

**Expressionism in *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, adapted and
directed by Steven Berkoff**

*To what extent did Expressionism influence the 2009 East Productions restaging of
Metamorphosis by Franz Kafka, adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff?*

Theater Extended Essay

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Introduction

The avant-garde movement of expressionism of the 20th century significantly influenced all means of arts and creative expression, shedding light into the intricate human experiences and emotions, diving deep beyond the objective world and into the subjective world of human's deepest inner thoughts and feelings (Britannica, 2024). Fresh out of the horrors of war and economic turmoil after WW2, expressionism, particularly in Germany, initially found a place in theatre as a form of social protest that expressed feelings of alienation and isolation reflected by societal events and the rapid modernisation of the world (Britannica, 2024). This medium became a potent tool for artists to express their emotional turmoil, striving far from realism and naturalism and birthing unconventional styles unique to the expressionistic theatre with horror and nightmare themes. As the movement evolved, its impact was widespread beyond Germany and into the world, where its style still influences theatre in a modern context (Britannica, 2024).

This prompted the inquiry - to what extent did expressionism influence the 2009 East Productions restaging of *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff? *Metamorphosis* tells the story of Gregor Samsa, who wakes up one ordinary morning to be transformed into a life-size insect. We see those around him, society and his family, try to adjust to his "condition," ultimately making Gregor feel alienated from society. The choice of this production to analyse expressionism's influence on theatre is because it is a quintessential example of expressionistic theatre, written originally as an expressionistic piece of literature by Franz Kafka and adapted by Steven Berkoff in his expressionistic "Berkovian" style attributed to physical theatre and total theatre (Rosen, 2000). His stylistic choices, such as acting, stage design and more, in specific scenes from this production, will be examined using primary and secondary sources to evaluate the role expressionism played in its development.

Origin of Expressionism

The term ‘ Expressionism’ first emerged as a fine art form early in the 20th century, considered ‘modern’ art because it was a new concept to the artist’s world (Britannica, 2024). It was also considered the antithesis of impressionism, associated with the movement where artists depict the impression of a moment in art (artst, 2020). Expressionism, however, is essentially emotional art, art that conveys the inner state of one’s psychic mind, emotions and thoughts that result in art that disregards ‘beauty’ in the external form and feature, encouraging distortion of form to convey the complexity of emotions such as anxiety in response to the urbanisation and mechanisation of society and the alienation from the natural world as a result (American Drama 2022). This movement prospered especially in Germany before, during and immediately after the First World War and during the early era of the Weimar Republic in Germany. During this time, the movement of expressionism majorly influenced art and other major disciplines such as literature, cinema, dance, music, architecture and theatre (American Drama 2022). However, this movement was short-lived, as the arrival of the Nazis led to the ban of artistic work, especially expressionistic works since Hitler denounced them as “degenerate art” in the early 1930s(Murphy 2017). This led to the decline of expressionism in Germany. Still, the movement remained as it gained popularity outside, reaching the US and shedding light on well-known artists, writers and playwrights who produced expressionistic work, such as Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Sophie Treadwell (Murphy 2017).

Expressionism in Theater

Despite Expressionism as a movement not being as dominant in theatre as before, it has shaped and developed expressionistic techniques such as distortion, the telegram style (fragmented scenes in theatre), the use of bold colours, emotional intensity, and the concept of expressing not the objective world but the subjective emotions and the emotional experiences of one's self (Ignou The people's University 2000). Due to the nature of expressionism of conveying one's emotions and thoughts, one can also gain insight into the social, political and cultural settings and see the creator's response to the ongoing event and the reflection of the creator's emotional state, like in *Metamorphosis* where we gain insight into Kafka's own feelings of isolation from society reflected through Gregor's transformation to an insect. We now understand that this is one of the reasons why most German expressionistic plays have a dominant theme of despair, horror, and apocalyptic visions of the collapse of society (Ignou The People's University 2000).

Steven Berkoff and Franz Kafka

Metamorphosis has long been considered an expressionist work because it shows Franz Kafka's honest interpretation of the world and his fears from his life - alienation in society. Some of Kafka's real relationships in life are reflected here, like his strained relationship with his father (Arslan, 2023). *Metamorphosis* also follows a narrative similar to Kafka's life of being alienated from his Jewish community for identifying as German and alienated from the German community due to his Jewish heritage. The social isolation, rootlessness, and not belonging anywhere contributed to this lifelong unhappiness (Britannica, 2023), producing many iconic expressionistic works known today, like *The Trial* and *Metamorphosis* (Britannica, 2023).

Kafka's expression of his thoughts, anxieties, and emotions are clearly reflected in the protagonist of *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa, which makes this an expressionistic work.

Steven Berkoff, a renowned theatre practitioner, playwright, director and actor, read Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and was the first to adapt it into a one-man show in August of 1969 - an endeavour that most thought was insanity and utterly fearless on Berkoff's behalf (Hills, 2011). Berkoff answers a question in an interview about why he chose to adapt *Metamorphosis*, to which he said he wanted to "exercise the possibility of an actor being stretched beyond the pale of naturalism and to create truly theatrical theatre" and "shatter the plate-glass window of British theatre" (Hills, 2011). Berkoff was always considered an "outsider" in the British theatre establishment despite his works being critically and commercially accepted later in his career (Rosen, 2000). One reason is that he remains committed to pushing the boundaries of the conservative theatre establishment, as his plays often touch upon class politics and personal issues of estrangement, isolation and loneliness (Rosen, 2000). When asked about the theatre establishment loving and hating his works, Berkoff replied, "The more you hate something, the more you find yourself attracted to it, curiously" (Rosen 2000). Berkoff's works, including *Metamorphosis*, are so unique and act as a testament to Berkoff's own aesthetic that is known as Berkovian theatre - a theatre style influenced majorly by Ancient Greek theatre, Japanese Noh, Kabuki, Artaud, Brecht, physical theatre, total theatre and expressionism (Rosen 2000). The techniques Berkoff commonly uses in his plays are in *Metamorphosis*, such as stylised techniques, exaggerated facial expressions and vocal work, minimalistic use of costume and set, and miming. He also likes to use soundscapes and aural effects to enhance the overall atmosphere and mood of the production (Rosen, 2000).

Berkoff has experienced isolation and alienation from his professional life. When he came across the novel *Metamorphosis*, upon reading it, he was captivated by Kafka's depiction of alienation and the subjective world that Kafka illustrated in the novel. His adaptation has many common elements compared to his other productions that he had adapted and directed, such as a minimalistic set, miming, physicality, and stylised movements. Being the first to adapt this novel into a theatre performance, it is apparent that he kept true to Kafka's expressionistic literature, adapting this novel using expressionistic features to convey the emotions Kafka had felt in the turmoils of his life.



Figure 1. A photo taken at 01:24 from *The Trial* by Franz Kafka adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff in 2006.

Set Design

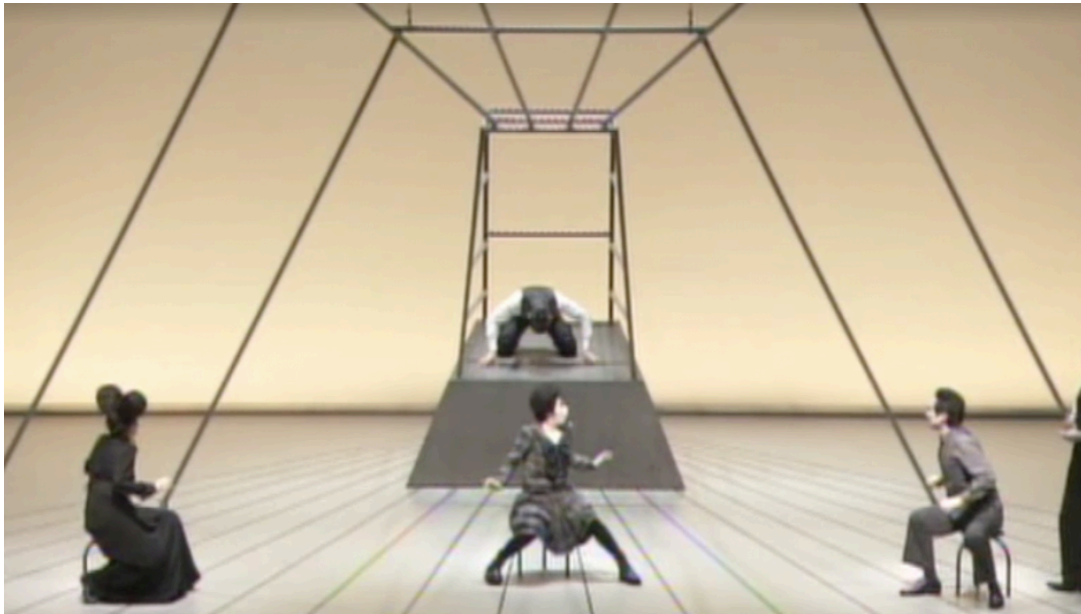


Figure 2. A screenshot taken at 12:10 from the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - Gregor wakes up transformed into an insect, his family oblivious.

As observed in Figure 2, a large angular metal jungle gym with legs that spread out like an insect is placed behind the three stools evenly placed downstage. The ladder-like ramps on either side of Gregor seem to cage him into his room, where Gregor is on all four legs, almost mirroring the structure of the jungle gym as a transformed insect. The set design is simplified, angled and distorted in a versatile setting instead of a local setting - typical of an expressionistic stage design to create a distance between reality and subjective reality (Cash 2021). The metal jungle gym also serves as a function for the actor playing Gregor to embody the insect by crawling horizontally, laterally, and hanging upside down—this representation of Gregor as an insect plays with the expressionistic technique of contrast. Contrast in expressionism can be white and black, rich and poor, cultured and savage, love and hate, clean and filthy, and in this case - man and animal (Cash 2021).

The geometric patterns applied to the stage floor also have contrast. The black lines on white, seemingly coming closer from downstage to upstage, create an illusion of an infinite perspective, which distorts the set. The lines on the floor enhance the prison cell imagery created by the metal jungle gym. The angular shapes of the metal structures, alongside the illusion of the infinite perspective, are expressionistic techniques of distortion, emphasising the expression of the subjective reality of the confusion and turmoil Kafka feels. These lines lead from the centre, where Gregor rests towards the audience. The extra lines on the floor enhance the prison cell imagery, complementing the set design's linear, stark, black-and-white contrast. Through the metal jungle gym, the actor can fully embody Gregor as a transformed insect, evoking feelings of disgust and absurdity. Not only does the set design represent him as an insect, but it also functions as a cage (both the lines and the metal jungle gym) where Gregor is trapped not only physically in his room but metaphorically into the shell of an insect - he is trapped in a nightmare, the aesthetic expressionism creates. Kafka's feelings of helplessly being trapped and caged in a prison of urbanisation and alienation are portrayed through the set design.

Acting



Figure 3. A photo taken at 14:16 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - Gregor screams to be left alone when the Chief Clerk visits to ask his whereabouts.

Ethan Mordden, an American author and musical theatre researcher, defines expressionism as “forms of composition and stagecraft through which the wishes, fears and obsessions of the human psyche are made audible and visible” (Sacar 2021). To express the human psyche that is otherwise internalised and hidden, actors are encouraged to exaggerate their movements, their words, and their gestures to express what they felt in that moment, to have a “sense of soaring”, as the playwright Paul Kornfeld advised (Sacar 2021). At 14:16 of the production, with reference to Figure 3, Gregor’s facial expression is extremely exaggerated - mouth wide open to its total capacity, eyes slightly crossed over, a facial expression of madness and almost insanity. “Leave me in peace!” - Gregor yells, exaggerating the last syllable as he croaks it out until his breath runs out. As an audience, it is extremely disturbing and provokes feelings of shock and disgust in reaction to something almost inhuman. Gregor’s emotional

turmoil is made visible and audible with his exaggerated facial expression and exaggerated yelling with unnaturalistic croaking at the end as if life is being sucked out of him. This moment certainly expresses Gregor's honest feelings, as he releases the pent-up feelings of frustration and anger from all the purposeless, mundane days he lives all for the sake of his family while putting up with the company he works for and its strictness. By emphasising angular, distorted, bizarre shapes, the play moves away from depicting reality to emphasise the portrayal of being in a "nightmare" instead, highlighting the turmoil Gregor is feeling.

Lighting design



Figure 4. A screenshot taken at 25:05 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of *Metamorphosis* in 2009 in Tokyo - Gregor's father pushes Gregor back into his room, against Gregor's mother and Greta's wishes.

This stage's lighting is more transformative and colourful than the minimalistic design. The range of intensities, colours, and lighting variations visually portray Gregor's internal state and strongly communicate the emotions felt to the audience, which is the essence of expressionism. The use of colours and range of lights contribute to the aspect of expressionism that it portrays subjective experiences and not objective reality (American Drama 2022). Therefore, the lighting is unrealistic and consists of dream-like scenery, instant flashes, and transformations of light that would not occur in reality. In expressionist theatre, it is very common for lights to be used to manipulate and create distortions through the use of varying ranges of intensities of light, colours, and different angles at the light shown (Cash, 2021). They

also effectively portray Gregor's internal emotional state, an element of expressionism - it portrays subjective experiences and not objective reality.

For example, as seen in Figure 4, at 25:05 of the restaging of Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*, the light instantly changes, as light from below is shown upwards, creating this massive shadow on all of the actors on the big plain backdrop. The combination of the enlarged metal structures, Gregor hanging on it like an insect, and the three families all enlarged around it create a distorted display of shadows - large and small, depending on where the actors were positioned on the stage. In this scene, the use of shadows is used as a means to represent the power hierarchy; for example, when the father had the most influence, his shadow was larger as he took a step backwards away from the light, and the other two mothers and sisters had smaller shadows, representing the limited significance they have and also their position in the typical family "hierarchy". The representation of the hierarchy, using the shadows and distortions created, can be interpreted as an expression of the internal state of mind of Gregor, who feels the father is the dominating figure in the family, which, in reality, reflected Franz Kafka's relationship with his father as well (Arslan 2023).

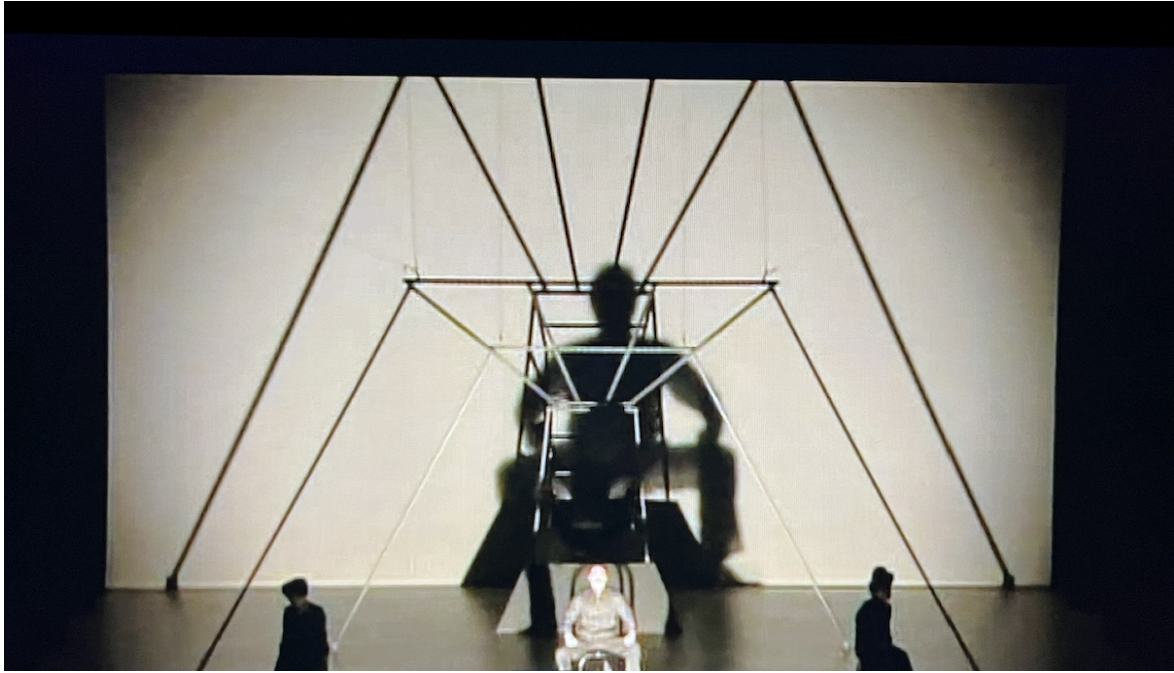


Figure 5. A photo taken at 49:20 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - Gregor's father sits down on his stool after subduing Gregor back into his room.

Another moment where a strained relationship with his father is expressed can be seen at 49:20 of the production, where the father's large shadow is displayed against the backdrop, positioned as if to sit on top of Gregor caged in his room. This occurs after Gregor's father shoulders Gregor back towards his room and slowly stomps his foot as he sits back on his stool—the exaggerated, slow motion stomp and the enlarged shadow of his dominant man spread on the backdrop look as if the father is sitting down to crush Gregor down in his small cage. Berkoff states in the director's notebook that the “giant black shapes seem to form a parallel to the nightmare and intensify the action like a Greek chorus of giants” and “silhouette highlights what they are feeling as well as what they say”. This silhouette of the father highlights not only Gregor but also Kafka's internal turmoil of his emotions and thoughts regarding his family relationships, especially the strained relationship with his father.



Figure 6. A screenshot taken at 31:10 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - opening the door to feed Gregor milk and bread.

Figure 6 shows Greta opening the door to Gregor's room at 31:10 of the production. This is when the family's main living area is lit sharply with white light, which slowly fades to neutralise the contrast between the living room and Gregor's dark caged room to lighten Gregor up as they approach the room. The lights show two different realities - Gregor's room and the living room without Gregor. As soon as Greta opens the door at 31:14, referencing to Figure 7, an effect is created with two lights crossing each other across the stage to display two Gregors on the plain backdrop with a distorted, fragmented interior of Gregor's room. Berkoff writes in his director's notebook that "the criss-cross effect creates a nightmare vision" only when Greta opens the door to "reveal" Gregor's reality to the audience. The shadows disappear when Greta

closes the door - Gregor's reality is ignored. Two realities exist in just one stage space, and the conflict of these two realities constructs an otherworldly, dream-like world. When the light is off on Gregor, the door is shut; therefore, the family does not see him, and he does not exist with them. However, as an audience, we can always see the family and Gregor, resting in a dimly lit light. We see him move across the ramps on the walls and ceilings, fidgeting at times like an insect. This creates an effect of alienation and distance because two realities cannot exist next to each other. The decision to let two realities exist next to one another is Kafka's choice to emphasise their non-naturalistic space. Through the shadows and distortion created, we also understand Gregor's reality - a nightmare.

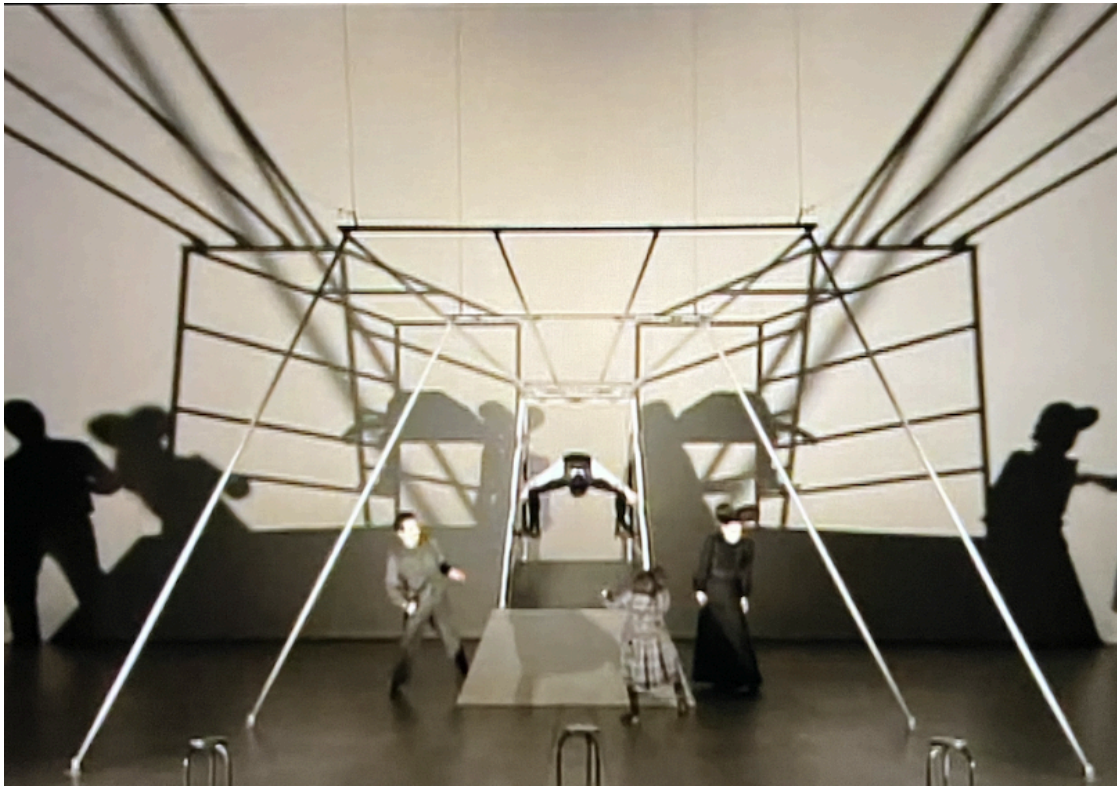


Figure 7. A screenshot taken at 31:16 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - opening the door to feed Gregor milk and bread.

Costume/Make-up Design



Figure 8. A screenshot taken at 04:16 of the restaging of Berkoff's adaptation of Metamorphosis in 2009 in Tokyo - opening sequence to the performance.

The novel's synopsis is that Gregor turns into a bug. However, Berkoff's adaptation demanded the actor to play Gregor "as if a human being locked within the carapace of the beetle". This meant that the actor did not use a bug costume but remained in the business attire he wore to work. The director's intention for this decision diverted the audience's focus from interpreting the adaptation literally to an imaginary and non-naturalistic style. Seeing a human wearing an office suit to live as a bug is unrealistic. However, this choice emphasises the non-naturalistic element of expressionist theatre to convey that a human being locked within the beetle's carapace is truly a nightmare. The audience can see that Gregor is now an insect through his physicality instead of his costume. The costumes of each character also represent stereotypical traits, which is very common in expressionistic theatres; most characters are nameless and represent a certain stereotype (Cash, 2021). In Metamorphosis, Gregor wears

business attire with black and white stripes, reflecting his life as an ordinary salaryman, the father in trousers with work boots, Greta in a simple child-like dress, and the mother in a formal middle-aged woman's dress, all of the characters dressing according to their stereotypical costumes, conforming to the expressionistic style of all the characters representing a group of people or a stereotype. There are no other colours on their costumes other than black and white. Even their skins are painted white, and their features are accented with black, which enhances the prison-like monochrome setting. The makeup style is very non-natural and eerie, and the exaggeration of their facial features highlights the expressionistic style of their exaggerated stylised acting, avoiding the realism and naturalism of Stanislavsky; instead, the mechanical movements, as well as the white, pale skin makeup, highlight an enacting of a doll or a puppet (Cash, 2021).

Conclusion

To answer the initial question of this essay, “To what extent did Expressionism influence the 2009 East Productions restaging of *Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka, adapted and directed by Steven Berkoff?” expressionistic features were found throughout the entire production, influenced not only by Kafka's expressionistic literature but also from Steven Berkoff's approach to the theatre with his “Berkovian theatre” aesthetic comprised of expressionism, total and physical theatre. In this exploration, the influence of expressionistic techniques has been delved into in this production's form and its stylistic choices of the set, acting, costume, and lighting. It is apparent that Berkoff successfully illustrated the essence of expressionism to convey the inner turmoil and alienation experienced by the protagonist of this novel, Gregor Samsa and the

novel's author, Franz Kafka, effectively allowing those who watch it to step beyond the objective reality but into the subjective world of emotions and the human psyche.

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