

The Artist's PLAY and the Artistic Experience: Integrating Emotional Operating Systems and Contending with FEAR of Death

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Abstract

This paper examines how artistic creativity, as one mode of PLAY, enables both artists and respondents/audiences to express and integrate diverse emotional operating systems. Through the theoretical framework of affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp, complemented by psychoanalytic perspectives, the manuscript analyzes the complex interplay between emotional systems in artistic creativity. Particular attention is given to the interaction between PLAY and SEEKING systems, exploring how this interaction motivates artistic innovation and enhances aesthetic appreciation by the audience. The question—why do we enjoy art?—is explored through psychoanalytic as well as neuropsychological narratives, using, among others, Shakespeare's drama Macbeth. The paper then focuses on one specific function of artistic creativity: the role of PLAY in contending with FEAR, particularly the fundamental fear of death and extinction. This relationship is examined through analysis of A. Bronz's stage performance "Die", moving between author/director, actors and audience.

Keywords: art and emotion; enjoyment of art; PLAY, SEEKING and FEAR emotional systems; art and fear of extinction; art and immortality.

Introductions

Art has, for millennia, embodied human attempts to express emotions and particularly to integrate or manage conflicts between different emotional operating systems. This manuscript examines artistic creativity through the theoretical framework of affective neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp's labelling of the seven main emotional operating systems: SEEKING, FEAR, RAGE, LUST, CARE, PANIC/GRIEF, and PLAY¹ (Panksepp, 1998; Panksepp & Biven, 2012). All these systems originate in deep areas of the brain that are remarkably similar across all mammalian species. In humans, higher order tertiary processes interact with the basic primary drives to enable artistic creativity (Arieti 1964; Arieti, 1976; Panksepp, 2011; Solms & Panksepp, 2012).

The first part of the manuscript examines the PLAY emotional system as it is expressed in artistic creativity and in the emotional reactions of art respondents, from a psychoanalytic as well as from a neuropsychological perspective. Then the interaction of PLAY and SEEKING in artists' motivation is explored, affording examples from innovative artists who endure extreme hardships to PLAY according to their own vision.

The article then explores the intriguing question of why we enjoy art from different perspectives, relating to PLAY as a

brain source of joy, and to developmental and social aspects. It examines enjoyment as an interrelation of emotion with sensory perception, as it is modulated by cultural influence (Oppenheim, 2026). Then it analyzes the way we enjoy the interplay between the expected and unexpected — the confirmation of familiar predictions alongside novel, challenging elements that invite predictive processing, mastery and integration.

The next part focuses on artists dealing with a basic survival drive, that of FEAR of death and extinction. Examples from ancient cultures through great European classical music composers, Holocaust painters, to contemporary playwrights and directors, are discussed. The stage performance "Die" is analyzed in more detail (Bronz, 2023), moving between author/director, actors and audience, aiming to explore how artistic creativity can serve the predictive and active brain that anticipates needs and playfully examines predictive actions.

The PLAY Emotional System and Artistic Creativity

Although the PLAY system does not have one definite center in the brain (Panksepp, 1998; Panksepp & Biven, 2012), it has several distinctive hallmarks. Playful activities are done for their own sake and do not have an immediate benefit. They have an "as if" quality and are pleasurable and reinforcing. Artistic creativity can be conceptualized as one mode of PLAY. Artists constantly search for self-expression, experimenting

¹Panksepp insisted that they are always printed in uppercase, to differentiate them from everyday use of these nouns.

with different materials in imaginative ways. They relentlessly endeavor to find new and original ways of articulation and communication, and higher levels of integration. They draw on their own resources to transform one set of experiences — ideas and emotions — into a completely different medium: music, poetry, dance, or any other artform. Ogden (2012) sees in this process of translation a potential for transformation. For this transformation to take place, artists have to overcome their own inner resistances to facing forbidden impulses, or “private demons,” which are hidden, or even repressed (Lumer & Oppenheim, 2019, p. 29).

Freud introduced the concept of sublimation. He regarded art as a medium through which artists succeed in expressing their hidden wishes and conflicts, the direct expression of which is forbidden; therefore he regarded art as another “royal way to the unconscious activities of the mind,” alongside daydreams, dreams and jokes (Freud, 1900/1952, p. 608; Freud 1908). While Freud and his followers emphasized the circuitous fulfilling of hidden needs, Klein and her followers emphasized the defensive aspect of artistic activity, especially against aggressive/sadistic drives and wishes (Klein, 1975). Another aspect, originally proposed by Tarachow (1949), connects artistic pleasure — for both artist and respondents — to a feeling of victory, where beauty, order and harmony overcome the forces of chaos and destruction. We can view this as a combination of discharge and control that contributes to self-organization. Such achievement also enables readers or spectators to overcome their own inner resistances and undergo a sublimated aesthetic uplifting experience.

Art is almost always multidimensional, as it is cross-modal, synergistic, and synaesthetic (Carroll, 2003). To quote Anton Ehrenzweig (1967), “All artistic structure is essentially ‘polyphonic’; it evolves not in a single line of thought, but in several superimposed strands at once” (p. xii).

The poet, for instance, plays with words — on one level there is the message the words communicate, but on another level, the words evoke a world of associations and emotions by rhythm, rhyme, and imagery. Thus, poets combine emotional resonance with structured language and conscious artistic choice.

When we encounter William Blake’s poem “The Tyger” (Blake, 1794/2009), particularly when reading it aloud:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire? (II, 1–8)

We are immediately engulfed by vivid imagery, a compelling rhythm and rhyme, sensing the power, the dread, the glimmering eyes and fiery stripes in the dark night. Throughout the following stanzas, Blake, a devout Christian, grapples with the contradiction between God, as merciful and protective of the

lamb and his flock, and God as terrifying creator of predatory power. As he writes later in the poem:

“Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (II, 12–13)

PLAY and SEEKING in Artistic Creativity

Brain research demonstrates that the SEEKING system shows heightened activity during dreaming states (Solms, 2011, 2020), as its neurochemistry is centered on dopamine—a neurotransmitter often named the “power switch” for its energizing effects on motivation and learning. SEEKING was also found to be the foundation for enthusiasm, curiosity, and, ultimately, creativity, already active at birth (Panksepp, 2019a; Panksepp et al., 2019b). Dopamine mediates both the pleasure of discovery and the drive to formulate meaning via spontaneously active associative networks (Tang et al., 2024). The anticipatory eagerness it arouses proves both pleasurable and reinforcing (Wright & Panksepp, 2012), akin to PLAY. I suggest that creative art involves a phase in which, as in dreaming, the SEEKING system becomes highly active (Fox, 2016, p. 33); associations and experimentation run free because imagination reigns free, without the constraints of reality testing. This represents the “inspirational” part of artistic creation that some attribute to the muse, God, or other mysterious agents (Noy, 2010). Kris (1952) coined the expression “regression in the service of the ego,” showing how artists can deliberately access more primitive, primary mental states while maintaining the ego’s organizing, secondary functions. Artists’ accounts of the creative process reveal two distinct phases: an enigmatic phase of inspiration, followed by a second phase of deliberate crafting, in which artists work within the transitional “as if” space of play, expressing personal ideas and emotions while employing higher-order mental processes to achieve what Noy calls “perfect form” (Noy, 1979). According to Noy, the perfect form serves both artists and respondents as a means of restoring order and consolidating split-off parts of the psyche into a more cohesive self.

From a neuropsychanalytic perspective, this two-phase movement can be understood as a transformation of primary-process, “anoetic” emotional experience into the reflective, symbol-making acts of artistic creation—a tertiary, “autonoetic” achievement.

Vandekerckhove and Panksepp’s (2009, 2011) model of anoetic, noetic, and autonoetic consciousness offers a useful conceptual bridge here. Anoetic consciousness corresponds to the raw, unreflective affective states generated by subcortical systems such as SEEKING and PLAY. Autonoetic consciousness, by contrast, represents the developmentally emergent, tertiary-process capacity for self-reflective awareness, dependent on higher neocortical structures (Vandekerckhove, Bulnes, & Panksepp, 2014).

Vandekerckhove and colleagues (2014) explicitly identify the arts, alongside literature and other cultural forms, as privileged expressions of this autonoetic tier, in which primary affective material is reorganized into meaning-bearing, symbolically

elaborated form. This offers a neuropsychological grounding for Kris's "regression in the service of the ego."

Within this continuum, SEEKING and PLAY jointly constitute the motivational core of artistic creativity: SEEKING supplies the appetitive, exploratory drive toward engagement and novelty, while PLAY furnishes the open-ended, non-goal-directed exploration of form through which that drive is elaborated into aesthetic structure. Artistic creativity is thus not a cognitive process layered over emotion, but a developmental continuum in which the anoetic urgency of SEEKING and PLAY is progressively transformed—never erased—into the autooetic, tertiary-process achievements of aesthetic form and meaning.

From a neuropsychanalytic perspective, when the brain operates in default mode—free from pressing needs—SEEKING engages with uncertainty, either reducing it or updating predictions to generate meaning. In this mode, a sort of internal foraging occurs, whereby wide-ranging imaginary scenarios are explored under conditions of safety; that is, virtually (Solms, 2020, p. 20).

I propose that the SEEKING emotional system is especially intense in artists, as well as in many scientists. In artists, SEEKING typically couples with robust PLAY activation; together, these systems motivate artists to invest significant time and energy in experimentation and discovery. Although there is not yet sufficient empirical research measuring the intensity of the SEEKING and PLAY emotional needs, I suggest that further research of this hypothesis would be fruitful. The dominance of this system helps explain the insistence of many artists on persevering in their efforts even when they are hungry, tired, or oppressed by external circumstances. The drive to create may be experienced as a compulsion, not at all pleasurable (Lumer & Oppenheim, 2019, pp. 43–44). Consider the numerous poets, actors, and dancers who are willing to live for years in poverty, and/or deny themselves many comforts of life, yet remain devoted to their creative art. Consider the artists in Germany during the Nazi regime, who continued producing their own "degenerate art"—as Expressionist and modern art, particularly Expressionism, was labelled and denounced by the authorities.

In more recent times, consider the renowned Chinese artist and filmmaker Ai Weiwei, an active human rights advocate, who in spite of enduring physical violence and imprisonment under China's totalitarian regime (Hencz, n.d.; Richburg, 2013), persists in asserting the right to his own, unique, free artistic expression and his social criticism.

Such artists willingly endure deprivation or censorship because they are driven from within by a need to SEEK and to PLAY in their own individual way. These artists, and many others, undoubtedly enjoy positive reactions from the audience, but their primary gratification and reinforcement arise from an inner conviction of self-expression and achievement. When successful, such efforts enable them to organize the inner

chaos, reduce aroused anxiety, and attain "the supreme goal of any creative artist—to convert excitement, distress and anxiety, into pleasure, enchantment or elation" (Noy, 1979, 1989).

Artists continuously search for the novel and optimal way to transmit meaning from their deepest mental layers to corresponding depths in the respondent's mind. This communicative aspect is essential, as the PLAY emotional system in both humans and many animals fundamentally involves establishing contact with others—whether fellow players, listeners, or spectators (Bekoff, 2021; Bekoff & Allen, 2011).

Enjoyment of Art: Psychoanalytic and Neuropsychological Formulations

Turning from artist to audience, we wonder, what is it that attracts us to art in its various forms? Why, indeed, do we enjoy art?

Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp identified the brain's PLAY networks as crucial to human development and social integration. He emphasized play as a primary source of joy in the brain (Panksepp, 1998, p. 686). While the pleasure of play is readily observable in children and animals (Vanderschuren & Trezza, 2014), adults experience more complex, nuanced emotional reactions. On the one hand, there is an attempt to reduce uncertainty, learn social skills, or practice future roles. On the other hand, many individuals both produce and expose themselves to situations that break established habits and offer a variety of possible meanings. Artworks simultaneously challenge perceptual habits and facilitate active sense-making that may eventually lead to pleasurable insights (Muth, 2021; Spee, 2021). Shakespeare's *Macbeth* exemplifies how dramatic art engages audiences through complex psychological identifications. The play's gripping exploration of human ambition, guilt, and the corrupting nature of power draws viewers into the protagonist's conflicting emotions. Throughout the play, the audience is held in suspense regarding his future decisions. At the beginning, identification with *Macbeth*'s ambition, which was kindled by the mysterious witches, generates a sense of empathy. For some viewers, this identification may evoke repressed, forbidden fantasies of unrestrained, uninhibited achievement of glory. Subsequently, the audience witnesses the inner struggle between his yearning for power and the nagging conscience that warns of the consequences. This moral conflict is powerfully revealed in *Macbeth*'s inner debate on the verge of killing King Duncan, who lies sleeping innocently at his castle:

[...] Besides this, Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed.
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur.

To prick the sides of my intent, but only.
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself.
And falls on the other (I.7.16–28).

As the play proceeds, the audience, now fully engaged in the protagonist's inner turmoil, amplified by his wife's ruthless ambition, experiences a rollercoaster of emotions, swinging from fear and sympathy to repulsion at his mounting atrocities. The introspective soliloquies add another layer to the spectator's identification with Macbeth's inner conflict, evoking an experience of tragic inevitability. This psychological journey culminates in Macbeth's devastating descent into disillusionment and despair. His last major soliloquy reveals a man utterly broken, stripped of all meaning and purpose.

I am sick at heart,
When I behold—this push,
Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now.
I have lived long enough: my way of life.
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not (V.3.22–31).

The play's enduring appeal across centuries lies in its ability to immerse spectators in Macbeth's tumultuous journey, inviting them to confront the complexities of the human condition. This may be followed by a sense of satisfaction, a moral prediction confirmed, that the powers of justice and loyalty have triumphed over merciless ambition. On another level, this experience may evoke ignored or repressed emotions from the individual spectator's past and thus bring about a deeply purifying and gratifying experience—a catharsis (Noy & Noy Sharav, 2013).

From a neuroaesthetic perspective, the aesthetic appeal of performance arts aligns with our brain's drive for prediction confirmation and error reduction. Simultaneously, the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) manages the interpretation of social cues and shapes how people connect socially while viewing art (Doricchi, 2022; Soutschek & Mattes, 2025).

Popular music's appeal, and what truly makes it popular, i.e., enjoyed by many — lies in listeners' satisfaction in recognizing familiar melodies — those embedded in shared cultural memory, built on well-known harmonies and lyrics, with just enough variation to prevent boredom. We witness this in how crowds not only demand to hear their favorite hits by Bruce Springsteen or by one of the currently popular bands, but also join in, reciting lyrics, and singing along with the performers. This seems to maximize the enjoyment of playing together, in a game where participants are well-acquainted with the rules, and can win most of the time. When performance art is actively viewed and enjoyed with others, synchronised neural circuits are activated, thereby creating a sense of group engagement and social bonding (Rai et al., 2025; Müller et al., 2013).

In contrast, complex art forms — classical polyphonic music, abstract painting, nonfigurative sculpture, and sophisticated drama — demand greater effort from their audience, yet offer a further kind of satisfaction, one born from joy in mastering a cognitive challenge. Noy names this “a meta-emotion,” emanating from the ability to integrate the contrarities within us (Noy & Noy Sharav, 2013). Noy even speculates that this joy elicited by immersion in artistic experience served an evolutionary function: “We are left with few alternatives other than supposing that if in the course of evolution a certain activity became a source of pleasure for the human being, it must have considerable survival value for the individual or the entire species” (Noy, 1989, p. 135). Semir Zeki's research follows the same line (Zeki, 2009; Zeki & Stutters, 2012). He argues that the appreciation of beauty is “hardwired” into our brains and can be found across different cultures. His key finding — that the brain seeks visual constancies to understand the world — illuminates art's cognitive function. Some novel infant studies tend to confirm that infants already have a sense of beauty (Mottier, 2026). Animal research also offers some support for Noy's speculation, as it reveals playful behavior across various species, from mammals to reptiles and birds (Burghardt, 2005; MacLean, 1990; Sivi, 2016). Play appears to be a brain system that emerged fairly early in the course of mammalian evolution (Schank, 2015; Sivi, 2010). Animal research has also shown that play, as a phenotype, has developed through the rigors of natural selection and has afforded some advantage to those species that play. There is also growing evidence that play itself is important for socialization, and has the potential to ease stress when humans are placed in anxiety-provoking situations (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Sivi, 2010; Vanderschuren & Trezza, 2014; Zeki, 2009).

The Paradox of PLAY: Enjoying Unpredictability, the Allostatic Brain

Examining play through a neuropsychological lens raises a fundamental paradox, aptly formulated by Kiverstein and associates: “Why would a biological agent that aims at minimizing uncertainty in its encounters with the world ever be motivated to seek out novelty?” (Kiverstein et al., 2019) — a pursuit that itself elicits uncertainty, free energy, and increased anxiety. Friston and associates (2017) address this through their theory of Predictive Processing (PP), proposing “epistemic actions”—exploratory behaviors that ultimately minimize uncertainty about future outcomes. This aligns with our growing understanding of the brain as an allostatic organ — active and proactive — that anticipates needs and tests predictive actions, rather than primarily maintaining homeostasis (Andersen et al., 2023; Parr & Friston, 2019). In fact, the enjoyment of some degree of unpredictability is basic to many forms of PLAY, including artworks. Art often breaks through the restrictions of habits and prejudices, challenging our sets of predictions, often demanding that we, as respondents, restructure our previous understanding. These efforts open windows onto diverse layers of meaning, which enhance our aesthetic pleasure.

Gestalt theorists claim that positive emotions intensify when we resolve prediction errors and restore predictability after

navigating through uncertainty. Artists, they argue, deliberately use these perceptual obstructions to enhance aesthetic pleasure, as when a painting initially appears as only a collection of lines and colors before resolving prediction error, as we discover the Gestalt (Van de Cruys & Wagemans, 2011).

While Gestalt theorists focus on visual perception, Cuccuru, K. (2021) extends similar principles to narrative experience in her analysis of the kind of pleasure experienced by spectators watching an action film. She proposes that the audience's aesthetic satisfaction arises from the appealing tension and interplay between layers of prediction — while watching the plot unfolding on the screen — and internally developing probabilistic guessing vis-à-vis the portrayed characters and action. She argues that when elements of surprise, plausibility, suspense, consistency, and success are pleasingly balanced and resolved, the audience experiences aesthetic pleasure.

Returning to a psychoanalytic perspective, Noy's exploration of artistic enjoyment illuminates childhood developmental needs. In his paper "Why do we enjoy art?" (1989), Noy observes that children need periodic escape from reality's demands through play, which allows fantasy and pleasure to flourish. This escape becomes especially crucial when environmental reality becomes overwhelming, too complex, or changes too rapidly, driving children to seek refuge in the haven of play and fantasy. For adults, whose mental organization is more

complex, fantasy and dreams may not suffice, so the higher order of artistic creation or appreciation serves this fundamental need for the maintenance of self.

Art as Contending with FEAR of Death and Extinction

It is beyond the scope of this paper to deal with the many ways that artistic creativity addresses different emotional needs. The following part focuses on one particular contribution of art — how art serves our deep human need to express and to cope with the FEAR emotional system, particularly our fear of death and extinction. Cultural anthropologist Becker (1973), as discussed by Fischman (2023), claims that much of human behavior and civilization, including religions, science, and artistic creativity, is largely designed to avoid or overcome the fear of death that haunts the human animal like nothing else (Fischman, 2023, p. 218). In his illustrious book *The Denial of Death* (1973), Becker even goes so far as to claim that all human civilization is a defense mechanism against the knowledge of our mortality.

Throughout history, humans have used art to grapple with mortality. Consider Tutankhamun, who lived in the fourteenth-century BCE. Through his golden burial mask, he achieves a kind of artistic immortality, remaining forever young and beautiful (Fig. 1). According to Becker, this would be one example of an "immortality project," a culturally approved means to deny mortality.



Figure 1: Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamun's burial mask. Transferred from Wikipedia, GNU Free Documentation License (GNU FDL), photograph by Michael Reeve, 26 December 2002.

Moving to contemporary examples, Rimas Tuminas (b. 1952) was a respected Lithuanian theatre director who recently directed *Anna Karenina* in Israel's Gesher Theatre, while concurrently battling terminal lung disease. After having undergone a surgical procedure in Israel, he offered a striking perspective on art's defiance of death. In an interview for the newspaper *Haaretz*, he said: "The surgeons gave me six months to live; that's a lot! Before I had only two! In six months one can direct two theatre plays!" Tuminas added, "Time touches

us with its cold finger, like a deep-sea fish, but we should be grateful—this is theatre! Art says to death, 'Yes, you are here, but wait, I am going to cheat you!'" (in Rozovsky, 2023)².

Artists often engage playfully with death. Israeli theatre director Ariel Bronz demonstrated this by assembling a unique group of elderly individuals, aged 72–90, and mostly non-professional actors, to create and stage a performance that deals with preparing for death, coping with limited time and

²Rimas Tuminas died in March 2024, having fulfilled his promise to life and art by directing three theater plays in Israel.

confronting the inevitable (Bronz, 2023). The name of the performance is already playful—"Die," which in Hebrew ("ד") means "Enough" (Figure 2). This alludes to the possibilities of choice in an unavoidable predicament, for instance, choosing the time and/or means of dying. It is a documentary poetic and satirical performance — a kind of playful protest. Aging and dying are gloomy subjects, and Bronz ponders, "Why would someone want to watch a play about something we try to repress and forget?" (personal communication, Feb. 22, 2023). So he counters the gravity of the subject with a multilayered approach — weaving together humor, poetry, music, and intergenerational performance by including a young singer and adolescent stage assistants. With audience members seated in a circle among the performers, the boundary between observer and participant blurs, creating an immersive experience likely enhanced by mirror neuron activation (Fox, 2016, pp. 75–76; Gallese et al., 1996).



Figure 2: Photo taken during live performance of "DIE," May 2023. By permission of performance director Ariel Bronz.

The performance works on multiple levels. The actors, all elderly, and some suffering serious illnesses, report enjoying this experience that gives additional meaning to their lives. For Bronz himself, death was a constant presence — having grown up with elderly grandparents until their passing. His parents worked as caregivers for the aged, and Bronz reports death was a regular topic at family dinners. By now his parents are themselves getting old and ailing. All this makes his present work deeply personal, perhaps even therapeutic (Ginzburg, 2022).

The drama unfolds through provocative questions and raw expressions of emotion. The actors, as well as the audience, confront direct questions: "What about death frightens you? What should your gravestone say?" Their responses are unvarnished: "Screw old age! What a fuck it is to be old!" They read aloud bits of poetry—"I am public enemy number one. I am the ugly, the wrinkled, the weak, the scarred, the needy.... I am the burden that is heavy on you." In a haunting sequence actors move around blowing bubbles from cups of green liquid. This evokes associations of fragility: bubbles—now they are, now they are not. The green liquid itself carries darker significance, referring to the green cocktail used by Switzerland's euthanasia group Dignitas to terminate life (Figure 3, video from live performance).



Figure 3: Photo taken during live performance of "DIE," May 2023. By permission of performance director Ariel Bronz.

In this performance, then, the audience joins the performers, as well as the playwright/director, in playfully examining FEAR, specifically fear of aging and mortality, while trying out various ways of mastering these universal anxieties. By providing a safe space to confront these fears, the performance may lead participants to new insights. This illustrates how artistic creativity serves our predictive and active brain that anticipates needs and examines predictive responses to life's ultimate challenges.

As we turn our attention to the spectators, readers, or other art respondents, we realize that art's contribution extends beyond giving form and meaning to shared emotions and emotional conflicts. In times of extreme stress, such as war or natural disaster, it serves multiple psychological functions. When we must grapple with threatening and horrible experiences, the need to detach from reality and escape into fantasy intensifies. We look for even brief times of relief. However, there is also the fear of losing control, of drifting into fantasy and endangering our sanity. Art provides a unique solution — it offers respite from constant vigilance, while its inherent order and structured framework help organize inner chaos, thus promoting self-cohesion (Fox, 2016, pp. 35–38). Art can also help by bestowing meaning on anarchic or threatening occurrences, so that in times of extreme chaos, an encounter with artworks can be appreciated without the threat of disorganization.

Conclusion

This paper has undertaken a daring integration of artistic creativity, affective neuroscience, and psychoanalytic theory. Through Panksepp's framework of emotional operating systems, we have explored how artistic creativity emerges from the complex interplay between PLAY, SEEKING, and FEAR systems, offering new insights into both the creation and enjoyment of art.

Artistic creativity represents far more than mere aesthetic entertainment: it constitutes a fundamental neurobiological mechanism for emotional integration and psychological survival. The coupling of high PLAY and SEEKING systems drives artists to persist despite adversity. This process, illuminated through examples from Blake to contemporary theatre, demonstrates how autonoetic, tertiary brain processes enable the sophisticated emotional regulation that Kris termed "regression in the service of the ego." For audiences, this same interplay of prediction, novelty, and resolution — evident in responses ranging from Macbeth's tragic inevitability to the shared pleasure of a familiar melody — generates a parallel joy, rooted in mastering uncertainty and restoring order.

The examination of art's role in contending with death anxiety — from Tutankhamun's immortality project to Bronz's participatory performance "Die" — reveals how PLAY paradoxically allows us to engage with our deepest existential fears. By creating controlled spaces where prediction errors become sources of aesthetic pleasure rather than anxiety, it enables audiences to confront mortality rather than being overwhelmed by it.

Particularly significant is our demonstration of how psychoanalytic concepts like repression, sublimation, and catharsis align with contemporary neuroscientific findings about dopamine-mediated reward systems, mirror neuron activation, and the brain's allostatic functioning — suggesting that psychoanalytic insights long considered metaphorical may reflect actual neurobiological mechanisms.

This exploration has limitations: empirical measurement of SEEKING and tertiary-process intensity in artists remains underdeveloped, and our largely Western and Israeli examples limit cross-cultural generalizability. Future research should employ neuroimaging to examine artistic engagement with challenging themes and explore cultural variations in artistic PLAY.

Despite these limitations, this paper contributes to neuropsychanalysis by demonstrating how artistic phenomena can be understood through integrated brain-mind perspectives. In an era marked by existential uncertainties, understanding how artistic PLAY transforms FEAR into meaning and even pleasure is not merely academically intriguing but clinically relevant, with implications for therapeutic applications in treating anxiety and trauma.

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The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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