

THE PRISON OF STYLE (AND AN ESCAPE PLAN)

Style is something recognizable, identifiable, permanent, unchanging, stagnant, and cautious. It is a form of fear: fear of change, fear of loss, and fear of being different.

Style is well-established and the artist is easily recognized. The artist knows what to do and how to do it. On the other hand, the audience gets what it expects. Things fall into place. The same formula can be seen in both mainstream and underground — as if creating and experiencing have each gone their own way. The artist just goes with the flow. Critics are able to develop an opinion, as long as they can chew on things long enough and the taste is familiar. We are living in a society where everything tastes the same. The Americans have a habit of adding sugar to everything. In Russia, all the food is dripping with grease. An old sanitarium saying goes: “The more you eat porridge, the less you want anything else.” It is of course possible to dedicate your life to only one thing and dive into the details. However, different tastes and cuisines give the porridge new context.

Style can be appealing to the audience for a variety of reasons. It can be a purely pleasing aes-

thetic experience. Style can resonate with a consumer's own identity and place in the world — it can be loosely contemporary or trigger childhood memories of popular culture, thus evoking nostalgia. A typical audience does not analyze why something is appealing. It is simply just “important” or “good.” Contents are not subject to analysis; instead the experience is all that counts. Overanalysis is not preferred, because it can interfere with communication, the ability to experience. In the worst case, style is only applied on the surface. Meanings then develop only from the relation of the work to the consumer's own identity and realm of experience. In the complex world of the 21st century people often want something simple. The mere surface has already been branded onto products many times over. In the age of social media hundreds of millions of people can personally relate to a single piece of work. Imagine a world where everyone shares the same experiences from childhood. The only thing needed for their growth is a single “eternal porridge” which feeds all of their senses. It is useful for capitalism to disarm people as early as possible. Style is indeed specifically a

capitalistic tool. Markets force the same product to be wrapped in different packages to reach different audiences. The aim is to offer something that is already familiar to the receiver. Bringing up new ideas, plain information, or ideological content is simply bad for business.

In a firmly entrenched style, development is made on a nuanced level — in small details or processes. These types of changes are almost imperceptible to the audience. They can alter the experience but they don't affect the content. Style is the enemy of the artist. It distorts the experience. The work should lay upon the audience like a gentle rainfall in the midst of sunshine. You must be able to move people and be moved yourself.

The artist who has found a distinct style becomes apathetic. The work becomes formal and energy ceases to flow. The quality of the work is diminished and creativity devolves into series of repetitions. Mannerisms are born. The artist is still liked by the audience that subconsciously remembers the good times and is prone to loyalty. The artist likes the audience for appreciating the style. It is a symbiotic relationship but symptomatic — in the mind of the audience the artist's first work is still the best.

The capitalistic machinery likes the artist and the style, but first and foremost it likes the audience because it is the yeast in the commercial dough. The machinery markets the artist, but in particular it markets the style. Market research determines what kind of person might need this and that. At the same time the audience's thought process has atrophied. The artist's works are attractive because their style evokes a feeling of security. The relationship has turned serious, things have become familiar. In the warmth of the fireplace

the artist and the audience both feel cozy. People have a tendency toward self-indulgence. It would be rather inconvenient to stick your head into the flames of the fireplace. But that's exactly what you should do in order to learn something new. The goal is the development of mankind as a species. Only individual thinking and the ability to make personal choices can save the environment we have conquered so supremely — the Earth.

Styles usually reflect their time. Social pressure forces many artists to stick to the styles of the times. Most people take interest in things based on external properties. It's frightening to be left out of a scene — not having a style is perceived as lacking an identity. Most artists craft their own identity around external attributes. People of the 21st century have a compelling need to belong to something. In the middle of constant change, people seek safety in anything perceived as their "own." The punk rocker, the golfer, and the fisherman all need their own group. Without it, they don't exist, or at least something seems to be missing. Everything is insignificant next to nothingness. We need like-minded support to maintain our own simple world. We experience things together. We watch reruns. The tears triggered by a nostalgic, generation-defining moment emphasizes all of this. At the same time, the algorithms of social media try to offer us like-minded friends and yet more of the same old thing in a new wrapping. We look in the mirror and don't exactly know what to make of what we see. If we had to take off our clothes, jewelry, make-up, tattoos, and artificial nails we wouldn't feel very comfortable. It's hard to see in the mirror that your face is not symmetric.

The market economy loves a product that is easily recognizable and easy to sell. The hive mind

of social media is used by commercial operators to infiltrate the world with whatever they wish in just milliseconds of time. Proven styles and content from monoculture are being recycled and commercialized faster by the day. The experimental imagery of yesterday decorates the underpants of today. In order to avoid the struggle, most artists sell out. To tolerate themselves they become distorted. This is a defensive mechanism of our body and mind.

Social media is full of visual streams, where artists copy each other *ad nauseum*. Every corner of the world simultaneously has identical subgenres, from 3-D effects to outsider art, Risograph-printed fanzines with phony innovations copied from the art world, all the same sounds and uniforms and so on and so forth. On the opposing side, mentally declining geezers who represent the past are laughing to themselves, in their own cliques. Connections between old and new occur less frequently than ever — the gaps between them seem wider than ever. Historical significance does not fit the commercial framework. The same thing can be sold several times to ignorant people.

The transition to new technologies necessitated by the internet was well-timed from the viewpoint of financial powers. The relatively free internet of the 1990s was mostly the privilege of a small group. The development of the internet was fueled by the enthusiasm for a new digital age. The commercialization of the internet was, however, enabled by the net itself. In the Western world, the biased global media deliberately equated “free internet” with drug dealing “criminals” sharing music and movies using P2P technologies. More often than not, these lawbreakers were just teenagers who were subconsciously attracted to the idea of

freedom. Changes in the net often remain invisible to the end user. Still, everyone has to understand that by the 2010s, the information, viewpoints, and experiences gathered from the net are not objective. Usually there is an underlying attempt to sell something, but essentially it is a question of power. Beneath different visual surfaces there are things growing that we are not aware of. The entity strives for automation, presumably in an attempt to eliminate the human factor. The Nazi soldier who pulled the lever of the gas chamber often never grasped the consequences of his actions; likewise we are not aware the consequences of our clicks. In the final climax of the global commercial machinery, no single individual is responsible. The power has been automated to serve profits and compound itself.

Globalization has diminished the margins in all fields of culture. The ruling class defines both old and new. The artist must either precisely select an audience from the underground or stick to the codex of the mainstream. The similarities between truly creative work and the mainstream are getting fewer all the time — publications, media, stores, venues, and internet forums are so removed from culture containing real and important thinking that such perspectives are encountered only by those who specifically look for them. The effectiveness of culture is minimal or only superficially apparent — people asking for change, preaching for others to do the same. Governmentally, culture exists only as budget numbers on paper, like a relic. Its power has been subsumed by profit margins. Experiences are hard to quantify, as a work of art can elicit positive or negative reactions and be valuable from both points of view. At the same time the mainstream attitude toward culture, education,

and knowledge has turned hostile. I repeat: it is all about power and power is the means and ability to make a difference. Nations have been ruled for centuries by withholding education. There was a time when the art of printing was tightly guarded, because it was the most important tool of power and education. Former colonies in Africa and South America are still suffering from inadequate printing resources. Print has been superseded by social media in enabling and consolidating global control. It is essential for today's market economy to consider the human mind a commodity as quantifiable as a toaster and vibrator in the "internet of things." With money being the ultimate authority, the net is defined in all respects in a prescribed manner that reflects this. Both the contents and the user are defined by their economics. When net traffic builds a well-organized data mass there is nothing media can offer to dissident culture.

It has been said that a feeling of emptiness best describes this beginning of the new millennium. Humanity has trouble adapting to the constantly changing and formless virtual world. The internet increasingly resembles a mirror in which net addicts marvel at their own image. The nineties' dream of information, culture, and education made available to everyone has been drowned in a false sense of freedom. The artists and intellectual property owners are both responsible for dumbing down the public, because rights have become commodities. Organizations and net purists have seldom agreed, even though they are the ones who should have collaborated on defining what information should be shared on the net and how. However, the current net regime remains vulnerable and the public is not irrevocably dumbed down. We must seek alternatives and preserve them, but most impor-

tantly the channels and platforms for expressing different ideas must be maintained. Any culture will cease to exist and any revolutionary idea will be forgotten if there is no venue to express it.

Artists choose their publishing platform according to what their work represents. Hipsters, museum art painters, and amateur daubers all have their own preferred publishing channels. They all share a strict common view of what their art consists of and who does not belong in their group. This is comparable to peer support. All this has very little significance. Museums resemble graveyards and the local gallery's guestbook gains five names per day. This is not sustainable and national culture funding is wasted. Artists must go where they are not wanted or expected. It is most important to communicate with common people. Instead of enjoying pleasant company in high society you must be completely on your own, if the situation demands it. "Artistic capital" is an oxymoron. Forget it. That is not what matters.

Many artists collect books containing visual reference material. Styles are blatantly copied; technically as well as semiotically. Some teachers even encourage this. In the meantime, scientists cannot base their methodology on one source only, even when they are employed by a commercial entity. They must learn everything about the desired truth and its counterforces and form their view about the subject with these facts in hand. Similarly, artists must build bridges using their education and experiences. You must strive for wisdom. Stealing is not wise for the artist, because it is hardly educating. You must try to learn constantly and aim beyond what can be found in books. You must distance yourself from influences, but also know the way back to communicate your

findings. It is futile to claim that “everything has already been done” as if that would justify copying. Despite the space being carved, the scope of possibilities is limitless for our feeble species.

The commercial stream of culture tries to pigeonhole everything it encounters. Artists shouldn't consider this when creating, but they must acknowledge different styles and their references. Content-focused artists should indeed be interested in the mainstream and how it works. The goal still is to communicate to the common people in a language they can understand. Different fields of art converge with people in very different ways. For example, almost everyone reads comics as a child, which makes them a good means of communication to reach common people. At the same time, artists can use generation-defining moments as a reference point to communicate to particular groups of people.

To successfully communicate ideas to large groups of people, the artist should choose a style which is somehow familiar to the recipient. The scheme is to utilize capitalistic means to serve the artist. This does not mean compromise; within these restrictions freedom can be subversively planted. When the recipient has been tempted to study the work, the artist can communicate inconvenient matters, too. The recipient will probably be ready for this. Even though our age seems to encourage stupidity and mediocrity, the recipient can prove surprisingly susceptible when he decides to be.

In an ideal situation, the recipient gains insight and becomes able to digest thought-provoking content alongside the usual entertainment. The quest for finding new audiences is a long one. The artist must have something to say and know

how to say it. In addition to creating art, you have to find publishing channels. The idea that a good work of art will speak for itself is regrettably wrong these days.

Typically in the 21st century, styles only rarely reveal any real content underneath. Content here refers to the willful communication of something to someone, the ability to crystallize the essence of a moment, to express a different viewpoint about something, to make unexpected associations, and to understand and communicate something fundamental about life and get the message through to ordinary people. The basis for a work of art must be the content. Popularity is besides the point. The content itself must dictate the form that suits it best.

The artist creates a style within the chosen form of expression to best communicate the content. This is essential. As with letters and text and spoken language, likewise an artist's style is born to serve a special purpose. It tries to communicate the message as accurately as possible. Accuracy is not only pure information but something much subtler — the first rays of morning sun look completely different depending on the moment, location and the person observing them. Instead of repetition and copying you should try to capture actual moments and wholes using all senses. As a comics artist, I consider the relation between text and images thoroughly before starting work. Do I need colors? What kind of rhythm would suit the comic? What is best left for the audience to figure out and what should be explained? Who is my target audience? And so on. The style of the work is composed of many components and it rarely has anything to do with what you personally like. More often than not artists have to chal-

lunge themselves. They must step out of their comfort zone and sacrifice style, beauty, and general acceptance. You must draw difficult things. You must break something. As an artist you must go through constant self-scrutiny. This will bring out your own unique identity. The artist's self is not superficial style; the content defines your identity. What do I want to say? What am I?

The artist can deliver clear ideas, give different views, or just challenge the audience and develop its ability to sense, experience and — finally — think. In order to succeed, the artist's expression must be free and wide-ranging. You must be willing and able to learn. Communication is at the core of everything. The artist must think what is the message and how to get it across to the audience. A comic artist's style can be defined by the illustrations, color schemes, narratives, contents, and details. The methods of communication are unlimited. Freedom can be intimidating, but tireless work will teach you to understand its approximate meaning. Different work methods and corresponding tools, different lengths, different formats for publications and different venues must be exhausted. All this is possible, because it is you who decides what to do. I use the term "creative spectrum." It is a state of mind and body where thoughts and ideas find their expression and formats naturally.

Forms of expression and styles can be compared to languages and dialects. You don't have to know all of them as long as you're being understood. Playing the banjo teaches the artist something besides music itself, but also about rhythm, structure, and nuances — all of which are essential to comic artists. Different forms of expression and styles must be understood as a broader

spectrum of communication and creativity, which has no boundaries. Pigeonholing is a symptom of capitalism — in the beginning there was voice and rhythm, later music, much later came "adult rock" and finally a concept shop from where you can choose between a hip-hop and goth rock uniform. The artist must not think about genre, but instead, what is the message? It's dangerous to develop your own art on terms of style. You must be conscious of what you're doing, but act on instinct.

Not having a style may develop into a style itself — a compulsive need to act differently or unpleasant expectations of renewal. It is more important to be unexpected. You must be conscious of your earlier work and what the audience thinks about it. Neither party should be filled with too much satisfaction. In dance terms, the artist must be the one who leads the audience and not the other way around. At its best, both sides advance to learn something new about themselves. Routinely changing styles may help artists understand themselves. With every message and their respective visual or narrative style, the artist must go through every detail in his working process. Being associated with no particular style creates a feeling of freedom, because the artist does not have to represent anything. It gives a broader perspective of the work and makes it easier to manage as a whole in addition to its numerous components. The various influences and references become audience-startling surgical strikes.

Stylistic requirements naturally have an influence on the content — i.e., the message which the artist tries to get across. One artist is always obliged to be funny, another must offer excitement. Contemporary art trends may require sketchy drawing from someone. Political correctness is natural to

one whereas another wants to smash every imaginable taboo. I repeat: the artist must constantly change. Your work must reflect life. Life is a stream of different experiences and feelings — sorrow is often the prerequisite to happiness, hate is born out of fear, sound is louder after silence, explosions are more powerful when they break the steady course of everyday life.

The most adaptive species survive in nature. Nonetheless, a zebra's style may seem timeless and an elephant's trunk looks as long as it was yesterday. In reality our ecosystem is under constant change, regardless of humans. Butterflies in industrial cities change their coloring according to pollution in the air. The blueberry is a candidate among other varieties to vanish from Finnish nature due to climate change. In the sphere of biodiversity it's impossible to imagine any species that could remain the same forever. The brain of a digital native born in the 2000s is already developing in a completely new direction. Stability is not typical to nature. The human race is not conscious of its fight for survival, but that is precisely what it is constantly going through. Capitalism aims to simplify things in order to control humanity easier. Biodiversity is simplified with intensive production processes and gene manipulation. The plan is crumbling, however. Marginal art may one day rise from misery to domination, but it will require tireless work and watching for opportunity. When it knocks, you must rise and be ready to communicate your message.

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