



INTERPRETING MUSIC, ENGAGING CULTURE

AN INTRODUCTION TO MUSIC CRITICISM

KATHERINE WALKER

Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture

Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture: An Introduction to Music Criticism offers a clear, hands-on guide for emerging music critics that brings together aesthetics, critical theory, and practical music criticism in an accessible format. Over the course of the book, readers develop a vocabulary and framework for criticizing music of all kinds and for various media while learning how to connect music to its cultural, social, and political contexts.

Excerpts from primary sources throughout provide a wide range of writing examples, while Chapters address the distinct challenges of describing and interpreting music for various media and in diverse formats. Along the way, the book explores questions at the core of music and its criticism, such as what constitutes a musical work and what makes a piece of music “authentic”; it also introduces critical lenses, including feminist and queer criticism, postcolonialism and critical race theory, as well as the analysis of music in consumer culture. Addressing both classical and popular music criticism, *Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture* is a comprehensive and lively textbook that enables students to uncover, articulate, and analyze what makes music compelling and meaningful.

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Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture

An Introduction to Music Criticism

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**This book is dedicated to the family I made and the
family I chose:
Clara, Eme, Ian, and Rhys**



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Contents

<i>How to Use This Book</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction: A Critical Engagement With Music	1
<i>Critical Discourse</i>	2
<i>From Critical to Criticism</i>	3
<i>What's Not Criticism?</i>	14
<i>Why Do Criticism?</i>	15
<i>Chapter Summary</i>	16
PART 1	
Aesthetic Foundations	19
1 What Is Art? The Musical Work Problem	21
<i>The Musical Work Concept</i>	21
<i>Getting to Know the Musical Work</i>	25
<i>Historically Informed Performance (HIP) Movement</i>	25
<i>Getting to Know Technical Aspects of the</i> <i>Performance</i>	28
<i>Getting to Know Interpretive Aspects of the</i> <i>Performance</i>	29
<i>The Musical Work and Value</i>	30
<i>The Case of Popular Music</i>	31
<i>Chapter Summary</i>	36
2 Music and Authenticity	38
<i>Defining Authenticity</i>	39
<i>Folk Authenticity</i>	41
<i>Authenticity in Hip-Hop</i>	45
<i>Chapter Summary</i>	50

3	Beyond Authenticity	53
	<i>Postmodernism</i>	53
	<i>Postmodern Music and Its Criticism</i>	56
	<i>Postmodernism in a Post-Truth Era</i>	63
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	65
	PART 2	
	Criticizing Music	67
4	Describing Music	69
	<i>Elements of Music</i>	74
	<i>Genre</i>	80
	<i>Style Period</i>	82
	<i>Audience</i>	83
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	83
5	Interpreting Music	86
	<i>Musical Interpretation</i>	88
	<i>Interpretive Strategies</i>	94
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	95
6	Evaluating Music	98
	<i>Some Negative Criticism of Negative Criticism</i>	98
	<i>Evaluation and the Work's Purpose</i>	100
	<i>The Value of the Purpose</i>	104
	<i>The Critic as Educator</i>	106
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	108
	PART 3	
	Critical Lenses	111
7	Feminist Music Criticism	113
	<i>Feminism and Feminisms</i>	113
	<i>Why Do We Need Feminism?</i>	114
	<i>History of Feminisms</i>	115
	<i>Feminism and Music</i>	116
	<i>Feminist Criticism</i>	119
	<i>Chapter Summary</i>	123

8	Queer Music Criticism	126
	<i>Genderqueer</i> 127	
	<i>Queering the Patriarchy</i> 129	
	<i>Music and Queer Expression</i> 130	
	<i>Camp Isn't Always Queer</i> 131	
	<i>Queer Isn't Always Camp</i> 134	
	<i>Queer Criticism as History and Allyship</i> 138	
	<i>Chapter Summary</i> 139	
9	Postcolonialism and Critical Race Theory	141
	<i>Orientalism</i> 142	
	<i>Postcolonialism</i> 144	
	<i>Postcolonialism and Critical Race Theory</i> 147	
	<i>Chapter Summary</i> 152	
10	Music and Consumer Culture	154
	<i>The Case of Popular Music</i> 155	
	<i>Embedded Advertising in Popular Music</i> 157	
	<i>Music and Marketing in the Age of Social Media</i> 159	
	<i>Chapter Summary</i> 162	
PART 4		
	Critical Contexts	165
11	Album and Track-by-Track Reviews	167
	<i>Album Review in the Age of Streaming</i> 167	
	<i>Track-by-Track Review</i> 171	
	<i>Writing for a Specific Publication</i> 174	
	<i>Chapter Summary</i> 175	
12	Program Notes and the Live Concert Review	178
	<i>Program Notes as Guide</i> 178	
	<i>Live Review</i> 182	
	<i>Chapter Summary</i> 189	
	<i>Index</i>	191



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How to Use This Book

For Students

A book about music criticism is, at its heart, a book about music. The reviews in this book span a wide range of genres, styles, and even time periods. You will read about Bach and Beethoven; the Pixies and PJ Harvey; Taylor Swift and Nicki Minaj; and Arcade Fire and Radiohead. For these critics, and for me, the reviews are intended to be companion pieces to the music itself. In order to benefit fully from the content of this book, be sure to listen to the music that is the subject of the review at hand. (You may wish to experiment with listening before and after reading the review. Does it shape or influence the listening experience?) Watch the videos when relevant and pull up the lyrics alongside any critical discussion of them.

Sometimes, in the service of space or for reasons of copyright, only a short passage of a review is quoted in the book. In such instances, I encourage you to refer to the entire review whenever possible. Many of the reviews in this book are quoted from open-access websites like *Pitchfork*, *The Quietus*, *Boston Classical Review*; other sources, like *The New York Times* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, may be available through your public or academic library system. Similarly, pulling up the lyrics or a song's accompanying music video, whenever relevant, will enrich your understanding of the content at hand.

Lastly, while the book focuses on music criticism, it contains so much more—you'll be introduced to critical theory, popular culture studies, history, aesthetics, and music theory. Indeed, any one of the chapters in this book could be its own book; some of them could be entire libraries. If you feel drawn in by a topic raised in the book, please know that there is a whole universe of knowledge and interest awaiting you. Consider taking a course in critical theory or reading books devoted specifically to feminism or aesthetics. This broad overview provides access to many different disciplines and epistemologies. I hope that you will travel further down the road with some of them.

For Instructors

The 13 chapters of this book roughly align to a 16-week semester (when accounting for final projects, exams, and breaks). Nevertheless, the pacing through the chapters is not a steady one. Some topics are introduced in this book that deserve more attention than suggested by the space I give them. For example, although I have devoted only a few paragraphs to the concept of taste, I teach an entire unit on that topic in my Aesthetics course. As you organize your syllabus and prepare to teach this material, I invite you to consider where you might want to pull in the reins, add additional readings, and go deeper into a topic.

Although the book contains some music terminology, including references to the backbeat, time signatures, appoggiaturas, etc., those references generally accompany explanations; and students can most certainly engage the material without being literate in them. There is no need to require music theory prerequisites for a student's engagement with this book. On the contrary, the book has utility well beyond the realm of academic music studies; it may be an appropriate resource for a course on journalism, popular culture studies, media studies, and nonfiction writing. It can also provide an accessible alternative to traditional *Introduction to Music* textbooks.

As stated in the "For Students" section, above, I encourage you and your students to refer to the entire review when only a short excerpt is quoted. Many can be found on open-access websites or (as is the case with *The New York Times*, for example) through your academic library system. Engaging with the entire review will enhance student learning and enrich the topic at hand. Lastly, though it goes without saying, the music itself is the primary source material of this book and should be at the center of the student's engagement with it.

Introduction

A Critical Engagement With Music

Imagine that you are walking down the street, listening to music through your ear buds, as Katy Perry's pop anthem "Roar" begins to play. Your gait changes imperceptibly as you pace yourself to the beat. Your head starts to move with the music, and your mouth forms the words along with the singer. As the climactic chorus approaches, your fingers instinctively reach for the volume button on the side of your phone (though it's already playing at the maximum level). When the long-awaited chorus drops, your arms swing freely by your side, and your step becomes bouncy and rhythmic. Now you're outright singing along as the music washes over you: "I've got the eye of the tiger, the dah dah, something something fire, 'cause I am a champion . . ." You glance ahead and see someone smiling at you. You realize at that moment that, not only have you been putting on your own one-person show, the show is pretty bad. How can it be that you don't know the lyrics to a song that you have heard so many times?

Suppose this question gnaws at you, and you find yourself looking up the lyrics later that day. Scanning the text, you are struck by how few lyrics there are. You are familiar with the standard verse-chorus pop song structure; here, each chorus is preceded by a "pre-chorus," which (like the chorus) restates its own lyrics and music. The verses seem diminutive and insignificant in relation to the repeating, multi-section chorus, which occupies so much of the song. In fact, you notice that the verses gradually diminish in length as the song unfolds. The first verse contains two parallel statements of three phrases each. The second verse (which begins, "Now I'm floating") only has one such statement, rendering it half as long as the previous verse. Following the second statement of the chorus is a mere shadow of a verse, a brief transition section, which recalls themes from the chorus, itself. One does not have to wait long for the third, extended statement of the chorus, which brings the song to its exultant, highly satisfying conclusion.

Listening to the song confirms your observation. The space occupied by verses gradually decreases, propelling the music forward, toward each culminating statement of the chorus. It's almost as if this song can be reduced

2 *Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture*

to music that anticipates the chorus and the chorus, itself. Now you understand why the lyrics have eluded you all this time; the arrival of the chorus is so immersive that it leaves little room for reflection. And yet that sense of abandon, of losing oneself in the music, is precisely what makes the song so satisfying to listen to. You put your ear buds back in, and, setting aside for the moment thoughts of compressed forms and extended choruses, you lose yourself in the music, enjoying the emotions it conjures and the movement that it generates in your body. As the chorus drops, you sing the lyrics, this time, not missing a word.

This is a story about two ways of listening to music, the first of which is probably familiar to you. Even if you've never sung your way down the street with your ear buds in, you've probably enjoyed the pleasures of dancing to music or the boost that an upbeat song can provide to an exercise regime. For most of us, in these contexts, it's as if the body has its own way of comprehending musical meaning. Our experience is immersive, embodied, and ultimately passive.¹ In the story above, however, you temporarily stepped out of that passive, embodied state to actively engage with the music. You asked questions, made observations, and drew meaningful conclusions about its structure and form. Although you didn't publish your ideas on a music website; though you're not preparing a lecture on the compressed form of Katy Perry's "Roar"; though you haven't even made any judgments about the value of the song, you have nonetheless enacted a shift from passive and embodied to active and reflective engagement with music. That shift marks the beginning of criticism as this book defines it.

Critical Discourse

The word *criticism* originates from Greek, *kritikos*, meaning "to judge" or "to decide." Given its etymology, it may be no wonder that criticism is often disparaged as being explicitly evaluative and implicitly negative. In practice, however, criticism encompasses a great deal more than judgment. Broadly speaking, it is a form of discourse, in that it produces and reinforces systematic ways of actively engaging a subject through language. It thus follows that music criticism involves the use of language to actively engage with musical sounds and contexts. Such engagement may include describing a song (album, band, genre, or performance), interpreting its meaning, analyzing its structure and composition, evaluating its worth, and/or placing it in its proper historical or cultural context. To engage with music critically is, in this broad sense, to engage with it discursively; that is, actively and systematically, through language.

Viewed in this way, you probably encounter music criticism regularly in your everyday life. Certainly, an album review published in *Rolling Stone*

magazine constitutes music criticism. However, have you considered that the informal debate that you had with a friend over which band is better is also a critical activity? A piano teacher who encourages a student to approach a piece of music from a certain interpretive or stylistic perspective; a music major who writes a paper on Debussy; even a person contemplating the unfolding structure of Katy Perry's "Roar," is engaged in music-critical work. The differences between these various critical activities relate to the degree and kinds of knowledge that each person possesses and the purposes to which the knowledge is put. Knowledge strengthens a critical voice and directs it toward certain observations and conclusions.

In the Katy Perry example above, one needs certain habits of listening and knowledge of music in order to perceive the gradual compression of the verses. One must be able to distinguish between a verse, pre-chorus, and chorus, and be able to count musical phrases in the respective sections. It also helps to understand tempo and meter and to be able to count beats and measures. Indeed, the more knowledge one possesses, the more equipped they are to engage in meaningful critical work. Knowledge, however, is not linear; it can expand in any number of directions, such that different kinds of knowledge point the critical engagement toward different conclusions. A computer scientist who makes beats in their spare time might notice the conspicuous absence of a backbeat until the onset of the chorus. The political theorist, meanwhile, might investigate Hillary Clinton's promotional use of this song during her 2016 presidential campaign. The women's studies major might be interested in the music video, reflecting on the complexities and contradictions of mainstream pop culture's particular shade of feminism. Each of these modes of inquiry is valid, for there is no single answer to the question of a song's meaning.

From Critical to Criticism

As suggested, critical discourse involves the use of language to understand and provide understanding about music and its contexts. Thus defined, critical discourse encompasses a vast array of activities, spanning diverse disciplines and professions (both within and outside of music). Criticism begins with critical discourse, applying its methods to specific goals and outcomes. Here again, the scope of activities and priorities is vast; nevertheless, music critics are, on the whole, concerned with a category of questions that distinguish them from other writers on music, and they frame their answers in discipline-specific ways. While there is no universal agreement about the parameters or definition of music criticism, the following general guidelines may distinguish music criticism from other related activities.

Critics are concerned with present-day music and music culture.

4 *Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture*

This is not to say that critics don't write about music composed in the past; on the contrary, much present-day concert life is centered on the historical canon. However, criticism primarily concerns present-day music culture and the music—be it ancient or contemporary—that contributes to it.

Consider this essay by William Robin, a music critic for *The New Yorker*.² It begins with a clear grounding in history:

Over the course of eight weeks, the group of passionate London musicians mounted the first-ever survey of Beethoven's sixteen string quartets. The Society distributed scores for dedicated audience members to peruse; attendees were asked to arrive thirty minutes early so as not to disrupt the music.

In this brief introductory paragraph, the reader is transported to nineteenth-century London, where erudite concertgoers rustled scores in an otherwise hushed auditorium, awaiting another performance of Beethoven's string quartets. Yet just as swiftly as the reader was transported into the past, they are pulled back into the present:

That spirit of veneration has changed very little. Today, cycles of Beethoven's quartets, symphonies, and piano sonatas are ubiquitous. Up-and-coming string quartets frequently take a crack at performing the complete Beethoven. A traversal of the composer's nine symphonies has become a regular staple of the concert hall.

As the essay unfolds, the author moves fluidly between the past and the present, focusing in turn on Beethoven's lifetime, his later nineteenth-century legacy, and current trends in performing and recording his music. Notwithstanding this fluidity, the purpose of the essay—its thesis and conclusion—concerns present-day music culture:

The benefits of listening to a full set of sonatas, symphonies, or quartets are obvious: they paint a rich portrait of a composer's musical development, allowing connections to be heard across an artistic career. [. . .] For the interpreter, cycles offer an opportunity to grapple with repertoire on a grand scale. [. . .]

Yet, there is something puzzling about the classical fixation on cycles. Unlike Wagner's "Ring" or Schubert's "Winterreise," Beethoven's sonatas do not tell a singular, unified story. The composer did not know that he would write a ninth symphony when he composed his first. These omnipresent cycles represent, instead, an anachronistic grouping—one made only in hindsight and informed by a shrewd combination

of the Romantic ethos of classical music and the box-set mentality of the record industry. And, though they claim to embrace a wide swath of music, cycles are symptomatic of the past century's thinning of the repertory, one that has squeezed out much fascinating music and left behind only the most pre-sanctioned of classics.

Ultimately, this essay posits a critique of a commodified record industry, a shrinking canon, and an anachronistic Romantic ethos of classical music. The author reaches expertly into the past in order to bring light to present-day music culture. Focus on the present is a basic tenet of this piece and of music criticism in general.

Critics operate in the subjective realm of taste.

Criticism has been designated “history without footnotes,” which reflects the commonplace frustration with writing that is at once persuasive and informative and, at the same time, unsubstantiated by scholarly methods.³ Even with its footnotes, history (like any discipline) takes shape in part through the priorities, goals, and thought processes of the historians that write it. In fact, an entire subdiscipline, historiography, exists to interrogate the claims, biases, and agendas that underwrite our historical narratives. While history's authors tend to recede into the background of their writings, historiography situates them in the foreground and makes visible the fact that history is written in and for the present; that it is, essentially, a story.

In this sense, criticism and history are analogous: each provides a lens—framed and focused by its authors—through which to experience a particular object or event. Nevertheless, there is an important difference between the disposition of the historian and that of the critic: the historian seeks to attenuate bias and takes as a professional goal the maintenance of maximum personal distance from the subject; the critic, on the other hand, invites the reader directly into their subjective point of view.

Consider Laurie Anderson's review of Animal Collective's album, *Centipede HZ*⁴:

First of all, I hate to admit it but you might as well know it right off: the more it sounds like “Grass” (my favorite Animal Collective song) the more I like it.

“Grass” is ecstatic. A huge football game that goes haywire. The players suddenly running in circles, insanely chirping cartoon birds, clouds billowing, the marching band spelling out arcane words in quickly shifting formations, the scoreboard in fast forward, the crowd going “Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah!”

6 *Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture*

As a musician I know that's not the most generous approach to a new record that has ambitions and lots of great sounds and dangerous harmonies and new constructions. It's not fair to hope it sounds like something from the past. But I just can't help it. "Grass" is so full of joy and freedom, all that manic humming and rattling and chirping. Are there more of you out there like that?

Not only are her first-person voice and colloquial, almost confessional, tone acceptable in the realm of criticism (as opposed to an historical essay, where they may be out of place), they are standard in the field. Indeed, the reader expects to meet with the subjective impressions of the critic. For contemporary music and literary critic R. J. Wheaton, a critic needs

taste . . . [Y]ou need to have an opinion on which types of music, which artists, which techniques are better than others. You need to have an opinion on why. And you need to be able to explain or imply that in a compelling and interesting way. Without that, your writing will lack passion and you yourself will lack the drive to explore the new, whether it's actually new or merely new to you in the service of deepening your enthusiasms.⁵

Of course, taste cannot be reduced to opinion alone, as Wheaton seems to suggest. This complex concept is a central preoccupation of the philosophy of art, among whose earliest and most probing examiners was the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant. For Kant, taste is a faculty of judgment, which responds to feelings of pleasure or displeasure when experiencing an aesthetic object (usually an object of art or nature). Whereas the rightness of a mathematical principle can be logically defended, the value of a symphony or a painting is determined by the pleasure that it awakens in the perceiver. Judgments of taste, thus based on feelings of pleasure and displeasure, are necessarily subjective.

In matters of taste, however, subjectivity is not to be confused with personal preferences and predilections. Aesthetic pleasure denotes a specific kind of subjectivity because it is "disinterested," which, for Kant, means that it is divorced from desire. Compare, for example, the pleasure derived from experiencing a sunset with that derived from a cookie. We can enjoy a sunset without wanting anything from it, but the perception of a cookie activates our appetitive motives and responses. Examining this distinction more closely, we observe that it is not the sunset itself but its representation that pleases us—its colors, shapes, and movements. The cookie, on the other hand, offers something beyond its representation—namely, calories. (To focus on the light and warmth provided by the sun would similarly be to turn away from the aesthetic.) Thus subjectivity, as a feature of taste, refers to the disinterested pleasure (or displeasure) experienced in perceiving the *representation* of an aesthetic object.

Subjectivity is the first of two essential features of Kant's formulation of taste. The second is, somewhat paradoxically, universality. Aesthetic responses seem to derive from properties of the objects themselves, and, as such, seem to transcend individual preferences to communicate universal truths. Universality suggests that the perceiver feels "as if beauty were a property of the object" and not a feature of one's experience.⁶ Thus, we tend to believe that sunsets, for example, give pleasure because they are innately beautiful and not because we subjectively perceive them as such. Although the language of "seeming" and "believing" is necessarily tentative, a wealth of universally appreciated art confirms the mysterious logic of subjective universality. The beauty of a Bach sonata or Shakespeare sonnet cannot be logically defended because it rests on subjective pleasure; yet that pleasure is so widely shared that it seems to transcend our subjective impressions to communicate something universally true. Indeed, if I don't care for a particular food or type of weather, you will not question my taste, but if I don't care for a Bach sonata or Shakespeare sonnet, you will believe that I am wrong. Kant describes this feature of aesthetic judgment in no uncertain terms:

If [a person] pronounces that something is beautiful, then he expects the very same satisfaction of others: he judges not merely for himself, but for everyone, and speaks of beauty as if it were a property of things. Hence he says that the thing is beautiful, and does not count on the agreement of others with his judgment of satisfaction because he has frequently found them to be agreeable with his own, but rather demands it from them. He rebukes them if they judge otherwise, and denies that they have taste, though he nevertheless requires that they ought to have it; and to this extent one cannot say, "Everyone has his special taste." This would be as much as to say that there is no taste at all, i.e., no aesthetic judgment that could make a rightful claim to the assent of everyone.⁷

The claim to universality is a keystone of aesthetic judgment and a distinction between personal preferences and judgments of taste. It is marked by a shift in focus from properties in the perceiver (e.g., "I like this painting because red is my favorite color") to features of the object itself (e.g., "The reds in this painting have tremendous depth").

Despite Anderson's initially subjective first-person praise of "Grass" in the review above, the essay unfolds to emphasize features in the music as opposed to resting on her personal preferences and predilections:

Centipede Hz is a record with lots of things in it—motors and propellers, a giant samba band with the massive surdo drum. A record that's going somewhere, inventing its own form of transportation.

And it's in the transitions where you can hear the method, the sounds of large structures breaking down into pieces, chunks, the metal springs

8 *Interpreting Music, Engaging Culture*

still trembling, the spent batteries. And it's from these pieces that are lying around that the next song is swiftly deftly assembled. In "Pulleys" the initial construction is half techno, half organic. Big bundles of hollow rushes through Indonesian filters mix with big, thick chords and a massive, pointy bass line, hooting smoky vocals that curl and twist. Once in a while a vocoder.

By the end of the review, we've traveled a significant distance from Anderson's almost confessional opening lines that communicated her love for "Grass." Her comments are now firmly rooted in the music, as she turns our attention from the fact that she likes the album to the reasons why. We may not have listened to the album, but we hear it nonetheless: it is nostalgically industrial, with big, machine-like motives that are made to dance over Latin rhythms; it contains short, metallic ideas that are presented and then swiftly disassembled and reconfigured as if they were Legos; and one hears non-western exoticisms and big, earthy drums alongside the eerie crooning of a vocoder. Anderson's description vividly captures the energy and excitement of the album, the irreverent mix of nostalgic and new, urban and rural, western and other. Though her review begins by emphasizing her personal preferences, it ultimately provides the reader with a compelling justification for her judgments.

Reflecting now on the opening lines, which initially seemed so subjective, it is clear that the first-person language and ironically apologetic tone provided a foil for her critical evaluations. Critical judgments are judgments of taste, which, while subjective, are nevertheless justified by qualities that inhere in the work of art (rather than qualities, experiences, and preferences of the perceiver), and by means of these justifications demand universal agreement.

So far, so good. Why, then, did Salvador Dali proclaim that "it is good taste, and good taste alone, that possesses the power to sterilize and is always the first handicap to any creative functioning"? Why did Pablo Picasso cite "good taste" as "the enemy of creativeness"? And why did George Bernard Shaw define a "man of great common sense and good taste" as "thereby a man without originality or moral courage"?

First of all, these artists recognized that taste tends to favor established (over emerging) aesthetic ideals. This is perhaps one reason why the term *avant-garde* so aptly describes artists on the forefront of their respective mediums. A medieval French military term, "*avant-garde*" (literally, "advance guard") originally referred to soldiers on the front line of an advancing military formation. The *avant-garde* were the first to deploy in battle, and as such the first to meet with opposition. In the early twentieth century, the term was repurposed for artists and works that promoted new, experimental ideas. This connotation communicates both the broad