

## Conference Paper

# The Positive and Negative Provocativeness of Transgressive Art As a Manifestation of Its Multimodality

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## Abstract

Feelings such as moral disgust, protest and antipathy are increasingly understood as the most important aspects of cognitive processes in moral psychology and reveal the complex structure of human nature and culture. Transgressive fiction, cinema or visual arts which are characterized by a graphic representation of violence and different traumatic experiences, are a strong ethical stimulus. In this article, transgressive art is viewed through the prism of its multimodality. The article examines both the positive and negative roles of transgressive art in the constitution and the confirmation of the boundaries and limits of social acceptability. By acknowledging the risks of aestheticization of violence that can expand the ethical boundaries of a person as a witness, this study also elicits that transgressive art offers a safe environment for exploring taboos without consequences for the audience. Although transgressive art depicts various violations of moral norms, it does not deny the boundaries of what is permitted, but only confirms them.

**Keywords:** transgressive art, multimodality, transgression, moral norms, public morality, ethical boundaries, screen violence

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## 1. Introduction

Works of art regularly challenge established moral standards. The genre of art that makes a shock value its essence is called transgressive art. This article raises the question of whether transgressive art, by mobilizing moral judgments, can really influence a person's ethical boundaries.

The concept of "transgression" was developed in the framework of the non-classical philosophy of postmodernism by such authors as G. Bataille, M. Blanchot, M. Foucault. Transgression is an act or process of breaking a law or moral rule [1]. The transgression goes beyond the limits of the familiar habitual sphere of being or, in other words, goes beyond the limits of the "norm". According to Foucault, transgression is "a gesture that

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addresses itself to the limit" [2, 117], as well as the philosophical non-dialectic language of the limit [3]. In other words, transgression means going beyond social acceptability.

Transgression is also commonly regarded as a special art genre (most commonly literary). The concept of "transgressive fiction" was first introduced by Michael Silverblatt in his essay for the Los Angeles Times [4]. Transgressive fiction, cinema, or visual arts are characterized by a graphic representation of violations of socially acceptable norms, such as violence, drug use, and different sexual deviations [5]. Transgression is not just a violation of a certain boundary between good and evil, or legal and illegal, but the very question of the existence of such boundaries, and this is the issue of the danger of transgression [6, 17]. In ethical discourse, the concepts of "boundaries" and "limits" are not interchangeable. If the boundaries indicate the desired framework, then the limit is more imperative in relation to the permissible norm. The development of society begins with the establishment of certain boundaries (prohibitions), the purpose of which is the separation of human and animal nature, the division of life into secular and sacred. The main subjects of prohibitions are death and sexuality. These are topics that have become central to transgressive art.

Examples of transgressive art are performances of Yang Zhichao, Petr Pavlensky; photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, J.-P. Witkin; in literature these are the novels of the Marquis de Sade, *The History of the Eye* by George Bataille, *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess, *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis, as well as the works of Chuck Palahniuk and William Burroughs. In the cinema, examples of transgressive art are *The Green Elephant* by Svetlana Baskova (1999), *Irreversibility* by Gaspar Noe (2003), Tom Six's dilogy *The Human Centipede* (2009; 2011), *Serbian Film* by Srjan Spasojevic (2010), as well as, the so-called torture porn [7], reflected in the work of Lucifer Valentine and the series of the movie *Saw*.

## 2. Methods

In this article, the problem of witnessing transgression in art is considered through the prism of the concept of ethics of discourse, developed by Karl-Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas. Habermas defends cognitive approaches to ethics and introduces the principle of universalization as a holistic principle that allows reaching agreement in moral discussions [8, 90]. Social interactions are a key aspect of morality, and it is impossible to solve moral problems through a monologue. It is important to understand that transgressive artists and viewers share certain moral norms, since public morality is based on norms and values that individuals share in their sociologically significant

majority for a given society [9]. Since the ethics of discourse implies that in consensus on moral standards the greatest of what we can achieve is only partial coherence, the article will examine the multimodality of transgression in art, which allows it to function as an indicator of the ethical boundaries of a person as a witness, not denying the limits of what is permitted, but affirming them.

### 3. Discussion

There are different views on the problem of the influence of transgressive art on the limits of social acceptability and the ethical boundaries of a person as a witness. One of the positions is perfectly reflected by the moralists of art that follow David Hume, who argue that we should not tolerate moral ideas in works of art that disgust us. In his essay *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757), Hume tried to define the norm as "some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners" [10, 307]. Hume notes that moral perceptions change in different eras, however, if moral standards that have changed during the transition from one century to another are not condemned by the audience, this makes it disgraceful and perverted [11, 15]. In other words, a person cannot and should not have a soft spot for a work that contradicts his moral views. One can excuse the poet for the peculiarities of the morals of their century, but the enjoyment of their works is impossible. Many contemporary philosophers of art adhere to David Hume's moralism to one degree or another. Richard Moran says that an immoral work cannot make a decent person feel sympathy for the ideas offered by this work, and this, therefore, is its aesthetic flaw [12, 160]. The ethicist Berys Gaut argues that an aesthetic evaluation of work should be made straight-forwardly through moral standards. If a work of art encourages the enjoyment of the unjustified suffering of others, this speaks of its aesthetic and ethical defects and establishes the subsequent basis for the connection of morality with an aesthetic assessment of the quality of work [13, 172].

According to the logic of moralists, transgressive art should morally arouse disgust among the viewers and provoke the sharpest protest reaction. However, as practice shows, transgressive art has become a niche genre of art that is not popular with a mass audience. Transgressive art is not intended for a wide audience, for example, most transgressive films are shown only at film festivals. There is an assumption that the inability of transgressive artworks to go through the initial stage of popularization and commercial success limits their access to a mass audience [14], therefore, such art does not have a big impact on social norms. Violence is considered acceptable in the

mainstream cinema (even in films for children) as long as it occurs in a clearly defined moral setting that contains the polarity of the protagonist and his antagonist. Works of art that go beyond the framework of this structure can also be positively accepted by the audience if they are not part of the mainstream cinema. For example, in the United States, the 1992 film *Man Bites Dog* was not censored despite a naturalistic gang rape. It was decided that a black-and-white film with subtitles would not be popular with a mass audience, and those viewers who would attend it were likely to be prepared for specifics of the genre and moral message embedded in the film [14, 146]. At the same time, it was proposed to reject a film distribution certificate for the more mainstream film *Bad Lieutenant* because of five letters complaining about violent content.

Another view of transgressive art suggests that "violating the law, the transgression does not cancel it" [6, 42], since the transgression in itself denies and confirms the limits of what is permissible [15]. The question of the fate of the fundamental values of the XX and XXI centuries has led artists to extreme (transgressive) situations in which values such as kindness, freedom, love, moral purity and humanity fail, paradoxically confirming themselves and causing a cathartic experience of the audience [16, p. 69]. Thus, transgressive art gives us only a new moral understanding, revealing all the horrors of deviant behavior.

In this context of the multimodality of transgressive art, it is interesting to consider Nietzsche's position on the dialectics of Dionysian and Apollonian concepts of culture. According to Nietzsche, in culture and art, the Dionysian transgression is subordinate to the Apollonian principle and functions under its enlightening power. At the same time, Dionysian passions are necessary, since they help a person not to go blind in the face of immediacy [17, 688]. According to Peter Sloterdijk, in the face of the loss of the naive faith of modern man in values and their autonomy, Nietzsche lays the foundation for new philosophical ethics -- ethics based on tragic irony. [17, 691]. Thus, transgressive art should not be a priori equated with cynical aesthetics if transgression is justified by the Apollonian wisdom and reverence for life.

One of the key techniques of transgressive art is to place the audience in a position witnessing criminal acts, which inevitably leads to the ethical question -- should I be a passive witness to these events? Susan Sontag mentions that when reporting on the tragedies, the photographer may consider it his moral duty to create a less overwhelming image than in reality [18, 63]. Transgressive art, on the contrary, literally "forces" the viewer to look at scenes of violence and the physical and mental suffering of other people. Artists visualize violence by offering various procedures for transitioning violence as an ontological quality into symbolic forms [19, 69].

The basic idea of transgressive thinking (following Foucault's notion) is that knowledge can no longer be found through the opposition of dialectical thinking. Instead, knowledge falls within the limits of experience. The body becomes the locus for the possibility of cognition [9]. Transgressive art helps us go beyond what is permitted in a fictional world. One of the most popular examples of transgression in art is the work of the Marquis de Sade, who openly described the practices of violence and eroticism, which were absolute transgression for his contemporaries. The language of de Sade "called by their right names things that were not called before because of their obscenity" [6, 107], and it combines reason and obscenity, concepts that were previously considered opposite (de Sade's characters clearly articulate their actions). In his prose, de Sade allows his heroes all kinds of transgression of the law without any consequences. There is no morality, but there is pleasure, which becomes the principle of existence. Art moralists often refer to the works of the Marquis de Sade as an example of "ethically sick" art [13, 169]. Although the works of de Sade became a literary classic, the violence reflected in them (for example, in the novel *120 Days of Sodom*) did not become the norm. Moreover, the novels of the writer are prohibited by the governments of some countries, including the loose film adaptation of *120 Days of Sodom* (1975) by Paolo Pasolini [20].

The dialogue dominance is inherent in art and the world of humanitarian values. For example, to understand the artistic representation of the reality displayed on the screen, a subjective attitude to this reality is necessary [21, 85]. However, the audience is repelled by the idea of interacting with transgressive art. A negative reaction to contemporary transgressive art is a direct result of the dominant mechanism of transgression as a genre, namely frustration (disappointment). Transgressive art deliberately throws the audience off-balance, abandoning the objective meaning and structure. Therefore, a person must interpret this type of art himself. For example, transgressive artworks systematically do not meet the reader's expectations of a literary, musical, or visual work, such as finding and gaining meaning, avoiding reality, mimesis, and most important, restoring justice. In transgressive art, the main villain escapes punishment and representatives of the law are either inactive or even more immoral than criminals. A person seeks in art a personal meaning, a kind of moral navigation map that can strengthen existing beliefs or help during an identity crisis [14, 102]. Transgressive art does not satisfy any of these needs. Then what is its function?

The works of the transgressive genre must be correlated with the era in which they were created. The Marquis de Sade was a libertine, a supporter of hedonistic morality and considered transgression as a manifestation of freedom. In the 20th century,

transgression in art began to pursue other goals, this time criticizing the irresistible craving for spectacles in modern society. Jean Baudrillard argues that the style of reporting a terrorist act turns it into a spectacle [22]. It does not matter if the victim or the terrorist dies, the most important thing for the media is that something sensational is happening. Transgressive art criticizes the constant attempts of the media to issue an act of evidence of violence for entertainment and thus indirectly capitalize on people's fears. When interacting with a transgressive artwork, a person suddenly becomes a conscious witness who understands the importance of his ethical judgments.

In the context of this role of transgressive art as an indicator of a person's ethical boundaries, let us refer to a case study by Annette Hill, devoted to the viewers' perception of extreme forms of screen violence. Hill argues that the discussion of violence in art and the media needs to be re-evaluated with a focus on the emotional rather than the behavioral consequences of watching violent movies. Her research offers comprehensive material on how viewers intellectually and emotionally interact with violent movie scenes. Hill's study is based on the obvious but often underestimated observations that observing an event is a social activity. The viewer is an active participant in the process, and watching violent movies is not only a popular but also a conscious decision [23, 38-39]. Hill conducted a study of the audience's reaction to films containing violent scenes. She found that violent films perform the function of social activity, in particular, to put the audience to test. In addition, viewers can usually determine the line between reality and art and have a clear vision of what is unacceptable in real life and what seems entertaining in art. In this way, art helps the viewer to study violence in a safe environment, checking the limits of what is permissible, as well as self-censoring content that seems unacceptable to them.

## 4. Conclusion

Feelings such as moral disgust, protest and antipathy are increasingly understood as the most important aspects of cognitive processes in moral psychology and reveal the complex structure of human nature and culture [24]. Transgressive art is a strong ethical stimulus to which the audience reacts affectively. Transgressive art is characterized by the aestheticization of cruelty, death, and pornography, the lack of a clear structure, and the opposition of good and evil. We can conclude that transgressive art offers a safe environment for exploring taboos without impacting the audience. Modern transgressive art does not shift the norms of public morality, firstly, because it is unpopular among the general public, and secondly, because it is not aimed at promoting deviant behavior.

Regardless of how the taboo is violated in the narrative, it always remains inviolable, often simply confirming its necessity in the minds of the reader or viewer. At the same time, there is a risk that the naturalistic depiction of violence can expand the ethical boundaries of a person as a witness, raising the threshold of sensitivity to cruelty and violence. The red line in transgressive art, its limit is a criticism of social deviations, which serves as an enlightening Apollonian force. In other words, the criterion of acceptability is what remains after the shock. If transgressive art only manifests deviation and violence only for the sake of shock and scandal, then this is an unjustified transgression.

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