

In his book *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari argues that the ability to believe in something that one couldn't tangibly observe—the ability to “imagine”—is a trait that fundamentally differentiates humans from other species. As evolution provided us with an ever-increasing brain capacity, the more we were able to grasp abstract ideas that were beyond the realm of the visual, auditory and tactile. Humans could visualize another person's perspective on a much deeper level than any other species—in other words, empathize—and ultimately cooperate with other individuals that are not related to us by bloodline or heritage. This ability to conceptually grasp another's experience allowed for strangers to be seen as potential allies and created endless opportunities for cooperation on a scale never seen before. Our capacity to imagine aspects of the lives of others that are not a part of our own reality has allowed us to look at our society with a critical eye. What if slavery was not allowed? What if a leader of a nation was selected by all? What if everyone was equal regardless of race, sex, and nationality? All of these questions stem from observing our reality and imagining a better world. Without imagination, we would never be able to conceptualize a better world with less problems, and neither could we think of improving our own imperfect reality.

In many cases, an individual who holds such imagination actively tries to convey what he or she envisions, which eventually contributes in improving our collective reality, through the process of creating and viewing art. From this inherent prerequisite for the creation of art—a message—it allows for people to exercise their own ability of critical imagination, by vicariously experiencing the perspective of another. Hence, Good art allows people to think empathically and transcend the inevitable biases and prejudices that come with the obscurity of one individual experience in a universe of others, and ultimately, make one a better person.

Imagine a world without art, a world without music, film, literature, poetry, paintings, dance, or theatre. The world untouched by human expressions would be an incredibly dull place to the point where the monotony of reality would become intolerable. Spirkin explains, “We live not in a primevally pure world, but in a world that is known and has been transformed, where everything has, as it were, been given a "human angle", a world permeated with our attitudes towards it, our needs, ideas, aims, ideals, joys and sufferings.[...] If we were to remove this ‘human factor’ from the world,[...] we would be confronted by a desert of grey infinity, where everything is indifferent to everything else” (Spirkin). Our lives as humans will not be, and cannot be the same without our contributions to the universe that stem from our inherently subjective perspectives that involve our highly individual senses, emotions, and thoughts. The void that comes with the realization that no one person would completely understand the experience of another, with all the minute details and nuances of emotions that cannot be enumerated or measured, compels us as human beings to perpetually attempt to share what we see, think, and feel. This has been responsible for something that seems solely unique to the human experience: Art. As Friedrich Nietzsche examines it, “we have art in order not to perish from the truth.”

Such significance of art resultantly forms an intimate relationship with individual desires: as curator, writer and lecturer Katerina Gregos puts it, art is about a person’s views, the freedom to act, and the freedom to express themselves. Art is always about taking a position. Thus, the value of art cannot be measured by popularity or statistical data, as it is closely linked with the abstract desires of humanity to share one’s ideas and voices. From this, Gregos deems that the art that matters is “socially, and politically engaged art” (Gregos). To support this, Alexander

Spirkin adds, “The main responsibility of art to society is the formation of a view of the world, a true and large-scale assessment of events, a rational, reasoning orientation of man in the world around him, a true assessment of his own self” (Spirkin). Good art should be defined as one that upholds such responsibility, and one that does not shy away from the idea that one individual with a piece of art, whether creating or consuming, can, and will, change the world.

There have been various different pieces of art that call for social reform and change, pieces of that uphold the responsibility of good art. One of the most universal mediums for such expression has been music. From Chopin’s piano pieces that expresses the grief of war to the recently popularized hip hop genre that, underneath the extreme and explicit lyrics, convey the sufferings of african americans, music throughout history has been one of the main tools of an artist to engage with the empathy of the audience, and ultimately attempt to immerse others in his or her perspective. Such timeless nature of the medium has provided society with numerous music that suggested the audience to think of a world without the problems that arose during the creation of the piece.

One notable example would be John Lennon’s 1971 hit single “Imagine.” Aptly titled for the main argument of this paper, the song forwards Lennon’s desire to invite the audience to think of a world that is not necessarily devoid of issues, but is willing to address societal problems during the time. The lyrics, such as "Imagine there's no heaven.... Imagine there's no countries.... Imagine no possessions.... And no religion, too,” all seem to sound very anti-establishment, as it seems to reject the fundamental ideas of major religions, nationalism, and capitalism. Such choices of expression represent anarchy to some, as critics at the time raised their eyebrows on its seemingly “communistic” message. However, through the melody

and the musical artistry of the words delivered, the song is full of “positivity and hope, and the possibilities of a better human existence” (Ulster). Other parts of the song such as “above us only sky” works to provide a strong sense of unity not among a single nation or community, but among the entire human race: an idea Lennon held to be crucial among times of conflict during the 70s, such as the Vietnam war and the Cold War.

Even separate from his song, Lennon himself had beliefs that were aligned with the fundamental idea of socially engaged art: the potential of one individual’s imagination. “One of the key concepts in Lennon’s thought is that every individual represents a singularity of potential, each of whom is capable of influencing others, and the ripple effect can change society” (Ulster). Lennon believed that people’s imagination and perspective for the world could be touched with an idea that came from one individual, and snowball the potential for change; as Ulster puts it, “What if, instead of everyone focusing their attention on the bugaboo of the day, [...] they instead visualized a peaceful society, characterized by nonviolence and harmonious relations?”(Ulster). This pillar of Lennon’s insight into the world proved itself to be correct, as his songs went on to influence the world and the collective human desire to this day. “Imagine” calls for the audience to let go of the things that we hold dear in the name of a better society, and imagine some things that seem unimaginable. It truly challenges the societal norm, and allows one to think both introspectively and outward, allowing one to improve oneself, and the world.

A more recent example shines light on a more specific, tangible issue than a conceptual call for imagination of a better world. The Hip-hop genre that gained increasing popularity from the 90s to the present, had its roots as a way for african-american musicians to express the pains and discrimination faced by the black community in the United States. Due to its take on a

predominantly American issue, and its messaging on specific incidents that are still happening to this day, music from this genre has been, in many cases, the rallying cry for protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement. In late 2016, protesters of the movement chanted Kendrick Lamar's "We gon be alright," which was a rap about the empowerment of african americans following the inaugural of the first black president of the US, Barack Obama.

Another artist of the genre, J Cole, has been especially vocal about such issues through his music, and his 2016 album *4 Your Eyez Only* has been dedicated for this cause, as he wrote multiple music aimed at providing a perspective of the hardships African-Americans face inside the country. From the album's first track to the last, Cole retells the story of his friend who was murdered at the age of 22, from multiple perspectives that each provide different insights into the pain such an event causes to the black community. In "Change," his lyrics that read "I made it home, I woke up and turned on the morning news, Overcame with a feeling I can't explain, 'Cause that was my nigga James that was slain, he was 22" expresses the grief that is felt by everyone who is linked to the violence in predominantly black neighborhoods. In his second track "Immortal," Cole examines the struggles and prejudices a young african american face in society, aided by the use of his anecdote of when SWAT officers broke down his recording studio in search for drugs, as his neighbors automatically assumed that the only possibility that Cole could have moved into a nice neighborhood was that he was a rich drug dealer. This desperate expression of anger and frustration is heard in his lyrics—"They tellin' niggas, "sell dope, rap or go to NBA," (in that order)/It's that sort of thinkin' that been keepin' niggas chained." Furthermore, he voices his concern that such violence is perpetuated as it often leads to a loss of a strong father figure in many children's childhoods. In his title track "4 Your Eyez

Only,” the meaning of the album title is revealed, as it turns out to be the wishes of Cole’s dead friend that he wants his daughter to hear his story if one day, he doesn’t come back home, for her eyes only. Through his music, J Cole attempts to vividly convey what hardships African Americans face in their daily lives that cannot be told through statistics and numbers. His use of emotional expression and poignant storytelling leaves the audience with an empathetic understanding of what it means to live as a black person targeted for discrimination.

So how could such art make one “better?” As aforementioned, humans were able to develop into sophistication through a better understanding of the self and the other. Pavlovich demonstrates that our ability to empathize and connect with others’ experience is intimately related to the Aristotelian idea of “eudaimonia”: the human need to flourish and improve independently as well as a society. He explains through empathy one can “suspend judgement and comprehend paradigmatic differences to foster more enlightened relationships. This in turn creates more humanitarian, interactive and creative environments” (Pavlovich). Good art is able to foster this truly defining feature of our human experience, empathy. It allows one to be less judgemental. It allows us to think and act not only in self interest but for the betterment of a community where others coexist. Good art provides opportunities to be immersed in another’s ideas and views in invaluable ways and matures humanity, one individual audience at a time.