

Comprehension

Vid Simoniti argues that art could be a way to move political conversations forward.

- 1 When we look back at the early 2020s and ask which work of fiction held up the mirror to society with greatest clarity, my bet would be on Michaela Coel's television series *I May Destroy You* (2020). Narrating a young woman's rise to fame as a cultural commentator and her struggles, the series cut into several social and political conversations that have defined the first decades of the century. When the series aired, politics had already entered a feverish state: the tail end of the Donald Trump era in the United States, the height of the Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Democratic societies were faced with key decision points but much energy seemed expended on battling unreason, on acrimony and paranoia, that hope for progress seemed but scant. 5
10



PAUSE & REFLECT: Based on the first paragraph, what is the focus of this article? Can you predict how the rest of the article will unfold?

- 2 Works of fiction like *I May Destroy You* are one of the ways in which we engage with political issues of the day. I say "works of fiction", but we can also speak of "the arts" in a liberal sense: Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) critiques patriarchal oppression; Beyoncé's pop music album *Lemonade* (2016) asserts anti-racist values; Guerrilla Games/Sony's series of PlayStation games *Horizon* (2017-) revolves around the consequences of the climate disaster. But while the skill of the artists who weave such themes into their work is impressive, we may wonder whether works of art contribute to political conversation, or simply reflect it. Does *I May Destroy You* simply show us what conversations were ongoing at that point, or does it move those conversations forward? 15
20
- 3 Today, it seems reasonable to pose the question of art's relation to politics in the context of the specific crisis that democracy seems to have entered within the past decade or so. The crisis in question is by now familiar: polarisation, disappearance of consensus, the brutality of public discourse, the spread of disinformation. One response to this crisis has been a kind of return to calmness and order: a call for facts, impartiality, objectivity. The other response to the democratic crisis has, by contrast, called for a departure from calm deliberation: for anger, for indignation, for speaking truth to power. The case for passionate speech has been taken up by movements ranging from Extinction Rebellion to Black Lives Matter. At a time of crisis, intractable discussion becomes, as Greta Thunberg proclaimed at the 2021 UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, just more 'blah blah blah', which we can contrast with her own strident position-taking. 25
30
- 4 Deliberative rationality and impassioned speech – or, as we might call them for short, objectivity and activism – have thereby emerged as the twin ideals of public discourse for our time. Yet neither of these ideals can make much sense of the aesthetic realm, which I designate here to characteristics of speech more readily found within the arts. Ambiguity, irony, open-endedness, unresolved complexity, wonder, bemusement, allegory, allusion: such modes of discourse are too inexact for objectivity and too non-committal for activism, and so cannot be endorsed by either. Consider, for instance, what either ideal of political discourse might say about *Never Gonna Snow Again* (2020), a Polish feature film that deals with climate change. The film charts the arrival of Zhenia, a handsome Ukrainian masseur with mysterious powers, into a privileged, gated community in Poland. Zhenia goes around offering his dream-inducing massages to wealthy but anxious and lonely Polish individuals, and it is not until towards the end that the film's allegorical significance begins to emerge, as a portrayal of a society 35
40
45

- sleepwalking into a global-warming disaster. Set during a particularly snowy winter, the film ends with a title sequence that proclaims: “Forecasts predict that there will be no snow past 2025.” The film is undoubtedly artistically accomplished, but such artistry might still seem pretty useless. From the point of view of activism, all this chin-stroking about magical masseurs isn’t enough to jumpstart us into action. From the point of view of objectivity, the film’s allegory is a poor guide to truth. Even its final prediction does not seem to be based on some verifiable scientific fact. 50
- 5 We might agree that the arts should be allowed to pick up a political banner, but this still leaves us wondering what good art might be politically, other than as an extension of politics as usual. An artwork – a novel, a TV series, a play, a painting – can suspend us in such a space of contemplation of a political reality without forcing us down a path of a conclusion. Art, unlike an argument or a call to action, can keep us in that space before the final “therefore”. It is this inconclusiveness of art that separates it both from the objective and the activist approaches to political deliberation, where the speaker is attempting to get the audience to agree with some statement or a demand, on the basis of either argument or sentiment. So, what might be the benefit of hovering before the conclusion in this manner, or decisively stopping thought before the final call to action? 55 60
- 6 Here is one hunch. Both objective and activist modes of discourse, necessary though they are to a functioning democracy, are predicated on a dynamic of opposition, which requires one party to lose or to yield to the greater force of the “better argument”. Among ideally rational beings, that would happen easily, without resentment. But in real life, it is impossible to disentangle political disagreement from group allegiances and self-interest. If a political opponent is making a convincing argument, rarely do we simply adjust our beliefs, but instead retreat into an aggravated silence and try to think of a comeback. None of this is to say that rational argument and activist persuasion are not needed in democracy. Of course they are. But if one part of the current crisis in democracy is entrenched polarisation, then it seems we could also benefit from forms of thinking that transcend such polarisation. Art can offer just such an open-ended space of thought. Artworks offer a change of rules in the game of discourse where there are winners and losers; they make it possible to discuss shared social issues without invoking the humiliating opposition between those in the right, and those in the wrong. 65 70 75
- 7 So, does art contribute to political conversations, or simply reflect them? We can begin to offer an answer. Art, perhaps uniquely, allows for audiences to contemplate issues at the heart of political clashes, while temporarily suspending the judgement of right and wrong. The space of aesthetics is therefore neither fully political nor anti-political. It allows us to attend to politics but relieves us from the weight of taking on a stance. It allows us to feel comfortable to engage with those artworks, regardless of our political persuasion. The value of the arts thus becomes intertwined with the value of democracy itself; and this, if anything, is a reason for the state to support and promulgate the arts. 80



PAUSE & REFLECT: Was there any part of the article that you found surprising or thought-provoking? Can you connect any part to your own experiences?

Vid Simoniti argues that art can be a way to transcend objective and activist approaches to politics and in so doing help move political conversations forward. How applicable do you find his observations to you and your society?

Point #1: One response to this crisis has been a kind of return to calmness and order: a call for facts, impartiality, objectivity. The other response to the democratic crisis has, by contrast, called for a departure from calm deliberation: for anger, for indignation, for speaking truth to power. (lines 24-28)

Sample response:

Point:	The writer stated that one response to the crisis in democracy has been a return to calmness and order, a call for facts, impartiality and objectivity, whereas the other response has called for a departure from calm deliberation, for anger, indignation and speaking truth to power.
Stand/ position:	While these two modes of discourse can be observed in Singapore to some extent, Singaporeans have generally responded to such a crisis with indifference, to the extent that it is questionable if there is a “crisis” at all. Hence, I largely disagree with the writer’s views.
Example from Sg context:	In Singapore, the rise in polarised discourse and disinformation has similarly led to calls for more objectivity and rationality on the part of the government, whereas others, particularly young Singaporeans, have expressed more passionate views. For instance, younger Singaporeans have appeared to grow more vocal in expressing their outrage over various issues , with some such as Youtuber Preeti and rapper Subhas Nair calling out racism and Chinese privilege in a vocal rap music video online. In response, the government has criticised the video for being in poor taste and not acceptable, saying instead that certain lines should not be crossed such as using vulgarities when discussing such issues. Here, there is a clear divide between the impassioned and outraged response of younger Singaporeans and the call for more objective language and conversation from the government. That said, these two ends of the spectrum are not representative of the majority of Singaporeans. A recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies showed only a small minority or less than ten percent of respondents frequently discuss politics with friends , and political activism is also generally unpopular here. The findings were especially stark when compared with overseas, with high percentages of Singaporeans responding that they would never join a boycott, a peaceful demonstration or an unofficial strike, as compared to other countries.
Evaluation:	From this, it is evident that these two responses to the democratic “crisis” as highlighted by the writer are not that

	widely manifested in Singapore. In fact, they represent only a minority of Singaporeans, usually younger Singaporeans who are inclined to speak out against what they deem unacceptable on one end, and voices from the government on the other end that call for calmness and objectivity in response. Most Singaporeans however do not really advocate any kind of response at all and prefer to stay out of politics altogether.
Link:	Therefore, I find the writer's views applicable to Singapore only to a small extent.
Relevant resources:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/spore-highlights-pragmatic-approach-rights-review • https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/politically-apathetic-no-more-young-singaporean-perspectives-on-race-and-civil-liberties/ • https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/rap-video-by-local-youtube-star-preetipls-on-brownface-ad-crosses-the-line-not-acceptable • https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/most-singaporeans-politically-apathetic-not-keen-on-activism-ips

Point #2: The space of aesthetics is therefore neither fully political nor anti-political. It allows us to attend to politics but relieves us from the weight of taking on a stance. It allows us to feel comfortable to engage with those artworks, regardless of our political persuasion. The value of the arts thus becomes intertwined with the value of democracy itself; and this, if anything, is a reason for the state to support and promulgate the arts. (lines 80-84)

Point:	The writer states that the space of aesthetics is never fully political or anti-political, and that its value lies in allowing us to attend to politics while relieving us from the weight of taking on a stance. He concludes that the value of the arts is therefore intertwined with the value of democracy, and states that this is a reason for the state to support and promulgate the arts.
Stand/ position:	While the arts in Singapore occasionally take on an overtly political significance, it is true that the value of the arts in Singapore does lie in providing a space for Singaporeans, regardless of political persuasion, to engage in issues that are close to them and important to Singapore as a society. Therefore, I agree with the writer to a large extent.
Example from Sg context:	In Singapore, arts are sometimes unable to transcend politics due to the existence of “OB markers” or out-of-bounds markers , which means that certain issues cannot be discussed in the arts such as politics, race and religion. This regulation of the arts means that the arts can never be fully divorced from politics, as they might be deemed to be making a political statement if they touch on controversial issues.

	<p>That said, within permitted boundaries, the arts have been an important space for Singaporeans to engage in issues of national and political importance, such as identity and multiculturalism. Singapore has hosted many art events such as the Biennale and Arts Week, during which artists provoke thought on such issues.</p>
<p>Evaluation:</p>	<p>From this, it is evident that while the arts might not have fully transcended the realm of politics in Singapore, it still plays a key role in allowing everyday Singaporeans to consider issues that have political significance. For that, despite keeping in place certain rules to regulate the arts, the state, through organisations such as the National Arts Council, continues to support and promulgate the arts by providing funding for artists and platforms for them to showcase their work.</p>
<p>Link:</p>	<p>Therefore, I find the writer's views applicable to a large extent in Singapore's context.</p>
<p>Relevant resources:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://www.sg101.gov.sg/social-national-identity/case-studies/artmusicsceneinsg/ • https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/09/art-v-government-at-singapore-festival-i-fear-once-i-leave-they-will-punish-me