

**SENSE FROM THE MARGIN:
NONSENSE IN THE EUROPEAN VISUAL ARTS**

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Abstract

The marginalization of Nonsense is in readership as well as in scholarship. It is looked upon as an 'effeminate' and juvenile genre. . Nonsense thus provides sense from the margin challenging the dominant idea of sense-making. Sense and nonsense are not essentially antagonistic to each other; rather they nurture a complimentary and holistic relationship. The world of nonsense is one where the authoritative codes of functions are inverted; it disrupts and destabilizes the tradition creating an alternative universe. Nonsense captures this politics of representation in foregrounding the Kheyal Rasa that unfurls the repressed sensibilities through a garb of fun and frolic. The generic as well as aesthetic marginalization surmounts to a position of self-castigation, thereby voicing its own propaganda through its jolting creative faculty. I would like to talk about three European painters, among many others, who contribute to the idea of nonsense in the visual arts. We will also see how it is different from or similar to the later modernist art movements and how the marginal and the centred works of art represent almost similar experiences of human life, only in different forms. The credibility in art is an elastic phenomenon that, however implausible, broadens our experiential vistas to an awakening, intuitive consciousness that blurs the distinction between sense and nonsense.

Key words: Nonsense, margin, dominant, sense, alternative, visual, representation.

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Sense and nonsense are not essentially antagonistic to each other; rather they nurture a complimentary and holistic relationship, assimilating and accommodating their individual elements. Nonsense has its own mythopoeic apparatus that creates new paradigms of absurdity and insanity out of the feelings of thrown-in-ness from our point of origin to an alien universe, which in no way suffers from the lack but celebrates the excess of sense. The world of nonsense is one where the authoritative codes of functions are inverted; it disrupts and destabilizes the tradition creating an alternative universe.

A parallel universe is created which may not have any link with our world of familiarity. In creating an alternative reality, nonsense aims at the subversion of the existing orders and the conventional process of production and reception of sense which takes place within the horizon of expectation of a particular community. It is characterized by paradoxes: making sense out of nonsense; creating a world of anarchy out of pattern as well as restoring an alternative form of order out of chaos.

Nonsense foregrounds the serious sense of marginality of human beings in this cosmic design and the pathos of meaninglessness of progress. Nonsense as a genre holds a satirical mirror to the rational ideas of life. It envisages a movement from bondage to emancipation; from marginality to empowerment. Nonsense believes in inviolability of human predicament, self-defeating, agonising failure and awareness of futility. Fun loving impulse and the paradox of making fun of everything serious is directed against the outside world and one's own self. This centripetal critique and centrifugal awakening jostles for space in a totalitarian and collectivist state where individual voices are gagged, unheard; individual subjectivity is lost. History suppresses individual stories. Nonsense rekindles these discourses under the garb of whimsicality. Representing a marginalised portrayal of one's own self, nonsense draws our attention to the intricacies, lacunas and fissures of a deformed society of which we are products, and which needs to be reformed. Pursuit of nonsense takes off from this painful awareness of marginality and its pointless, meaningless, absurd attempt. Nonsense through its anti-consent attitude subverts the centred discourse of normative sense making and, through subtle political resonances, brings a peaceful revolution. The human rationale is debunked for the advent of post-human irrational emancipation. Nonsense uses and abuses the centred discourse of aesthetics and turn topsy-turvy by creating a new kind of aesthetic reality altogether.

Since the reality is either idealistic or ideational in the classical world, the anthropomorphosis or any form of dehumanization or cruelty was looked upon as improper

despite its catalogical abundance in the mythology. The Greek world, dominated by evil, has this tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian forms of appropriation and even the most beautiful beings carry out the most horrific atrocities: Saturn, Medea, Tantalus, Agamemnon remind us of the cruelty that resides in the scheme of nonsensical and irrational actions. Sirens in Homer; Cerebarus and Harpies in Virgil; Gorgons and Sphinx – all these creatures find their creative parallels in the illustrations of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll or, for that matter even in Sukumar Ray, the writers of nonsense literature in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. All sorts of combinations are worked out where the matter and the forms are brought together in a weird combinatory relationship wherein the new creatures produced evoke a nonsensical appeal despite being artistically pleasing. The ideas of agreeability in art come from the ideas of propriety and proportion. Therefore, the aesthetic appeal of an art is essentially something which accommodates and appropriates the ugly or the non-beautiful and the disagreeable within its schema.

Pondering over its seriousness, it is worth noting that the nonsense as a category, generic and aesthetic, is not essentially comical in nature. Nonsense ruptures our psychic and phenomenal understanding of the world and gives it a philosophical dimension through the comic and weird delineations. However, the spirit of carnivalesque and gay abundance that the nonsense entails accommodates the grotesque, thereby making the representations either ugly or pathetic or, by combining the two, achieves the artistic mode of producing the horrible and the disgusting. Moreover, it challenges the existing distinctions and welcomes a new mould of normalcy into being.

The idea of sense is inextricably linked with the idea of civilization at large opposed to which is insanity and barbarousness. The mediaeval and Renaissance sensibilities toward the concepts of proportion and harmony, as in those architectonic structures, come to a clash due to the change in perspectives; Renaissance man sees the proportions of cathedrals as barbarous and pejoratively “gothic”. Therefore it can be said that the ideas of sense and nonsense, civilization and barbarousness, and that of beauty and ugliness are relative to various historical periods or various cultures. Moreover, it also depends upon the perspective that precedes the perception in this case. Our moral aesthetics prepare our subjectivities to respond in a particular way; our visual reception is scarcely independent of the cultural nuances and the stable societal models.

Journeying from the classical to the postmodern art, one might ponder over the repertoire of deviations and digressions that are results of the creative faculty. The installation art in the contemporary period builds a saga of rich craftsmanship that goes much beyond the montage during the modernist period. The graphic designs that have come into being, thanks to the technological advancement, brew every kind of possibilities in its creative regime. The invention of the camera has inspired a paradigm shift in the production and reception of visual arts, and the eventual development of editing tools, technical reproducibility and the virtual world of global networking has created a hyperreal space of being where the nonsensicality of visual images is obvious due to its non-specific, non-generic reception. The nonsense is well received as it has become a part and parcel of our everyday sensibilities, and the

dehumanization is complete in the era of commodity fetishism and late capitalism. Art as a commodity bears its nonsensicality within its whole aesthetic appeal which though apparently going through a sea change is not quite so if one remembers the practice of patronizing politics that prized the beautiful and not the ugly.

Nonsense, in various cases, arises from the highlighting of deformities and the limitations are brought into a nuanced, political comicality. In Edward Lear's illustrations, the mismatch and disjunctions appeal to the comic glands, however adulterating then with the visual implications of violence. The illustrations of John Tenniel in the *Alice* books carve out a niche of surreal and fantastic historiography of the wonderland where Alice is confronted with various weird creatures or weird thought processes turned topsy-turvy in a disproportionate and inverted universe of dream. Nonsense has its own logicity that counters Alice's positions. In a similar fashion, Dadaism as a movement claims to formulate an alternative logicity which counters sense with its own sets of logicity. Thus, what is nonsense is always not necessarily ugly. The ugly might have its own rational justifications; even if it does not, it surmounts to a position of self-castigation as a marginal, ostracized form or art thereby voicing its own propaganda through its jolting creative faculty. What lies in that revolutionary spirit is the appreciation of differences and acknowledgement of true beauty that comes from the pleasure of creation.

The beauty lies in the conception of the distortions and deformities as new possibilities. In a way this happens to be the advent of modernity that not only lays bare the lacunas in the conventional understanding of sense but also adumbrates the novel possibilities of an alternative universe where the repressed ideas are given a voice and shape through the emergence of the unconscious in the Dadaist and the Surrealist movements. Surrealism, as envisioned by Andre Breton, would discard the conscious production of art and would instead rely on the unconscious for inspiration in art. Breton and other surrealist philosophers and artists believed that art as access to the unconscious was more "real" or "true" than rationalist art works. The most famous scene in *An Andalusian Dog* shows Luis Bunuel himself sharpening a razor, then cutting a woman's eye with it. Surrealists tried to create 'multi-layered realities' in their work. For example, the eye-cutting scene could also be seen as symbolizing rape, castration, or an attack on vision. The act of cutting the eye, though apparently a depiction of nonsensical grotesque, suggests that what we are about to see is not visible reality, but the inner workings of the mind: it tells us that the film is a dream. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* can be seen as the basis for what became Surrealism over a hundred years later. We can extend the surrealist element: for example, the real life Alice has a monologue taking the parts of the so-called Avatars (virtual figures), but in fact the scene is a talk within the avatars themselves, and we, the readers, get an insight into the virtual life. Thus, like the parallel nonsense universe, the virtual can be well looked upon as the search of centred human beings for an alternate being residing in the margins, the search for the perfect Alter Ego.

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the later modernist art movements and how the marginal and the centred works of art represent almost similar experiences of human life, only in different forms.

Hieronymus Bosch, the brilliant and original northern European painter of the late Middle Ages that he is, through his works reveals an unusual iconography of a complex and individual style. Although at first recognized as a highly imaginative creator of devils and a powerful inventor of seeming nonsense full of satirical meaning, Bosch demonstrated insight into the depths of the mind and an ability to depict symbols of life and creation. His fantastic imagery and eccentricity illustrate the moral and religious concepts, the torment of hell in particular. Nonsense cultivates its content through spontaneity. Bosch's paintings serve to unfurl a whole new dynamo that produces sheer panoramic depictions of monstrous apocalyptic scenes of chaos and nightmare juxtaposed with idyllic portrayals of the mankind. Bosch's spontaneous iconography presented in a dreamlike eruption of fantasy suggests the pattern in the simulation of multitudes of human figures, giant birds, and unearthly landscapes within a harmonious whole. The sheer fun and frolic captured in the amalgamation of variety of monstrous, repulsive, demonic creatures and their scatological details inspires a feeling of disgust as well as that of amiability. The aesthetic appeal is that of nonsense since the mediaeval nuances are replicated in a horrible manner through the forceful colours, fine brush-point calligraphy, and hectic contouring of uncanny dystopia. The carnivalesque here assimilates the grotesque within its worldview and the fantastically bizarre or hellishly ugly creatures are well conceived in his chaotic world of visual amalgamation. The subtlety of colours tickles the topography with a sense of stylistic maturity. Inventive and creative energies coagulate to form the otherworldly beings that are at once ghostly and ghastly, yet the proportionate disproportions lays bare the tortuous human imagination only to console with its irrational emancipation. Despite the seeming nonsensicality, Bosch's details are structured with utmost care and therein triumphs the strategic ploy of the artist playing with the aesthetics created through the ambivalence of responses and the religiosity of meticulous iconography.

Pieter Brueghel the Elder was a Flemish Renaissance painter whose oeuvre is overtly chaotic and filled with the nonsensical activities and foolish looking people. The food metaphor is stark and often leads us to believe the human beings as nothing but the nonsense consumer with no ethical or rational endeavour. His paintings suggest immense amount of dynamics through those abundant static human figures. The chaotic world of Brueghel is in motion and the wheel of sense and nonsense rotate around each around; their axes seem to be inseparable. The connotations work through their abruptness as the crowd of figures jostle for space, lost in the celebration of the nonsensicality of human existence despite the overwhelming Biblical themes posing pseudo sincerity.

Arcimbaldo tries to depict the bizarre and fruity human portraits producing a nonsensical appeal, at times comic and yet repelling. The manner in which the artistic creation has found its fruition in those ridiculous constructions of human countenance with inanimate objects reveal the anatomic and physiognomic curiosities of the age and Arcimbaldo simply subscribes to it rather than giving vent to the faculty of nonsense as such. The Mannerists

tended to show a close relationship between human and nature. Arcimboldo's conception of heads is surrealistic and is considered to be a particular approach to Physiognomy which, far from being irrational and fanciful, catered to the taste of that particular time.

The preoccupation with the body seem to be overwhelming in the course of these artistic ventures as very clearly does it establish the human fascination with the matter. The forms that take shapes from the raw materials are tantamount to any creative sojourn since the poetic adventure is unmistakable in carving out variety of sensible deductions from the seeming collage of nonsense. The preoccupation with the body and finding it as a source of filth fill Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* with all the scatological details reducing man to a nonsensical object of creation stripped of his grandeur, devoid of any enlightenment aura. This act of dehumanization is also seen in the macabre and the portrayals of 'triumph of the dead' in its numerous forms. Nonsense haunts only to delight; it vexes our aesthetics only to amuse, foregrounding the uncanny combination of the Eros and the Thanatos. It destructs only to recreate. It challenges the etymological roots of aesthetics; subverts the norms and cultural constructs only to bring about a new order of principles, however bizarre and obnoxious.

Nonsense has never emerged as any kind of movement, but has recorded the pain and pleasure through its sartorial aesthetics. The human body is degenerated and decomposed within the autonomy of art and presented as nothing more than mere geometrical shapes: the Cubist movement mechanizes the rigidity of the alternative imprisonment that distorts only to enslave. The Dadaist movement rejects any kind of logicity and aesthetic appeal of art but, unknowingly, creates an altogether different paradigm of aesthetic appeal through its delineation of the non-conformist, intuitive and irrational approach toward life. The nonsensicality is not imposed, rather it emerges out of the scheme of things and the subterranean violence is a part of the comicality that the nonsense embodies. The Dadaist and surrealist paintings prize the unconscious rumblings of forms that distort and deform the realism, paving the way for a neo-realist approach to life. Here, the nonsense gives way to sense only by habituation and assimilation. It works by accommodating what legitimizes the nonsense in the visual arts, within or beyond the time and space of its production. The objective distance is necessary to romanticize the art only when the subjective deprivation is complete. A cathartic effect follows our perception and reception of nonsense; it prepares us to appreciate and welcome novelty and the avant-garde, but fails to purge us of any form of sadomasochistic identification with it. The perverse atrocities lurk in the wings when the absurd drama is performed: reality is not given but comes into being through art; therefore the nonsensical universe emerges out of a phoenical reinvigoration of the fossilized reality. The primordial and ur-forms of artistic endeavours are appropriated through abstractions. In no way can this be regarded as nonsense, but rather is to be looked upon as a voice that foregrounds the aesthetics of anti-sense. Revolutionary in its spirit, nonsense as a genre and as a tendency, juxtaposes the 'other' with many incarnations of the 'self', manifest in the dichotomy or dilemma that pervades the emotional response. In the history of European visual arts, nonsense as an aesthetic appeal oscillates between the extremes of sensibility. The various forms of beauty give ways to the synonyms of the ugly only to celebrate the grotesque humour through a perverse sensibility.

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Nonsense captures this politics of representation in foregrounding the *Kheyal Rasa* that unfurls the repressed sensibilities through a garb of fun and frolic. The credibility in art is an elastic phenomenon that, however implausible, broadens our experiential vistas to an awakening, intuitive consciousness that blurs the distinction between sense and nonsense. "Nonsense" is like that looking glass that not merely reflects but refracts our senses and sensibilities positing us in an ambiguous and ambivalent position of non-judgment. The aesthetics of coherence is jeopardised in the world of dreams; the surreal haunts and as opposed to the carnivalesque mood of the nonsensicality in the earlier periods, it creates a space of claustrophobia and celebrates the subversion of all the conscious human faculties, playing with our aesthetics by accommodating the avant-garde within the tradition, the art within anti-art, the sense within the nonsense.

The marginalization is in readership as well as in scholarship. It is looked upon as a "effeminate" and "juvenile" genre. The marginalization becomes a tool for empowerment. Nonsense ruptures our psychic and phenomenal understanding of the world and gives it a philosophical dimension by dabbling in serious discourses. Nonsense thus provides sense from the margin challenging the dominant idea of sense-making.

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