Dissertation Proposal

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Word Count: 2482
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3 Key Words/Phrases

Aesthetic of Music

Nihilism

Skate Culture

key thinkers/artists

Friedrich Nietzsche

Tristan Tzara

Vaughan Oliver

A Brief Introduction

When deciding what to focus on in my proposal I felt quite lost, as I often do when I'm given a large degree of creative freedom. I have settled on topics and thoughts that I find quite interesting and take up a sizable chunk of my personal interest, while they may seem a tad disparate in when viewed on a surface level I have been stressed the importance of going with my interests as it needs to be a piece of writing I am ready and willing to throw myself into as opposed to be forced to do.

I have chosen Nihilism as a topic as I find it incredibly intriguing as a philosophical belief. I lead in from this to try and relate Nihilism to my own practise of design.

I have chosen the "aesthetic of music" because I wish to explore the ethos behind some of my favourite album covers and their slightly unusual design conventions which influence me as a designer now, particularly since album branding is my favourite thing to design.

Finally, I settled on skate culture as my third topic. I would argue until I found skateboarding I had no luck really finding my identity. Skateboarding gave me exercise, a creative outlet and lots of great memories of youth I will look back on fondly when I'm older.

Nihilism

"*Nihilism is the righteous and honourable resistance of people crushed under an iron rule. Nihilism is the evidence of life… the last weapon of victims choked and manacled beyond all other resistance.* " Gertz. N.G. 10th September 2019. *Nihilism.* 1st Edition. MIT Press.

https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Nihilism/aU6qDwAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=nihilism&printsec=frontcover (1)

However it is also a lack of anything. Nihilism is defined by its context. The dictionary definition of nihilism is **"*the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.*"** I think of it as the black hole of philosophical beliefs, the anti-matter. I discovered the concept of it years ago when watching a film called The Big Lebowski which features a group of cartoonish villains who are defined by their belief in Nihilism, which encouraged me to read further into the topic. The belief in nothing and that nothing has any inherent meaning in the grand scheme of things has always fascinated me, particularly because of my upbringing being surrounded by different people trying to ascribe meaning to everything. For example when I was in primary school I would have to pray before every lesson, before I could eat and at the end of the school day. Which at the time made sense because I was told to do it and everyone else did it, but now just seems laughable. Whilst it may seem incredibly negative to think like this it does not have a preimposed emotion attached, it's down to how the thinker decides to perceive and apply the belief (or lack thereof) to their given situation. Nihilism has actually brought me a great deal of happiness, as it helps me detach myself from distressing circumstances when I feel overwhelmed.

I would however like to apply the belief to different artwork, in order to help relate it to my practise.

Tristan Tzara's Dada Manifesto

Tristan Tzara's Dada Manifesto, written in 1918 is the closest piece of design or creative direction that I can relate to Nihilism. While I found the Manifesto very hard to digest as I feel Tzara's writing is intentionally lacking structure, there are few points of sanity in the text that I believe hold the essence of Nihilism. Tzara Writes **"*Dada means nothing*" (2)** which I feel perfectly sums up their attitude to the movement and contemporary schools of creative thought at the time. Dada to Tazara is the anti-manifesto, The opening paragraphs of the Manifesto are filled with verbose and slightly surreal sentences such as **"t*o fly into a rage and sharpen your wings to conquer and disseminate little abcs and big abcs, to sign, shout, swear, to organize prose into a form of absolute and irrefutable evidence, to prove your non plus ultra and maintain that novelty resembles life just as the latest-appearance of some whore proves the essence of God. His existence was previously proved by the accordion, the landscape, the wheedling word*." (3)** These outbursts show the open rejection of sense and order in other manifestos, which I feel is Tzara's goal with their statement. This anti-belief of order echoes the inherent principles of nihilism.

TRISTAN TZARA 'Dada Manifesto 1918'. (n.d.). [online] Available at: http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Tzara_Dada-Manifesto_1918.pdf.

Tate (2019). *'Fountain', Marcel Duchamp, 1917, replica 1964 | Tate*. [online] Tate. Available at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573. (4)

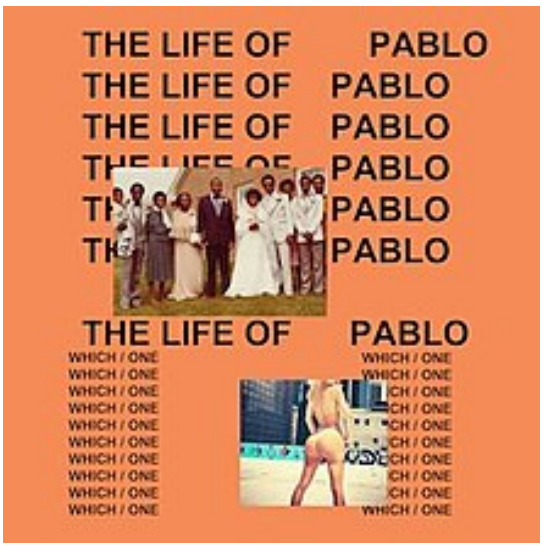
This piece, titled "Fountain" by Marcel Duchamp is a perfect example of early Dadaism and the ethos the movement was trying to push. It is a urinal with the artist's sign scrawled on the side. When submitted to the Society of Independent Artists that Duchamp had helped found it was denied, despite the societies openness and accepting nature as it was considered indecent. Whilst it's well-known that the 20th century was awash with new experimental art styles and genres I feel like pieces like Fountain are especially noteworthy, particularly in this context of nihilism within art and design as it simply does not care, as a piece of art the sort of emotions and responses it elicits are so varied depending on the viewers own beliefs. It is a symbol of waste, dirtiness and perhaps even obscenity. Or it is just a toilet. The piece itself does not try to be one thing or another and does not care, it just is.

Aesthetic of Music

I have always had a keen eye for musical branding and design, prior to me even pursuing any creative subjects I was always drawn to my father's CD's or Record Collection purely based on the designs emblazoned on the covers. Thanks to my parents' alternative tastes in music I ended up seeing a lot of varied designs. Recently I have thought a lot about why certain imagery and iconography in genres of music signal that genre, or a particular artist.

thelastnoelle (2014). *The Pixies 'Doolittle'*. [online] Album Design Class. Available at: https://albumdesignclass.wordpress.com/2014/09/11/the-pixies-doolittle/ [Accessed 25 Apr. 2022]. (5)

Designed by the late Vaughan Oliver this album cover is synonymous with my childhood. Along with most of the branding for 4AD's branding. I don't know why or how but Oliver managed to cultivate an aesthetic for 4AD's artists that is unlike anything else. **"*Everything I was getting was through record sleeves. It was a democratic way of discovering art. the local record shop was an art gallery for me.*" designboom | architecture & design magazine. (2014). *interview with graphic designer vaughan oliver*. [online] Available at:https://www.designboom.com/design/interview-with-graphic-designer-vaughan-oliver-12-19-2014/." (6).** I found this quote from an interview particularly poignant as Oliver and I both have very similar experiences with being intrigued by album cover designs and branding. It also showed me that Oliover's inspiration and creative flair was a product of the media that surrounded him, or the art he encountered growing up. Whilst this doesn't really help answer the question of "why does a certain art or design style signal a certain genre" it gives an insight into how unique designers such as Oliver get their own creative flourish, and as someone who would like to enter a similar line of work when I graduate it's touching to realise that I have similar inspirations to one of my favourite designers.



go.distance.ncsu.edu. (n.d.). *The Life of Pablo Album Cover | GD 203*. [online] Available at: https://go.distance.ncsu.edu/gd203/?p=28564 [Accessed 25 Apr. 2022]. (7)

One album cover I absolutely adore is Kanye West's The Life of Pablo. Designed by Peter De Potter the cover split hairs on its initial unveiling as it seems relatively chaotic and without meaning. I initially wanted to include this in my

Nihilist design segment prior as it is so far removed from almost any genre specific design tropes (since the genre is hip hop this would be guns, drugs, jewellery etc) it's almost laughable, however upon relating the art to the content of the album itself its actually remarkably lucid. The album covers themes of Kanye's duality of personality and personal choice, choosing whether to be a good, christian family man and settle down or lose himself to a fast and loose lifestyle more synonymous with fame. The "Which / One" plastered on the cover is in reference to which path should be chosen. The scattered and chaotic arrangement of the assets on the cover are in themselves a metaphor for Kanye's sporadic mental health changes and impulsive or 'chaotic' nature.

Ultimately I feel album artwork doesn't always have to signal a genre, while use of tropes and iconography is good in helping portray a genre or mood, I feel paying close attention to the content of the album, and what individual messages or feelings it's trying to convey is much more artistically powerful and takes more skill and thought.

For example when I look at the Doolittle album cover I don't initially think of the alt rock, grunge genre that the pixies helped cultivate, but knowing the content of the album I can say from the cover that perfectly encapsulates the Pixies identity and image at that point in their career and also perfectly conveys the themes and feelings of the album itself.

Skate Culture

One of my other major creative influences is skateboarding, in particular skate culture. I've never been the most technically proficient, however I have always been enthralled by the culture, the artwork, the music. Much like the influence record and CD sleeves had on my artistic tendencies, skate culture art also did. I used to be drawn to decks, stickers and other such merchandise purely based on the artwork.

artists, Directors, A., In 2018, Years, A. 2, Work, A.H. of, Art', I. released the book 'Skate and forward, an anthology from the more than 3000 boards I. put (2020). *Mark 'Fos' Foster, founder & Art director of Heroin Skateboards*. [online] The Daily Board. Available at: https://www.thedailyboard.co/en/behindboards/illustrators/mark-fos-foster-founder-art-director-of-heroin-skateboards/ [Accessed 27 Apr. 2022]. (8)

The man pictured above is Mark ‘Fos’ Foster, owner of the brand Heroin Skateboards. I distinctly remember going to my local skatepark when I was 13 and seeing my first Heroin deck on the wall, which I then promptly begged my mother for weeks to buy me. Throughout my school life I found myself doodling and drawing in Fos’ scruffy and abrasive style. For my art GCSE I tried replicating his style for a skateboard design and then in my graphic design A level, one of my final projects was creating a line of surreal skateboard graphics.

I owe so much of my creativity to this brand as Fos’ work taught me that there was always a place for your own creative style and abilities. Most traditional artists would argue that Fos’ art style is unskilled, took little discipline or is just plain sloppy. However Fos has done literally countless designs for his own company along with many others. His art style has taken some turns and he continues to be experimental but he has never compromised his ethos for the sake of commercial gain or censorship and in turn he was probably one of the most successful contemporary figures in all of skateboarding.

Note Shop. (n.d.). *Heroin Chopper Video Nasty pro deck 8.25*. [online] Available at: https://www.noteshop.co.uk/products/heroin-chopper-video-nasty-pro-deck-8-25 [Accessed 27 Apr. 2022]. (9)

My first Heroin deck, which I would ride to school at 7:30 every morning so I could practise before my lessons. My teachers hated the graphic, the word 'Heroin' and the fact I was using the picnic benches as obstacles but I persevered.

I was also drawn to the photography of early skateboarding in the 70's and 80's.

Friends of Charlton Public Library. (2016). *(#TBT) Craig Stecyk Interview: My Q & A Session with A Legend*. [online] Available at: https://friendsofcharltonpubliclibrary.wordpress.com/2016/11/03/tbt-craig-stecyk-interview-my-q-a-session-with-a-legend/ [Accessed 27 Apr. 2022]. (10)

Through my early exploration of skate photography as a teenager I became heavily drawn to the work of Craig Stecyk. His pioneering vision to capture skateboarding in the way he does influenced everyone to come after him. His picture above and similar pieces of his hold particular weight for me as he managed to make the most subtle and relaxed tricks and manoeuvres look amazing. This masterful manipulation of shots to someone like me who values art and photography is far more beautiful and poignant than any of the big trick youtube compilations and shots of modern skating. To me the way these tricks and stunts are captured is how we will remember them, and I look upon the method of recording and how much time and thought was put into said method with much more interest and scrutiny than the manoeuvre itself.

Like I mentioned previously, I was never the most technically proficient but I used to try and mimic the angles and compositions of Stecyk using my phone on a timer to capture the rather scattered collection of tricks I could manage to land.

Synthesis

I feel all the subjects I've discussed share a theme of sorts. This being an unflinching commitment to one's artistic integrity or vision. Whilst I will concede that Nihilism is the lack of belief, that in itself is paradoxical as it is a belief in a lack of belief. I view nihilism through a creative lens in this instance as I find dismissing rules, codes and beliefs in art and design as an incredibly freeing endeavour. Which then leads to my love of unique album cover designs and skateboarders. The creators of which all have their own creative styles that more often than not contrast and oppose the norms of their genre.

When researching for my dissertation I would like to look into more experimental art work, whether this be print, film, product design etc. There is a great degree of success to be found when you allow yourself leniency from the rules and guidelines you were initially taught. As a musician I could go into depth talking about how some of the most creative and influential artists and musicians out there were self taught, and as such felt less tied to theory and conventional practises, which then in turn allowed them to cultivate a bespoke discography that was true to them as a creative individual.

I think if I were to pick a question to research it would be **"What value is there to be gleaned from abandoning the conventional?**" .

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