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— ♦ Abstract

A duality-driven research-creation project, *Elysium* reinterprets Toronto's rental housing crisis through the parodical-critical framework of Linda Hutcheon's recontextualization of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Double-Voiced Discourse. Drawing from James C. Scott's theory of Everyday Resistance, I argue parody is an effective tactic of everyday resistance, challenging the systemic erasure of tenant experiences in the rental housing search.

In twofold forms of cute-countercultural design and autoethnographic-satire, *Elysium* operates within dissonance, absurdity, and the prevalent Gen Z phenomenon of "trinket culture," an aesthetic of affective nostalgia, as a visual strategy for social engagement.

Elysian Friends, a series of fictitious mascots, function as representational communicative agents, utilized across lowbrow mediums as an entry-point to encourage solidarity among women aged 18-28. *Elysium* proposes an alternative method to how tenants engage with housing culture, whilst establishing a critical commentary on the exclusion of women-identified media in housing and design research.

Keywords: Parodical-Critique, Everyday Resistance, Autoethnography, Rental Housing, Communication Design

—◆ Acknowledgements

If I were to summarize this process, I'd first start with saying I built a tent. Then a shed, with imagined floor plans of a mansion, which ultimately hard-carried me toward the close of December. Needless to say, there were structural *issues*. In turn, I was granted a gracious spring and summer to place this unit on the market.

It would be an obvious statement to claim the creation of this project would not have reached completion without the multiple individuals supporting it, clipboards in hand, as I attempted the academic and artistic equivalent of maneuvering a forklift, a cement truck, and honestly whatever else is used at a construction site. So thankfully, and *finally*, I can make the claim I built a house.

To the individuals who built this home with me:

An eternal thank you (!!!!!!!) to my primary advisor, Angela Bains, and secondary advisor, Jay Irizawa. In an unpredictable reversal of events, my undergraduate professors have also become my thesis advisors. I've been persistently floored this year (I got obvious at the end, lol) by the level of compassion and patience from two exceedingly capable and inspiring individuals. Thank you to the lovely duo of Natalie Waldburger as external reviewer and Simone Jones as defence chair.

To my non-biological sisters, Hailee and Aimé. I have a months-long deficit of missed plans and matcha lattes owed to the both of you (iced, of course). You are the original pioneers of parodical-critique (comments best left outside the scope of this paper).

To my actual biological sister, Kristina, the unpaid editor of this thesis. My Elysium is wherever you are. I'd fear a nihilistic, even-more skeptical Jewel Pavao out there sans the influence of your charm, empathy-driven logic, and admirable belief in other people. I'll place this in writing for your future convenience (you're welcome): my lifetime thesis repayment plan begins *now*.

And to my parents, *of course*. Being raised as your daughter is my greatest privilege. I hold no prouder accomplishment than to inherit the name of a Pavao well knowing from whom it derives. This degree is a faaaaaar distant second place.

Lastly, thank you to OCAD University for its generous contributions in the form of an entrance scholarship, and various financial awards which have funded this research. Undergrad to master's, six years is a LONG time.

Now, welcome in. ♡

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A Preface's Preface

I hereby make an application to rent _____ effective ____ September 2025 at a monthly rent of _____, payable in advance on the ____ day of each month for the duration of this tenancy.

Applicant #1 (Author)

Full Name: Jewel [REDACTED] Pavao

Date of Birth: December 12 [REDACTED]

SIN No. (Optional): [REDACTED]

Occupation: Graphic Designer (?)

Applicant #2 (Reader)

Full Name: _____

Date of Birth: _____

SIN No. (Optional): _____

Occupation: _____

Document Instructions (How to Read this Paper)

The first condition for taking this thesis seriously is to not take it seriously: a self-appointed internal directive from January, and the full-circle phrase which now introduces this work.

This is a paper of contradictions. This is an MDes (Master of Design) thesis unconcerned with palatial resolution. Instead, I offer a proposal for future research into the combined study of small-scale resistance, parodical-critique, and popular culture as a lowbrow visual strategy for social engagement.

This paper is an art piece. I employ the research method of Autoethnography (see: *Consequent*) to transpose the academic obligations of this degree into arguably one of the most enduring and reliable forms of information-sharing available: a narrative.

I also happen to be a liar. *Partially*. In the ethos of its primary framework, Double-Voiced Discourse (see: *Antecedent*), this document *performs* its theory. There is deliberate omission in transparency, positionality. As Linda Hutcheon contends, there is merit in embracing tension. And of James C. Scott, is the virtue of ambiguity, of untraditional risk in service of the basic, elementary task of surviving, trying. I am no exception.

On page 15, I describe this thesis as a “mock-epic and a tragicomedy,” but I’ll also call it a satire of the academic paper, a chronicle of career precarity as allegory, a generational love letter, and an auxiliary foundation for communicating housing-as-identity.

Graciously, I've done the hard work and recorded 80% of the research in writing. I pen this preamble with complete reliance on the reader's capacity to decipher the remaining 20%.

Terms of Agreement

The Applicant represents that all statements made above are true and correct. For further information, inquiries, and literary clarity, please refer to the Coda of this document (see: Appendix B).

Introduction

— ♦ Prelude

Good Neighbourhood. Four Bedrooms. Home Office. An opening sequence of housing preferences which typically comprise the introduction of an HGTV episode of *House Hunters*. A reality television series in which a working-class couple, on the basis of personal opinion, select a pristine suburban home to purchase from a potential three contenders.¹

The notable point being *House Hunters* is an American show. If this were a Toronto-based series, participants would undoubtedly *not* be purchasing a house. The episode's culmination, the final deliberation, would not rely on the determining factor of whether the master bedroom is an ensuite with a walk-in-closet, or if the precious family golden retriever has enough backyard space. It would likely hinge on two fundamental financial questions: 1. What is the asking price? And 2. What is the minimum down payment?

I don't think any of those questions would make for entertaining television. However, to address those queries: 1. Unaffordable. 2. *Also*, unaffordable. For the interested parties yearning for homeownership in 2050, a prospective buyer necessitates twenty five years of consistent saving to afford the minimum downpayment for a home, assuming an annual household income of \$241,404.² An assumption glaringly incongruent with the 46% of employed residents who earn less than \$50,000 annually.³

The cataclysmic state of housing in Toronto, and even more broadly, Canada is *long-standing*. Accessing housing, securing housing, sustaining housing. It remains a subject of examination in numerous academic studies, political rhetoric, media campaigns, and anecdotes presumably heard and shared.

¹ *House Hunters*. HGTV. 1999–present. In the golden age of cable television, this is what the people (me) would watch when there was almost nothing else on.

² Kyle Dahms, *Housing Affordability Monitor: Affordability Improves for a Fourth Consecutive Quarter in Q4 2024*, National Bank of Canada, March 20, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/kx4fe564>.

³ City of Toronto, *2021 Census Backgrounder: Families, Households, Marital Status & Income*, <https://tinyurl.com/y993n7n3>.

If it isn't already firmly ingrained in public knowledge, the city, and country, is in a housing crisis.⁴ And an affordability crisis.⁵ A climate crisis.⁶ A mental health crisis.⁷ An opioid crisis.⁸ A potential recession.⁹ And, very recently, a trade war.¹⁰ In summary, there are *problems*.

It would be no surprise cynicism has permeated housing discourse, and social discourse in full. Disengagement has imprinted its apathetic presence in the descent of political interest and participation. The 2022 Ontario provincial election experienced a significant decline, with voter turnout reaching a historic low.¹¹ And to offer a consolation for the astutely optimistic: the March 2025 election witnessed turnout rise, to a second historic low.¹² A frequently occurring platform topic, (mostly) qualified politicians have attempted to address the housing crisis to substantial results.

In 2019, the Canadian federal government passed the *National Housing Strategy Act*, declaring housing a fundamental human right affirmed in international law.¹³ Yet beyond ambitious promises in business formal, and omnipresent bus stop advertisements of

4 Ali Hoss, "Affordable and Sustainable: Can Canada Solve Its Housing Crisis?" *Forbes*, January 30, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yc4y7v2y>.

5 Josh Rubin, "An Affordability Crisis Has Ontario in Its Grip—And People Are Still Feeling the Pain," *Toronto Star*, February 25 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/46dnka8m>.

6 Environment and Climate Change Canada, "Climate Change Sets and Breaks Heat Records Across Canada This Summer," Government of Canada, October 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/yv5rfbjv>.

7 Josh Rubin, "Canada's Mental Health Crisis Is Crippling Productivity. Here's What We Can Do About It," *The Globe and Mail*, February 11, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/mry2pbe2>. Ironical how mental health is only valuable insofar as it affects economic output.

8 Camille Bains, "More than 1 in 4 deaths among young people in Canada were opioid-related in 2021, study finds," *CBC News*, April 15, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/2pxxufc9>.

9 Global News, "More than half of Canadians concerned of potential recession: survey," January 20, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2rkunfxe>.

10 Rob Gillies, "Trudeau says trade war between Canada and U.S. expected for the 'foreseeable future,'" *PBS News*, March 6, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2edfbpw6>.

11 Elections Ontario, *General Elections Statistics from the Records*, <https://tinyurl.com/rjw4kuht>.

12 Toronto Star, "Ontario elections results map 2025," February 28, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/yhvjzamz>.

13 Government of Canada, *National Housing Strategy Act*, S.C. 2019, c. 29, s. 313, <https://tinyurl.com/uudf7vzd>.

realtor portraits, remains the lives of the remaining majority, namely, the 59% of Canadians in contemplation of sacrificing basic living essentials to afford housing.¹⁴

When did we as humans morph into survivalists, 40-hour-a-week corporate sheep, and now simultaneously fighting social advocates, all for the mere right *to shelter*? That's my personal opinion, but arguably a common sentiment among my demographic Generation Z: individuals born between the years 1997-2012.

Impeccably convenient to the writing of this introduction, Maclean's March 2025 issue headlines "Why Gen Z Will Never Leave Home." The op-ed, quoting StatsCan, states 46% of Canadian adults in their twenties currently reside in a household with a parent.¹⁵ Such a *promising* state of affairs for future generations.

This should be the part of the narrative where I make the bold, fearless claim I'll solve the housing crisis and permanently alter the dialogue of housing research through love, revolutionary hand-holding, and faith. Well, no. I can't do that. I'm a graphic designer. And truthfully, not to be insulting, I doubt you can either.

Housing transcends necessity. As philosopher Gaston Bachelard would phrase it, a "house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space."¹⁶ As I would phrase it, it's autonomous identity: housing is the most distinguished repository of the self.

There is a desperate, pleading call for humanity, relatability toward a fundamental need so entwined in simple human nature. What is inexplicably absent from sterile, overpriced listings, well-intentioned resources of indecipherable, unnavigable PDFs, what landlords and corrupt policymakers fail to recognize are the very qualities and emotional attachments that truly constitute a living space. *A home*.

Therefore I ask, should this not be accounted for in the current landscape of housing discourse in some capacity, albeit limited?

14 Habitat for Humanity Canada, *Affordable Housing Survey*, <https://tinyurl.com/yf4hsy76>.

15 Claire Gagné, "Why Gen Z Will Never Leave Home," *Maclean's*, February 11, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/3p39ff9h>.

16 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 47.

My intention is not to provide a utopian all-encompassing solution to an inherently complex social problem. Or ascertain the self-important promise I can. But instead hone in on a specific set of challenges sustained by a specific demographic, within a specific city.

What I do offer, is an alternative means of visual communication: one that is tailored towards women between the ages of 18-28 — an audience overlooked in both housing and design research (and honestly, too many other things to list in an opening paragraph) with the goal of emphasizing the disparity of rental housing within a flawed market. A market in which its currently existing media could use just as much revising in Adobe Creative Suite as it could in the morality of its content.

And so, I introduce the title of this thesis project.

Elysium (n.)¹⁷

1. an eternal paradise in ancient Greek mythology.
2. a place or state of bliss, felicity, or delight.
3. a reclamation, and a design strategy.

Elysium is a series of fictitious mascots which I call “communicative agents”. Or more affectionately, *Elysian Friends*.

This research is a mimicry. A response of absurdity to absurdity. A protest articulated in satire, criticism, and conversational prose. An inquiry into the hostilities of Toronto’s rental housing market: an environment where deceptive listings obscure the reality of exploitative practice, masquerading in idealistic imagery and sanitized language.

This research is a characterized reinterpretation of tenant-led digital platforms which once offered peer-to-peer insight, now seemingly censored by unethical landlords and corporate interests.

This research is inherently useless. To be clear, that’s not a self-deprecating statement, but a theoretical one, nurtured in James C. Scott’s framework of Everyday Resistance, and performed through Linda Hutcheon’s recontextualization of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of Double-Voiced Discourse. I argue parody is an effective tactic of everyday resistance — one that can challenge the systemic erasure of tenant experiences in the rental housing search, demystify fragmented legal policy and resources, and offer an accessible entry point into localized forms of tenant-led discourse.

¹⁷ “Elysium”, *Merriam-Webster*, <https://tinyurl.com/2s3u75f9>; Author’s modification.

Drawing from the prevalent Gen Z phenomenon of trinket culture, an aesthetic of affective nostalgia, synonymously classified as “inner child consumerism,” I propose cuteness, its potential for subversion, and its signifying relation to emotional security as a counterpoint to verbose clinicality.

In classic Gen Z nihilism, my methodology is critique. Satire. Irony. Metafiction (more on this in 4). I say research-creation too, which is practically a given for any MFA/MDes project, but when I say this, I truly mean research-*failure*-creation. Which to confess, occurred numerous times throughout the process. This paper is sung in the recitation of autoethnography, its accompaniment in the community-based tenor of the creative market.

What does a Gen Z-aged woman, Hello Kitty (cuteness in its entirety, essentially), and satire all have in common? The instinctual, and logical answer is they’re not related. Superficially, I can agree. The admittedly, unconventional crux of my thesis however, is the three are all incredibly underestimated.

Can parody solve the housing crisis? No. Can it create commentary on the inanity of the situation, and perhaps 5-7 individuals on the offshoot who engage with this project will thoughtfully consider the ramifications of the financialization of housing? That they’ll give it another thought? I genuinely think so. And that is exactly where my capabilities lie, and the capabilities of visual communication.

I mentioned earlier I’m a graphic designer. True. I’m an illustrator as well. But I’ll also be a negotiator, a theatrical narrator, an academic allegedly, yet most importantly, a persuader. I want to persuade *you*. I want you to understand, and to believe me. And if not me, believe in the citations, the research, and the often undetected, immeasurable agency of duality. And maybe then, we’ll really move slightly forward.

—◆ TLDR

The remainder of this document is partitioned into a series of floors.

A Disclaimer on Satire

Can parody engage alienated audiences in the actionable spheres of Toronto's rental housing crisis?

Ground floor, lingual context. A short story, a study session on parody, and a rationalization of tonality.

1F: House-Home

What exactly constitutes the necessity for a home?

The relationship of housing to its target audience. The relationship of the author to the project.

2F: Mascots, Trinket Culture, and the Blind Box

How can cute aesthetics and mascot-based communication negotiate inaccessible forms of social discourse while challenging elitist assumptions of femininity and popular visual culture?

Literature review. Case studies of cultural context. A few personal interests.

3F: Narrative and Creative Influence

What role does lowbrow visual media perform on the stage of this project?

Interlude. Cinematic parallels. Worldbuilding.

4F: Elysium

Can participatory, low-barrier, informal design strategies facilitate acts of everyday resistance and reclamation in urban spaces in response to rental housing precarity?

The creation of *Elysium*. The culmination of the thesis exhibition and its preceding methods.

Conclusion

What are the current and future implications of this research?

Curtain call, soliloquy. An overarching summary of events. Top floor.

And with a nod of acknowledgement, or an intentional, avoidant glance, we'll return to our original places.

A Disclaimer on Satire

— ♦ Preface

In the early development of this project, a significant concern brought to my attention was the implementation of satire within the project's overall tone, and the writing of this paper. Is it appropriate to work in a manner which could potentially appear nonchalant or dismissive? Would it create the impression that I'm undermining the severity of a social issue that is quite literally, life-or-death for some? These were apprehensions that interfered with the process, the work, and its ever-changing deliverables.

The reservation of my opinions would also be met with fair critique of my writing. Uncanny. Detached. Finding equilibrium between the academic tone used in my benchmark essay on *Hamlet*, my casual off-the-clock self, and my client-facing voice proved itself to be a challenge beyond the established parameters of the project.

Earlier drafts of this paper were clinical. A diluted version ironically resembling the work I was actively critiquing for the aforementioned reason. As the midpoint of the academic year approached, I was greeted with a near-lethal end of semester to my graduate education. Unfortunate circumstance and personal error tapping on the forehead of my composure. Directionless on the state of the project. The absence of a thesis committee. The threat of failure (and the abysmal job market) looming in from close distances and on my LinkedIn feed: a digital graveyard of talented peers and envisioned omens of an own archival.

So in response, I spent the winter break rewriting, and restructuring my paper from the very start. Rewiring of a creative psyche. The same period further occupied by reading. An intensive, external consultation to academic sources for any sense of semantic guidance. Scrambled excerpts among Google documents in tandem with Filipino holiday parties. Research-Creation. Satirical Postmodernism. Autoethnography — somehow, the two of us now a literary offensive backcourt. Theoretical papers of assurance forwarding a resuscitation to conceptual woes. An opportunity for genuinity born from severe disappointment, and refreshingly, relief?

It was a naïve, arrogant assumption on my part to believe an arts-based degree of this caliber wouldn't be associated with an introspective self-workshop. I recall the audacious childhood variation of myself whose relentless critique and questioning of *everything* in a Catholic education system: antiquated feminine ideals, religion, and existentialism, resulted in frequent phone calls to my household. Adolescent years of predominantly, moralistic delinquency.

Between deliberate, conscious polish and its subsequent limitations, I'm in search of a specific reckless, tenacious individual as I reclaim the voice of this thesis. An individual who selected a creative profession as a means of expectational challenge to begin with.

—◆ Antecedent

The timbre of this project is constructed on the primary exploration of the literary concept Double-Voiced Discourse and its related themes of parody, satire, and metafiction within postmodern analysis.

Conceptualized in *The Dialogic Imagination* by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the term derives from a broader tree-diagram of the paradigm of Dialogism. Its notion states all language is inherently social, continuously positioned by interactions with prior and future voices: “The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object.”¹⁸

To translate simply, no singular voice, opinion, or text ever remains in isolation. Instead, speech, either in literature or everyday conversation, is an ongoing process of interrelation. All forms of communication are an infinite Russian nesting doll of incarnations, influenced and morphed by its preceding porcelain layer. Or comparably, an eternal improvisational exercise of “Yes, and”, in which dialogue is in constant, evolving succession.¹⁹

Yes, and its major classifications are summarized as:

Heteroglossia: *Language is not homogeneous.* It is a composition of diverse, conflicting social and ideological voices establishing significance in its interactions. All text functions as a “matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve.”²⁰

Polyphony: *Language is multiplicity.* Akin to concurrent melodies in musical theory, various voices coexist in equal status, each maintaining their autonomy: “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices.”²¹

18 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 279.

19 Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (Theatre Arts Books, 1981), 56.

20 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 428.

21 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6–7.

Double-Voiced Discourse: *Language is contested duality.* It is constructed of a primary authoritative voice and a secondary voice, either responsive or subversive, often expressed in satire. Both function in continual exchange of inversion and reference. In Bakhtin's words: "two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other."²²

Bakhtin's discourse on dialogism precedes numerous disseminations of the subject. Its initial manifestations arise in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, an analysis of the multi-narrative form of the 19th Century Russian novelist, positioning Dostoevsky's work as the epitome of dialogism in literature, the "creator of the polyphonic novel."²³

In later studies, Bakhtin authors *Rabelais and His World*, framing Renaissance-era satire as a foundational model for double-voiced discourse. His examination of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais specifies the historical role of dual discourse: the authoritative voice, is a representation of systemic institutions such as the church and state. The subversive voice, embodied in the "carnavalesque," temporarily suspends social strata. It creates an environment of inversion where typical hierarchies are upended. Within the "carnival," oppressed individuals, namely peasants and those of lower classes, are free to openly ridicule and mock authority in a disruption of social order.²⁴

While Bakhtin introduces the terminology, I specifically draw on its contemporary re-contextualization from Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Form*. In Chapter Four, "A Paradox of Parody," Hutcheon aligns with Bakhtin's theorization of double-voiced discourse, yet critiques its hierarchical framing. The investigation thus centers on the paradox under trial: the discursive flexibility of dialogism as a framework versus the rigidity of Bakhtin's enforcement of double-voice. Hutcheon views Bakhtin's classification in *Rabelais and His World* as too restrictive for abstract application — his rejection of double-voiced discourse in contemporary literature contradicts his own theory: "It is his own statements of application that threaten to place limits upon the concept's viability."²⁵

22 Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 324.

23 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6.

24 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

25 Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 70.

Her verdict: a postmodern, open-ended, parodical approach. She states one should “look to what the theories suggest, rather than what the practice denies” for “within the very unsystematic and often vague nature of those theories lies their power of suggestion and provocation.”²⁶

Parody, in this context, is “repetition with critical difference.”²⁷ Unlike the parody of the carnival, which manifests as exclusively ridicule, Hutcheon’s contemporary implementation is simultaneously critical and constructive: “What is ‘critical’ in parody is its marked ideological intent: it redefines or reorients the perspective of its target text.”²⁸ Parody to first resonate, inquiry to reconfigure. Whilst parody and satire frequently overlap, to distinguish the three: not all parody is satirical, not all satire is parodic, and metafiction can intersect both, teasing its artifice. If Hutcheon’s parody is inquisitive, then satire is irreverent, metafiction is self-referential. A defense lawyer, a prosecutor, and a juror.

Satire is morally embedded in structural defiance, its *actus reus* “both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention.”²⁹ It does not emulate a subject as parody does; it confronts authoritative structures in its critique, identical to Bakhtin’s early views on the subversive nature of double-voice. Metafiction, in contrast, distances itself from structure altogether as a member of the jury: self-aware, subjective, and capable of evaluating the armature of narrative and representation itself.

I picture Hutcheon’s dialogical reinterpretation of the “responsive voice” not as a fleeting carnival, but instead the inhabitation of a perpetual banquet hall. Bakhtin situates double-voiced discourse in Renaissance tradition as a singular, outlier transgression in which individuals “built a second world and a second life outside officialdom.”³⁰ Hutcheon’s revision extends the surface-level mimicry of temporary inversion. There is no imposition of an authoritative or subversive voice. Parody can be “centripetal — that is, a homogenizing, hierarchizing influence. But it can also be a centrifugal, denormalizing one.”³¹

26 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 32.

27 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 37.

28 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 101.

29 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 16.

30 Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 6.

31 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 76.

In lieu of unequivocal opposition consists the voice of the original text and the voice of the critiquing response. Parody is a participant in the source material, a member of the system it questions. It interferes with the playing field of the banquet's hosts in a conscious waltz of intricate footwork and anticipation. A fluid, ambivalent partnership between two parties, echoing the heterogeneity of dialogism. What remains is an ever-evolving, self-reflexive negotiation. Parody does not seek to overthrow conventions as Bakhtin would argue, rather to strategically operate within them.

Thus the amended definition of double-voice:

Double-Voiced Discourse: *Language is negotiable transformation.* It is constructed of an established voice, and a responsive voice, often expressed in parody. Both function in continual exchange of reinterpretation and inquiry with the intent of internal reform. It is “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”³²

What Hutcheon accomplishes in her postmodern recontextualization is the expansion of dialogical presence beyond the confines of traditional literary text. Her book, published in 1985, is arguably more significant in the current digital landscape, where parody and satire are ingrained in media and popular culture. Its several instances in contemporary study: feminist analyses of digital communication, environmental advocacy in addressing climate change, the memeification of corporate marketing, and satirical critique in the horror film genre.³³ Hutcheon's theory emphasizes the necessity of these examples, as contemporary parody and satire are “one of the major forms of modern self-reflexivity,” placing its timely arrival into my winter workspace as the guiding narrative and spirit of this thesis.³⁴

32 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 37.

33 Susan C. Herring, “Gender Differences in Computer-Mediated Communication: Bringing Familiar Baggage to the New Frontier” (Keynote Speech, American Library Association Annual Convention, San Francisco, CA, June 1996); Massih Zekavat and Tabea Scheel, *Satire, Humor, and Environmental Crises* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023); Ferdian Arie Bowo, Anisah, and Lia Marthalia, “Meme Marketing: Generation Z Consumer Behavior on Social Media,” *Jurnal Indonesia Sosial Sains* 5, no. 2 (February 2024), 188–201; Jordan Peele, *Get Out*, (2017).

34 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 2.

—◆ Consequent

What I will do is be critical. And satirical, at times. Above all, this is a parodical-critique on the absurdity of rental housing and its *contributing parties*.

This thesis is also a rebuttal. An opposing argument to the countless snide comments and elitist views on the interpreted creative value of contemporary illustration, “cuteness” as a visual aesthetic, and popular media primarily favoured and consumed by women.

What I won’t do, for obvious reasons, is direct my unfavourable interjections and personal commentary to the *affected parties*.

Parody is an exposé on the contradictions and inequities traditional analysis may overlook. A contrast to the matter-of-fact approach which populates the currently available government and corporate resources on housing. What satire provides is the opportunity to engage with an audience who may otherwise feel alienated by academic discourse. A paper in which my intended audience can actually decipher the argument I’m seeking to convey.

Parodical-critique is the term I coin to describe Hutcheon’s reinterpretation of Bakhtin, and my reinterpretation of Hutcheon to “rework those discourses whose weight has become tyrannical.”³⁵ I assert that dialogical and visual exaggerations of incongruities are a productive means of challenging dominant narratives and assembling perspectives otherwise illegible within conventional channels. Consider this thesis an opening demonstration.

To cite Hutcheon, citing Valle-Killeen and Edward Bloom, “While satire can be destructive, there is also an implied idealism, for it is often ‘unabashedly didactic and seriously committed to a hope in its own power to effect change.’”³⁶

This is a mock-epic, a tragicomedy, and before I forget what this document is, a research paper.

But it isn’t a memoir. It’s autoethnography with a thesaurus.

35 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 72.

36 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 36.

An autoethnographer is “first and foremost a communicator and a storyteller.”³⁷ Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.”³⁸ It “challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act.”³⁹ Or plainly, this is first-person narrative with Chicago-style footnotes.

By definition, I employ autoethnography incorrectly. I’m *too shy*.

I question the parameters of what Bochner and Ellis classify as personal experience. I distinguish transparency in the descriptors of one’s being, reclaiming its persistent biases, and the character of linguistics as valuable, legitimate methods of conveying personal experience. In submitting the self or the voice for critique, I admire the former, and situate myself in the latter.

The article “Research Fictions: Arts-Informed Narratives That Disrupt the Authority of the Text” by Elizabeth de Freitas identifies this tension. Examining the self-reflexive “I” of autobiographical scholarship, she suggests the unfiltered, confessional author is likewise a revised, crafted narrator of vulnerability.⁴⁰

Rather than framing performativity as shortcoming, de Freitas encourages dissonance, regarding autoethnographical craft and fiction as scholarly disturbance. Her principal example, the literary device of the unreliable narrator, “enhances the ambiguity and shifts the authority further towards the reader and towards reader-constructed meaning.”⁴¹

Referencing Wayne Booth, she writes: “As readers we are drawn into collusion with an alternative point of view [...] Our desire to exclude the central narrating voice and be privy

37 Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, “Communication as Autoethnography,” *The SAGE Handbook of Communication and Instruction*, ed. Deanna L. Fassett and John T. Warren (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006), 111.

38 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), Article 10, 273.

39 Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” 273.

40 Elizabeth de Freitas, “Research Fictions: Arts-Informed Narratives That Disrupt the Authority of the Text,” *Interchange* 38, no. 4 (2007), 337.

41 de Freitas, “Research Fictions,” 343.

to something that is hidden beneath the surface is gratified as we decipher the textual signals of unreliability.”⁴²

Not to say *I’m* unreliable. Moreso selective. Performance, artifice, and falsehoods are qualities I consider an honest component of narrative experience. It’s merely a supplementary practice of conveying truth and staking ideological claim to a demographic who already questions the supposed validity of sincerity. A calculated design choice.

Quoting Konstantin Grcic in *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design*: “Designers are not mere mediators [...] not taking a position is a problem of our times. An author is the one who takes an outspoken position.”⁴³

So, I’ll make a forward attempt at being the pioneer of parodical-critique, from a Jewel Pavao, polemical-satire, communicative design perspective, as “modern metafiction exists on the self-conscious borderline between art and life, making little formal distinction between actor and spectator, between author and co-creating reader.”⁴⁴ For the next 40 pages, I’ll place a temporary hold on formalities and we’ll exist as contemporaries in the banquet.

To intercede the premature lines of the preface: *Is it appropriate to implement satire in the project’s tone?* I’ll have Bakhtin respond to this line of inquiry in my stead: “The dialogic means of seeking truth is counterposed to official monologism, which pretends to possess a ready-made truth, and it is also counterposed to the naive self-confidence of those people who think they know something, that is, who think that they possess certain truths.”⁴⁵

And as for the writing of this paper? The discernment of the genuine and the parodical, perhaps even metafictional in nature itself — I’ll find amusement in delegating the ambiguity to interpretation.

42 de Freitas, “Research Fictions,” 344.

43 Konstantin Grcic, quoted by Louise Schouwenberg and Michael Kaethler, eds., *The Auto-Ethnographic Turn in Design* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2021), 82.

44 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 72.

45 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 110.

1F: House-Home

— ♦ A Paradox of Everyday Resistance

Everyday Resistance is selfish. A trickster. Plausibly immoral. It's "Foot-dragging, dissimulations, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, arson, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats, and so on."⁴⁶

In "Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance," James C. Scott writes of *nothing*; of covert action redacted from the record. He documents the peasantry's class struggle and its stratagem toward the "superordinate classes" (landlords, the state, owners of machinery, moneylenders).⁴⁷ A method of survival "abetted by both elites and social scientists," largely unremarkable in the archives, and fundamentally reliant on self-sufficiency.⁴⁸

Among the conscious acts of "riots, rebellion, and revolutionary movement" exist the discreet, the cautious collective acts of non-collective action.⁴⁹ Yet its greatest contradiction lies in its classification of everyday resistance as the all-powerful word, *Resistance*.

For all its reputation as an academic catchword, the term's connotations remain rather ambiguous.

Cited in Erin Sharpe's "Against Limits: A Post-Structural Theorizing of Resistance in Leisure," Weitz observes the term "remains loosely defined, allowing some scholars to see it almost everywhere and others almost nowhere," including examples of "leisure-based smoking, older adults gardening, parkour, roller derby, female Harley riders, and competitive masters athletes."⁵⁰

46 James C. Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 4, No. 1 (May 1989), 34.

47 Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," 36.

48 Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," 34.

49 Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," 33.

50 Erin Sharpe, "Against Limits: A Post-Structural Theorizing of Resistance in Leisure," *The Palgrave Handbook of Leisure Theory*, ed. Kevin Spracklen, Brett Lashua, Erin Sharpe, and Steven Swain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 911.

When arson is placed on a spectrum adjacent to the hobbyist activities of parkour, it raises the pressing question: what *actually* qualifies as resistance?

In relation to youth culture, Dr. Rebecca Raby articulates the dilemma through the delineation of modernist and postmodern opinion.

The modernist perspective is operative in pairs. Raby's analysis of Scott explains this as "oppositional binaries such as public/hidden, dominant/subordinate and public/private": a theory of duality necessitating an oppressor, and a reactionary oppressed class.⁵¹

The postmodern turn is perhaps best, if somewhat notoriously expressed by Michel Foucault's claim: "where there is power, there is resistance," and its reversal, Lila Abu-Lughod's "where there is resistance, there is power."⁵² Postmodern resistance refuses a singular subject or heroic oppositional force: its preference "may often be more fragmented and transitory than some such 'grand narratives' of resistance."⁵³

Despite the modernist profiling of Scott's framework by Sharpe and Raby, I partially disagree. I'll suggest everyday resistance holds postmodern, Foucauldian potential in the ambiguity of its scope.

Raby, quoting Susan Gal, asserts everyday resistance "fails to recognize 'the coexistence of deeply felt yet contested discourses' and intersecting identifications within a single person."⁵⁴ While acknowledging the importance of recognizing complexity in identity, the insistence of ideological nuance risks overintellectualizing, and ultimately obscuring the survivalist nature of Scott's framework.

Peasant refusal was not combatively oppositional: "the 'resisters' rarely intend to make a revolution and their actions do not openly challenge existing power arrangements."⁵⁵

51 Rebecca Raby, "What is Resistance?" *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005), 159.

52 Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson, "Everyday Resistance: Exploration of a Concept and Its Theories," *Resistance Studies Magazine* 1 (2013), 1. Would this be an academic paper if not for the inclusion of a Foucault citation?

53 Raby, "What is Resistance?" 161.

54 Raby, "What is Resistance?" 159.

55 Scott, "Everyday Forms of Resistance," 51.

Resistance was not grandiosely performed to destabilize authoritative structures; it was tacitly performed to endure within them. To *pine* for better circumstances.

To regulate these acts, described by critics as “trivial coping mechanisms that are either non-political forms of self-help or, at best, prepolitical,” within strict binaries such as resistant-complicit, or reactive-premeditated, is ironically, to replicate the reductive logic Scott is accused of perpetuating.⁵⁶

From my view, the most compelling conceptualization of everyday resistance is not from Scott, Raby, or Gal, but by scholar Richard Ballard. Of his theorized quartet on everyday resistance, Ballard’s concluding pitch is the most persuasive: acts of resistance are defined by their intentionality.⁵⁷

Quoting Ballard quoting Scott:

Whereas a person may dream of a ‘*millennial kingdom of justice may never occur*,’ their most immediate and practical purpose is to survive.

Everyday activities such as survival help Scott write against the implications of a passive class in itself, insisting that ‘*however partial or imperfect their understanding of the situation, [the exploited] are gifted with intentions and values and purposefulness that condition their acts*.’⁵⁸

Elaborating in plain-speak, Ballard’s reading ascribes motivation. He posits the peasantry as capable, as imaginative wishful thinkers equal to the revolutionaries and the greats, constrained by the impediments of day-to-day struggle.

Ballard repositions minor refusal and ethically questionable gestures as an intentional response to unachievable aspirations. Whether partial, imperfect, or emerging from limited cognizance, the beliefs and actions of the oppressed deserve recognition as skillful maneuvers, worthy of respect and deeper analysis.

56 Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” 50.

57 Richard Ballard, “Everyday Resistance: Theorising How the ‘Weak’ Change the World,” *The Routledge Handbook of Social Change*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 310.

58 Richard Ballard, “Everyday Resistance: Theorising How the ‘Weak’ Change the World,” 311.

To resolve the question of what *actually* qualifies as resistance: I'll cast my ballot into the arson and parkour debate — yes, they're all applicable.

I circle back to Sharpe, who inevitably elaborates on her leisure-based citations of resistance. Joy, a senior gardener observed by Raisborough and Bhatti, “negotiated through and creatively positioned herself within the traditional gendered norms to which she was subjected (e.g., wife, mother, neighbour, friend, gardener),” and was “able to manoeuvre through them to find her own location.”

Then Pavlidis, who argues “positions such as ‘roller derby grrl’ are simultaneously retraining and liberating, in that they celebrate certain versions of femininity while rejecting others.” And parkour, described by Sharpe through Bavinton: “resistance is exercised when runners play with and circumvent the norms of behaviour and conventional uses of public space.”⁵⁹

The preceding examples may very well be disputable in their specificity or applicability. Yet if “resistance” offers even a semblance of aspiration to its participants, its potential generates a meaningful, paradoxical grey-zone where reappropriation can be practiced.

Therefore, I'll contend, the defining quality of resistance, namely everyday resistance, above all, is purpose.

As Scott warns, “If only open, declared forms of struggle are called ‘resistance’, then all that is being measured may be the level of repression that structures the available options.”⁶⁰ To deny intent in favour of action is to place the burden of progress on those privileged enough to act publicly, and without fear of retribution. It would be no different to conflate resistance with spectacle.

Raby concludes in her writing: “Young people occupy a specific location in relation to power and identity as they experience a temporary inequality that intersects with other significant identifications, are framed in ways that negate their existence in the present, are shaped by discourses of a fluid, becoming self, and are also diversely shaped through the material inequalities of their diverse lives.”⁶¹

59 Sharpe, “Against Limits: A Post-Structural Theorizing of Resistance in Leisure,” 919.

60 Scott, “Everyday Forms of Resistance,” 51.

61 Raby, “What is Resistance?,” 168.

Reading Raby and Scott as interconnected theorists highlights observations resonant to the present: paradoxical actions and spaces wielded as strategies of alleviation parallel economic uncertainty experienced by contemporary young adults. Looking to the peasant class as a historical model illuminates what acts of *nothing* can truly signify to those who enact them.

If identity and its association with resistance is fluid and postmodern, then any rigid, scholarly definition proves insufficient against reality. When conditions of action are finite to survival, I'll declare intent then becomes the most accurate expression of everyday resistance.

2F: Mascots, Trinket Culture, and the Blind Box

— ♦ He May Bring You Happiness

“He is always by your side to make you smile. Sonny Angel will provide healing moments in your everyday life. He is a welcome sight at the entrance to your home, next to your bed, on your desk and so many other places.”⁶²

This is the strangely saccharine, questionably ominous description of the *Sonny Angel*: a miniature, cherub-like figurine adorned in a crown of thematic headgear. Toru Soeya, CEO of Dreams Inc., developed the novelty doll in 2004 to provide emotional comfort to young women in their twenties navigating the stressors of their professional and personal lives.⁶³ A retail value of approximately \$15 CAD, the Sonny Angel is founded on the principle of the “useless product,” where functionality is secondary to “visual sensitivity.”⁶⁴

I reject the opinion of his creations as “useless.” Visual sensitivity *is* a function. The Sonny Angel exemplifies D. W. Winnicott’s concept of the Transitional Object. The psychological term describes the emotional relationship between a “comforting” material item and an infant, commonly in the form of a blanket or doll, which performs as a proxy of the child’s caregiver in their absence.⁶⁵

In adulthood, it manifests as a tangible representation of any significant individual, place, or memory. It serves as an intermediary between the self and the owner’s recollection of comfort, eliciting emotional security in moments of distress. In dramatic fashion, it’s the cliché narrative trope of a protagonist clutching a heart-shaped locket. In practical application, it’s a bereavement object to ease the grieving process, a memento held by

62 Sonny Angel, “About Sonny Angel,” <https://tinyurl.com/mud99cv9>.

63 Toru Soeya, “Free Thinking Focused on ‘Sensitivity’ as the Source of Hit Products—Dreams Inc.,” Keizaikai Web, March 2, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yb8jrj2e>.

64 Soeya, “Free Thinking Focused on ‘Sensitivity’ as the Source of Hit Products—Dreams Inc.” Aesthetics over practicality? Such a statement could incapacitate traditionalists.

65 D.W. Winnicott, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. 34 (1953), 89–97.

military veterans to adjust to life post-deployment, and an art therapy tool to alleviate symptoms of C-PTSD.⁶⁶

And of course, it's the Sonny Angel. Developmental-Behavioural Pediatrician Dr. Barbara Howard suggests up to 25% of college-aged women are in ownership of a transitional object upon leaving home.⁶⁷ What is framed as "healing moments" in everyday life is in actuality, a strategic cultivation of childhood memorabilia as sentimental infrastructure.

He May Bring You Happiness. The aspirational slogan wraps the front of the hexagonal, pastel-coloured packaging.

Well, does he? On my front, I'm actually quite a fan! In an unconventional sense, they're actually kind of charming?

On the *young women in their twenties* front? I would argue Soeya has exceeded his expectations.

It would be no exaggeration to claim the success of the Sonny Angel as *transcendental*. In social media metrics, #sonnyangel currently holds over 600,000 engagements on Instagram, and 95 million views on TikTok respectively.⁶⁸ *BBC*, *Vogue Hong Kong*, and *The New York Times* are a sample-size selection of global publications who have penned the notoriety of the product.

Sales have experienced a significant increase, with 2023 and 2024 marking the highest levels in the United States.⁶⁹ At present, there is a national shortage of the figurine across

66 Wakenshaw, Clare, "The Use of Winnicott's Concept of Transitional Objects in Bereavement Practice." *Bereavement Care* 39, no. 3 (September 2020); St. George, Julia, "The things they carry: a study of transitional object use among U.S. military personnel during and after deployment" (2013). Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA; 119–123; Brenner-Malin, Emma T., "Art as a clinical tool in the treatment of complex PTSD : a theoretical study" (2015), Masters Thesis, Smith College, Northampton, MA.

67 The Learning Network, "What Was Your Most Precious Childhood Possession?," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2013, <https://tinyurl.com/72ty6jdk>.

68 Shane O'Neill, "Why Do People Love This Tiny Doll?," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/dmbtyuua>.

69 Alex Abad-Santos, "This Tiny Doll Is Making Everyone So Happy," *Vox*, July 8, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4x8nbx9n>.

North and South America.⁷⁰ Websites of its five official Toronto distributors list all variations of the figurine as either sold out, or out of stock.⁷¹

As capitalism would have it, no consumerist phenomenon exists in seclusion. Therein lies the Labubu, a Nordic-inspired monster who “is kind-hearted and always wants to help, but often accidentally achieves the opposite.”⁷² And the Smiski (a personal favourite), who are “curious little creatures that love hiding in small spaces and corners of your room”, which also happen to glow-in-the-dark.⁷³

They’re the darlings of “trinket culture” — the pop culture-assigned umbrella term encapsulating the collection of “cute”, aestheticized characters, memorabilia, and novelty items reminiscent of childhood nostalgia.

I’m reminded of my friend, Hailee, who a few weeks prior to writing this (I will attempt to type this in earnest), attended the *Smiski Meet-and-Greet* hosted by the cosmetic and lifestyle franchise Sukoshi Mart at Toronto Eaton Centre. Complimentary photographs were offered to visitors who attended, with an employee dressed in a life-sized Smiski costume. According to her recount, she arrived two hours before the shopping centre’s opening, and one hour prior to the event, to be greeted by a queue extending two floors of the shopping mall. Upon reaching the storefront, it would be to her crushing dismay to discover the figurines had been cleared in its entirety within the first thirty minutes of opening. Needless to say, the demand is *local*.

Could one deny the promising chance that he too, *may bring you happiness?*

70 Alex Abad-Santos, “This Tiny Doll Is Making Everyone So Happy.”

71 Distributors Sparetime, Sukoshi Mart, Mr. Pen, Hobbiesville, and Urban Outfitters, accessed January 2025.

72 Pop Mart, “The Monsters Collection,” Pop Mart Canada, accessed January 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/ytwbj6e4>.

73 Dreams Inc., “Smiski,” Smiski Official Website, <https://tinyurl.com/yc6trhp4>.



FIG. 1

Goat Sonny Angel (2022 Cherry Blossom Series),
Sonny Angel USA, accessed August 2025.

*“The goat’s horns resemble a branch of a cherry tree
with plump blossoms in full bloom. This angel cap-
tures the beauty and wonder of a real cherry tree.”*

(Poetic. You know what? Sure, I agree.)



FIG. 2

Smiski Meet-and-Greet Promotional Image,
Sukoshi Mart, accessed February 2025.

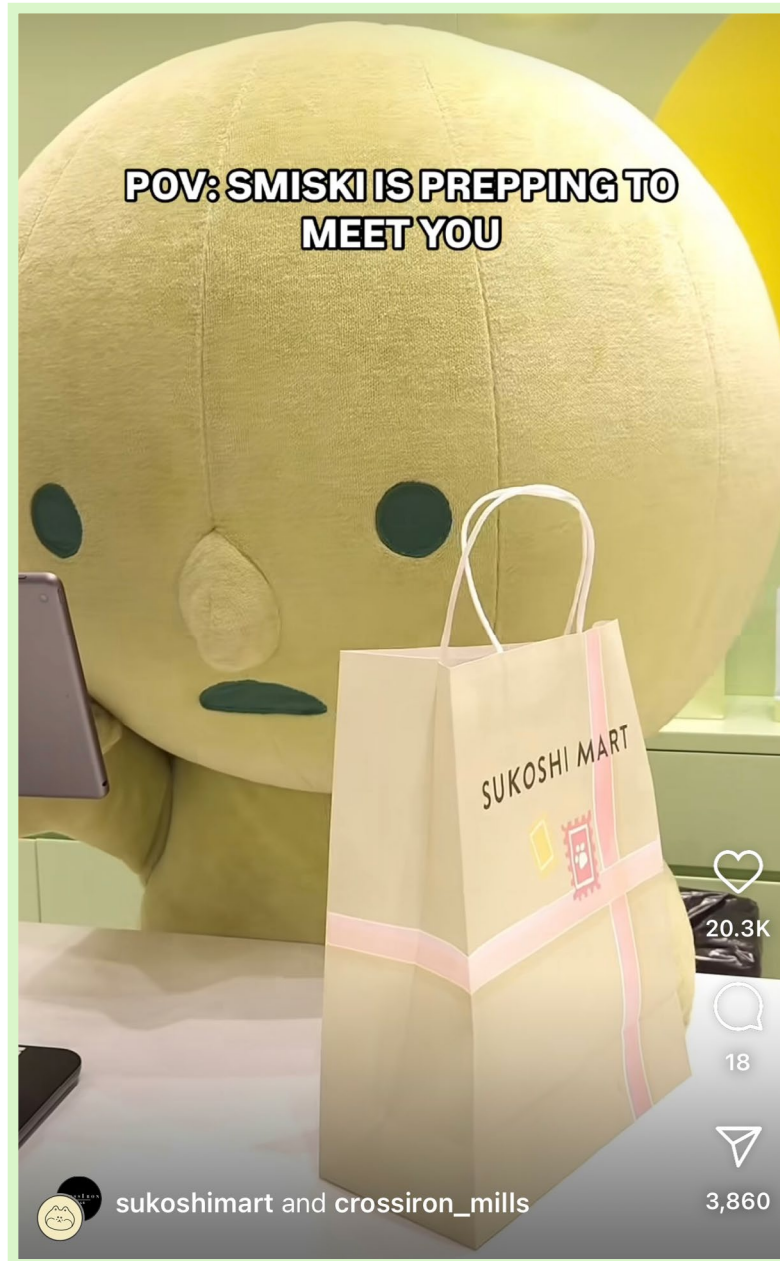


FIG. 3

Smiski Meet-and-Greet Promotional Video (via Instagram), Sukoshi Mart, accessed February 2025.



FIG. 4

Smiski Meet-and-Greet Event Lineup,
Photograph by Hailee Manõsca, 2025.

——◆ *The Loneliest Generation*

In honesty, yes.

There is an intentional, overt omission in the previous chapter. To what extent can corporate sins be forgiven in the pursuit of virtuous intent?

The Sonny Angel, the Labubu, the Smiski, and its genial neighborhood of peculiar-named friends present a contradiction of imperious magnitude. One would only need to refer to the subculture's alternative moniker, "inner child consumerism" to grasp the dilemma.

He May Bring You Happiness. The aspirational slogan wraps the front of the hexagonal, pastel-coloured packaging. It wraps all the packaging. The *opaque* packaging. Rendering its contents unknown to the consumer.

Raspberry. Peach. Orange.

Pear. Strawberry. Grape.

Watermelon. Melon. Durian.

Dragonfruit. Pineapple. Apple.

These are the one-in-twelve draft prospects of the Sonny Angel *Fruit Series*. This is the gimmick of the "Blind Box."

The blind box "is an example of probabilistic selling or surprise offering, in which a retailer creates probabilistic goods by concealing the product information and offering such products as additional purchase choices."⁷⁴

At face value, is the novelty of deliberate risk. From a cognitive level, is the "psychological reward of conquering uncertainty": an incentive reinforced by the assurance of a guaranteed, tangible outcome.⁷⁵

74 Florent Nkoulou, Fengjie Jing, and Khalid Hussain, "What's in the Box? Investigating the Benefits and Risks of the Blind Box Selling Strategy," *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 71 (2023), 3.

75 Zhiyan Zhang, "An Analysis of Consumer Behavior and Marketing Principles in Blind Box Purchasing: A Case Study of Pop Mart," *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences* 78 (2024), 7.

It's an alluring marketing approach with disproportionate influence on Gen Z women: in a case study of leading blind box retailer Pop Mart, data indicates individuals between the ages of 18–24 comprise 32% of consumers, while those aged 25–29 account for 36%, identifying women born after 1995 as the primary drivers of consumption.⁷⁶

The inclination here is not that women of this age bracket have an increased interest in gambling. Generational preference is more economic than visual, and more tactical than kindhearted.

In *The Overspent American*, economist Juliet B. Schor first theorized the concept of the Lipstick Effect: “a phenomenon whereby expenditures on cosmetics increase during economic downturns.”

“[Women] are looking for affordable luxury, the thrill of buying in an expensive department store, indulging in a fantasy of beauty and sexiness, buying ‘hope in a bottle.’ Cosmetics are an escape from an otherwise drab everyday existence.”⁷⁷

And as Forbes reports, “In 2001, Leonard Lauder, chairman of Estee Lauder, supplied anecdotal evidence of the lipstick effect when he reported his company saw a spike in lipstick sales after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. He doubled down on the message after the recession of 2008 reporting once again a rise in company lipstick sales.”⁷⁸

Providing a rationale for the occurrence is first the (asinine) hypothesis put forward by E. Hill, et al., insisting the isolated purchase of lipstick in financial crisis is “driven by women’s desire to attract mates with resources”:

An economic recession may signal that financially stable men are becoming scarce. Given that the number of people who have financial security declines in a recession, women—whose reproductive success has been critically dependent on a mate’s

⁷⁶ Zhang, “An Analysis of Consumer Behavior and Marketing Principles in Blind Box Purchasing,” 8.

⁷⁷ Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don’t Need* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999).

⁷⁸ Pamela N. Danziger, “With Inflation Rising, the Lipstick Effect Kicks In and Lipstick Sales Rise,” *Forbes*, June 1, 2022, <https://tinyurl.com/mr737kst>.

resource access—should both increase the preeminence of this preference and increase the effort they invest in attracting a mate who has them.⁷⁹

While common sense can easily dispel such reductive logic, Daniel MacDonald counters the validity of the sample-size methodology. He sources the Great Recession of 2007–2009, utilizing microdata from the Bureau of Labor:

“Looking ahead to the main findings, we show that during the Great Recession average cosmetics expenditures among women aged 18–40 increased. However, the increase was not driven by life cycle-based mechanisms: average expenditures on cosmetics are higher among unmarried women aged 18–40 in general, and there was no significant change in behavior between unmarried and married women during the Great Recession – both groups increased their cosmetics expenditures. Furthermore, the frequency of cosmetics expenditures declined slightly during the Great Recession, further disproving the idea that women’s response was to increase their frequency of use in order to attract a mate.”⁸⁰

MacDonald concludes with a substantiated reframing, proposing increased purchasing by young women is a psychological impulse to “treat” oneself frugally during periods of economic downturn.⁸¹

Yet to apply this hypothesis to the contemporary context of the blind box trend is to unmask a somber, self-deceptive paradox of the Sonny Angel: the willing consumption of illusory safety as consolation for external instability.

Beneath playful marketing rhetoric is a borderline predatory dynamic directed toward Generation Z: the cohort sensationally branded *The Loneliest Generation*, a dramatized epithet drawn from the 73% of Gen Z individuals who self-identify as *lonely*.⁸²

79 Sarah E. Hill, Christopher D. Rodeheffer, Vladas Griskevicius, Kristina M. Durante, and Andrew E. White, “Boosting Beauty in an Economic Decline: Mating, Spending, and the Lipstick Effect,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103, no. 2 (August 2012).

80 Daniel MacDonald and Yasemin Dildar, “Social and Psychological Determinants of Consumption: Evidence for the Lipstick Effect during the Great Recession,” *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 86 (2020).

81 MacDonald and Dildar, “Social and Psychological Determinants of Consumption.”

82 Bakhtiari, Kian “Gen-Z, The Loneliness Epidemic And The Unifying Power Of Brands,” *Forbes*, July, 28, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/yfp3bks8>

And its inverse. The innocuous identity-shaping, emotionally-securing promise: *He May Bring You Happiness*.

What a dilemma. Soeya, how could you?

The double-voiced nature of "cuteness" precipitates moral debate: questions of agency, consumerism, and whether the value of individual sentimental comfort can ever possibly negate the flaws of its medium.



FIG. 5

Sonny Angel Blind Box Packaging,
Sonny Angel USA, accessed August 2025.

——◆ OAA

I can't provide a definitive answer to the statement. But what I can provide is a case study.

A local one. Fulfilling the grey-zone, theoretical criteria of reappropriated, double-voiced, everyday resistance.

I am (now formerly) the leader of the student organization and artist collective OCAD Artist Alley, commonly abbreviated as OAA.⁸³

Established in 2018 by former OCAD University students Salisa Jatuweerapong and Becky Wu, the organization facilitates biannual creative markets dedicated to showcasing and selling the original work of students and alumni. Its primary initiative is to support emerging, marginalized artists and designers in developing entrepreneurial skills to kickstart their small businesses within the local community.

The majority of the exhibited work is innately small-scale and lowbrow: mass-printed, low-cost, and ornamental. Appropriation, fan-art, and media-inspired works are normalized and routinely anticipated practices.

Challenging the status quo of charging for equipment and space (upwards of \$200-500 to partake in other markets with similar traffic), our events are completely free in both participation and admission. In my opinion, this demolishes the greatest financial and opportunistic disadvantage that exploits emerging creatives, specifically from equity-seeking communities. Despite persistent rebuttals from corporate and institutional interests to impose even marginal fees (it always begins at *marginally*), I consider this a non-negotiable factor to how we've maintained a less-competitive, encouraging environment amid an acquisitive, (irritatingly) hyper-competitive industry.

OAA is one of the most recognized student groups at the institution and, biasedly so, probably hosts the most notorious public-facing campus events aside from the highly-sponsored, highly-promoted undergraduate showcase, GradEx.

Referencing the internal annual financial report documenting the 2024–2025 academic year, our most recent market, *Spring OCAD Artist Alley 2025*, held in April, recorded an estimated unique traffic of over 1,300 visitors to campus on a Saturday daytime.

83 *Three years of service with honourable discharge.*

As for direct translations to sales, nearly half of the vendors reported earning more than \$500 in a six-hour window, with roughly 23% reaching four-digit earnings: an impressive feat considering our markets are often one of the first professional platforms for creatives to sell their work.⁸⁴

And anecdotally, are the multiple individuals who have cited OAA as personal reasoning for submitting a student application to the university.

OCAD Artist Alley has garnered quite the reputation.

For a rotational planning team composed entirely of twenty-something, marginalized, women-identified, full-time students, operating on an annual budget of three digits, we produce exceptional results.⁸⁵

Very transparently, I will not place the onus of success on administrative duties alone.

The sustained culture, induced by eager, opportunity-seeking creatives, reciprocated by a community of well-intentioned individuals seeking to support creatives, has established a rare, aspirational carnivalesque in real time.

What the creative market provides, contradictorily, is a social and community-driven function as it is a mass-produced and profit-driven one. The embrace of artistic practices not typically considered "employable" (decorative, cute, hyperfeminine) achieving success substantially by quality of work, community reputation, and word-of-mouth is commendable. It's actually ridiculously endearing.

This temporary, biannual ecosystem informed the baseline architecture of the research: Is it possible to appropriate the successful, enclosed space of the creative market and its aesthetics beyond the carnival? Specifically, within the social and economic spheres affecting its attending demographic?

The inquiry initiated a research deep-dive into pre-existing forms, and alternative, non-financial models, ultimately instigating the development and conceptualization of the *Communicative Agent*.

84 OCAD Artist Alley (OAA). *2024-2025 Financial and Post-Event Survey Report*. May 2025. Unpublished internal document.

85 It would be disingenuous to gloss over the accompanying challenges (emphasis on *challenges*) and barriers experienced from the correlative descriptors.



FIG. 6

*Spring OCAD Artist Alley 2024 (Lobby),
Photograph by Charlize Simbulan, 2024.*



FIG. 7

*Spring OCAD Artist Alley 2024 (Great Hall),
Photograph by Charlize Simbulan, 2024.*

—◆ The Communicative Agent

*“He smirks from the office desks and mussy bedroom chiffoniers of crusty bachelors; he has his smile. Hashed back at him by the debutante as she tucks in the final stray lock of hair at her mirror; in all his unclothed dignity, he invades the sanctum of the elderly maiden lady and the strong-minded young woman.”*⁸⁶

This is the strangely saccharine, questionably ominous description of the *Kewpie*. Diminutive for “cupid”, the stylized character debuted as a serialized comic in the December 1909 issue of *Ladies’ Home Journal*, achieving global commercial success. It would later translate to \$1.4 million in sales, a series of collectible dolls, numerous publications, and influence Toru Soeya himself.⁸⁷

The first published female cartoonist and highest paid female illustrator of the United States in 1914, O’Neill is an honorary, historical contributor of parodical-critique. Miriam Formanek-Brunell, quoting Shelley Armitage, states “O’Neill created new meanings in her art by mingling genres and forms, and subverting sanctioned images of women, ethnic groups, and children. She did this with a visual humor (e.g., whimsy, wit, irony, and satire) that served as a vehicle for questioning established American myths about women’s roles, family life, and class structure.”⁸⁸

At the height of the Kewpie’s reign, O’Neill leveraged the caricature as a political mascot for the women’s suffrage movement. She illustrated several posters and postcards for the National American Woman Suffrage Association for distribution at rallies, including a 45,000-person march in which she personally participated.⁸⁹

86 “The Washington Times, November 30, 1913, Page 10,” *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://tinyurl.com/5yx333mf>.

87 Adina Solomon, “The Prolific Illustrator Behind Kewpies Used Her Cartoons for Women’s Rights,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 15, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/52t49jzp>; Rose O’Neill, *The Kewpies and Dotty Darling* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1912); Rose O’Neill, *The Kewpies: Their Book* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1913); Rose O’Neill, *The Kewpie Kut-Outs* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1914); Rose O’Neill, *The Kewpie Primer* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1916); Rose O’Neill, *The Kewpies and the Runaway Baby* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928).

88 Rose O’Neill, *The Story of Rose O’Neill*, edited by Miriam Formanek-Brunell (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1999): 6.

89 Ian Gordon, “Rose O’Neill’s Kewpies and Early Transmedia Practices,” *Transmedia Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. Christina Meyer and Monika Pietrzak-Franger (New York: Routledge, 2021), 230.

If the Sonny Angel is the contemporary, contradictory transitional object of visual sensitivity, its historical ancestor is irrefutably the Kewpie. The lowbrow comic figure is a 20th Century case study on reappropriation: the transformation of a seemingly trivial, consumer-based doll into an activist mascot of social engagement.

And an exemplary prototype of the *Communicative Agent*, the novel title I appoint to describe the visual execution of this thesis, validated by the precedent of the similarly titled, Pedagogical Agent.

The pedagogical agent is an avatar. It's also a human, an animal, a mascot, and a teacher, either digital or analogue.

To be precise, it's a visual tool utilized in educational studies, ascribed to “an anthropomorphic character used in a learning environment to serve instructional purposes.” The agent performs as a “learning tool by providing help and guidance, demonstrating principles and procedures, and demonstrating examples to help learners process and store information,” replicating an instructor, mentor, or guide as a supporting actor for human instruction.⁹⁰

Sans context, the descriptor implies a veneer of human accuracy. It would be reasonable for one to assume the appearance of such a concept is represented by the photographic likeness of a classroom teacher.

In actuality, the implementation of standard realism is adversely detrimental. The reality is fictionalized. Exaggerated. Cute.

A study by Vicneas and Zamzuri, conducted among post-secondary students, surmised the “level of realism of [a] virtual agent may cause distress to the users, especially when the character mimics human-like behaviour based on the uncanny valley phenomenon.”⁹¹ Participants rejected hyperrealistic designs, instead expressing affective preference for semi-realistic and stylized 2D illustrations.

90 Ati Suci Dian Martha and Harry B. Santoso, “The Design and Impact of the Pedagogical Agent: A Systematic Literature Review,” *Journal of Educators Online* 16, no. 1 (January 2019).

91 Vicneas Muniady and Ahmad Zamzuri Mohamad Ali, “The Effect of Valence and Arousal on Virtual Agent’s Designs in Quiz Based Multimedia Learning Environment,” *International Journal of Instruction* 13 (2020), 903.

The pedagogical agent, or its most straightforward genre, a mascot, subverts traditional expectations of information distribution. Its functionality thrives in the imaginative. It resides less in quantifiable outcomes than in emotional, qualitative registers, placing attachment as the primary measure of success.

Research documented in “Do Pedagogical Agents Enhance Student Motivation?” by Gladstone et al., discovered the integration of pedagogical agents significantly increased self-efficacy in both adolescents and adults outside of post-secondary education.⁹²

Comparing its appearance and utility as reminiscent of the transitional object, it's unsurprising. The context propels a compelling argument for the continual presence of object-attachment, specifically in the cute and sentimental, surpassing infancy.

If mascots have advantageously functioned as chaperones of comfort in both distressing and educational environments, then their convergence points to further study external to the nursery and classroom.

And really, extensive application already exists at present: mascot loyalty in amateur and professional sports, cultural Olympic ambassadors, regional-specific tourist guides, traffic security influencers, and psychological relief provided by anthromorphic video game characters during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹³

Therefore, it is not nonsensical at all to advance the development of mascots as communicative tools for addressing rental housing and broader forms of social precarity. The communicative agent is merely a label for an enduring concept. I just happen to identify it with a label.

I position the term as a reframing, situating its potential within the scope of conveying information, and propping its capacity within the local, parodical, and small-scale.

92 Jessica Gladstone et al., “Do Pedagogical Agents Enhance Student Motivation? Unraveling the Evidence Through Meta-Analysis,” *Educational Psychology Review* 37 (2025).

93 Brad Schultz and Mary Lou Sheffer, “The Mascot That Wouldn’t Die: A Case Study of Fan Identification and Mascot Loyalty,” *Sport in Society* 21, no. 3 (2018), 482-496; Qianqian Su and Fangxuan (Sam) Li, How cute mascots affect relationships with tourism destinations: A moderated mediation model, *Tourism Management*, Volume 99, (2023); José Manuel Simões and Chong Chan U Alberto, “A Case Study: The Effect of Traffic Police Mascot (CPSP) in Promoting Pedestrian Crossing Habits,” *International Journal of Frontiers in Sociology* 6, no. 10, (2024), 27-36; Andrew Yee and Jeremy Sng, Animal Crossing and COVID-19: A Qualitative Study Examining How Video Games Satisfy Basic Psychological Needs During the Pandemic”, *Frontiers in Psychology* no. 13, (2022).

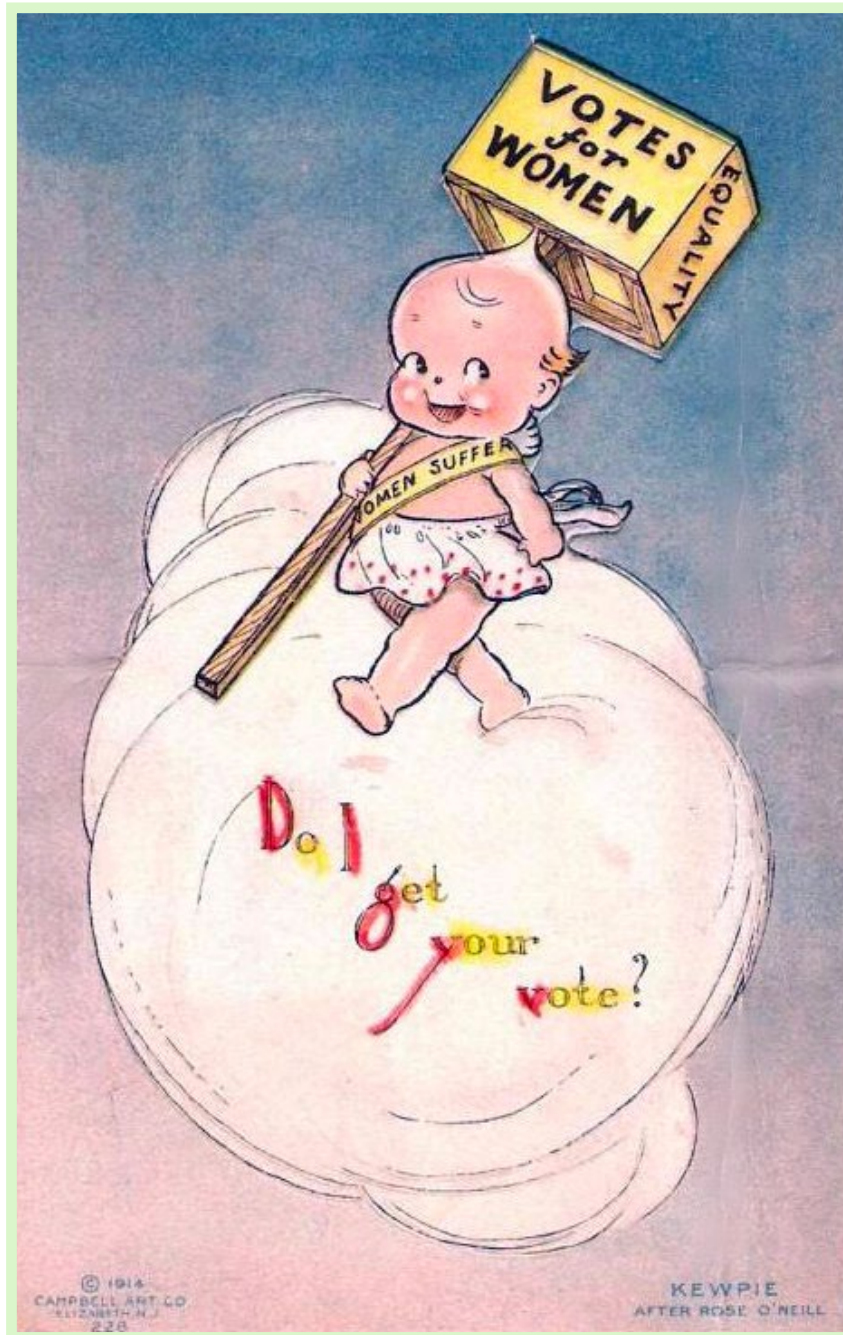


FIG. 8

Kewpie Votes for Women Postcard,
Rose O'Neil, 1914.

3F: Narrative and Creative Influence

— ♦ Interlude: Nocturne

The nocturne is a visual influence. Paradoxically, it's an auditory form. Whether this is relevant to a thesis discussing housing, mascots, and parody, I'll extend a far-reaching argument of relation, a recurring gesture in this paper, in a brief interlude of Romantic-era music history.

The 19th Century served as a pivotal transformation for the pianoforte. No longer were pieces reserved as passive entertainment for aristocracy. Technical advancement, parallel to the Industrial Revolution, facilitated the emergence of amateur female pianists, and the mass introduction of the instrument within middle class households.⁹⁴ Repertoire would evolve in tandem toward its increasingly female audience, embracing the dramatic, the sentimental, and the character piece.

The miniature solo-piano form, translating to “of the night,” is characterized by a cantabile melody superimposed over an arpeggiated or chordal left-hand accompaniment. A companion to evening drawing rooms are works of John Field, the “father of the nocturne,” and Frédéric Chopin, his compositions (rightfully) renowned as a “perfection of the genre.”⁹⁵

Deriving its lineage from the serenade (a man performing to a woman), the nocturne is ironically cast by women in a domestic context and performed before male listeners: audiences who have historically dismissed the genre as trivial, ornamental, and disparagingly emblematic of femininity. “It was a disquieted male gaze,” scholar Katharine Ellis notes, “that beheld women’s public display of that most appropriate female domestic

94 Brîndușa Tudor, “The Piano, a Perfect Musical Instrument – Beginnings and Evolution (18th–19th Centuries),” *Review of Artistic Education* 17–18 (2019), 100–05.

95 Frédéric Chopin, *Complete Preludes, Nocturnes & Waltzes*, Schirmer Library of Classics, vol. 2056 (New York: G. Schirmer, Inc., 2005).

accomplishment: playing the piano.”⁹⁶ The nocturne “found its embodiment in the actions of a man; on the other hand, it expressed the soul of a woman.”⁹⁷

Musicologist Jeffrey Kallberg asks: “Can we find evidence of a ‘double-voiced discourse’ in the realm of the nocturne?”—a mode in which women, even within patriarchal musical frameworks, could gesture toward “woman-centered meanings.”⁹⁸

I actually think we can Kallberg, to some degree.

I recall Clara Wieck-Schumann’s *Soirées Musicales: Nocturne Op. 6 No. 2*, speculated to reflect the developing affection for her eventual husband, composer Robert Schumann. If factual, enacts a gendered role-reversal of the traditional serenade trope.

Toronto-based researcher Irina Bazik in particular, focuses on the absence of women-centered scholarship in the study of 19th-century female composer-pianists. Her Doctor of Arts dissertation, an analysis of the nocturne form, examines eight female-composed nocturnes which have challenged conventional rhythmic and thematic premises referencing Kallberg as a theoretical foundation.⁹⁹

Ultimately, Kallberg responds to his own hypothesis, writing “the association of femininity with the nocturne served to reinforce an idealized male view of womanhood, one that may have had little connection with the perceptions of women themselves.”¹⁰⁰

I return to Schumann, who once penned of Chopin’s work: “a cannon concealed amid blossoms.”¹⁰¹ The star of Romantic-era piano is in interpretation, after all.

96 Katharine Ellis, “Female Pianists and Their Male Critics in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 50, no. 2/3 (Summer–Autumn 1997), 355.

97 Jeffrey Kallberg, “The Harmony of the Tea Table: Gender and Ideology in the Piano Nocturne,” *Representations*, no. 39 (1992), 114.

98 Kallberg, “The Harmony of the Tea Table,” 116.

99 Irina Bazik, “Nocturnes in Great Variety: Reconsidering the Nineteenth-Century Nocturnes Through Women Composer-Pianists” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2021).

100 Kallberg, “The Harmony of the Tea Table,” 126.

101 Alan Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 266.

How *exactly* is this relevant to my literature review? As I mentioned earlier, the nocturne is a visual influence. It's also a literary one. The nocturne taught me how to write, and by extension, interpret a story. My venerable mentor lies in the anatomy of Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 55 No. 2* and the melody of Field's *Nocturne No. 16 in C Major*.¹⁰²

The nocturne is the god of subtlety. In technical terms, to perform a nocturne is simple. Audibly, it sounds simple. Yet to *interpret* a nocturne is deceptively challenging. Melodic phrasing is an orchestration of conscious storytelling.

Rubato is a musical term defined as “subtle rhythmic manipulation and nuance in performance.”¹⁰³ It's the musicianship to recognize when and how to deviate from the score. Practice with the intent of instinctual fluidity. It's an ability I continually strive toward yet endlessly struggle with in the context of my design practice. I hold the greatest respect for creatives who succeed at intentional effortlessness.

There is an understated skill in stylization. Hierarchical value on the basis of technicality is not limited to piano performance. I think of the generalization of all illustration and popular visual media reduced to comments of “*I can draw that.*” Then I equally think of the nocturne.

“A corpus of some of the finest operatic arias ever written.”¹⁰⁴ Contemporary widespread acclaim. A gold standard of intermediate-advanced level piano pedagogy. And I consider the author of this paper, the amateur pianist who attends weekly evening lessons in a second-floor rental room of a Baptist church, on a semitone-off-tune Yamaha upright, who merely enjoys studying the nocturne. Is it not intrinsically double-voiced to find opportunity within a flawed medium? I believe all of those categories outweigh the opinions of a 19th Century critic. I extend the same rationale to the critics of the aesthetics of this thesis.

102 Honourable mentions: Fanny Hensel's *Nocturne in G Minor*, Chopin's *Nocturne Op. 48, No. 1* (of course), and *Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1, Movement II* — not a nocturne but close enough.

103 “Rubato,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://tinyurl.com/5dzme28f>.

104 Stephen Hough, “Chopin Nocturnes on Hyperion,” <https://tinyurl.com/bdy5r4zy>.

— ♦ Disco Elysium

*“There is a radio in the distance. A radio of the world. Playing sounds: Good morning, Elysium. Soon you will return to the world.”*¹⁰⁵

Is it deliberate the title of this thesis mirrors what is plausibly the greatest indie RPG of all time? *Maybe*. Amidst a fantasy-realist dystopia, *Disco Elysium* transpires within an environment of rising political instability in Martinise, a corroded district of an unsuccessful post-revolutionary nation.

The narrative accompanies the morally ambiguous, amnesiac detective Harrier DuBois — an unheroic, “overbloated avatar who’s gone wrong for a long time.”¹⁰⁶ His task: to solve the murder of a hanged man, lest he forego both his career and sanity.

For what appears to be a seemingly straightforward homicide case resultantly unfolds the plannings of a socialist uprising, underlying spiritual-supernatural conduct, and the feasibility of self-rebirth under almost any circumstance.

*“PERCEPTION (SIGHT): [Medium: Success] — People are beautiful. Statuesque. Parodies and tragedies of themselves. A great democracy of creatures.”*¹⁰⁷

“The world itself is not a ‘massive open-world,’” in the “palm-sized, intricate toy-box of a world”, “the characters of *Disco Elysium* are all real people to us. We wrote them in sincere belief that they truly exist. That they have souls that demand dignity.”¹⁰⁸

Where *Disco Elysium* shines is its pen. In place of monologic dialogue are the polyphonic musings of DuBois: an ensemble of miscellaneous internal commentators known as “skills”, categorized by *Intellect*, *Psyche*, *Physique*, and *Motorics*. Pretentious prose which occasionally warrants a second study for comprehension. Appropriate required reading for a graduate education that would await me.

105 ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut* (ZA/UM, 2021).

106 Robert Kurvitz, quoted in Alex Wiltshire, “The Making of Disco Elysium: How ZA/UM Created One of the Most Original RPGs of the Decade,” GamesRadar+, January 9, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yznx-hwz3>.

107 *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*.

108 Mikk Metsniit, “The Hungarian Interview,” ZA/UM, March 31, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/jjahrhaz>.

Show, don't tell. The rudimentary commandment of all successful literature. To tell is to render the audience a fool. Instruction on how to think is a discourteous mockery of the reader's perception. Ernest Hemingway's *Theory of Omission* posits writing as ice: "If the writer is writing truly enough, [the reader] will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."¹⁰⁹

For an object to float, the force of its buoyancy must equal that of its object. Sardonicism is the upward thrust of omitted sincerity. *Disco Elysium* is a glacial masterclass.

Its most significant remark is not delivered by the protagonist, but a minor, inconsequential character: Cindy the Skull, a delinquent street-artist idling in contemplation of her next work. In the aftermath of the narrative's climax, a lethal political tribunal, emerges her crowning authorship, coalesced in state-sanctioned fuel and blood.

Un jour je serai de retour près de toi.
One day I will return to your side.

Forged in political violence is the thesis of the artist, the city, and the protagonist. To me, this is the truest encapsulation of everyday resistance. This is the most poignant line of the entire narrative.

¹⁰⁹ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 192.

4F: Elysium

— ♦ *Elysium: A Three-Step Guide to Better Living (Research-failure-Creation)*

“Absolutely the worst place I have ever lived. I once lived in an apartment where there were weekly knife fights and a guy chased people down with a hatchet and I had a better time living there.”¹¹⁰

The statement above is a very real excerpt from the now-defunct Toronto-based rental-review website *Rentitornot.com*. The niche, word-of-mouth online space was a rare, hidden-in-plain-sight platform exclusively for tenants. It once produced transparent, literary rhinestones like this one in the format of short-form reviews.

Buried in the same graveyard lies *Bedbugregistry.com*, the reliable public-facing poll on reports of bed bugs, cockroaches, and other pests.¹¹¹ The modest, low-quality interface featured a series of semicircular sliders with an arrow pointing toward "Yes" or "No," based on visitor votes. Tenants could anonymously record and observe multiple rental addresses in the city during their housing search, free from corporate meddling.

The makeshift websites functioned as an essential tool to vouch for livability that is undocumented in official advertisements and listings. Yet as of writing, these sites cease to exist.

Though I'm incapable of providing documentary evidence for the accusation, online speculation points to legal action and landlord interference as the primary cause of shut-down. Minor in scale, their disappearance is an erasure of already-scarce spaces, both online and in-person, that provided tenants with a local platform to express housing dissatisfaction without fear of reprisal.

In reaction, I sought to replicate fragments of these now-lost digital archives in physical form: an imperceptible depiction of rental housing realities encouraging a similar, subdued solidarity. Framed through the lens of everyday resistance and parodical-critique, the effort was carried out via the communicative agent and located within the

¹¹⁰ *Rentitornot.com*, Anonymous Tenant Review, Wayback Machine, <https://tinyurl.com/w29y3jk9>, accessed September 2025.

¹¹¹ *BedbugRegistry.com* (defunct), site description based on author's notes.

methodological stance of research-*failure*-creation: the title surpassing its ornamental flourish as a tagline. *It's a mantra.*¹¹²

Elysian Friends is the menagerie of five parodical, anthropomorphic communicative agents, modelled after a specific rental grievance. Visualized in the nostalgic, counter-culture aesthetic of contemporary trinket culture, they adopt the rhetorical device of cuteness as a convention of double-voice: inconspicuous, approachable, and critical in persona.

Combining installation, assemblage, and mounted mascot characters, the exhibit simulated a visually deceptive rental listing in a trio of distinct "rooms" — a bedroom, kitchen, and living area. Ostensibly polished and stylized, upon closer inspection, each divided segment revealed a haphazard structure, indicative of underlying dysfunction.

Elysium: A Three-Step Guide to Better Living was a site-specific graduate exhibition, held at the OCAD University Graduate Gallery at 205 Richmond St. W., from July 17-July 20, 2025.

¹¹² Before this project was a critique, it was a collection of representative emblems intended for street-level tagging. Prior to that, it was an inspired website prototype. And initially, it began as a REB (Research Ethics Board) application in the silhouette of a focus group.

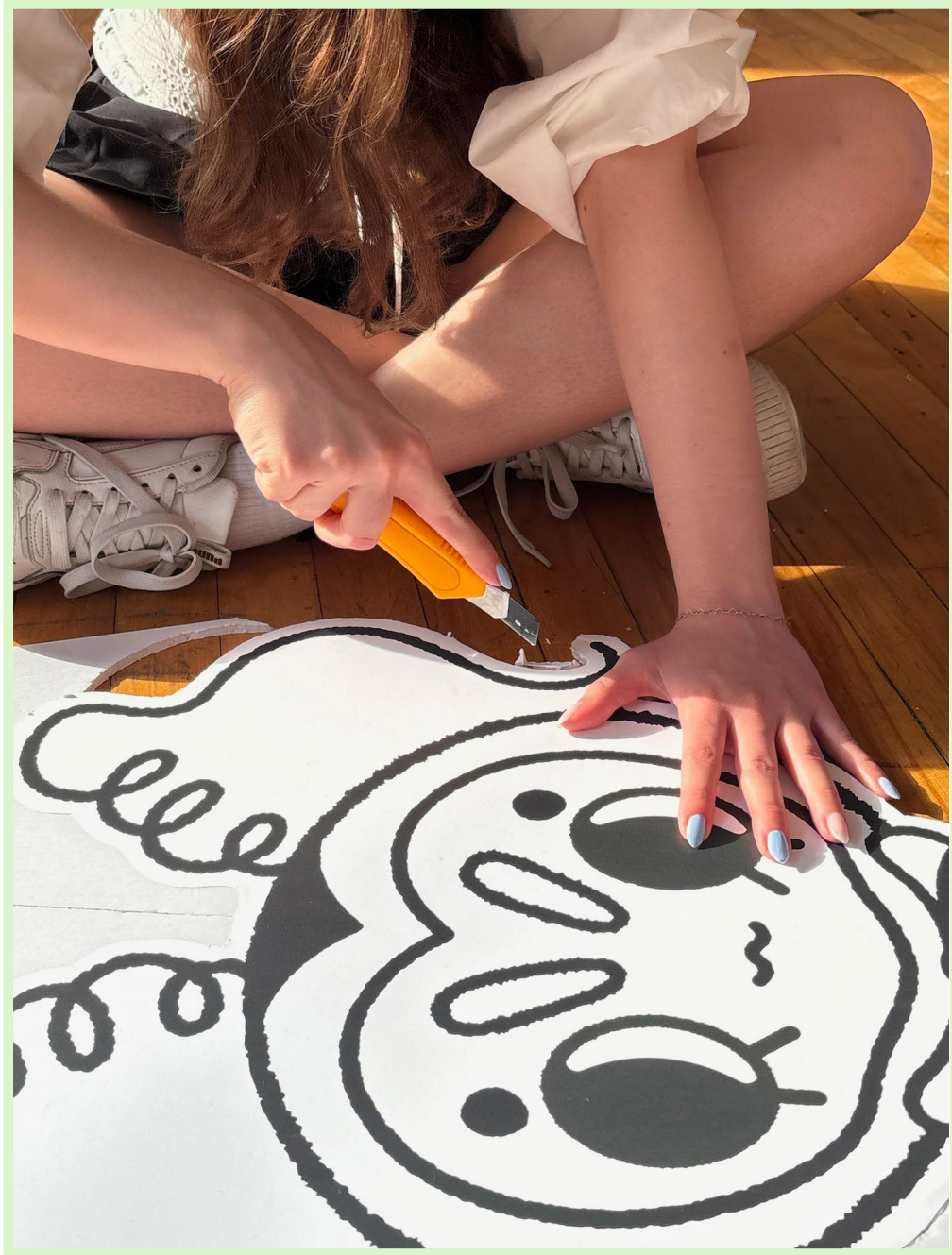


FIG. 9

Exhibit Process (Image of Aimé Saldias),
Photograph by the Author, 2025.

Conclusion

— ♦ Curtain Call

In December, I genuinely intended to *quit*. And by quit, I mean quit being a designer. Like, *forever*. I admit, I pose the threat often for hyperbolic effect, but this time around, I was majorly sincere in my words. I settled on three viable top options for next career moves *1. Librarian. 2. Piano Teacher. 3. Florist.*

I really can't do this. I really don't belong here. Lovely phrases which accompanied me to year's end. In response, my sister provided me with some very valuable words of encouragement: "If you drop out now, me, the family, and all our friends will think you're a loser." To be fair, cliché camaraderie followed after, but she knows me so well that she knew that would be the only phrase to succeed, to get my resistant self back to the studio, writing. And then I wrote the preface.

I was out of commission for the entirety of the season. My close friends delivered a card to my sister to deliver to me. In brilliant comedic timing, as I would not expect less, was not a traditional card, but a senior's retirement card: a gag illustration featuring a man desperately lobbing balls at a carnival dunk tank occupied by a grim reaper. Inside, in the likeness of true duality, were earnest, thesis-length paragraphs encouraging me to finish this degree.

As predicted, I sadly and tragically did not solve the Toronto Rental Housing Crisis. I find it misguided idealism to claim diminutive acts of resistance can produce instantaneous products of systemic change. I find it even more misguided to bolster such acts under the mass of grandeur language.

But what I do believe is that the same actions are capable of lessening the burdens of daily life, if only momentarily — a hallmark characteristic of art and design.

The communicative agent is a self-assigned term for a preexisting concept. One which has historically functioned without recognition as a legitimate medium. If anything, the emergence of research on pedagogical agents in adulthood is a promising signifier. Setting aside aesthetic and gendered bias is to reveal a broader potential for expressing sentiments outside the limitations of conventional media.

I have the caricature retirement card face-up within the shelf of my office desk. I conducted some reverse searching to find the illustrator to no avail. *Still*, thanks. I guess the attachment of objects surpasses the aesthetic confines of this thesis.

Where housing and art intersect is company. I'd like to think this project offered a form of visual company, cementing itself as a minute contribution to the broader discourse of housing, of everyday resistance. A project of "covert action, redacted from the record, largely unremarkable in the archives," and *maybe*, noble in intent.

The only "Elysium" of the mortal plane is one that is self-created, self-sustained, and in this rental market? Negotiated and researched. However, what Scott fails to acknowledge about the peasant class, is that beyond survival, the value of everyday resistance is born from the yearning of circumstances better than one's own.

Dialogue begets evolution. Yes, I will agree with Bakhtin and Hutcheon. Yet I'll propose an amendment: dialogue begets evolution, if not as a result of the intent of the individuals behind them.

Un jour je serai de retour près de toi.
One day I will return to your side.

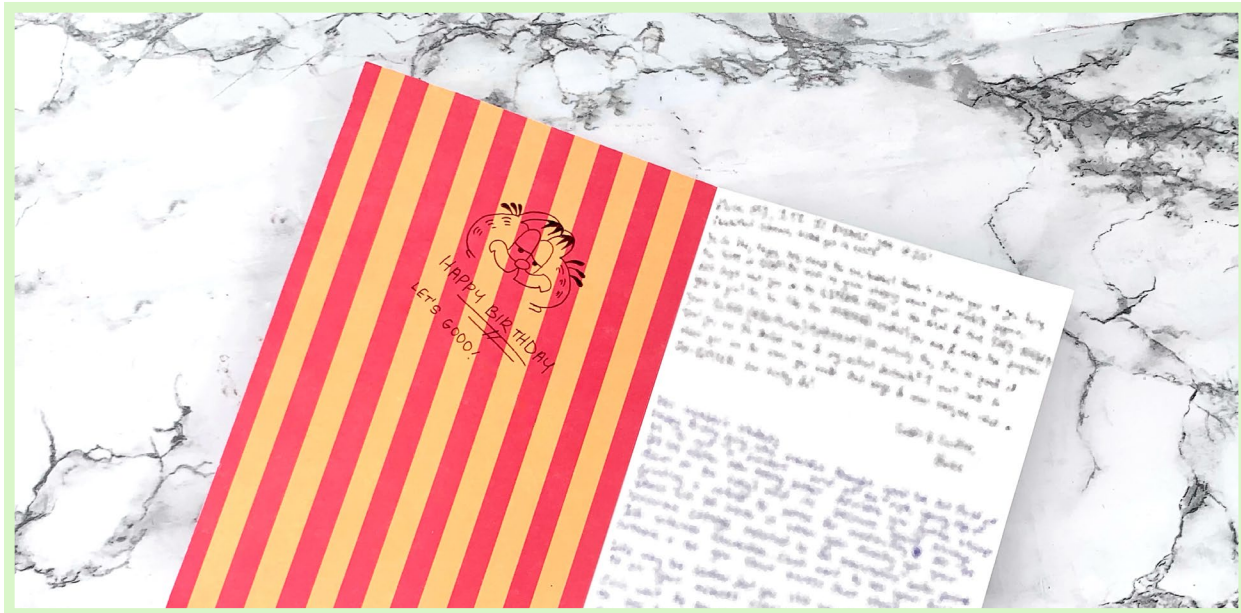


FIG. 10

The Card (Interior), Photograph by the Author, 2025.
Content blurred for *parodical-critical* reasons.

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Appendix A: Defence Presentation

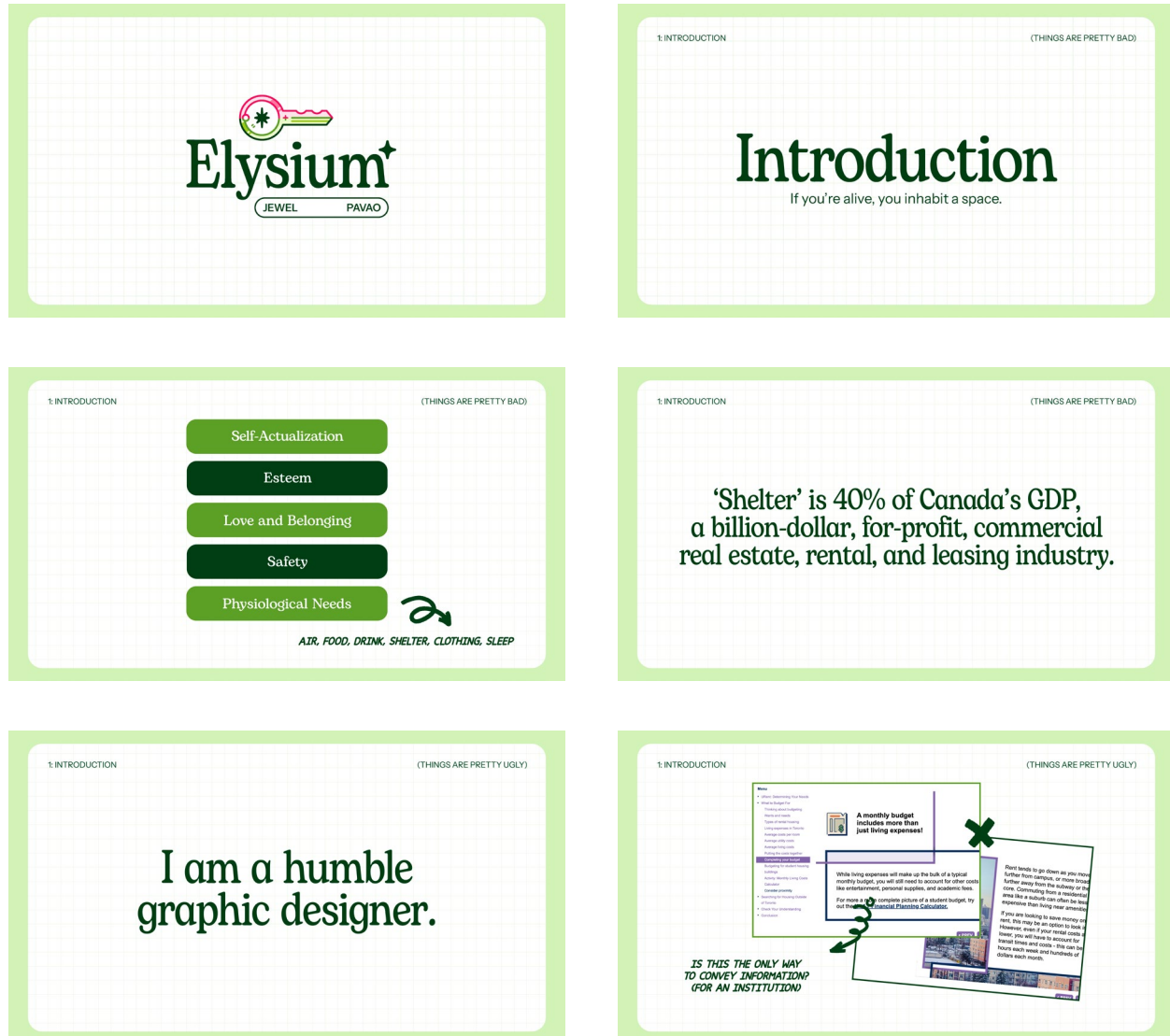


FIG. 11

Elysium Defence Slides (1-6),
Images by the Author, 2025.



FIG. 12

Elysium Defence Slides (7-12),
Images by the Author, 2025.

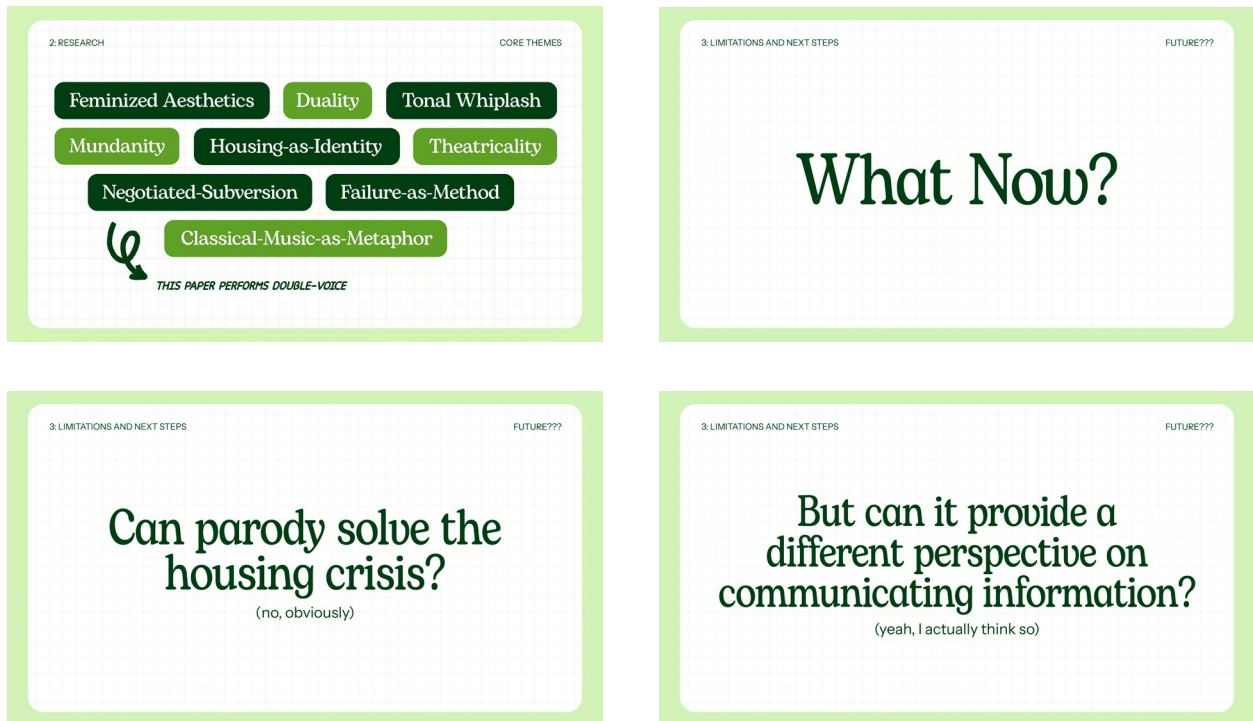


FIG. 13

Elysium Defence Slides (13-16),
Images by the Author, 2025.

Appendix B: Coda

Coda (n.)¹¹³

1. a concluding musical section that is formally distinct from the main structure.
2. a concluding part of a literary or dramatic work.
3. a compilation of the symbolic-narrative elements of this thesis.

— ♦ **Narrative Themes**

Embodying a postmodernist literary framework, this document employs an arsenal of literary tools to demonstrate its argument.

Classical Music-as-Metaphor

Mikhail Bakhtin likens Dialogism to Polyphony, a musical term characterized by multiplicity of voice. He argues the independent-dependent nature of polyphonic melody is applicable to the study of literature (p. 11). In homage, I argue the independent-dependent nature of polyphonic melody is *also* applicable to the study of art and design. I utilize classical music as a recurrent thematic motif to underscore the coexistence of critique, narrative, and design (*Prelude, Antecedent, Consequent, Interlude: Nocturne*).

Tonal Whiplash

Alternatively referred to as Mood Whiplash, or its analogous counterpart Bait-and-Switch, Tonal Whiplash is a literary device and narrative trope emphasizing the depiction of two extremities in quick succession. In literature, tragedy may be quickly followed by levity, or vice versa, as a ploy to subvert the reader's expectations.

The dramatization of inconsistencies parallels Hutcheon's double-voiced discourse, shifting the responsibility of interpretation and meaning-making to the audience. I assume three distinctive, polyphonic vocal registers:

Academic: The high-register. Straightforward prose. The laborious big work.

Satirical: The low-register. The realization of wait — I can *literally* just write how I speak. Hence the phrase: "autoethnography with a thesaurus" (p. 15).

Sincere: The implied. This spectrum ranges from the somber: "I want you to understand, and to believe me" / "And with a nod of acknowledgement, or an intentional, avoidant

¹¹³ "Coda," *Merriam-Webster*, <https://tinyurl.com/yp47sdzt>.

glance, we'll return to our original places" (p. 7-8), to potentially, the aspirational: "The value of everyday resistance is born from the yearning of circumstances better than one's own" (p. 52).

I consider this register the anchor of the paper, and consequently, the most difficult to convey. But as one can interpret, I don't leave those lines out for free. Guess I'll call it *A Paradox of Jewel Pavao*.

Juxtaposition

In relation to double-voice and the ambivalence of everyday resistance, Juxtaposition is the deliberate framing of contradictory elements in close proximity. While tonal whiplash is primarily concerned with duality of voice, juxtaposition renders duality in communicating information. Each chapter of this thesis is structured around its own paradox or contradiction (*Consequent*, *A Paradox of Everyday Resistance*, and *The Loneliest Generation* to name a few).

Theatricality

A question posed during my thesis defence queried the absence of overt transparency and positionality in the research method of autoethnography. My subsequent answer framed theatricality as a calculated framework choice. A truth.

And a partial reply. In my own self-debrief, I was faintly dissatisfied with the response. The time-effort investment of the committee deserves far greater verity than a monologic cop-out.

I am burdened by positionality. Not from self-perception; from false, assumed liabilities projected onto it. I'm well-accustomed to reality, I'm devastated by its interference in my creative practice. The performance of ambiguity is the relinquishment of biased critique. Selective anonymity places the quality of work above everything.

I don't view the paper as the genesis of a novel voice. I view it as an environment of well-timed, emboldening conditions placing it into academic sight. Graduate school is a *true* carnivalesque, leaving plenty to contemplate. *Does this qualify as a Rite of Passage?*

— ♦ Chapter Commentary

The following program notes provide an expansion on select passages, offering additional clarification and context.

Table of Contents

The appearance of the table of contents is modelled after tenant directory plaques commonly displayed at the entrances of condominiums and apartment buildings.

A Preface's Preface

I begin this paper with an invitation, imitating the jargon of a rental application form as a precursory illustration of parody and metafiction.

For the duration of this document, I continually emphasize the role of the reader as co-author and participant (*Prelude, Consequent, Disco Elysium*), returning to Hutcheon's quotation of contemporary metafiction existing "on the self-conscious borderline between art and life, making little formal distinction between actor and spectator, between author and co-creating reader" (p. 17).

Prelude

"In classic Gen Z nihilism, my methodology is critique. Satire. Irony. Metafiction (more on this in 4)." The parenthesis is literal: four pages succeeding this line opens the *Antecedent*, the chapter devoted to Hutcheon's theoretical framework on parody.

TLDR

The TLDR is an elevator. It mimics a staccato upwards cadence, functioning as the required outline for the remainder of this document. I wrote this section picturing each chapter as an arrival on a new "floor", concluding with the departure of the attending parties. The final line maintains the audience is at liberty to deduce their own opinion of the content, whether agreeable or not.

A Disclaimer on Satire

This triptych is characterized as an *inverse* of the hero's journey. The classic storytelling blueprint recites the transformation of a protagonist, who over the course of the narrative, undergoes a series of theatrical circumstances, dramatically and optimistically transforming themselves at the denouement.

Clearly, I'm not positioning any exaggerated declarations of being a dramatic, life-altered protagonist, thus the inverse hero's journey: a microscopic turn of events, akin to the minor nature of everyday resistance.

Preface

I argue the trifecta of housing unaffordability, employment scarcity, and the rising cost of living are all interrelated economic themes contributing to the moniker of Gen Z individuals as *The Loneliest Generation*. The anecdotal preface is an allegorical tie-in to generational uncertainty.

I develop and place a narrative arc in both the introduction and conclusion of this paper to construct a dialogic flow. It manufactures "real-life" stakes for the reader by fastening the conflict of the thesis to an imagined character, in this scenario, the author.

Antecedent

In music theory, the term "Antecedent" denotes an introductory phrase of an instrumental piece, equivalent to a question — the melody concludes with an "incomplete" sound.

This chapter acknowledges the fundamental question at the outset: *Why parody?*

Consequent

In reply, the term "Consequent" is the parallel resolving answer, rearranging the melody of the antecedent — creating a "complete" sound.

The *Antecedent* recounts the framework; the *Consequent* provides the rationale to reinterpret it.

3F: Narrative and Creative Influence

Section 3F is an interlude, literally. Double-voiced discourse and everyday resistance are not exclusive to the study of housing or mascots. I cite two examples of popular culture: one historical, one contemporary, to further illuminate the postmodern, interdisciplinary nature of the framework.

Interlude: Nocturne

The nocturne is feminine. It is low art, inconsequential to the technically charged "masculine" genres of the sonatas and concertos, inherently domestic in nature, and steadfast in the amateur female pianist's repertoire. Kallberg's argument suggests that in spite of patriarchal assumptions made by male critics, women reinterpreted the performance of the nocturne, enacting double-voice.

I regard this as a supplementary example of everyday resistance, akin to those listed by Erin Sharpe in the chapter *A Paradox of Everyday Resistance*. The nocturne is markedly a "paradoxical, grey-zone where reappropriation can be practiced" (p. 21).

The chapter positions Romantic-era piano as a purposeful metaphor for cuteness. The nocturne historically epitomizes the deficiencies of the former: trivialized and mass-produced. And likewise its virtues: stylized, attainable, and sentimental.

Gendered conflict of the contemporary era is by no means equivalent to gendered conflict of the 19th Century. Though by analogy to the peasant class, it provides an additional lens to view defiance within societal containment.

“A cannon concealed amid blossoms.” Spoken by Schumann of Chopin and appropriated by me, the citation is the metaphorical core of the nocturne chapter, and runner-up for thesis statement of the paper.

Interlude: Nocturne (Chopin)

Frédéric Chopin is occasionally documented as a pretentious asshole (as many of the greats are). I don't idolize his being, but I revere his creative practice.

His pianistic contemporary, Franz Liszt, wrote of him: “Chopin’s character is composed of a thousand shades which in crossing one another become so disguised as to be indistinguishable.”¹¹⁴ A double-voiced figure himself, despite self-imposed exile, persistent chronic illness (resulting in premature demise), and a volatile temperament, remains one of the greatest melodic composers in the game.

An intermittent device in Chopin's nocturnes is the Picardy Third: a Baroque-era chordal resolution in which a musical piece in a minor key (melancholic, somber, ominous) closes on a major key (uplifting, hopeful). The abrupt shift is audibly jarring and divisive among critics. Yet its recurrence reveals less a technical maneuver than a conceptual one. I'll hypothesize the Picardy Third is suggestive of a more profound underlying intent, reflective of the composer's true psyche.

Disco Elysium

Aside from the foreshadowing of the conclusion's final line, this chapter is a metaphorical, tonal rationale for sardonicism, and the interchange of satire-sincerity in prose. I draw parallels from this thesis to game design, a contemporary medium not typically perceived as high art, underlining double-voiced discourse's literary prowess and multidisciplinary value across media.

¹¹⁴ Walker, *Fryderyk Chopin: A Life and Times*.

The Ernest Hemingway quote, "If the writer is writing truly enough, [the reader] will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water" (p. 47), is a direct mirror to this paper's *modus operandi*.

There's a sense of gratification in having to work for the answer, don't you think?

Curtain Call

I had this chapter penned not long after the preface, establishing the paper's core themes early on. This was a painful chapter to write. Actually no, that's moderately dramatic. Painful in the context of texting this chapter to my circle and asking: "*Is this too cringe?*" It was a 1-2, yes-no ruling from the jury.

I wanted the ending to be *earned*. For the potentially-revealing, potentially-indulgent, character exposition to be thwarted by a defence of 50 pages of hard theory.

Curtain Call is exactly that — the end of the performance. A final justification, and yes, the sincerest, truest intent of this thesis.

"*One day I'll return to your side.*" Kicking myself because I wish I wrote this line. Crystal-line authorship and command of voice. Dialogical reappropriation in practice.

One day I'll return to your side. This is the thesis statement of the paper. This is the Picardy Third of *Elysium*.