

## The Implications of Fun: Art Student as Repeat Viewer

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*This essay argues that the art student who decides not to be an artist exposes the essential lack in many working artists today: this is the lack of fun, which is necessary for successful art and which—ironically—the artist might find once they leave their craft. Responding to Arjun Appadurai’s essay, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu: Repeat Viewing of Bollywood Films,” I use Appadurai’s “repeat viewer” to focalize the art student as a figure who is both the repeat viewer and the artist who creates the work of art that solicits repeat viewing to begin with. The art student embodies in his or her own self the transition from the artist to the viewer, allowing for a productive reciprocity whereby the artist performs the role of the viewer and vice versa. I close my essay by reflecting on the art student as a possibility for rethinking India’s political dilemma that concludes Appadurai’s essay.*

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Nabokov is frequently cited in arguments that make the case for rereading. In “Good Readers and Good Writers,” he famously states, “Curiously enough, one cannot *read* a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader.”<sup>1</sup> When quoted by the many, they often forget that Nabokov is writing about reading in relation to *seeing*; rereading a book with respect to seeing a painting. A reader acquaints himself with a book only after the first read, whereas the viewer who makes first contact with a painting can encapsulate its totality with the eye. There is, Nabokov says, no organ equal to that of the eye for reading: “We have no physical organ that takes in the whole picture and then can enjoy its details.” “But at a second, or third, or fourth reading we do, in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting.”<sup>2</sup> The difference is time—a book first read is learned in space and time; but time does not enter when seeing a painting for the first time.

How about the moving image? Can films be taken full like seeing a painting? Its first viewing? And how is time altered when we watch a film? In his essay “The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu: Repeat Viewing of Bollywood Films,” Arjun Appadurai considers repeat viewing of films by Bollywood audiences, consolidating the second reading of a

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1 Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1980), 3.

2 Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 3.

book and a first seeing of a painting.<sup>3</sup> Drawing from Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition* (*Différence et Répétition*), Appadurai uses Deleuze's time of a "succession of moments of repetition-as-difference" to argue that "the *sensation* of seeing a film for the second time (even when the viewer is seeing it for the first time) is . . . an experience of the repetition of difference, and not a repetition of the same" (my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> In other words, the sensation of the second viewing depends upon a formula that serves *only* to call forth the sense of repetition—of déjà vu—while allowing for its manipulation to create a new experience of viewing pleasure.<sup>5</sup>

What Nabokov and Appadurai proffer are three mediums (films, painting, literature) in which people seek pleasure and repeat viewing, seeing, and reading, respectively. The two offer something distinct that is useful to hold onto. In regard to reading, Nabokov breathes life into the docile reader and makes him active and creative—the reader assumes the seriousness with which the artist took to write the book, constantly reworking the novel through each reading. Appadurai gives us great insight into the social relations of repetition that democratize the sociality of repeat viewing of films, suggesting that it "blurs the line" between those who've already seen the film and those who are seeing the film for the first time because the first viewing is always the *sensation* of seeing the film a second time.

This brings me to the artist. For isn't the artist also a repeat viewer? An active reader? Possibly an extreme repeat viewer. A conflict clearly arises when we figure the artist as the repeat viewer. Although the artist is implicated within this repeat viewing paradox, the artist is also responsible for the art's success in soliciting repeat viewing—the manipulation of "formula" that tries to avoid being just a formula.

Nabokov focused on the good reader, starting with its most basic arrangement; one is not a good reader without first being a mediocre reader. But how can we extend Nabokov's usage of "good" to rescue the mediocre? The coexistence of this binary allows us to highlight what is implicit in Appadurai's machinations to "formula": "Like any recipe, no formula is guaranteed against complete failure. The challenge is to manipulate the formula so as to create a new experience of viewing pleasure while calling forth the sense of repetition. Simple imitation of a prior hit rarely does the trick, as both audiences and filmmakers know very well."<sup>6</sup> Appadurai is writing in the context of commercialized cinematic culture, broadly speaking, and Nabokov in the context of "serious" literature (*Madame Bovary*, *Swann's Place*, *The Metamorphosis*). A filmmaker's achievement in mastering the formula for a "hit" film undergoes the same dilemma as Nabokov's "master artist": the creative process, what Nabokov so eloquently writes as "the creation of a new world, so that the first thing we should do is to study that new world as closely as possible, approaching it as something brand new, having no obvious connection with the worlds we already know. When this new world

3 Arjun Appadurai, "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu: Repeat Viewing of Bollywood Films," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.1 (2019), 140–152.

4 Appadurai, "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu," 142, 146–147.

5 Appadurai, "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu," 147.

6 Appadurai, "The Ready-Made Pleasures of Déjà Vu."

has been so closely studied, then and only then let us examine its links with other worlds, other branches of knowledge.”<sup>7</sup>

The art student is perceived as mediocre. Therefore, it might be suitable to begin with the art student, who is neither filmmaker nor master artist, but who, recontextualizing Appadurai’s repeat viewer, spends years studying (“seeing”) art. By considering the art student, I make two arguments. The first is that when art students terminate their dreams of being an artist altogether, they tend to immediately thereafter produce some of their most provocative works. I rely upon a commencement speech by the artist Paul Chan, who introduces two kinds of debts that art students amass from their education—financial debt and the debt of works of art. It is the latter that I engage with to argue that debt accrued from works of art can neither be let go nor taken upon. This impasse allows us to critique the creative process, showing that it is not the debt of works of art that the artist must let go, but, instead, the artist himself as his own debt, the archetypal image of himself as the artist, that must be let go. Art students are well aware of Chan’s two debts, which are largely the culprits for extinguishing their aspirations. These art students had, I argue, consciously submitted themselves to such a banality like *fun* (unaware of *fun*’s profundity), which artists who *knew* the necessity of fun, but forgot that fun, in its most unadulterated form could be achieved only by the renunciation of their title of “artist.”

In 1996, the artist Paul Chan graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago with a BFA and student loans (the two are hardly separated). A decade later, Chan found himself speaking to the senior class of SAIC, admitting that he still had to pay off his student loans.<sup>8</sup> Not paying off financial debt is the foundation on which Chan bases his speech, developing it into another (but not detached) kind of debt: “And that is the kind that seduces us. When we are attracted by a movie, or an installation, or even a person, I believe we feel, in a way, indebted. The elation we feel when we like something, or someone; the joy we feel when we are exposed to something truly worth the word *art* can be expressed by another word: gratitude.”<sup>9</sup> The different art forms Chan links together—movies, installations, people—form an eloquent sequence of synonyms. The debt ends properly with its originator—the person or someone being the *artist*. Chan finds his thesis for this “other” debt through an observation of “art school” thesis shows, between the graduate show and the undergraduate show. The former, Chan says, always “pales in comparison” to the latter because graduate students have far greater financial debt to pay off: “Fear impoverishes art, as well as us.” Chan’s interest in the undergraduate thesis show—as opposed to the graduate thesis show—contributes to the idea that there is a failure in the creative process of graduate students. The illusion that an applicant to an MFA program thinks of himself or herself as an artist—or as someone who will specialize in art—makes the debt this applicant is sure to incur overwhelmingly tragic.

Chan’s first debt—student loans—produces not fear but entitlement, impoverishing not art or us, but the gap between us and art—why art is made to begin with. Chan knows *this* gap, but never penetrates the gap’s surface to reveal the difficulty in which the artist must surrender the second debt—the debt of influence, the debt indebted; to surrender

7 Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers,” 1.

8 Paul Chan, “Debts Not Paid,” in *Selected writings 2000–2014*, eds. George Baker, Eric Banks, and Isabel Friedli (New York: Badlands, 2014), 52–53.

9 Chan, “Debts Not Paid,” 52.

what he knows of art and, most importantly, what he believes of himself (I will return to this point).

Sometimes this means letting go of debts we feel we ought to carry with us that have made us who are, and changing them: making them silly, absurd, or confounding, even to ourselves. This is harder than it sounds and more illuminating than you will know.<sup>10</sup>

How does one even let go of something that is not yours? Was never yours to begin with? If one can't let go of debts because they were not yours to begin with, then one must, conversely, grab debts, "carry with us" debts (perhaps in perpetuity) until they are no longer yours.<sup>11</sup> In other words, to let go of debt is to take debt on as our own and contain it in the very thing we make out of its company: that is when debts can be let go, must be let go, are let go. No longer yours—the thing is made and contained in it is the debt we've used to make it. To let go of debts is, really, to let go of yourself.

Fun. Not to have fun, as a kind of possession, because fun is never yours to begin with. Fun is never known until after the fact; and even then, when fun is known, it can hardly be trusted, for to trust fun means risking reproducing its conditions, the only problem being that fun, when reproduced, is no longer fun. You end up only with a simulacrum of *that* fun, and you end up making the same thing, or, to take from Appadurai, a repetition of the same. You become your own influence, your own debt; you mistake replica for original and, in the process forget how to be absurd, stupid. This is a romanticization of the artist that must be taken seriously. I do not know how to have fun and that is my point. When I do locate fun in what was, I immediately try to dispose of it. I do not want to know what fun means, what it entails, what it gives, what it may provoke within me. But that cannot be the case. Just stating what I just said, I know what fun is, I know of its symptoms, and that is my point. Let me try again. I do not know how to have fun precisely because I know what fun is. That because I must attempt to not have fun in order to permit fun is to be in conflict with what I already know (discovered much later), and therefore I must dispose of fun by engaging in its theatrics. This is the paradox. You must know fun's essential nature in order to ensure that nature eludes you.

A video about the artist Isa Genzken will help to illustrate how fun is stymied when a work is seen before it is a work of art. In 2013, the Museum of Modern Art exhibited a retrospective of Genzken's work. MoMA published a short twenty-minute video summarizing her work and career with interviews from curators, art collectors, and friends such as Wolfgang Tillmans, Lawrence Weiner, and Dan Graham. In one part of the video, Brigitte Oetker, an art collector, recounted an anecdote Genzken told her—one that gives insight specifically into the precariousness of fun:

I remember that she once said to me, a long time ago, that when somebody was in her studio and saw an installation, that she couldn't stand the fact that then this person went away again, and immediately she had to change the installation again as to make it once again her own.<sup>12</sup>

10 Chan, "Debts Not Paid," 53.

11 I'm speaking here of Chan's second debt and not his first.

12 The Museum of Modern Art, "This Is Isa Genzken," December 5, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8nLkge34mE>.

How can we understand Genzken's frustration in having to deal with company in her studio without a clear definition of *fun*? It's important we understand the savage nature charged in a person's seeing and departing Genzken's studio just as she's set about her work. Act as if caught; as if what is seen is not supposed to be seen—Isa's unfinished work and Isa herself. One asks, though, who is Isa Genzken to the art collector if not Isa Genzken? <sup>13</sup> This does not mark an occasion to inquire into who Isa Genzken is; it is simply to acknowledge that Isa Genzken is oppressed by Isa Genzken. She feels compelled to change her work so to reject not only the individual person present, but the gaze of that person who saw the work *plus* the artist who is Isa Genzken. The gaze commodifies the liminality between what was thought impossible to commodify and the thing made that is inevitably commodified—the “gap,” let us say, when Isa can play with debt (Isa as *Isa*), steal from influences, appropriate them, even use them verbatim. “In the creative process you're very much on your own. You can't simply call someone up and say, ‘Have a look at this,’” Genzken said during an interview in 2006. <sup>14</sup>

Three years prior, in 2003, Genzken had a conversation with her close friend Wolfgang Tillmans in which she spoke in passing about her time as a visiting professor. What bothered her about students' work was its coldness toward the viewer: “I have always told the students that they have to imagine how the viewer sees something, too. You've got to put yourself into the viewer's shoes when you do something.” <sup>15</sup> Genzken's advice to “put yourself into the viewer's shoes” substitutes artist for the viewer, from one who makes to one who spectates. But does Genzken also mean that—if the artist must try to see like the viewer—then the viewer must see like the artist? What would it entail for a viewer to become the artist? What would it mean for the viewer (like the collector) to place herself into the artist's shoes? This can be understood by referring back to Oetker's account of Genzken's distrust of visitors in her studio. Considering Genzken's frustration, we can infer that Genzken was in the viewer's shoes at the same time the visitor was seeing her work. Genzken's frustration is really a frustration over having two of the same persons seeing her work simultaneously—the viewer and Isa as a substitute for the viewer. But even when the work is complete, the reversal of the artist/viewer cannot be switched back to its original positions. The roles are destabilized altogether. This departure does not involve new roles for the artist and the viewer to perform, but, instead, it implies that they retain their original meanings, which moves through a newly fabricated conduit wherein their functions are endlessly being seized from/and by each other, thus affecting the work—the single thing that neither the artist nor the viewer are in possession of. And neither do each possess what is contained in the work. Genzken's advice is important because when the artist wears the shoes of viewer, the artist is able to see him- or herself as the namesake imagined, manufactured by the viewer. For that reason, the artist must assume the role of the viewer in order to usurp their own construction devised by the viewer. This single act not only

13 See Virginia Woolf, “Why Art Today Follows Politics,” in *Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 213–15.

14 Lisa Lee, ed., “Diedrich Diederichsen in Conversation with Isa Genzken,” *October Files: Isa Genzken 17* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 111.

15 Lisa Lee, ed., “A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans,” *October Files: Isa Genzken 17* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 104.

usurps their title as artist, but all the artists one feels indebted to—that’s what it means to let go of debts.

Isa Genzken’s observation about putting yourself in the viewer’s shoes, together with Paul Chan’s debt of works of art, focalizes the art student who spends years seeing and studying the “formula.” And yet the art student is not an artist but seen as mediocre. Only when the art student surrenders the aspiration of being an artist does he or she inhabit the absolute necessary condition many artists tend to underestimate, and that is fun. The art student is patently aware of fun, equally sensitive to its risks—repeating the learned formula in order to be *seen* as an artist, to show that he too can *do* art. Reflecting on what Arjun Appadurai has put forth—viewing a film for the first time as if for the second time—animates the thought of what an artist sees when looking at a work of art for the first time. What are the pleasures elicited in the second viewing (when they’re actually seeing it for the first time)? At least for the repeat viewer, the second viewing elicits a pleasure like percussion “that recalls prior experiences of cinematic pleasure: of *déjà vu*, of seeing something one has seen before.”<sup>16</sup> This pleasure is obfuscated to the artist, precisely because the artist is too preoccupied with what he *thinks* is compulsory. The artist is troubled to manipulate the formula because he is too learned in its machinations.

Appadurai concludes his essay by reorienting repetition in the context of India’s future. He brings attention to India’s current prime minister, Narendra Modi, who is working toward globalizing India, “about the coeval replication of the ‘best practices’ of globalization, about making India a contemporary hub, an Asian version of the bastions of global power across the planet. Globalization abroad, cultural repression at home: this is the formula of the new order.”<sup>17</sup> Appadurai doesn’t neglect the Indian film viewer in his conclusion. Although film viewers may indulge themselves in the “grist for the mills of capital,” they, more importantly, “recapture the experience of repetition as pleasure.”<sup>18</sup> The Indian film viewer allows for the conceptualization of a “*formal* possibility for the mediation of modernity as pleasure rather than as discipline or as repression of dissent.”<sup>19</sup>

As prime minister, Modi will always be a repeat viewer of films; he sees, too, the pleasures of prior experiences that make the first viewing a second: “He wants Hindutva to provide the rhythmic, percussive element that promises the joys of repetition, while his story line is about globalization, digital technology, and smart cities.”<sup>20</sup> However, Modi feels indebted to the industrial West and thus wants to repeat its history. Appadurai asks, “Will Modi succeed in his effort to make Hindutva the source of India’s repeat pleasure while installing globalization as its narrative drive forward?”

The formula is too precarious for the artist to be left unaccounted for. But as I suggest in the beginning, figuring the artist has revealed too much of his arrogance and obliviousness, as seen in Modi, is why Appadurai says, “no formula is a guarantee against complete failure.”<sup>21</sup> A visible divide separates the artist indebted to the formula and the

16 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*,” 147.

17 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*,” 151.

18 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*,” 151.

19 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*.”

20 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*.”

21 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*,” 147.

viewers who, as repeat viewers, already know if the formula will produce a “fake.” The art student fills this void, acting as a transition from the artist to the viewer, enjoying a reciprocity that has far better chances at determining a film’s fate—the larger implication being India’s future. “The Owl of Minerva has yet to fly on this matter,” Appadurai concludes, “but many of us are wagering on the possibility that Modi has not got the formula right and that perhaps very soon, Modi’s vision of a Hindu India will prove to be a flop, not a hit.”<sup>22</sup> The art student recollects the failures of being an artist through being a repeat viewer. The difference with the art student as a repeat viewer is that he not only recalls past cinematic pleasures like everyone else, but the art student sees the debt contained in those cinematic pleasures and, above all, the debt unpaid so as to create, echoing Nabokov, a new, familiar world.

22 Appadurai, “The Ready-Made Pleasures of *Déjà Vu*,” 152.