner of an eye portrait would take the portrait into their hands, making them a beholder of a returned gaze. By holding the portrait and by returning its gaze, a temporary bubble is created through a private feedback loop of perception. When the reciprocal gaze is broken or the beholder's attention is redirected in any way, the bubble pops. Bubbles, as Sloterdijk (2007: 48) points out, "like happiness and glass, (...) bear the risks native to everything that shatters easily". Grootenboer (2012: 23) refers to this fragile created space as "intimate vision". I adapt this term to intimate encounters, as an image interaction constitutes the entire body and imagination, not just vision.



Figure 1
 Giuseppe Sacco, *The eye of a young woman*, 1844, tempera on paperboard, 3.2
 x 3.8 cm, private collection
 (Leppert 1996: cover image, rights holder unverified)

According to Grootenboer (2012: 15), eye pictures are "symptomatic of a culture of seeing, as they are both agent and representation of vision". The eye miniature becomes a theoretical object and, in W.J.T. Mitchell's (1994) terms, a meta picture, one that renders visible the desire to look. This intimate, private, repetitive act of viewing epitomises a space of my inquiry here, and what Grootenboer refers to as "a sort of exclusive scopic circuit" is what I want to conceptualise as a feedback loop of attention. I argue that this exclusive scopic circuit, in suspending the viewer's ordinary, purposive looking, performs in miniature the release from the Will that Arthur Schopenhauer (1909) associates with aesthetic contemplation. Like the cinematic close-up, the eye miniature invites a mode of looking that is intensified by its scale

² The rights holder for this image could not be identified. The image is reproduced here for non-commercial academic use under fair use/fair dealing, with no known commercial licensing path. The image appears without attribution on the cover of *Art and the Committed Eye* (Leppert 1996), and is believed to be held in a private collection or orphaned. Should a rights holder come forward, appropriate credit will be added in future versions.

and specificity. But unlike a cinematic image, which unfolds across time, the miniature eye portrait compresses time into a single, suspended moment. It offers no narrative, only presence. Its power lies in its capacity to arrest attention, and in doing so, facilitate an intimate encounter in which the image and beholder are enveloped in a bubble to the exclusion of all else.

The recursive act of looking exemplified by eye pictures closely and repeatedly mirrors Arthur Schopenhauer's (1909) notion of aesthetic contemplation, from which I take broad inspiration. They reflect one another in that both describe a withdrawal from instrumental looking toward a self-sustaining attentiveness. The intimate encounter encompasses an escape from the will. In viewing the eye miniature, the individual is drawn out of personal striving and immersed in a quiet act of perception. For Schopenhauer, this aesthetic state is characterised by a surrender of agency. The participant of this state can be "free from all the aims of will, exist purely for itself, simply as a clear mirror of the world" (Schopenhauer 1909: 211). Simone Weil (1947: 118) similarly concedes that "I have to deprive all that I call 'I' of the light of my attention and turn it on to that which cannot be conceived". That which cannot be conceived, I argue, is all the possible interpretations of an image. She describes a patient, open form of looking that resists the will or judgement. The relevance of this quotation lies in its description of attention as a deliberate turning-away from the self, which is similar to the eye portrait's demand that the beholder set aside their own gaze to receive the gaze returned by the miniature.

The case study of the eye miniature offers a useful analogue to video art's looped projection. In what follows, I would like to explore the art museum and cinema as two particular institutions that encourage the kind of looping, intimate, sustained attention exemplified by the eye miniature. The miniature's historical specificity, however, also gestures toward a broader truth: that the desire for intimate, focused attention is not new. Objects have long been constructed to sustain focused attention, and the museum and cinema as institutions are constructed to accommodate this form of looking. The small size of eye portrait miniatures necessitates close looking which resembles the close attention we pay to our personal cell phones. The difference lies in the experience of looking at a screen which is not one image, but a constant torrent of images. In this image flood, miniature eye portraits model an oppositional mode of looking which is characterised by slow, repeated and intimate attention. This differs from the compulsive, fragmented attention of habitual phone-checking, which repeats without absorption. Following Katherine Hayles's (2007) distinction, the eye portrait solicits deep attention sustained on a single object, where the phone solicits hyperattention divided across many. In this way, they function as concentrated instances of a kind of attention that the cinema and museum may afford on a larger, more public scale. If a museum manages to make you pay attention to one image for as long as you pay attention to your cell phone screen, it will have exceeded its own expectations.

Video art and the loop

Video art complicates and enriches traditional models of spectatorship by disrupting linear temporality and staging repetition as a structural and experiential condition. Unlike conventional cinema, which proceeds from beginning to end within a fixed sequence and duration, video art installations often loop indefinitely, extending to the viewer the freedom to enter and exit the space at any point. This looped temporality is central to how the medium structures attention. It is rarely clear what the duration of the video is, and when the video will loop again for the participant to be able to watch it from the beginning. Each return to the video becomes a new image encounter, offering a shifting sequence of beginnings and endings. In this way, video art serves as a paradigmatic form of what might be called the temporal feedback loop, which requires absorptive, voluntary, and intimate engagement. Here I extend the term to

temporal feedback: a loop in which duration itself, not only the returned gaze, becomes part of the image, since the viewer cannot predict the point in its cycle at which they re-encounter it. This temporal feedback adds duration to the spatial intimacy already exemplified by the eye portrait. Where the miniature compressed attention into a single suspended moment, the looping video extends that suspension across an unpredictable span of time, adding another dimension to the temporality of the intimate encounter.

This logic is particularly evident in Bill Viola's (1951-2024) *Nantes Triptych* (1992), an installation composed of three simultaneous video projections (see Sánchez 2015: 37-38). The screens depict, respectively, the birth of a child, the submersion of a body in water, and the death of Viola's own mother. The videos are installed in a darkened gallery space, where they loop continuously, and the three videos play simultaneously. The screen on the left shows a pregnant mother and continues through the entire birthing process with the aid of two midwives until the baby emerges, screaming. The image of the child is given more importance until its face takes up the entire screen. We see its eyes opening and its first yawn. The video ends with the mother holding her new-born baby. The middle screen has three distinct scenes of actors in a body of water. The blueish monochrome images all resolve after what looks to be a near-drowning, with the figure either rising slowly to the surface, escaping to one side of the frame or emerging up through a whirlpool. The screen on the right is a video of Viola's own mother dying. Cutting between closer and further shots, this screen is arguably the least eventful, according to Carlos Sánchez (2015: 37). Certain shots are repeated as her constant, weak breathing can be heard. A reflex movement closes her mouth, after which she suddenly opens her mouth as her breathing gets weaker and weaker until it stops. There is a soundless image of her until the picture fades to black. From the three looping videos a larger thematic loop thus emerges: together, they constitute a metaphor for the loop that is our lifetime, cycling between our birth, significant moments, and death.

The installation suggests the looping structure of time not just as narrative content but as viewing condition. The middle screen, showing a series of submerged bodies repeatedly approaching the surface and struggling against the water, resists resolution. Like Schopenhauer's (1909: 211) suspended moment of aesthetic contemplation, this central sequence invites the participant to exist momentarily outside of time. Viola marks a near-drowning accident in his childhood as one of the most memorable moments of his life.³ Thus presented with a significant moment which encourages affective feeling in the participant of this installation, the middle screen refers to the turbulent reality of being alive. The beholder of this work might see the middle screen as a meta picture for image-encounters, as we thrash and struggle against our own short attention spans. Another significant detail worth mentioning here is that in their struggle to survive their submersion, the figures in the water constantly create bubbles which leaves them, floating to the surface. This depiction of life's significant moments being that of creating bubbles, we can read as the bubbles of intimate encounters shaping us.

The space in which the screens are installed is of significance to the experience for the museum visitor. The "black box" of cinema is transposed into the "white cube" of the museum (Elsaesser 2021: 222). *Nantes Triptych* invokes a cinematic atmosphere with a darkened room and the image or image apparatus as light source. In the museum, however, the visitors retain their mobility. The freedom of movement offers the participant the decision of which point in the room to view the work from, and the darkened space might complicate this movement. The

³ Ross, David. 2021. "Bill Viola's Slowly Turning Narrative: Art & Conversation". Los Angeles County Museum of Art. *YouTube*. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHWDYsXTUh0> Accessed: 28 August 2024.

added consideration is whether seating is provided, and how much of that seating might be available at any given time. This freedom Brian O'Doherty (1986: 61) phrases as “problems of deportment”. This phrase names the visitor’s perceptual confusion and uncertainty about appropriate bodily comportment in the gallery, not freedom of movement as such, though that freedom can be read as one of its effects. Unlike cinema, where the spectator is typically fixed in a single, seated vantage point and the image moves, video art in the museum offers a kind of reversal; the image is fixed in repetition while the spectator is free to move, though seating, dedicated viewing areas and gallery etiquette can in practice constrain that freedom as much as enable it. The looping videos are indifferent to the viewer’s presence, yet museum-goers are free to return to them. Approaching an image interaction with an open disposition is crucial to both Weil’s description of elevated attention and to Schopenhauer’s aesthetic contemplation as a release from the will, both of which contribute to achieving intimate vision.

Long before the museum displayed projections like *Nantes Triptych*, which consists of three large translucent screens onto which the videos are projected separately (Sánchez 2015: 37), television monitors, as distinct from the projected installations discussed elsewhere in this paper, entered the museum space. Hailed as the “father of video art” (Stoos and Kellein 1993: 9), Nam June Paik (1932–2006) was one of the first artists to be called a video artist. His iconic 1974 installation *TV Buddha* presents a plinth on which a buddha statue and a television screen rest, with a video camera set up behind the screen. The camera records the buddha, feeds the image to the television and presents it back to the buddha as the participant in this staged image interaction. The mechanism of closed-circuit television echoes the mechanism of a feedback loop, in the literal sense: the camera’s output becomes the screen’s input, which becomes the camera’s renewed object. As a system, there is no narrative or progression, there is no beginning, middle or end, only the repeated return of the camera’s gaze to its subject. The buddha’s gaze is both given and returned within the same mechanism. Yves Citton (2017: 43) describes attention as a self-reinforcing circuit: “I valorise what I pay attention to, and I pay attention to what I valorise”. The loop created here is one of an attentive gaze, since the loop figures attention itself as Citton’s self-reinforcing circuit of valorising what one attends to and attending to what one valorises, and is indicative of the way in which an image can arrest our attention in a suspension of time. Citton (2017: 22) also states that attention is always an interaction, even when done in solitude. The Buddha neither acts nor reacts, yet the loop continues. The viewer, encountering this structure, is invited to figuratively take the place of the Buddha, at least to partake in this circular exchange of gazes, though Paik’s own substitution of his body for the statue was a one-off performance gesture rather than a standing instruction to viewers. Paik himself replaced the statue with his own body on the opening night of the exhibition, completing the feedback loop of attention between image, viewer, and camera-and-monitor apparatus. In this way, the installation stands as a meta picture for image interactions of any sort, since it stages the general structure of return without resolution that this paper takes to define a feedback loop of attention

Philosophically, *TV Buddha* enlists Simone Weil’s theory of elevated attention as a practice of negation and stillness. “Something in our soul has a far more violent repugnance for true attention than the flesh has for bodily fatigue. That is why every effort of attention is a negative effort. It is a refusal to do something else” (Weil 1997: 119). The Buddha statue stages what Weil calls a “negative effort”, a form of attention that resists distraction, striving, and expectation. Schopenhauer’s metaphysics can also be read here: image interactions create a space where the viewer is freed from the demands of desire and returned to a pure state of perception. The work itself is a feedback loop which simulates the act of meditation, emphasised by Paik with his choice of a Buddha figure to stand in as the beholder, since the seated, still figure of the Buddha visually models the contemplative stillness Weil and

Schopenhauer both describe. Paik reinstalled and re-interpreted this composition frequently over many years (Wahl 2013: 37). Like image interactions in general, this motif of the TV Buddha repeats with different objects and in different spaces, in that both stage attention as a structure that persists across repeated, varied instances rather than a single fixed event or object, but the essential premise remains unchanged.

Peter Greenaway's (1942-) installation *The Wedding at Cana* (2007) engages directly with the tension between cinema's apparatus and the space of the museum. An image of the painting by Paolo Veronese, to which the title refers, is projected in the original location where it had hung, until the French Revolutionary army removed it in the eighteenth century: the *San Giorgio Maggiore* in Venice. The video work simulates looking and the imagination by highlighting, zooming, tilting, and lighting parts of the painting. The composition at various points gets reduced to linework, certain faces get highlighted, a three-dimensional model generated within the video projection itself shifts the vantage point of the composition by the video's own virtual camera moving around the rendered model, and fire is imagined in the surrounding landscape. Greenaway stages what Giuliana Bruno (2014: 144) calls a "projection of the imagination in an intimately public way". He projects the imagination, or a simulation of imaginative image interaction, in a public space which is meant for intimate contemplation. The loop in this case thus extends to a self-reflection on our own imaginative involvement with the work, and what might be occurring in our mind's eye whilst in the bubble of an intimate encounter. Both the cinema and the museum "enable the imagination to form the habit of feeling through the eye" (Bruno 2014: 155). These simulations suggest Weil's theory of imagination and perception, which posits that reality is constituted through a process of signification, or reading (Alfieri 2011: 40). Greenaway's work makes this reading palpable, through its highlighting, zooming and tilting of the image, which performs the act of imaginative attention it describes. *The Wedding at Cana* allows us to experience such reading as a process in which the various areas to which we may direct our attention, become the subject of depiction. In addition to a reading, there is the imagination instigating different scenarios or environments in which the picture could take place. Weil writes: "When I consider these same things on occasion of which my imagination rules in me, I find an idea of a different kind that does not impose itself on me, that exists exclusively in virtue of an act of my attention, that I cannot change" (quoted in Alfieri 2011: 49). Attention and imagination are thus intrinsically linked in Weil's philosophy. Greenaway's video installation is a simulation of participatory, voluntary, curious, patient, intimate attentiveness to an image as it might occur in our visual imagination. Simone Weil defines the imagination as a "bond of action and reaction between the world and my thought" (Alfieri 2011: 49), which describes the basic mechanism of a feedback loop: as the beholder's attention acts on the image, the image's renewed claim on that attention reacts in turn, each pass reinforcing the loop and sustaining the bubble.

In all three examples, Viola, Paik, and Greenaway, the loop emerges as a structure of individual attention and intimacy, but also as the artistically staged structure by which these subjective states operate and are made possible. The sort of anticipation of the viewer partaking in a loop is translated into the video art that, unlike the eye portraits, in various ways also depict or embody looping structures. These works demand what Hayles has called "deep attention". Hayles describes it as the capacity to maintain focus on a single object over extended periods of time, ignoring all other stimuli. Deep attention stands in contrast to the multitasking logic of hyperattention (Hayles 2007: 187). In such focused states of Hayles's deep attention, the viewer may enter what could be described as a temporary release from the pressures of will, existing in an altogether timeless state (Schopenhauer 1909: 211). This is the philosophical-ethical affordance of the feedback loop as a contemplative system: it allows the spectator to become rather than to act, to perceive without striving, and to linger without conclusion.

In the contemporary media landscape, where rapid consumption and algorithmic distraction are dominant modes of image interaction, these looped encounters model an alternative. The temporal feedback loop of video art makes time visible, and more importantly, makes attention visible. They suggest, like James Elkins (2009: ix), that seeing is not straightforward, but we can take the time to stop and look patiently so that the world can reveal itself to us.

The museum and cinema as mediums of experience

If video art materialises the loop through its medium and temporal form, the museum structures that loop spatially. The museum, like the cinema, is not a passive container but an active medium that choreographs attention (Preziosi 1994: 141), modulates duration, and frames the relationship between subject and object (Bruno 2014: 144). It is an architecture of attentiveness, and like all architectures, it encodes social, cultural, and perceptual behaviours. Within its walls, image interactions are staged as ritualised events (Alpers 1991: 26), shaped by movement, pacing, and framing. The nature of our attention within the museum does not come naturally, and as Jonathan Crary (1999: 29) has argued, is shaped by changes in perception which he traces back to the second half of the nineteenth century and the advent of the modern economy which brought issues of attention linked to productivity to the forefront (Crary 1999: 4; 1992: 9).

Art historian Giuliana Bruno (2014: 157) characterises museums and cinemas alike as spaces of “light and motion”, animated by the passage of bodies and images across surfaces. She introduces the concept of “haptic materiality” (Bruno 2014: 159), arguing that these institutions foster embodied and emotional engagements with images, not merely intellectual ones. The museum experience invites peripatetic viewing. Wandering from one work to the next, we shape our own narrative of image interactions. This movement engenders feedback loops in a spatial sense, as participants edit, reorder, or repeat their path through space, analogous to viewers “navigating” earlier-mentioned experiences of looped video installations. Just as a viewer may re-enter the space of a looped video installation at an unpredictable point in its cycle, museum visitors may retrace and revise their own paths through the gallery. The museum’s affordances are, however, not neutral. The museum does not merely display images; it conditions the subject to look in a particular way (Alpers 1991: 26), and it frames the image interaction as a private experience within a public space. Carol Duncan (1995: 13) argues that the museum ritual is enacted by those individuals socially and psychologically prepared to submit to a certain mode of behaviour and attention. I argue, however, that true attention to, and the bubble of intimate attention with an image in a museum is not subject only to being prepared but can also happen spontaneously.

This double logic of personal immersion and institutional scripting can be seen in Thomas Struth’s (1954-) *Museum Photographs*, which depict museum interiors populated by visitors. In *Kunsthistorisches Museum 3* (1989), a visitor stands before a pair of portraits, his gaze fixed on the male portrait on his left. Yet the figure in the portrait gestures toward a female companion piece on the right, who in turn gazes back at the visitor. A visual loop is created here, with clear lines of attention drawn by gestures and gazes. Just as the rope barrier ensures the participant does not come too close to the artworks, and like the edge of the screen in a cinema, the frame of the paintings functions as “parentheses letting the text of the world flow on around them, or little fences keeping the picture from straying into the world” in the words of James Elkins (1996: 35). The apparatus of the museum necessitates exclusion of other stimuli to create an intimate space for private perception and attentiveness which is set in a public space. According to Crary (1999: 24-5), “Attention as a process of selection necessarily

meant that perception was an activity of exclusion, of rendering parts of a perceptual field unperceived". The museum shields, in order to show. According to Tiffany Sutton (2003: 50), "There is a public need for the museum on the hill; and there will be, so long as the world outside the museum contains violence, tragedy, and threats of violence and tragedy." By housing experiences in an art museum, the participant is physically separated from the rest of the world. Museums and cinemas are uniquely designed to exclude light and stimuli from outside, so as to direct and maintain the participant's attentiveness to an image. As spaces of public intimacy, the museum and cinema are bound by their shared ability to act as a medium to facilitate this looping attentiveness, which functions much like the back-and forth of a conversation. Just as the eye miniature demands close, isolated viewing, the museum cultivates conditions under which intimate spectatorship becomes possible on a collective scale.

In this sense, the museum and cinema share more than superficial similarities. Both are spaces in which the world is paused. Both can enforce behavioural norms. Both stage public intimacy (Bruno 2014: 8). Yet their mechanics differ: the cinema fixes the spectator in place and unrolls the image in time; the museum fixes the image in place and allows the spectator to unroll time through movement. Julian Hanich (2022: 600), in his writing on the cinematic experience, describes the cinema as a space which grants "freedom from the everyday," where one is liberated not only from noise but from the pressure to act. The viewer is permitted to sink into a mode of deep attention, made possible by darkness, stillness, and narrative flow. The museum offers a different kind of freedom: the freedom to move, to linger, to return. It does not prescribe a duration of engagement. One may circle back to a painting, change their distance, or repeat a circuit of viewing. In contrast to the constituted time experienced in the cinema, this freedom in the museum creates a temporal elasticity, a rhythm of attention shaped by and dependant on the viewer's patience and participation, not by their will or an imposed desire.

Yet it is important to note that not all museum interactions by default produce intimate encounters, the institution affords the possibility without guaranteeing it. As Svetlana Alpers (1991: 27) warns, museums can also make it difficult to see. We never see in isolation; all seeing is contextual, shaped by histories, cultures, and habits of perception (Freeman 2014: 827). The museum may set the stage, but it is the viewer's willing attention that completes the feedback loop. The viewer needs to bring along a certain commitment or openness to an experience of attentiveness. Without this attentional investment, the circuit remains open, incomplete. Returning to Schopenhauer (1909: 241), we may understand this intimate mode of perception as a deliberate turning away from will and desire, though visitors are of course free to withhold that attention rather than grant it. To see with full attention is not to consume or analyse, but to surrender and to see into the "inner nature of the world". As Weil (1947: 24) suggests, this act is to enter into an apprenticeship with the object of one's attention.

My argument is thus that the loop can become a structure of absorption, forming a bubble of an intimate encounter. As proposed by Michael Fried (1980: 51), absorption is the state of being completely engrossed in an activity, with everything other than the object of absorption excluded from awareness. The painting by Jean Siméon Chardin (1699-1779) in figure 2 epitomises his theory, as Fried himself describes absorption partly with *Soap Bubbles*. The subject blows a soap bubble, showing complete obliviousness to the tear in his jacket, and seemingly being unaware of being watched by a second figure on the right or the beholder of the picture. According to Fried (1980: 47), these details serve to heighten our perception of the boy's absorption in the act, a complete exclusion of all distractions in favour of his bubble. Fried credits the artist, Jean Siméon Chardin, for secularising the tradition of absorptive painting in France at the time (Fried 1980: 45). By depicting the figure as absorbed in an everyday, seemingly unimportant activity, he presents a naturalised and purified depiction of

the simple act. In an exchange of air, I interpret the boy and the bubble as being caught in a feedback loop to the exclusion of everything else. Our presence as beholders is not acknowledged, and yet there is a second straw in the glass of bubble solution seemingly inviting us to participate in our own absorptive state.



Figure 2
Jean Siméon Chardin, *Soap Bubbles*, ca. 1733-4, oil on canvas, 61 x 63.2 cm,
Washington, National Gallery of Art (retrieved from the public domain
<https://www.nga.gov/artworks/994-soap-bubbles>)

The inflated bubble, ready to burst at any moment, suggests a specific moment in time, which is now frozen. The picture suggests a tension, as “the transparent, slightly distended globe at the tip of the young man’s blowpipe seems almost to swell and tremble before our eyes” (Fried 1980: 50). The duration of the activity is unclear, as the boy could have been occupied for hours by this point. The repeated arm movement of the activity might even have caused the tear in his jacket. The foliage on the left side of this panel, as pointed out by Mandi Bezuidenhout (2017: 15), might suggest the changing of the seasons. We can follow this change from the green leaves at the top to the yellowing golden leaves below the windowsill. This vertical axis can be read to indicate the slow passage of time as the leaves yellow in autumn. Weil’s elevated attention shares this characteristic of patience and the slowing down of time. Although we know that the bubble in the painting will never rupture, we stare at it in anticipation and can almost see its minute tremors. The spherical bubble, catching the light that streams in through the window, becomes a reflective surface, suggesting that images not only capture the world but also return our gaze, much like the eye portraits do, creating a fragile and intimate moment of exchange between image and participant which could dissipate at any moment. Our gaze is not visible to ourselves, and its pathways leave no traces in the world. According to Grootenboer (2012: 4), “it is only in painting that its operation gets articulated: not as a mere reflection of what we see or how we see it but by producing us, as seeing subjects, against the spectacle of the world.” Just as the boy breathes being into the bubble, image

interactions produce us as seeing subjects and intimate, elevated attention places us into an ever-expanding state of becoming.

The capacity for the absorption depicted in *Soap Bubbles* lies dormant in all museum and cinema visitors. If the museum and the cinema provide architectural conditions for attentiveness, it is ultimately the spectator who completes the circuit of attention. Far from being a passive recipient, the viewer is an active participant who negotiates space, time and perception. Jeff Wall's (1946-) installation *Movie Audience* (1979) produces the seeing subject as object. Wall photographs cinema's transposed *dispositif*⁴ to present not action but reaction. The work shows audience members in a cinema whose faces are illuminated by the screen in front of them which is not captured. A comparison can be made between the absorbed facial expressions of the cinemagoers in this photograph and the focused gaze of the boy blowing his bubble. These photographs return the gaze of the viewer, looping them into an exploration of seeing as subject.

This mirrored engagement is echoed in Roland Barthes' (quoted in Hanich 2018: 26) assertion that the cinema is a "completely projective activity", best experienced alone. The viewer's interiority is activated in the darkness, and the act of viewing becomes profoundly personal. Though cinema is a public, collective event, it stages a privatised perceptual zone, not unlike that of the eye miniature. Bruno (2014: 8) posits that projection in the cinema affords the experience of time as an internal phenomenon. The feedback loop here is not merely technological or spatial, but psychological and phenomenological. The spectator must remain still, while their attention moves. The screen glows; the viewer may reflect conceptually. Bruno (2014: 9) states that this is a display of public intimacy. Yet even within these controlled environments, the spectator's agency is never erased. In the museum, the participant can move, leave, or return. In the cinema, they may daydream without intending to do so (Hanich 2019: 337). This ambiguity is essential to understanding the feedback loop as a system not of closure, but of reciprocal openness. The museum and cinema become media through which these states of absorbed, intimate attention are invited, if not encouraged.

Conclusion: The eye as loop

Beginning with the historical miniature eye portrait and expanding into the architectures of the museum and the cinema, through the recursive temporality of video art and the absorption of spectatorship, I have traced the dynamics of a looped attention across objects, media and spaces. At each point, the feedback loop emerged as both a structural and conceptual form to describe sustained, intimate attention which opens up a private bubble, altogether constituting an intimate encounter with an image. In the eye portrait as my model case, the loop is as much a method as a metaphor. The eye calls its beholder into an intimate circuit of engagement. It reflects its owner's own capacity to look, and to return in a ritualised, intimate perception. The eye both initiates and completes the loop, functioning as a symbol of looking and a medium of perception.

This structure of returning is central to what I have tried to carve out here as an absorptive, intimate or elevated attention. Whether in Viola's endlessly repeating video projections, Paik's closed-circuit contemplative loop, or the slow ambulatory gaze in a museum gallery, the viewer is positioned in a temporality that is non-linear, cyclical, and self-reflective. The feedback loop allows for difference within sameness: every act of looking is conditioned by those before it. Each subsequent encounter is shaped by the accumulated history of prior encounters with the

⁴ A term from apparatus theory denoting the institutional and technical arrangement that positions and conditions the spectator (see Baudry 1974).

same image, much as a well-worn path through a gallery conditions how later visitors move through it, yet no two recurrences are ever identical. This recursive model of spectatorship stands in stark contrast to the forward-moving drive of digital media, where attention is constantly diverted, refreshed, and optimised for speed. In this context, the feedback loop and the bubble of the intimate encounter promises a countercultural structure which offers a temporal and perceptual sanctuary in that it resists the dominant cultural logic of rapid, algorithmically distracted consumption described earlier via Crary and Hayles. This is where the philosophical insights of Arthur Schopenhauer and Simone Weil find their fullest resonance. What unites these thinkers is their insistence that true attention is transformative. In the act of looking, we are always also becoming.

The metaphor of the feedback loop extends beyond any single object or moment. It is embedded in the architectures of the white cube of the museum, the black box of the cinema, and the visual rituals that unfold within them. These spaces are uniquely suited to house this form of looking, which is a radical gesture in our current visual culture, precisely because it resists the dominant, fragmented modes of attention that define contemporary visual culture. Ultimately, then, this essay makes an urgent appeal to scholars of images and art: our interventions should not only be analytical and theoretical, but experiential and practical. The intimate encounter is not only a descriptive framework for spectatorship; it is a philosophical and ethical call to return to the image, and to the possibility of perception as transformation.

Works Cited

- Alfier, Dino. 2011. *A Metaethical Study of Simone Weil's Notion of Attention through Critical Practical Analogy*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. London: University of the Arts London.
- Alpers, Svetlana. 1991. The museum as a way of seeing, in *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, edited by Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine. Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution: 25-32.
- Baudry, Jean-Louis. 1974. Ideological effects of the basic cinematographic apparatus, *Film Quarterly* 28(2): 39-47.
- Bruno, Giuliana. 2014. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bruno, Giuliana. 2022. *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Bezuidenhout, Mandi. 2017. *Strained Interpretations: The Labour of Imaging Lesbian Lifestyles in Art*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.
- Citton, Yves. 2017. *The Ecology of Attention*, translated by Barnaby Norman. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1992. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.
- Crary, Jonathan. 1999. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Duncan, Carol. 1995. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London: Routledge.
- Elkins, James. 2009. *How to use your Eyes*. New York: Routledge.

- Elsaesser, Thomas. 2021. Attention, distraction and the distribution of the senses: ‘slow’; reflexive’ and ‘contemplative’ between cinema and the museum, *Panoptikum* 2021 (26): 219-45.
- Freeman, Melissa. 2014. The hermeneutical aesthetics of thick description, *Qualitative Inquiry* 20(6): 827-33.
- Fried, Michael. 1980. *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Grootenboer, Hanneke. 2012. *Treasuring the Gaze*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hanich, Julian. 2018. *The Audience Effect*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Hanich, Julian. 2019. When viewers drift off: a brief phenomenology of cinematic daydreaming, in *The Structures of the Film Experience by Jean-Pierre Meunier: Historical Assessments and Phenomenological Expansions*, edited by Julian Hanich and Daniel Fairfax. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 336-52.
- Hanich, Julian. 2022. An invention with a future: collective viewing, joint deep attention, and the ongoing value of the cinema, in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Theory*, edited by Kyle Stevens. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 590-608.
- Hayles, Katherine N. 2007. Hyper and deep attention: the generational divide in cognitive modes, *Profession* 2007 (1): 187-99.
- Leppert, Richard. 1996. *Art and the Committed Eye*. New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, William J.T. 1994. *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- O’Doherty, Brian. 1986. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Berkeley, CA: California University Press.
- Preziosi, Donald. 1994. Modernity again: the museum as *Trompe L’oeil*, in *Destruction and the Visual Arts*, edited by Peter Brunette and David Wills. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 141-50.
- Sánchez, Carlos Vera. 2015. Bill Viola’s “Nantes Triptych”: Unearthing the sources of its condensed temporality, *Anik:: Portuguese Journal of the Moving Image* 2(1): 35-48.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1909. *The World as Will and Idea*, translated from the German by R.B. Haldane and J. Kemp [2011]. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. 2007. *Spheres Volume 1: Bubble Microspherology*, translated from the German by W. Hoban [2011]. Los Angeles: semiotext(e).
- Stoos, Toni. 1993. Video time – Video space; Notes on an Exhibition: Zurich and Basel, Düsseldorf and Vienna, in *Nam June Paik: Video Time – Video Space*, edited by Stoos, Toni and Kellein, Thomas. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers: 9-16.
- Sutton, Tiffany. 2003. How museums do things without words, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 61(1): 47-52.
- Wahl, C. 2013. Between art history and media history: a brief introduction to media art, in *Preserving and Exhibiting Media Art: Challenges and Perspectives*, edited by Julia Noordegraaf *et.al.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press: 25-53.
- Weil, Simone. 1947. *Gravity and Grace*, translated from the French by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr [2003]. London: Routledge.

Yan, Shu-chuan. 2019. The art of working in hair: Hair jewellery and ornamental handiwork in Victorian Britain, *The Journal of Modern Craft* 12(2): 123-39.

Beate Maria Jordaan obtained an Honours degree in Fine Arts from the University of the Free State, specialising in video art and digital collage. She then spent four years working in the commercial and creative sectors of the film production industry in Cape Town, as a production assistant and master of props. Beate returned to academia and completed an Honours degree in Art History and Image Studies in 2024. Currently, Beate is undertaking a Master's degree in Art History and Image Studies, with a related research interest in film theory. Alongside her studies, she works as a learning facilitator for undergraduate and honours modules at the Art History and Image Studies department. With a multidisciplinary approach to image studies, her research explores the creative intersections of attention, perception, and spectatorial experience in the museum and cinema.

Embodied knowledge as co-design: participatory design practices to visually represent visible and invisible illness within the public and private space

Micaela Scholtz

Nelson Mandela University

E-mail: micaela.scholtz@mandela.ac.za

Amberleigh du Plessis

Nelson Mandela University

E-mail: amberleigh.duplessis@mandela.ac.za

This research examines how embodied knowledge – of the lived experiences of individuals with visible and invisible conditions – coexisting with participatory design approaches can challenge the misrepresentation and misconceptions of illness and disability. Through two distinct, yet complimentary research projects, a participatory design approach was utilised and applied within different spaces, through varying experiential and observational lenses. Both research projects combine theoretical frameworks from disability studies and auto-ethnographic methodologies respectively, to explore how the embodied understanding of disability and invisible illness creates unique entry points for participatory design processes. These approaches revealed tensions between media conventions and embodied understanding, highlighting how standard media practices often unconsciously reproduce problematic representations of the invisible and disabled and promotes social exclusion. The findings, from both research projects, suggests that by embracing embodiment as a design resource rather than an impediment, creates a space for more authentic visual narratives. By centring the corporeal knowledge and experience of the participants, designers/visual artists can move beyond simplistic visual tropes towards positive representations that honour the complexity of invisible illness and disability conditions. It is proposed that a truly transformative design practice requires not only participatory methods, but a fundamental reconsideration of whose/which embodied knowledge shapes the visualisation process. By positioning people with lived experience as co-designers rather than subjects, we demonstrate how design practice can be fundamentally reshaped through embodied knowledge and experience.

Keywords: Participatory design, Embodiment, Autoethnography

Die beliggaamde invloed op deelnemende ontwerpstraktyk – 'n Uitdaging aan kliniese ruimtes en verteenwoordiging

Deur twee verskillende maar bymekaarpassende navorsingsprojekte, is 'n deelnemende ontwerpbenadering gebruik in verskillende ruimtes, met verskillende ervarings en waarnemings. Hierdie navorsing kyk hoe mense se eie beleefde ervaring – veral van sigbare en onsigbare siektes of gestremdhede – saam met deelnemende ontwerp gebruik kan word om verkeerde idees en voorstellings van siekte en gestremdheid uit te daag. Albei projekte gebruik teorie uit gestremdheidstudies en persoonlike navorsingsmetodes om te wys hoe mense se liggaamlike ervaring van siekte en gestremdheid nuwe maniere kan bied om ontwerp aan te pak. Hierdie benaderings wys dat daar konflik is tussen hoe die media dinge gewoonlik uitbeeld en hoe mense dit werklik ervaar. Gewone visuele media wys dikwels, sonder om dit te besef, negatiewe of verkeerde beelde van mense met onsigbare of sigbare gestremdhede, en dit lei tot sosiale uitsluiting. Die navorsing wys dat, as ons beliggaamde ervaring (ervaring wat in die liggaam gevoel en beleef word) as 'n hulpbron gebruik in plaas van 'n struikelblok, kan dit bydrae om meer eerlike en ware visuele stories te vertel. As ontwerpers en kunstenaars fokus op die kennis en ervaring van die mense self, kan hulle wegbeweeg van eenvoudige of stereotipe beelde na meer betekenisvolle en positiewe voorstellings wat die kompleksiteit van onsigbare siektes en gestremdhede respekteer. Ons stel voor dat 'n ontwerpstraktyk wat regtig 'n verskil maak, nie net deelname van mense vereis nie. Dit vra ook dat ons ernstig dink oor wie se ervarings en kennis gebruik word om beelde te skep. As mense met daardie ervarings as mede-ontwerpers en nie net as onderwerp gesien word nie, kan ontwerp verander word op 'n manier wat meer insiggewend, eerlik en menslik is.

Sleutelwoorde: Deelnemende ontwerpstraktyk, beliggaamde, outo-etnografies

The complex interconnection between invisible illness such as endometriosis, and visible disabilities reside within its societal perception, often misunderstood and misrepresented. As a result, the embodied realities of individuals living with these conditions are frequently overlooked. For example, medical views inherent in clinical spaces tend to dominate patient narratives. This authoritative medical voice influences visual culture and design practice, contributing to continued cycles of stereotypical representations. There are cycles that are largely unexplored in visual art and design, which leads to the questioning of how the meaningful integration of experiential understanding and embodied knowledge that is drawn from living with disability or invisible illness, might be consolidated through participatory design practices. These challenges are further complicated by the differing ways in which these conditions are perceived. Visible disability often becomes a site of public scrutiny and interpretation, whereas invisible illness remains obscured and frequently dismissed. Both conditions, however, are situated between the spaces in which they are encountered. The visual representation of disability and invisible illness in visual art and design, and media at large is known to be shaped or at least influenced by external, othered perspectives that, when viewed critically, often fail to capture the true lived experiences endured by those navigating these conditions. The medicalised view of such conditions extends beyond clinical spaces and sways the way conditions such as disability or endometriosis is visualised. The clinical space inhabited by those with sensitive medical conditions (in the context of this study, those with visible disabilities and endometriosis) are often detached from personal considerations, rather marked by discomfort and treatments deprived of empathy.

Despite continued growth in representing these conditions more positively, there remains a lack of research that critically examines how participatory design, embodied experiences and visual communication intersect with each other, particularly when considering how spatial experience informs meaning making. David Summers (2003: 38) states that, “the conditions of our own real spatiality entail the broader conditions of our finding ourselves in the world,” highlighting the extent to which embodied experience cannot be separated from the spaces individuals inhabit. It shapes an individual’s fundamental relationship with understanding reality and meaning making. Thus, what constitutes the space in which individuals with a condition or disability find themselves (regularly), influences their understanding of the condition and of others, whilst informing how they relate to the sense of self.

The traditional design process and practice, generally considers individuals (of any nature) as subjects to be used, observed or studied which inform the design output, they are rarely involved in the making of the design product. However, through a participatory design approach these “subjects” are regarded as collaborators, active participants, co-creators of visuals and/or knowledge, who through their embodied experience and understanding offer invaluable insights and contributions to the creative design process and authorship to the resultant output (which is led by the researchers). Participatory design is thus understood in this paper as a collaborative approach that challenges traditional design practices. To this, Ralf Cox and Lisa-Maria Van Klaveren (2025: 437-8) add that in turn, the interpretation or reading of a creative work is greatly shaped through the viewers’ own, brought, embodied experiences and responses, influencing the overall perception of the topic or theme, or in this case condition, which is visualised. Stephen Few (2009) supports this by noting that the inclusion and alignment of embodied experience with spatial (public and personal) relationships can produce more effective visualisations. Drawing on disability studies as a theoretical lens, and using autoethnography and participatory design as research approaches, this paper repositions embodied experience in relation to space as a form of fundamental knowledge, as opposed to simply a supplementary reference.

This paper considers how participatory design, grounded in embodied experience of the public and private space, can reshape visual representations of visible and invisible illnesses. It includes an exploration of how the presence of embodiment influenced a collection of creative work reflecting the shared experience of disability and endometriosis. It further examines how different forms of embodiment influence both the process and outcomes of visual representation. It considers two distinct research studies, both situated within the Visual Arts and similar in its methodological approach. Across both studies, the analysis examines how dominant societal and media narratives are challenged when embodied experience and patient perspectives are foregrounded through design and visual practices. Additionally, these studies contribute insights on how the participatory design approach and embodied experiences and/or knowledge can aid in more inclusive and authentic visual narratives. Rather than treating these projects as separate, the paper positions them comparatively to reveal how visibility and space operate differently across conditions, and how participatory design mediates these differences. The paper argues that participatory design, when informed by embodied knowledge, offers a critical lens to challenge dominant visual representations of visible and invisible illness. This, in turn, contributes to visual culture and design by presenting a more positive understanding and representation of illness and disability, grounded in co-creation and lived experience. By placing these two case studies in dialogue with each other, the paper aims to reveal how embodiment operates differently across both personal, private space and public, clinical spaces. Simultaneously, it aims to highlight the value of using participatory design as a methodological approach by examining the research outputs of Case Study A and B below. Both studies make use of participatory design, yet this approach is used to reveal different aspects of illness and disability. This demonstrates the capability participatory design has when researching and designing with various groups and individuals regarding sensitive or otherwise hidden information and experiences.

Case Study A: Communicating Positive Representations of Wheelchair Users' Disability Identities Through Illustration and Participatory Design

Within disability studies, clinical spaces often take on the perception of a medical model or lens when considering people living with disabilities. The medical model of disability is one of the most prominent and widely accepted models supported by scholars, scientists and medical professionals. The model defines disability as a medical phenomenon that causes impairment of bodily function, and the goal is to diagnose the illness or disease and cure or treat it (Haegele and Hodge 2016, Palmer and Harley 2012). The medical model takes a problem-based approach, by characterising disability as the main cause of an individual's lack of functionality. It creates a clear divide between the so-called normal and the abnormal, leading to several social issues. It supports the underlying hierarchy that promotes popular culture, favouring those who are able-bodied and healthy. By creating these binary oppositions, the medical model openly labels people living with disabilities as abnormal, which affects the way they are perceived in society. Dominant understandings of disability identity have been shaped by the medical, social and cultural models of disability. Each model offers different perspectives; the medical model views disability as an individual's impairment that needs a cure, the social model argues that society itself disables individuals through exclusionary practices, and the cultural model offers a more fluid interpretation of disability as a dynamic lived (embodied) experience (Waldschmidt 2018: 77).

The medical view strongly supports the idea of normality, meaning that a person is considered disabled because they are unable to function as a "normal" person does. Fixing the abnormality is considered the best way forward in providing the disabled person with a so-

called “normal” life. People living with disabilities are convinced that they should rely on medical treatment to remove themselves from the “abnormal” category of the opposition (Landsman 2005). The medical model is structured around the idea that the disability or impairment experienced by the individual is independent of the wider social, political, cultural and physical environment (Haegele and Hodge 2016). This model focuses on the disability, which becomes the defining characteristic for people living with disabilities. It eliminates the narrative behind the disability and places the individual in a depersonalised clinical space. Thus, when entering the clinical space, people living with disabilities are further dehumanised as they become spectacles to be examined and treated, hushed and rushed as the clinical space calls for cleanliness and sanitation.

The visual representation of a person is closely linked to how the individual or related cultural group is understood and the attitude towards it. Visually problematic images originate because of problematic social attitudes. For example, in cultural representations such as freak shows, horror films, tabloid images, and even villain tropes, differences are often exaggerated and depicted as monstrous, and unusual bodies become spectacles of sensational media. This turns disabled bodies into objects of horror and fascination or fantasy, discarding the complex realities surrounding disability identity and lived experiences (Worrell 2018: 37). Myths and stereotypes about disability thus fuel discriminatory practices against people living with disabilities. With increasing stereotypical imagery of people living with disabilities within the media, it creates the opportunity for art and visual communication to present alternative, more positive, representations of the embodied disability identity. Visual images and narratives present the opportunity to deal with issues of representation and embodiment, which are layered with meaning and enable one to present a story about disabled bodies. Images depicting people living with disabilities and narratives shape the world one lives in and affect the understanding of the self and others. Representation does not simply reflect reality but instead structures reality as fictional images of disability in the media allow space for people living with disabilities to see how non-disabled viewers might perceive them (Garland-Thomson 2005: 523). A person’s sense of self can thus be positively or negatively impacted by representation. New ways of representing disability should include imagery that challenges existing disability stereotypes. The imagery should not only have educational value, but should address discrimination against people living with disabilities, by presenting scenarios based on their lived experience. Inaccurate visual representations of disability limit the imaginations of the non-disabled community, in turn restricting the inclusion of people living with disabilities in society. Once an individual is represented differently, viewers are urged to think differently and to treat and look at people differently.

Case Study A foregrounds the public and visible embodiment by exploring how disability identity is shaped and communicated through visual representation, using both theoretical and practical approaches. It presents an analysis on the master’s study titled *Communicating Positive Representations of Wheelchair Users’ Disability Identities Through Illustration and Participatory Design* (Du Plessis 2024), which highlights the misrepresentation of people with disabilities in the media, and how it can lead to social exclusion and misunderstanding of the disability identity. The study focuses specifically on wheelchair disability and uses a participatory design approach, which allows for wheelchair users collectively to be part of the research. How might illustration provide a better method to represent people living with disabilities authentically in not just clinical spaces, but wider public spaces? It might do this with the use of participatory design and illustrative metaphor.

The study thus explored how illustration can challenge existing representations of the disability identity and culture in the media. Methodologically, the research made use of ethnography, case studies, and in particular, participatory design. Autoethnography was

employed as the researcher has lived experience with a sibling who is a wheelchair user, allowing her to reflect critically on her own understanding of disability. The participatory design approach involved semi-structured interviews with ten wheelchair users who were recruited through purposive sampling. All participants were residents of a care facility based in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape for chronically physically disabled adults aged 18 years and older. Through a thematic analysis of the participant interviews, three themes were identified: personal representation, lived experience and memory, and challenging ableism. These themes guided the development of an illustration collection, two of which is discussed within this section. The illustration collection contained 38 digital illustrations, combining line, texture, colour and text to communicate various aspects of the disability identity. Participants contributed to the visual development and interpretations through ongoing feedback, reinforcing the participatory nature of the process. The illustrations were not merely aesthetic visuals but designed to spark engagement and broader conversations around disability. Ultimately, the study demonstrated how participatory design, and illustration can facilitate more positive representations of the disability identity. For example, one participant suggested that the wheelchair be represented in a less obvious way to shift focus to the person instead of their disability. By centring the voices and lived experiences of people living with disabilities, the research aimed to challenge negative stereotypes and highlight the value of the embodied experience through vulnerability, narrative, and collaboration. Participatory design proved to be a powerful and meaningful approach to grant both people living with disabilities and non-disabled people the opportunity to engage with disability identity.

Figure 1 shows a woman sitting in a wheelchair while the crowd surrounding her has their back turned to her, seemingly walking away. The title indicates a play on words “The Phantom You See,” while phantom suggests she is but a ghost, unseen and unheard, she is in fact a real person. This brings into question the treatment of people living with disabilities within public spaces. In this case, it is not simply just about physical space, but the space we occupy emotionally, spiritually and mentally and how that translates into how we see and treat those around us within the same space. Various participants informed the development of Figure 1. No singular person or individual influenced this illustration, rather, it was developed after participants expressed their feeling of being invisible to the public eye, regardless of the place and/or environment. This illustration serves as a representation of feelings of social exclusion, loneliness and even isolation as the world continues to move around the person, indicated by the blurred lines and surrounding figures. These are feelings that the participants who live with disabilities, experience and describe as the invisible barriers in public spaces.

Rob Imrie and Claire Edwards (2007) argue that public space is constructed around normative bodily expectations, rendering disabled bodies as out of place. This is not simply through singular exclusions but continuous, accumulated spatial experiences and arrangements that supports non-belonging (Imrie and Edwards 2007: 626). Barriers for people living with disabilities are not always physical but also consist of invisible social barriers that reinforce exclusion. For example, a building might be physically accessible for a person using a wheelchair, however they might encounter stares or whispered commentary that produces a sense of non-belonging. Thus, creating an invisible social barrier that is not easily solvable by simply placing a ramp or elevator inside a building. There is a contradiction between access and belonging. Access itself is often compliance-based and driven, exclusive of the emotional and relational dynamic of disability within the public space (Lajoie 2022: 319).



Figure 1
Amberleigh du Plessis, *The Phantom you see*, 2024, digital illustration
 (source: courtesy of the artist).

A New Normal (Figure 2) shows an aerial view of a parking lot. This particular parking lot constitutes a reversal of the norm, as most of the parking bays are designated as disabled parking bays, and only one of the parking bays is designated as an able-bodied (“normal”) parking bay, indicated by the yellow figure symbol. The illustration in figure 2 invites viewers to imagine a world where non-disabled people struggle to find suitable parking. They now must worry about where they can park, as only by being disabled are they qualified to park in disabled parking bays, indicated by the wheelchair symbol. Disability, the so-called human disqualification, now becomes a qualifying and desirable characteristic to access certain spaces. The illustration aims to challenge the ableism mindset, which influences how environmental spaces are allocated, and how that leads to people living with disabilities being discriminated against, through illegal parking of non-permit holders in disabled parking bays. It further aims to create discomfort in non-disabled viewers, as they are made to imagine a world that does not cater to their needs based on their physical state.



Figure 2
Amberleigh du Plessis, *A New Normal*, 2024, digital illustration
 (source: courtesy of the artist).

The illustration highlights that public space is not neutral but constructed by ableist assumptions about what type of bodies belongs where. It redirects the viewer's attention to the relationship between individual parking behaviour and the power relations that structure access in public spaces. People living with visible disabilities experience space differently than those living with invisible disabilities or illness, as they move through public space already marked by ableist mindsets, including social cues about what their bodies are capable of and made for. People living with invisible disabilities or illness navigate these spaces differently as their disability or illness is not immediately recognisable to others. Thus, they often occupy spaces that are not designed with their needs in mind, while they manage scepticism from society about the validity of their disability, illness or medical condition. Spaces, both public and private, external and internal, creates a form of embodied surveillance of the self as people living with both visible and invisible disabilities or illness are required to navigate and evaluate themselves continuously within these unaccommodating spaces (Jackson 2018).

Case Study B: *Visual narratives portraying the lived experiences of women with an invisible illness*

The case foregrounds the private and invisible embodiment of the endometriosis experience, translated into visual form to bring an awareness to the increasingly silenced, (Bates 2025), and fragmented female, endometriotic body. With a focus on exploring how the visualisation of a largely invisible gynaecological condition, specifically endometriosis, could challenge and/or question the stereotyped understanding and connotation associated with the personal and lived experiences of many women. It presents a contextualisation of the master's study titled *Visual Narratives Portraying the Lived Experiences of Women with an Invisible Illness* (Scholtz 2020) through the portrayal and in consideration of intimate, or private space. The study considered theoretically, how stereotypical views and misrepresentation impact women who experience endometriosis, whilst reflecting on personal experience with this condition. The study further aids the understanding and impact of stereotypical misrepresentations, existing theories concerning the women's role as prescribed by patriarchal society, the taboos associated with the female body and the privacy surrounding female bodily and menstrual processes. The notion that female bodily processes are intensely private and cannot be discussed or shared contributes to the delay in diagnosis and the limited information surrounding endometriosis (Bhartiya 2013). In conjunction with existing theories, reflections on and semiotic analysis of the multidisciplinary, artistic works produced by artists such as Frida Kahlo, Georgie Wileman, and Ellie Kammer were employed to determine how they have addressed their illness experiences through a visual narrative approach. This provided a theoretical and practical foundation for the creative practice and approach to constructing a series of visual narratives that depict the lived experiences of women with endometriosis.

The lived experience of endometriosis is often described as a contradictory state, as it is physically present yet invisible in its manifestation, to medical imaging formats. Endometriosis is a chronic condition and is surgically diagnosed when endometrium-like tissue is found to be located and growing in places "other" than the uterus, most commonly within the pelvic region (Rajesh, Mehmeti, Smith-Walker and Kendall 2025: 1). With no way to escape the body, other than through surgical intervention, the surrounding internal areas often become intertwined, causing organs or tissue to stick together.¹ This leads to pain and inflammation, causing infection, nausea, abdominal bloating, unpredictable bleeding, and can have a negative impact

¹ Mayo Clinic. 2024. *Endometriosis*. Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. Retrieved from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/endometriosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20354656>.

on fertility (Cromeens, Knafl, Robinson, Carey, Haji-Noor and Thoyre 2024). A significant, and confusing attribute of this condition is that symptoms vary, it mimics that of other illnesses, and it is not present in the same way for all women who experience it (Delanerolle, Ramakrishnan, Hapangama *et al.* 2021). Endometriosis imposes a substantial burden on the “normalised” body of individuals affected by it, as it hinders daily functioning and contributes to psychological distress (Rossi, Uimari, Arffman, *et al.* 2021). Through these limitations, a feeling of defectiveness is adopted amongst women with endometriosis, a constant conflict arises between women and their endometriotic bodies, and sense of alienation (Mills, Shu, Misajon and Rush-Privitera 2023).

The study follows a qualitative research design, a practice-based approach and an autoethnographic research strategy. Autoethnography, as explained by Marko Orel (2023) positions the researcher’s experience as central to the inquiry. It is understood as a method that captures the authentic, lived experience, further employed as a lens into a particular social or cultural phenomena (Orel 2023). Due to its reliance on subjective self-experience, the method has faced apprehension (Wall 2006). However, it is argued that its consideration of community, societal, cultural, or political influences renders it crucial in shaping the experience and understanding of the self. Importantly, autoethnography enables the representation of othered or previously silenced groups which affords the new knowledge production “that can inform specific problems and specific situations” (Wall 2006). It is with this cognisance that autoethnography and selected data collection methods was deemed most fitting to apply to a research study that explores a misunderstood condition such as endometriosis and the underrepresented population of women in associated visual, emotional, and physical spaces. Thus, interpreting “my”² personal reality, as the researcher and as a woman with endometriosis in relation to those of other women experiencing it, enables me to write in first person. This further places emphasis on the nature of the “private”.

The autoethnographic data collection techniques employed in this study included, “chronicling the past, a detailed description of an event, and drawing a place of significance”. To provide evidence and support to these subjective experiences, a secondary set of data was retrieved through semi-structured interviews with other women living with endometriosis. The interviews were structured according to three themes which sought to gather information about: the participant self – as a woman, the participants’ understanding of endometriosis, and the participants’ experience with endometriosis. The interviews served as a crucial component to the study in combination with an autoethnographic methodology as in this way, one gathers external, otherwise unknown data that can support, confirm or reject introspectively accumulated data (Chang 2008: 104). Focused on the participants’ view and experience of the condition, I was able to establish similarities and contrasts between our experiences.

The self-generated data, as well as the insights gained from the interviews with women informed and guided the series of visual narratives I have created, leading to a mutual association whilst identifying with the participants’ experiences. Retrospectively, identifying the process as participatory design, the series of visual narratives produced can be interpreted as co-created with the women interviewed. The works produced centres their agency in how experiences are represented, and by literally including aspects of their voice, in textual format. Through reflexive feedback with participants following the creation of artworks and visual narratives, with guided summations of the work, I was able to enhance the resonance of my

² Writing in the first person serves as a supplementary methodological choice as a third-person summation cannot authentically capture and contextualize the embodied experience of living with or experiencing endometriosis. Consequently, the reflective account on Case Study B is further elaborated from the first-person perspective.

own story and to ensure that the representations remained authentic to their lived experience and broader significance. By visually presenting the lived realities of women with endometriosis, through various mediums and visual approaches, this participatory approach produced visual accounts that address the common misrepresentations of the disease and deepens the understanding of its effects.

The co-created images or narrative series express the internalised pain, emotions, and an intimately private view of that which is often rendered invisible. The instant photographic series, figure 3, provides record of the silent moments in my private space, as the post-procedure experience of endometriosis is navigated. The intimate or private moments were captured as they occurred, documenting the hidden realities of living with endometriosis. The soft tones and natural forms indicate a quiet, comforting space, whilst also alluding to loneliness. Similarly, that which is presented; a bruised, bare body, in its literal sense, is usually kept private. Through a rather pedestrian view, the neutrality and familiarity of the space provide comfort. The private space holds emotional associations, where women with endometriosis can shape what is revealed, or how pain, for instance, is narrated or embodied. It offers a mediation between control, comfort, medical legitimacy and gendered expectations of the female body. A known space, for ease during moments of pain, discomfort and in the process of healing and/or recovery from surgical interventions.



Figure 3
Micaela Scholtz, *Untitled series*, 2019, Instax photograph
(source: courtesy of the artist).

A fusion of private and public, or external space, is discernible, which can be interpreted as the embodiment of the intermediary or “otherness”. A feeling often associated with this condition is that of being othered, or erratic, as experiences vary and symptoms are never the same or constant. The journal entry as presented in figure 4 is a direct representation of a private space, as a journal or diary is often expected to serve as a private space reserved for reflection or sharing of internalised thoughts and emotions. The use of collage allows for a culmination of various extracts from journal entries which offered me a space to access and process my emotions experienced, through the process of questioning and engaging with the women interviewed. Additionally, the use of journals is a beneficial tool, which often exposes unknown details about personal experiences (Harrison 2002). There is similarly, a more direct influence of what is considered a merging of public and private space, the hospital room. In the background of the image presented in figure 4, a hospital room is depicted, which is a result of the autoethnographic method discussed, specifically the technique of “drawing a place of significance”. The hospital, as a public space, has become significant to me due to my extensive time spent there owing to endometriosis. However, it also highlights the infringement on privacy, as an invasion of one’s private space is experienced within this public setting. In this

context, private space relates to both the space in which the condition is mostly experienced or confronted (one's own, private environment) but also refers to internal space where the disease occurs, manifests and grows quietly, and in private.



Figure 4
Micaela Scholtz, *Journal Entry, 6 June (They cannot find a cure)*, 2019,
Digitally assembled mixed media collage
(source: courtesy of the artist).

The collision of the outside and inside, public and private, can be read through the lens of embodiment, as the endometriotic body registers and negotiates the effects of these juxtapositions as sensations, gestures or movements rather than relying solely on the mental interpretation. Brenda Schmahmann's (2004) insight that "the 'outside' that spills into the 'inside' is not simply a sign for negative and fearful forces but is also in fact an indication of refusal" conceptualises these juxtapositions as internalised, embodied forms of expression. The merging of public and private often results in a struggle for autonomy. In this context, such embodied juxtapositions are reflected in how women with endometriosis adjust their bodily postures, often avoid public exposure, adjust routines or conceal medication, and use silence as a manner to resist societal expectations. The body is deemed to absorb external pressures like social stigma or disbelief associated with the condition but also desires to resist it. Thus, by selectively determining what to reveal or conceal, the individual redraws the parameters between the inner, private experience and the public, social space.

Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to examine how participatory design, grounded in embodied experience across public and private space, can reshape visual representations of visible and invisible illnesses. Across two complementary case studies, the article demonstrates that representation is shaped by the spatial contexts in which bodies are encountered. It further highlights how dominant medicalised representations of endometriosis and disability often override personal narratives, contributing to cycles of misrepresentation. The researchers argue for a reconsideration of embodied experience as a vital form of knowledge, particularly within participatory design practices where individuals are positioned not as subjects, but as co-

designers. Drawing on disability studies and autoethnographic methods, the case studies emphasise how spatial experiences, both public and private, inform one's understanding of self. Through participatory design, the case studies demonstrate how lived experience can contribute to design outcomes that challenge societal stereotypes, enabling more authentic and inclusive narratives of invisible illness and disability. The embodied perception emphasises how our physical experiences and emotive/bodily sensations shape how we construct and interact with visualisations of disability and/or illness, and how it manifests within creative practice (Bardon 2023). Offering insights into the act of collaborative storytelling, Lambert Zuidervaat (2004: 8) terms this "a process of life-giving disclosure", a manner through which individuals open-up and come to flourish through narrating their experience, and their truth.

During Case Study A, each interview gave the researcher deeper insight into the participants' experiences, emotions and lifestyles. It also revealed that the researcher's own lived experience with a sibling who used a wheelchair, is not unique. At times it was challenging to separate personal experiences and biases around disability, but moments of shared or similar experience allowed for personal and critical self-reflection while connecting with each participant. The researcher of Case Study A had to navigate between the position of insider and outsider, the personal and the public. As a non-disabled person, the researcher occupies the role as an outsider, but the relationship with a physically and mentally disabled sibling offered a personal perspective that shaped the researcher's choice of topic. The dual positioning required openness, honesty and self-awareness. The participatory design approach, setting of the interviews (conducted at the participants shared residential home), and the sensitivity of the research topic, created a safe and empowering environment. Participants could be vulnerable on their own terms and within their own space, fostering a sense of trust and belonging. This further allowed the illustrations to have added meaning and depth as they are not just passive visual aids but invite engagement and conversation based on the space, whether private or public, in which they are represented. By placing the illustrations in a public doctor's room, for example, illustrations could challenge the stereotypical medical view forced on people living with disabilities. Places such as restaurants, public beaches, and sport stadiums for example, which mainly cater for non-disabled people, can also be used as space to exhibit the illustrations, further challenging other biases that non-disabled people might have about people living with disabilities. The illustrations can further occupy the digital space to reach an even wider audience, sparking online engagement, sounding a call to action and encouraging online users to not only challenge ideas surrounding disability but to become involved with the disability community. Although the public space is mentioned several times in Case Study A, the personal shared narratives tap into the private space, often unseen and hidden from public view. It creates a sense of reclaiming one's identity from the stereotypical public representation of people living with disabilities.

Case Study B advocates for the need of personal reclamation as it is crucial when one considers how endometriosis and the road to diagnosis can alter one's perception of self. This reclamation is not only needed within the public space, but also privately, on an intimate level. The lived experience of a woman with endometriosis (and her humanity) is greatly overlooked or easily dismissed as the medical paradigm often reduces such individuals to statistics, diagnostic categories and symptoms. Similarly, Western representations of the female body in the nude or as "object", pressure women to conform to an unattainable standard, and these pressures are often felt by those who experience/live with an invisible illness. Defying these concepts through the visualisation and portrayal of one's own body, and narration of one's own story, challenge the stereotypical depictions associated with "perfection" or the "ideal" female body. Larger, medicalised models place focus on transgressive potential (Schmahmann 2004: 8) and challenge historical notions of women's pain dismissal and of disregarding the "patient"

experience when not aligned with medical texts/established knowledge. In this study the female body is portrayed with a condition, from a private, intimate, personal view, which forms a different perspective than what is usually seen in the public sphere. From this private space, the female body is considered both a site of meaning-making and of inquiry, that shifts the focus from the inundated weight of bodily perfection, to one with narrative authority that restores agency.

It is important to shift the focus from a “patient” perspective to that of a “person living with”. To remove labels such as “ill” or “has a disease” to a “person experiencing”. It is thus encouraged to acknowledge the daily life of an individual “living with”, who navigates the invisible illness experience, rather than to place singular focus on symptoms or diagnosis. From a communicative consideration, storytelling could be used as a platform to narrate and visualise how invisible challenges are managed daily, or how emotions are experienced, how the good and bad days are navigated, and how resilience, ingenuity and bravery is maintained. Equally important, the aspects in understanding the condition include highlighting its medical persona, but also acknowledging the person experiencing it, and dismissing the romanticisation of suffering. Collaborative storytelling offers the opportunity for a renewed perspective, or a view of that which is otherwise completely unknown, literally invisible or hidden due to it not being made known, not being heard or even seen. This approach fosters an authentic connection by giving the individual control and authority over the narrative, with a mutual understanding. This enables the creation and translation of internal experiences to forms that can be understood, illuminating various aspects of invisible illness. Utilising collaborative storytelling ensures that the lived experience is centred. In doing so, one creates a narrative that challenges stereotypes and moves the public beyond superficial understanding to a space where assumptions about the appearance of illness are challenged. Storytelling promotes recognition and validation of the invisible illness experience. Considered together, the two case studies highlight the intersection between public and private space as sites of knowledge generation. While focusing on different conditions, both studies challenge stereotypical representations by foregrounding personal narratives, lived experiences, and embodied realities. Through participatory design methods, the research shows how collaborative and reflective creative processes provide alternative ways of seeing, navigating, and experiencing space. The illustrations and mixed-media artworks function not only as aesthetic outputs, but as tools that invite engagement with complex realities often marginalised in dominant visual culture. By working closely with participants, the research demonstrates how art and design can act as a vehicle for social change by supporting inclusive participatory practices.

The intersection of public and private spaces appears as a key theme across both case studies, revealing how illness and disability are experienced, represented, and understood. Clinical spaces, often governed by the medical model, tend to render bodies as objects of diagnosis, silencing personal narratives. In contrast, the body—understood as an internal, emotional, and embodied landscape—offers space for subjective experience and self-reflection. The case studies show how visual storytelling and participatory design can challenge the divide between public and private by positioning personal narratives as central. The article argues that when grounded in embodied knowledge, participatory design operates differently across visible and invisible conditions, requiring distinct engagements with public and private spaces to produce meaningful visual outputs. The findings suggest that when visual communication—such as illustration, photography, and mixed media—is informed by participatory practices, embodied experiences of exclusion, resilience, and joy are made visible, repositioning the disabled and ill body not as a site of lack, but as a source of knowledge and agency. By exhibiting visual works that draw from private experience, the research calls for a reimagining of public space as one that reflects vulnerability and humanity. Ultimately, the article calls for

a reconsideration of how artists and designers design with and for communities, and how visual communication can be more inclusive of lived realities. Whether living with visible disabilities, invisible illness, or neither, individuals navigate spaces that either support or diminish them. Visual art, when co-created and contextually grounded, can reframe these spaces not only architecturally, but conceptually, transforming how difference is seen, felt, and valued. As such, future work should continue to challenge existing stereotypes and move toward new, co-authored realities centred on embodied experience, where representation encourages belonging and transforms space into place.

Works cited

- Bardon, Alexandra. 2023. *The Power of Visual Perception: The Intricate Interplay That Shapes the Visual Arts*. Lindenwood University Online. Retrieved from <https://online.lindenwood.edu/blog/the-power-of-visual-perception-the-intricate-interplay-that-shapes-the-visual-arts/>.
- Bates, Victoria. 2025. Arts: Humanising healthcare, in *Feeling Blue: Colour and the Modern British Hospital*. Manchester: Manchester University Press: 102-49. Retrieved from DOI: 10.7765/9781526168528.00008.
- Bhartiya, Aru. 2013. Menstruation, religion and society, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 3(6): 523-27. Retrieved from DOI: 10.7763/IJSSH.2013.V3.296.
- Chang, Heewon. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method*. New York: Routledge.
- Cox, Ralf F.A. and Van Klaveren, Lisa-Maria. 2025. The embodied experience of abstract art: Moving across the 20th century, *Perception* 54(6). Retrieved from DOI: 10.1177/03010066251329918.
- Cromeens, Martha Grace, Knafl, Kathleen, Robinson, Whitney R., Carey, Erin T., Haji-Noor, Zakiya and Thoyre, Suzanne. 2024. Endometriosis and disability: Analysis of federal court appeals of Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income Claims by individuals suffering from endometriosis, *Women's Health Issues* 34(3): 221-31. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1016/j.whi.2023.11.008.
- Delanerolle, Gayathri, Ramakrishnan, Rema, Hapangama, Dharani, Zeng, Yutian, Shetty, Ashish, Elneil, Sohler, Chong, Sam, Hirsch, Martin, Oyewole, Molola, Phiri, Peter, Elliot, Kathryn, Kothari, Trusha, Rogers, Bryony, Sandle, Natasha, Haque, Nyla, Pluchino, Nicola, Silem, Martin, O'Hara, Rebecca, Hull, M. Louise and Majumder, Kingshuk. 2021. A systematic review and meta-analysis of the Endometriosis and Mental-Health Sequelae; The ELEMI Project, *Women's Health*. 17. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1177/17455065211019717.
- Du Plessis, Amberleigh. 2024. *Communicating Positive Representations of Wheelchair Users' Disability Identities through Illustration and Participatory Design*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Gqeberha: Nelson Mandela University.
- Few, Stephen. 2009. Data visualization for human perception, in *The Encyclopedia of Human-Computer Interaction*. Retrieved from <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/book/the-encyclopedia-of-human-computer-interaction-2nd-ed/data-visualization-for-human-perception>.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. 2005. Disability and representation, *PMLA* 120(2): 552-27. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486178>.

- Haegele, Justin Anthony and Hodge, Samuel. 2016. Disability discourse: Overview and critiques of the medical and social models, *Quest* 68(2): 193-206. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1080/00336297.2016.1143849.
- Harrison, Barbara. 2002. Seeing health and illness worlds – using visual methodologies in a sociology of health and illness: a methodological review, *Sociology of Health and Illness* 24(6): 856–72.
- Imrie, Rob and Edwards, Claire. 2007. The geographies of disability: Reflections on the development of a sub-discipline, *Geography Compass* 1(3): 623-40. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2007.00032.x.
- Jackson, Mary Ann. 2018. Models of disability and human rights: Informing the improvement of built environment accessibility for people with disability at neighborhood scale?, *Laws* 7(1)10. Retrieved from DOI: 10.3390/laws7010010.
- Lajoie, Corinne. 2022. The problems of access: A crip rejoinder via the phenomenology of spatial belonging, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8(2): 318-37. Retrieved from doi:10.1017/apa.2021.6.
- Landsman, Gail. 2005. Mothers and models of disability, *Journal of Medical Humanities* 26(2–3): 121-139. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1007/s10912-005-2914-2.
- Mills, Jacqueline, Shu, Chell Chih, Misajon, Roseanne and Rush-Privitera, Georgia. 2023. ‘My body is out to wreck everything I have’: a qualitative study of how women with endometriosis feel about their bodies, *Psychology and Health*: 1-19. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1080/08870446.2023.2218404.
- Orel, Marko. 2023. Autoethnography in the modern workplace: a reflexive journey, *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* 13(2): 144-60. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1108/joe-06-2023-0038.
- Palmer, Michael and Harley, David. 2012. Models and measurement in disability: an international review, *Health Policy and Planning* 27(5): 357-64. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1093/heapol/czr047.
- Rajesh, Sharangini, Mehmeti, Agnesa, Smith-Walker, Thomas and Kendall, Bryony. 2025. Diagnosis and management of endometriosis: summary of updated NICE guidance, *BMJ*: 2782. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1136/bmj.q2782.
- Rossi, Henna-Riikka, Uimari, Outi, Arffman, Riikka, Vaaramo, Eeva, Kujanpää, Linda, Ala-Mursula, Leena and Piltonen, Terhi T. 2021. The association of endometriosis with work ability and work life participation in late forties and lifelong disability retirement up till age 52: A Northern Finland Birth Cohort 1966 study, *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica*, 100(10): 1822-29. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1111/aogs.14210.
- Schmahmann, Brenda. 2004. *Through the Looking Glass*. Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing.
- Scholtz, Micaela. 2020. *Visual Narratives Portraying the Lived Experiences of Women with an Invisible Illness*. Unpublished master’s thesis. Gqeberha: Nelson Mandela University.
- Summers, David. 2003. *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism*. New York: Phaidon.

- Waldschmidt, Anne. 2018. Disability–Culture–Society: Strengths and weaknesses of a cultural model of dis/ability, *Alter* 12(2): 65-78. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1016/j.alter.2018.04.003.
- Wall, Sarah. 2006. An autoethnography on learning about autoethnography, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5(2). Retrieved from: http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_2/pdf/wall.pdf.
- Worrell, Tracey R. 2018. *Disability in the Media: Examining Stigma and Identity*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Zuidervaat, Lambert. 2004. *Artistic Truth: Aesthetics, Discourse, and Imaginative Disclosure*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from DOI: 10.1017/cbo9780511498398.

Micaela Scholtz is a researcher, visual artist and trained graphic designer, known to articulate and author complex visual communication solutions in unique and carefully considered ways. Micaela holds a Master of Arts degree and works as a graphic design lecturer at Nelson Mandela University. Her practice is concerned with female representations and their impact on women with an invisible illness, namely Endometriosis. Micaela has presented and written extensively on this topic, whilst continuing to explore and uncover different visual approaches. Her master's study titled, *Visual Narratives Portraying the Lived Experiences of Women with an Invisible Illness* aimed to uncover the truths and realities of Endometriosis, visualising the experience to encourage a better understanding thereof.

Amberleigh du Plessis is a Master of Visual Arts (Graphic Design) graduate from Nelson Mandela University. Her master's study titled, *Communicating Positive Representations of Wheelchair Users' Disability Identities through Illustration and Participatory Design*, aimed to challenge misconceptions about disability identities, to motivate more positive interpretations and understanding of the disability identity through visual communication. She takes particular interest in digital illustration and disability studies, and how combining the two disciplines can be used to encourage re-examination of the disability identity to create a more inclusive world. Du Plessis draws from both personal experiences with a disabled sibling, and participatory practices.