

# The Reinforcement of Narratives for Social Change: The Power of Art Through the Media

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## CONTENTS

1 EDITORIAL

3 PAPERS

4 Ricardo Baretto

*The reinforcement of narratives for social change: the power of art through the media*

16 Đurđica Gordić

*Ruthenians: missing or lost? An analysis of migrating European minority in the XX and the XXI century from the documents gathered by Miron Žiroš*

34 Colin Görke

*How Many Is That Now? Casual Sex as a Moral Failing in the Rebooted James Bond Films*

55 Iva Kurtović

*Blues Run the Game: A Comparison of Annie Proulx's Brokeback Mountain and Tits-Up in a Ditch*

78 William Puckett

*The Singular Instability: Action, the Ear, and the Eternal Return In Americanah and Wax Bandana*

96 Judith Schneider

*Gender Transgression in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho and Patty Jenkins's Monster*

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***The reinforcement of narratives for social change: the power of art through the media***

*In a time when it is more imperative than ever to face the difference that exists among the peoples of the world in a constructive way, aiming to build bridges and allow everyone to be part of a fluid, dynamic and collaborative mass which shall constitute a solid global community, we state the resurgent tendency of the growth of oppressive movements and narratives. The counter-measures for that reality exist and are carried by and manifested through an increasing number of people who are conscient of their role and potential as global citizens, voicing their ideals in a strong and consistent way which is then recognised by a section of the world media, amplifying their range and, subsequently, their influence.*

*This article aims to offer a transversal analysis of the importance of consolidating inclusive approaches and norms, as well as to justify why the movements, which sustain the looked-for change, with a primary focus on art, gain increased importance and potential when conveyed by the media.*

*A varied set of literature, from academics such as Cristina Bicchieri, aiming to evidence the interconnection between the fields related to the present topic will be used to articulate the argumentative structure of the article. The Eurovision song contest will be presented as the main illustrative item, focusing on its multifaceted artistic expression which often carries implicit political meaning and is able to represent symbols of fight and freedom - with the help of progressist approaches by media networks, empowering the message and its range.*

**Keywords:** Art, Social change, Media, Music, Eurovision.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first section of this article aims to build an argumentative structure to illustrate how art can serve as a symbolic stage which may represent people and any implicit political stand, following a reflection on the pertinence and necessity of art for change in our lives. It will then be followed by a chapter focusing on the media and its role as a tool of persuasion, illustrating the influential range of the Eurovision Song Contest by giving examples of the coverage of the event. The sequence of sections will be concluded with the reflection on the probability and likelihood of finding real changes in society and its behaviours and accepted narratives.

## **ART AND ITS ROLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Art, like other concepts that tend to have a wide pallet with multiple shades of meaning, can be hard to define with precision that would garner universal approval. For the purpose of this article, we will limit ourselves to the generic approach that would define art as being the “expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). Such definition catapults us to the understanding of how multifaceted art can be in the sense that it has a potential of wide adaptability to act upon the spheres of beauty and emotional power.

One of those ramifications - which, one would argue, would vastly depend on how well the power of its aesthetics and implicit rhetoric are moulded - is art with the particular intention of triggering or influencing change regarding some aspect of our society. Art for change is not a novelty when it comes to the role of art in our global society. As a matter of fact, that term was already conceptually illustrated before by many people and institutions, such as the Tate Modern (2008) when they state that that purpose of art (for change) aims to promote “a form of political or social currency, actively addressing cultural power structures rather than representing them or simply describing them”.

That essential premise, which helps us understand the potential of purposeful art with a political shape, links itself to the democratic value of this form of expression. As Kilgore states, “[w]hen we consider art as an international language, we assume that it must have some kind of universal meaning for the people of most nations” (1954: 303), and that

universality is, by definition, linked to a democratic sense of art. By stating that art is a democratic way of expressing oneself, I want to infer that the universal essence that defines art makes it universal not only regarding the transversality of its audience but also regarding everyone who might need a platform that would allow them to express themselves. The definition of art, which was initially presented, evidences the plasticity and wide spectrum of all forms of artistic expression, which points to how accessible it is to anyone who wishes to express himself/herself through art, hence bolstering the full accessibility of art as a transversal platform for every person.

If the artistic expression in question embraces the notion of art for change and if it aims to politicise a certain topic for those matters, art can potentialise “critical thinking ..., guiding communities, and maintaining peace and order” (Demirel & Altintas, 2012: 448) which can allow democratisation to also be present as it would represent an active influence on the attempt to promote some form of equity or social justice. Art is, then, capable of serving particular agendas which may include social justice aims; also, that referred potential is not limited to any particular person or group as it is reachable to virtually every member of society. Art, which “expands the worldview by serving to social areas like “social ethics”, “behave humane” and “freedom” ... should enlighten the community by setting light to social, communal, economic and political realities or matters” (Demirel & Altintas, 2012: 448), being, therefore, of vested interest and use for pro-social purposes by whomever wishes to zealously defend an equalitarian dynamics in our globalised society and represent people and any challenge they might face.

### **How pertinent and necessary might art be for social change?**

One may wonder if the state of the world regarding social progression justifies such an approach. In general terms, and in contrast to other times, liberty and fairness seem much more evident than ever. The available data does confirm that apparent positive trend; as a matter of fact, in the Social Progress Index (2018), the developed countries are shown in the higher tiers that evidence said progress. The Index (ibid.) has six tiers and the first three, which encompass the list of the so-called developed countries, are the ones that suggest the more promising data. The spectrum of economic and social factors that determine the presented results subdivide themselves in order to include a very wide and complete set of variables. As such, one can get a sense of how the



countries behave with respect to certain matters that express inclusiveness; in those matters, some of the relevant realities included are: acceptance of gays and lesbians, discrimination and violence against minorities, equality of political power by gender, equality of political power by social group, among others (ibid.).

In the first instance, one could recognise the immediate benefit of protecting and promoting what is already strong and solidified, following the assumption that this trending data and the behaviours associated with it would tend to strengthen and spread across the rest of the world due to globalisation dynamics, as a globalised world tends to generate favourable outcomes as “people largely favour more openness and interconnection between societies” (WCSDG 2004: 13). Nevertheless, in the second instance, the rise of policies is observable that defy or decrease the successes of an increasingly equalitarian society, which intensifies the need for manifestations that oppose and challenge them; as The Harvard Gazette states, “[r]arely have groups on the radical right advanced so far in recent decades” (2017), and art for change may present itself as a powerful multifaceted platform to go against those radical manifestations and their effects in the audiences that they might be encouraging.

## **THE MEDIA AS AN INFLUENCING TOOL**

This section will provide an understanding of how art and the media can be linked in the context of potentialised art for change and its influence in societies’ behaviours and dynamics.

In a globalised world, some degree of confrontation between realities is inevitable in order for social harmony to be reached; due to that, there must be a greater focus on communication, allowing discourses to have the power to be heard so that their existence and their aims are acknowledged and, eventually, understood by the masses. As Fairclough highlights:

[A]ny knowledge of a domain of social life is constituted as one discourse from among a number of co-existing or conceivable discourses ... different discourses are associated with different perspectives on the domain concerned and different interests ... discourses can work ideologically in social relations of power. (2011: 20)

The media, justified by the core of its nature, is a privileged platform to present and debate information. Irwin (2011: 109) defends the idea that the media has a crucial role in passing information, related to all sorts of events or matters that might be relevant to the public and their lives and that, inevitably, there is a line of ideological processes that run in parallel with the informational line. The media, which then can be perceived as a platform with an advantageous margin of influence, not only for sharing information but also for encouraging or influencing behaviours, can be perceived as ideal to voice art and its political aims to a wide spectrum of audiences.

Irwin (2011: 109) also highlights the idea that the people's role, when it comes to one's interaction with the media, is not merely passive (as an audience member or as someone who might be portrayed in the stream of information displayed by the media), for people have gained a more active presence as they are "increasingly involved in the production of news". Such leeway pressures certain permeability on the media, the information they present and the way they present it which can serve all sorts of narratives, including the ones which would contradict the purpose of the pro-social artistic manifestations referred to before when analysing the potential of art for change.

Nevertheless, following the logic which underlies the correlation between the media coverage of specific subjects and the will of the people, the probabilities should go in favour of the purpose for art defended in the present article, as the progressive indicators which are part of the Social Progress Index (2018) mentioned during the previous section are promisingly in favour of a generalised notion of progressive values in the countries that may be of major influence for those who might mirror those same behaviours and ideological positions, partially or in total, in the future. The proliferation of varied and inclusive discourses leading to a transversally equalitarian reality should promote a cyclical effect of empowerment as people might be more familiarised with different narratives and, by reflexivity, should start including them in what they would expect to find in their society. As Fairclough defends:

Information - or knowledge-based late modern societies are characterised ... by enhanced reflexivity – we are constantly reshaping our social practices on the basis of knowledge about those practices. This is true in the domain of ... how people conduct their personal relationships. (2011: 20)

## **Eurovision as a political stage**

In order to illustrate how art for change can be voiced by the media, as well as the varied discourses which can be portrayed in the scope of empowerment narratives for minorities, some examples of media coverage will follow. These selected examples originate from different media networks to include a varied representation within the ideological spectrum that shapes the *modus operandi* of the media.

The Eurovision Song Contest, a very popular song contest that brings together the countries of the European Broadcasting Union, which defines itself as being a “a state-of-the-art, prime-time entertainment programme, world-class television production” and which “consists chiefly of successive live televised performances of songs by artists ... entered by the Participating Broadcasters to represent their countries”, precisely states in its rules that “[n]o lyrics, speeches, gestures of a political, commercial or similar nature shall be permitted” (Eurovision, 2018). Nevertheless, it will become evident in the following examples that, throughout the years, a considerable number of acts have included many symbols, more or less explicit, which were charged with political connotation and an agenda, all of which also demonstrate a positive coverage by the media regarding different progressive symbols and messages. The Financial Times (2014), in the sequence of recognising that the Eurovision contest has been accused of politicising its acts, decidedly concludes that “[i]f it can give peaceful vent to the continent’s tensions while promoting liberal attitudes, all well and good”.

Still, in the very same article, some of the acts are discussed in the context of their political approach; one of them was ‘Rise Like a Phoenix’, the song which took Conchita Wurst to victory in the contest of 2014. The Financial Times (2014), in an implicit and explicit recognition of the song’s potential to address the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, reports that the Eurovision Song Contest of 2014 was “won by Conchita Wurst, a bearded transvestite from Austria, in a result seen by many as a riposte to President Vladimir Putin, whose government has passed increasingly strict anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender laws”. Russia, which according to Reuters (2017) “was ranked Europe’s second least LGBT-friendly nation in 2016 by ILGA-Europe, a network of European LGBT groups”, found its frequent and damaging discriminatory policies challenged by a message of empowerment (representing the promising potential of art for change) of the LGBTQ+ community, voiced and strengthened by the media.

Another act that followed the same line of minority empowerment was the song that won the contest in 2018: 'Toy' by Netta Barzilai, which addresses issues lying beneath the gender power dynamics. The Politico Europe (2017) reported that the referred act was one preferred by the public, highlighting its political charge in its lyrics which address women's objectification by males and represents the need for personal emancipation by whomever might be feeling a victim of gender violence of any kind. It is, once more, a meaningful opposition to a transversal problem which can be broadened to encompass many forms of violence; the fact that it "occurs across all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and in many societies" (Khasakhala-Mwenesi, 2004: 239) shows the said transversality of the problem and tackling it via a series of movements, namely artistic ones, with the appropriate support of the media is imperative.

Another example of an act which was very inclusive by representing many groups was 'A luta é alegria' (The fight is joy) by Homens da Luta, representing Portugal in 2011. The Portuguese revolution of 1974 on 25 April, served as the main source of inspiration for the clear political stance expressed in the song which favoured the common people, their pragmatic struggles and their rights. The Huffington Post, painting a clear picture of the symbolic representation and the practical aims of the people, wrote:

On stage they ... dressed as a factory worker, a peasant woman, a soldier, a student, a revolutionary and an unemployed member of the public ... Over the next several weeks the song became an anthem of the street protests that engulfed Lisbon. As Prime Minister Jose Socrates attempted to push his austerity package through parliament the protesters sang louder. Lawmakers ultimately rejected the bill, and the Prime Minister resigned on March 23. The media attributed his failure to the demonstrations — and the music that fuelled them. (2011)

In this case, not only was the media influence, which spread the message, capable of showing a representation of struggle and its legitimacy, but it also transformed itself into an embodiment of voices and wills, taken to the streets by the common people, the same people the act represented, who managed to impel concrete changes in their realities.

Although the examples which were mentioned are taken from a specific artistic context - the music context, more specifically the Eurovision Song Contest, they intend to illustrate all artistic manifestations which

are politically driven towards a fairer society. As such, these examples showed how the struggles that specific groups or minorities come across can, propelled by the media, have an effect and can now be accessible to the public. The media, thus, does not limit itself in offering information without it being influenced by the requests of the people. Still in the same line of thought, as the world is becoming more progressive, there has to be a progressive focus from the media on how they deal with information. There should be, then, a cyclical effect as the debate that is generated by this strengthened media coverage of realities, that was once be perceived by the masses as peripheral or inexistent, will ideally solidify the notion and knowledge regarding multiple realities so that “people can come to question and look beyond existing discourses, or existing relations of dominance and marginalisation between discourses” (Fairclough, 2011: 20) and, with that, promote society’s evolution towards empathetic and harmonious dynamics which recognise and incorporate the respect for and acceptance of the inalienable rights of every individual.

It is also relevant to highlight the implicit expectations that might have been growing recently regarding the political representation in each Eurovision performance which might act as a filter for certain performances or performers perceived as divisive and against a certain sense of political correctness. To illustrate this case, one could mention the case of the Ukrainian singer Maruv who, after having won in Ukraine, was withdrawn from the competition “after a row exposing tensions over Russia” as it was perceived by the Ukrainian TV authority that “[a] candidate could not be someone who performed in Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014 and backed a separatist insurgency in the eastern Donbass region.” (Euronews, 2019). To many, this decision could represent certain restrictive tendencies due to the referred expectations.

## **PROMOTING INCLUSIVE AND POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR**

Having covered the potential of art for social change and the way the media serves to voice certain narratives with emerged recognition in the world by giving a positive style of reporting on certain artistic manifestations and their political symbols, we will be questioning the likelihood of norms being stimulated in order to fortify the already promising social progress in the world - in this case, the norms related to pro-social behaviours which should encourage the masses to adopt an equalitarian set of attitudes in their lives.

By stating that “[d]iscourses are partial and positioned, and social difference is manifest in the diversity of discourses within particular social practices ... Critical awareness in this case is a matter of seeing the diversity of discourses and their positioned nature”, Fairclough (2011: 22) highlights the importance of being aware of the varied world of perspectives and values that we live in; recognition should be the first and crucial step towards recognising other spheres of existences beyond what one may consider as one and only reality and the public, in general, should have the means to access different narratives through art as facilitated by the media, as discussed previously.

Bicchieri (2006: xi) recognises that people may not be interested in following a particular set of “[p]ro-social norms of fairness, reciprocity, cooperation and the like” as they might not be able to identify why that meets his/her interests – in other words, people might not be able to recognise why one should behave in a way that benefits society. Bicchieri also affirms that “[s]ome people need incentives in the forms of the expectation of rewards and punishments to be induced to comply ... Others instead obey a norm just because they recognise the legitimacy of other’s expectations that they will follow the norm” (ibid.). One can infer, then, that stimuli, in favour of a particular behaviour, in the shape of rewards or punishments - which include situations as simple as the approval or disapproval of one’s peers - can help to create social cohesion, as people that do not immediately recognise the legitimacy of a certain pro-social norm or do not identify the benefit that he/she could reap from it, would still conform to it and, consequently, help to perpetuate it.

One could argue that, ideally, this mirror effect would embed a much more generalised conscious approach to whichever discourse we are to refer - nonetheless, in the first instance, the practical benefits of having behaviours which could endanger the liberty of, for instance, a specific minority, restrained is, *per se*, a sizable accomplishment. Likewise, if we take the Social Progress Index (2018) into consideration, the purpose within the developed countries - which, due to their relevance in the world dynamics have a major role, consciously or unconsciously, influencing behaviours and trends would be more a purpose of solidification of pro-social attitudes and not necessarily a complete change or building new ideological structures.

To reinforce the idea of the reflexivity and conformity regarding pro-social behaviour which, again may not be of the immediate interest to an individual, Bicchieri adds:

Focusing people on a social norm means that they know the situation is one to which the norm applies, expect a sufficiently large number of people to obey the norm, and also believe that a sizable number of other people expect and prefer them to obey the norm, and may even be prepared to sanction violations. Under these conditions most people would prefer to conform to the norm. (2006: 69)

By mirroring inclusiveness there would be the assertion that, after some time, the normalisation of it would start taking place, which should increase the number of people that follow pro-social norms because they recognise their value and legitimacy and not only because they want to avoid sanctions in the form of rejection from their peers, for instance, or because they are seeking to gather approval granted by the social groups of relevance to them. It may, therefore, be “possible to structure the environment in a way that produces desirable behaviour” (ibid. 7).

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude this formulation, there must be a clear notion of how all these lines of thought are linked: art is a democratic platform of excellence as it allows everyone to access it; also, due to its plasticity, it opens a myriad of possibilities when it comes to ways of one expressing an idea, which can be politicised in aiming to change something and to improve the equalitarian structure of society (art for change). Art, therefore, being able to strengthen or challenge narratives, needs to be potentialised in range and, consequently, number of people who can access that artistic manifestation. That can be done via the media networks which are now more open to the public, which means that regular people have more power to influence the media which will then voice the messages accordingly. As these messages increasingly reach more people, namely those who might oppose the core idea of the narrative being spread, will challenge paradigms as they will tend to grow and be normalised. The Eurovision Song Contest, which was the example analysed in this article, has a spectrum of influence in a region of the globe which shows promising behaviour for inclusiveness, making it a fertile ground for the solidification and consequent normalisation of messages and norms that should raise expectations which would, ultimately, be recognised and followed by those who found them to be legitimate or followed by those who prefer to conform in order to avoid

sanctions and/or encounter disapproval from people in society. That should grant at least a safer environment for groups and people that, for some time, were perceived as existing in outcast realities can now reach a fairer place in a much more global and diverse society and fight actively the rise of oppressive movements.

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