

Why we sometimes need to engage with complexity: In favour of artworks over services

As a child, when asked what I wanted to be when I grew up I would always say an artist. If pressed on what kind of artist I probably didn't have an answer, but I idealised my uncle's lifestyle which to me seemed the epitome of independence. As I grew older I struggled to see how artists impacted the issues they addressed, and art seemed to me more of a commentary on problems in our world and a therapeutic outlet than an effective change maker.

In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher makes the point that art often functions more as a therapeutic outlet for individuals rather than a tool for structural change or mobilisation. He argues that anti-capitalist art, literature, music and film provide an emotional release without political consequence, managing dissent rather than challenging it and that the arts often serve to reinforce capitalistic behaviours by channeling discontent into commodified forms, limiting the potential for radical change.

So with a desire to mobilise people, change systems, and support myself financially, I started working with social enterprises and human rights organisations using my creativity in a more functional way, as a service designer. Service Design is a research-focused design discipline aiming to improve the experiences of users and providers of services.

However, service design also has its limitations when addressing systematic social issues. Promising to build a solution for a well researched problem in an increasingly disconnected, platform-oriented world, Service Designers often default to synthesising complicated information into a user-friendly app. The illusion of a solution in the form of a service can reinforce the very problems it seeks to address, allowing individuals to engage only on a surface level but feel the gratification of doing the right thing. Simplifying complex issues for ease can deepen systemic injustice by masking its full complexity. Take an ethical shopping app such as Vinted: users may feel like they are spending more consciously, but are in fact continuing an untenable level of consumption.

Duolingo could be seen as a successful service using gamification, adding game-like features such as points, streaks and levels, to encourage a wider audience to learn languages. However, when users learn a set of memorised phrases without understanding the grammar and syntax, they limit themselves to the surface of the language rather than its structure, history or lived use. Education becomes more about measurable engagement metrics than about cultivating curiosity or critical thinking. Services like Duolingo, as well as the headline-grabbing, platform-driven media landscape we live in, encourage our brains to prioritise many pieces of bite-sizeable information over the richness of language, history and culture, limiting our ability to learn and understand with depth.

Service platforms offer clarity and convenience, synthesising issues into palatable information. But oversimplified narratives feed short attention spans and more polarised understanding of complex issues. Compassion on the other hand encourages us to slow down and fully engage with complexity. While works of art, music, literature, film and photography can serve this same mass consumption culture they also have the ability to evoke contemplation and hold ambiguity.

Visiting a Paula Rego exhibition in Istanbul's Pera Museum in 2023 and learning about the impact her series of *Abortion Prints* had on the legalisation of abortion in Portugal began to alter my opinion on art's place in social change. As I came close one of the prints I felt an urge to turn away from the pain so vividly depicted. What kept me intrigued was the finely scratched detail of the prints, in black and white which stood out from her colourful painting style. The prints were also left untitled, images so clearly depicting a well known struggle need no explanation. I was far from the first person to have such a strong reaction to these prints. In 1999 the series was exhibited in Lisbon and drew the largest audience the Centro de Arte Moderna José de Azaredo Perdigão had seen. In 2007 abortion was legalised in a second referendum and Rego was credited for inspiring this change in opinion. This experience reminded me of the dramatic impact a photograph of a refugee child's corpse on a beach had on the media's narrative about immigration in the UK, albeit for a short time. I realised there were instances where the arts have been catalysts for changes in political systems and public opinion.

Both promotion and censorship of the arts has long been used as a form of soft power by governments, such as the BBC's list of banned songs during the Gulf War, the list of songs banned in the U.S. after 9/11 and the promotion of impressionist artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko during the Cold War as a way of representing intellectual freedom and creativity that Russian art couldn't compete with due to censorship.

I started compiling a list of art, music, literature, film and photography that have had measurable impact on societies to see if I could notice any patterns. I defined impact in both public and political spheres because positive change often requires a policy change along with a shift in public opinion. One can follow the other, but it's important to target both for a higher chance of success. Popular songs which had no clear metric of impacting change such as Bob Dylan's *Blowin' in the Wind* did not make it onto my list. While it was an important protest song that is referred to as the anthem for the civil rights movement for all the times it kept protesters going through the night, there were no direct and measurable instances or references that I could count as a significant change in public opinion, a behaviour change or a mention in parliament in relation to policy.

1843: A Christmas Carol, Charles Dickens
1852: Uncle Tom's Cabin, Harriet Beecher Stowe
1930: Strange Fruit photo of lynching / 1939: Strange Fruit, Billie Holiday
1937: Guernica, Pablo Picasso
1963: The Burning Monk
1972: Napalm Girl
1983: The Day After
1985: The Handmaid's Tale, Margaret Atwood
1989: Tank Man (Tiananmen Square Massacre), Stuart Franklin
1993: Schindler's List
1993: The Vulture and the Little Girl, Kevin Carter
1993: Philadelphia
1999: The Abortion Series, Paula Rego
2003: Abu Ghraib prison photos
2012: The Act of Killing
2015: Photograph of Alan Kurdi
2017: Okja
2018: Who is America
2024: Mr Bates vs the Post Office
2025: Adolescence

What Impactful artworks tend to have in common

Timing is hugely important. Whether it's about war, racism, slavery, inequality or colonialism, almost all these pieces of work tapped into concerns and conversations that were already being had at the time of creation, often alongside major world events, amplifying issues to a point that they could no longer be ignored. I was shocked that it took a fictional series for our Prime Minister to take the issue of toxic masculinity seriously and talk about it in parliament. But I came to understand that *Adolescence* made it impossible for him not to speak about it, once the topic was a common household conversation.

These topics were humanised. To feel compassion we need to be able to relate to it, and relating to humans is easier than relating to issues. *Adolescence* doesn't reduce toxic masculinity into a simple narrative of 'men are bad', but considers a more complex understanding of how a young boy's impressionable mind can be influenced by external factors leading him down a tragic path. The humanity helps us understand that while he did something unimaginably evil, he is a product of a wider issue that we all play a role in. Examples of Film and TV in particular, such as the *Act of Killing* and *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*, combine human narratives with complex issues to reach broader modern audiences.

Stuart Franklin's photograph of a man standing in front of a tank, widely referred to as *Tank Man*, became the symbol of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. The photograph increased awareness about the massacre in representing the inequality and injustice with such obvious simplicity.

Global audiences connected with the photograph as a visual representation of defiance against the abuse of power.

A visceral emotion is evoked. Whether guilt and responsibility are effective emotions in social change is a long debated topic. Many researchers believe that guilt can be paralysing but recent research and recent analysis of a variety of research on the topic suggests that under the right circumstances, particularly when anticipated, guilt can be an effective tool for change, encouraging greater empathy for others and catalysing reparations for failures people feel responsible for. One paper suggests that hopeful endings are a tool created by the global north, rejecting and pacifying emotions of anger and guilt, while other cultures are more willing to leave an audience feeling unsettled. Bertolt Brecht believed art should not be a mirror for reality but a tool for change, creating Epic Theatre which had fractured and unresolved narratives, confronting the audience with questions rather than solutions.

An unsettling ending, leaving the audience thinking about the topic rather than allowing them to move back to their everyday life is most evident in the *Act of Killing*. The photographs, *Strange Fruit*, *Burning Monk*, *Napalm Girl*, the *Vulture and the Little Girl*, the *Abu Ghraib Prison photos*, the photograph of *Alan Kurdi* and Paula Rego's *Abortion prints* all evoke a visceral feeling of shock and disappointment in humanity, that we have let these atrocities happen. Viewers may want to turn away from these photos in attempt to avoid the unsettling feelings of guilt and anger.

Many of the works in this collection were initially controversial or suppressed and only later celebrated. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Handmaid's Tale* were banned in U.S. schools due to the unfiltered nature when dealing with highly politicised themes. Billie Holiday was targeted by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and told never to sing *Strange Fruit*, radio stations also refused to play it.

The renowned *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso was not a success until two and a half years after it's debut where Le Corbusier wrote that it 'only saw the backs of visitors, for they were repelled by it.' Whereas when exhibited in New York after the start of World War 2, it became a sensation, has repeatedly been a symbol for peace at protests and has been mentioned multiple times in UN speeches.

The dark undertones of satire can effectively draw in audiences who may otherwise turn away from difficult issues, softening the direct shaming with humour. *Okja*'s story feels absurd, far from the reality of this world, but the themes and characters draw direct parallels with absurd realities. There is an element of dark satire in the *Act of Killing* as we watch Anwar Congo proudly re-enact fantastical scenes of the killings he committed. *Who is America*, which resulted in political resignations, exposed the true and dark opinions of American politicians by lulling them into a false sense of security through a character played by Sacha Barren Cohen. The audience is aware of the context while the characters seem ignorant, adding to the humour of the situation.

Service platforms and the arts play roles in perpetuating mindless consumption, but some works of art have managed to make an audience pause, slow down and feel compassion. The arts have been most effective in mobilising a tangible social change when tapping into current concerns and conversations, humanising complex issues and evoking a visceral emotion. Satire has been used in some instances and some of the most successful catalysts for change were initially banned or suppressed by the governments they criticised.