



The Dialectics of Perfection: Interrogating Kierkegaard's Subjectivity of Truth in Cinematic Representation

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Abstract : The Netflix film Qala (2022) revolves around the psychological turmoil of its protagonist, a young singer burdened by her mother's rejection and the pressures of artistic excellence. This paper applies Søren Kierkegaard's theory of the subjectivity of truth, which argues that truth is an individual, deeply personal experience shaped by one's inner emotions and choices, rather than an objective reality. Kierkegaard argues that a proper understanding cannot be external, but rather a subjective experience with which one finds himself in contact with his or her true self. Qala's inner battle, in search of artistic approbation, and her untreated trauma, stands as a reminder of Kierkegaard's differentiation between aesthetic and ethical states of existence; while she sought the approval from the outside world, she trapped herself in this vicious cycle of self-deceit and sin. This paper argues that Qala's subjective truth, defined by her insatiable need for external validation, ultimately drives her to existential despair. The artistic burden she carries becomes a vehicle for self-destruction, as she sacrifices self-authenticity for societal expectations. By analyzing Qala through a Kierkegaardian lens, the paper illuminates the tragic consequences of living for others' perceptions rather than embracing one's own subjective truth.

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Artistic perfection is a concept deeply ingrained in creative industries, often portrayed as an essential goal. However, the relentless pursuit of perfection raises significant philosophical and psychological questions. How does one define perfection, and at what cost is it achieved? The tension between personal truth and external validation forms the foundation of this discourse. Søren Kierkegaard's theory of subjectivity argues that truth is not a universal construct but an individualized experience shaped by personal struggles and perceptions. Applying this existential framework to artistic expression, this study explores the burdens of perfection, examining the ways in which societal and familial pressures shape an individual's perception of self-worth and identity. The analysis will further investigate the interplay between artistic authenticity, existential despair, and the dangers of external validation in creative fields. (Hong and Hong 112).

Understanding Subjectivity of Truth

Kierkegaard's philosophy asserts that truth is not an absolute, objective reality but a deeply personal experience. He argued that individuals must define their own truths rather than conforming to external dictates. This subjectivity is particularly evident in artistic fields, where individuals struggle to balance personal expression with external expectations. The pursuit of perfection is often an illusion, as it forces individuals to adopt an identity that may not align with their authentic self. (Evans 45).

One of Kierkegaard's most significant contributions to existential thought is his notion that truth is 'lived' rather than 'known.' He believed that individuals are constantly faced with decisions that shape their reality, and these decisions define their personal truth. For an artist, this dilemma manifests as a choice between self-expression and conformity. If truth is determined by personal experience, then no single standard of perfection can exist. Rather, perfection is subjective, varying according to personal beliefs, cultural norms, and societal pressures.

The subjectivity of truth extends beyond philosophy and into psychology, where researchers have long debated the effects of imposed standards on human behavior. Studies suggest that when individuals are forced to conform to unrealistic ideals, they experience heightened stress, reduced creativity, and a loss of intrinsic motivation. These effects are especially prominent in artistic fields, where originality and authenticity should be celebrated but are often sacrificed in favor of mass appeal and external validation.

Artistic Burden and Trauma

For many artists, success is equated with self-worth. This belief is reinforced by societal and familial pressures, making external validation a necessity. However, this dependence can be psychologically damaging. When the pressure to conform overshadows self-expression, it creates an internal conflict that can lead to profound emotional distress. This conflict often manifests in the form of self-doubt, anxiety, and a loss of personal identity. (Greenspon 78).

Psychologists argue that an excessive focus on perfection can lead to anxiety disorders, depression, and imposter syndrome. In creative industries, artists who struggle with perfectionism often report feelings of inadequacy, fearing that any deviation from societal expectations will render their work meaningless. This internalized fear can stifle creativity, making it difficult for individuals to produce work that feels authentic.

Moreover, the need for perfection is often inherited from generational cycles of validation. Parents who view success through rigid criteria may inadvertently impose these expectations on their children, creating a self-perpetuating cycle of pressure. This phenomenon is evident in many high-achieving individuals who report a lifelong struggle to balance their own aspirations with external pressures.

Societal and Familial Influence

In a highly competitive and male-dominated industry, validation becomes a currency. Artists are frequently judged not only on their craft but also on their ability to fit into predefined molds of success. Over time, this constant evaluation strips individuals of their authenticity, leaving them feeling alienated from their own creative instincts. The societal pressure to maintain an image of flawlessness exacerbates this crisis, further intensifying the internal struggle. (Curran and Hill 532).

Familial expectations further complicate this struggle. Many artists come from backgrounds where success is defined in rigid terms, often in opposition to self-exploration. This leads to an internal conflict where the artist must choose between honoring their family's expectations and embracing their own creative truth. The resulting dissonance can create lasting psychological distress, leaving the artist in a state of existential uncertainty.

Beyond the family unit, media plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of success. The glorification of flawless achievements in films, advertisements, and social media distorts reality, making it appear as though true success comes without struggle. This misrepresentation leads individuals to set impossible standards for themselves, fueling a culture of dissatisfaction and self-criticism.

Kierkegaard's Stages of Existence in the Artistic Journey

Kierkegaard proposed three stages of existence that illustrate the journey toward self-awareness: (Weston 201).

1. Aesthetic Stage – At this stage, individuals chase perfection without self-awareness, believing that external recognition will bring fulfillment.
2. Ethical Stage – The individual begins to question whether the pursuit of success is worth the emotional and psychological cost, leading to a crisis of identity.
3. Existential Breakdown – When individuals fail to reconcile their internal truth with external expectations, they experience despair, a state of spiritual suffering described by Kierkegaard.

The Psychological Cost of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is often associated with success and high achievement, but beneath this exterior lies a complex psychological burden. Clinical psychologists have long studied the correlation between perfectionism and mental health disorders, noting that individuals who constantly strive for unattainable standards are at higher risk for anxiety, depression, and burnout. This is particularly evident in the creative industries, where external validation dictates self-worth, leaving individuals trapped in an endless cycle of self-doubt and dissatisfaction (Greenspon 82).

Media and the Cultivation of Unrealistic Standards

The media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of success and perfection. Social media, in particular, has amplified perfectionist tendencies, exposing individuals to highly curated portrayals of success. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok create a culture where flawlessness is not only expected but demanded. Artists are pressured to present themselves as effortlessly talented, leading to unrealistic expectations of productivity and skill (Taylor 191).

The Existential Crisis of the Artist

Kierkegaard's existential philosophy provides valuable insights into the struggles faced by artists. His concept of 'despair'—a state of being where one is disconnected from their true self—resonates deeply with those who feel pressured to conform to external expectations. According to Kierkegaard, individuals must pass through existential stages to reach self-actualization. Artists who experience perfectionist tendencies often find themselves stuck between the aesthetic and ethical stages, torn between external validation and personal truth (Evans 48).

Overcoming Perfectionism: A Path to Authenticity

Breaking free from the cycle of perfectionism requires a fundamental shift in mindset. Artists must learn to separate their self-worth from their work, recognizing that imperfection is not synonymous with failure. By embracing the philosophy of 'wabi-sabi,' a Japanese aesthetic that finds beauty in imperfection, individuals can cultivate a healthier relationship with their craft. This approach encourages artists to appreciate the process rather than fixate on an unattainable end result (Taylor 194).

The Fear of Failure and Its Role in Perfectionism

At the core of perfectionism lies an intense fear of failure. Many perfectionists equate mistakes with personal inadequacy, leading them to avoid risks that could potentially result in failure. This fear-driven mentality stifles creativity and innovation, as individuals become paralyzed by the thought of not meeting expectations. Psychologists argue that the fear of failure is often rooted in childhood experiences, where praise was contingent upon achievement rather than effort. As a result, perfectionists develop a conditional sense of self-worth, believing that they must constantly prove themselves to be valued (Curran and Hill 550).

Perfectionism and the Myth of Effortless Genius

Popular culture frequently perpetuates the myth of 'effortless genius,' portraying successful individuals as naturally gifted rather than products of persistence and hard work. This narrative is particularly damaging to perfectionists, who feel inadequate when their creative process does not yield immediate results. The reality is that mastery in any field requires years of practice, failure, and refinement. By reinforcing the idea that true talent should be effortless, society discourages perseverance and creates unrealistic expectations for success (Taylor 205).

Coping Strategies for Perfectionists

Overcoming perfectionism requires intentional efforts to reframe negative thought patterns and develop healthier approaches to self-improvement. One of the most effective coping strategies is mindfulness, which encourages individuals to remain present rather than obsessing over hypothetical failures. Mindfulness techniques, such as meditation and journaling, help perfectionists detach their self-worth from external achievements, fostering a more balanced perspective on success (Greenspon 95).

The Role of Mentorship in Combating Perfectionism

Having a mentor who understands the pitfalls of perfectionism can provide invaluable guidance for individuals struggling with self-doubt. Many successful artists and writers have attributed their growth to mentors who encouraged them to embrace imperfection and take creative risks. Mentorship offers a supportive space where individuals can receive constructive feedback without the fear of judgment, allowing them to develop confidence in their work. Studies have shown that individuals with strong mentor relationships are more likely to persist in their careers despite setbacks (Evans 55).

The Intersection of Perfectionism and Social Anxiety

Perfectionism and social anxiety often go hand in hand, as both are driven by a fear of negative evaluation. Perfectionists tend to be highly self-conscious, fearing that any perceived flaw will lead to rejection or criticism. This anxiety can be paralyzing, making it difficult for individuals to share their work or express their ideas openly. In severe cases, perfectionism-driven social anxiety can lead to avoidance behaviors, where individuals withdraw from opportunities that could help them grow. Addressing this issue requires a shift in mindset, emphasizing progress over flawlessness and recognizing that imperfection is a universal human experience (Hong and Hong 125).

Perfectionism and Burnout in Creative Industries

The relentless pursuit of perfection often leads to burnout, a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion caused by chronic stress. Burnout is especially prevalent in creative fields, where individuals are expected to consistently produce innovative work under tight deadlines. The perfectionist mindset exacerbates this issue by fostering unrealistic expectations and a refusal to take breaks. Many artists and writers report experiencing creative fatigue after prolonged periods of self-imposed pressure. Recognizing the signs of burnout and prioritizing self-care are essential steps in maintaining long-term creativity and well-being (Taylor 210).

Redefining Success: Moving Beyond External Validation

For perfectionists, success is often defined by external recognition, whether in the form of awards, social approval, or financial gain. However, this reliance on external validation creates an unstable foundation for self-worth, as it places one's sense of fulfillment in the hands of others. True success, as many psychologists argue, comes from intrinsic satisfaction—finding joy in the creative process rather than in external accolades. By shifting their focus from validation to self-expression, individuals can cultivate a healthier relationship with their work and reduce the stress associated with perfectionism (Weston 215).

How Different Cultures Approach Perfectionism

Cultural perspectives on perfectionism vary widely, shaping how individuals experience and respond to high standards. In some Eastern cultures, for example, the concept of 'kaizen' promotes continuous self-improvement while embracing failure as part of the learning process. In contrast, many Western societies emphasize individual achievement and competition, which can fuel perfectionist tendencies. Understanding these cultural differences can help individuals develop a more balanced approach to ambition, recognizing that perfection is not an absolute standard but a cultural construct (Evans 58).

The Link Between Perfectionism and Procrastination

While perfectionism and procrastination may seem like opposites, they are often closely linked. Many perfectionists struggle with procrastination because they fear that their work will not meet their own high standards. This avoidance strategy temporarily alleviates anxiety but ultimately increases stress as deadlines approach. Research suggests that perfectionists who learn to embrace imperfection and focus on effort rather than results are more likely to overcome procrastination and increase their productivity (Curran and Hill 555).

Conclusion

The struggle for perfection is a double-edged sword. While it can inspire artistic greatness, it can also lead to self-destruction when it is pursued at the cost of personal truth. Philosophically, truth is not an imposed standard but a lived experience, unique to each individual. The conflict between self-definition and societal validation continues to shape artistic expression, raising critical questions about the nature of success and fulfillment. Recognizing and embracing one's own truth, despite its imperfections, is essential for true artistic and existential liberation.

In creative industries, where perfection is often mistaken for artistic merit, it is vital to acknowledge the psychological costs of such expectations. Artists must be encouraged to develop a sense of self-worth that is independent of external validation. By embracing the idea that truth is subjective, they can navigate the artistic journey with greater confidence and resilience. As Kierkegaard suggested, authenticity is the highest form of self-expression, and it is only through personal truth that an artist can find true fulfillment.

Perfectionism, while often glorified, carries profound psychological and existential consequences. The pursuit of flawlessness, particularly in artistic fields, can lead to creative stagnation, mental distress, and a loss of personal identity. Søren Kierkegaard's existential framework offers a compelling lens through which to understand the struggles of perfectionism, highlighting the dangers of external validation and the necessity of self-actualization.

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