

SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

SUMMARY OF THE WAR OF ART

BY STEVEN PRESSFIELD



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Summary of

The War of Art

Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles

by Steven Pressfield



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The War of Art

Steven Pressfield

Key Takeaways & Analysis



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Overview

Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art: Break Through the Blocks and Win Your Inner Creative Battles* is a book dedicated to helping writers and other artists overcome creative barriers and produce valuable and satisfying work. Pressfield discusses his own artistic struggles and uses examples of artists throughout history in order to inspire and guide other creators.

The biggest barrier to artistic creation is Resistance. Resistance is a negative energy that intercedes whenever a person attempts to achieve a positive goal, such as painting a picture, exercising, or making a life change. Resistance is a combination of self-doubt, self-deception, fear of change, and fear of success.

On a day-to-day basis, Resistance is expressed as procrastination, as when an artist cleans the house, gets a snack, or does anything rather than sit down to work. On a larger scale, Resistance can mean that an artist abandons his or her profession, or denies his or her creative dreams.

In order to defeat Resistance, the artist must begin to think like a professional. Amateurs pursue art as a hobby and only work when they feel like it. Professionals are dedicated to working no matter whether they feel inspired or not. Professionals are not devastated by criticisms or setbacks, because they separate their personal feelings from the work.

To overcome Resistance, the main thing an artist needs to do is to sit down to work. Once the artist begins to work, spiritual forces will come to his or her aid. The universe wants to bring art into the world. Creating art helps shift the artist's consciousness from the inward-turning Ego and outwards to the spiritual, fuller Self. Overcoming Resistance through artistic creation is also, therefore, a path to spiritual growth.

Important People

Steven Pressfield is a writer of fiction, nonfiction, and screenplays. In addition to *The War of Art*, his books include the 1995 novel *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, which became a Hollywood film, and the 1998 historical novel *Gates of Fire*, a story about the ancient Spartans.

Robert McKee is a creative writing teacher and the author of a famous 1997 guide for screenwriters titled *Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting*.

Tiger Woods is an American golfer. Many consider him to be the greatest golfer of all time.

William Blake (1757-1827) was a British poet and painter known for the visionary nature of his work.

John Lennon (1940-1980) was a singer, songwriter, and musician best known for his work with the group The Beatles.

Carl Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist. He argued that universal symbols are embedded in the mind, or collective unconscious, of all human beings.

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827) was a German composer.

Key Takeaways

1. Resistance is the negative energy that stands between a person and his or her dreams.
2. Resistance takes many forms, including procrastination, sex, trouble, self-dramatization, and self-medication.
3. Resistance is a good thing, insofar as it assures the artist that he or she is pursuing a worthwhile path.
4. To defeat Resistance, a writer must think like a professional, not an amateur. This means working hard enough to overcome obstacles and temptations.
5. Professional artists separate themselves from their work. Although this sometimes means being paid for artistic work, the professional artist never sells out.
6. The universe supports creativity, and will help the artist succeed if the artist puts in the work.
7. Individuals are divided into an earthbound, mundane, insular Ego, and a broader, spiritual Self.
8. Professional artists are not concerned with hierarchy. Instead, they focus on territory.



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Analysis

Key Takeaway 1

Resistance is the negative energy that stands between a person and his or her dreams.

Analysis

Whenever anyone pursues a goal or a dream, that person is confronted with Resistance. Resistance is negative energy that pushes back whenever a person attempts to take steps towards his or her best self. Resistance is the reason people have trouble beginning exercise programs, or committing to relationships or marriage. Resistance is also what stands in the way of an artist pursuing his or her craft. To write a novel or paint a picture, an artist must overcome internal and external Resistance.

New Year's Eve is a moment when people make resolutions to change their lives in a positive way. As such, it marks the beginning of a yearly high point for Resistance. In the United States, more than 40 percent of people make resolutions for the New Year. [1] People promise themselves that they will exercise more, finish chores around the house, or even begin the novel they've always wanted to write.

In the first two weeks of the New Year, people tend to follow through well. They get out to the gym, refuse desserts, and start writing or painting. But after that, things begin to fall apart. By February, people are already backsliding, and soon thereafter, most resolutions are abandoned altogether. All told, only 8 percent of people fulfill their New Year's resolutions. That

means that 92 percent of those who make resolutions were defeated by Resistance. [2]

How can someone defeat Resistance and how to a New Year's resolution? One key can be to focus on only one small resolution, rather than on many resolutions. A huge goal, like completing a novel, may be too daunting to face on a daily basis; a more achievable goal, like writing for 30 minutes each day, can be easier to accomplish. Similarly, in overcoming Resistance, it is important to focus on the immediate present. An artist needs to think about what he or she can do immediately to advance towards a goal.

Key Takeaway 2

Resistance takes many forms, including procrastination, sex, trouble, self-dramatization, and self-medication.

Analysis

Resistance can undermine a creator in many ways. Perhaps the most obvious sign of internal Resistance is procrastination. When creators find themselves dawdling on Twitter, or cleaning the house, or running errands, or staring at the ceiling, or taking any excuse to avoid getting down to the work of creation, it is a sign of Resistance.

Seeking out sex, or being obsessed with sex, can also be a form of Resistance, as can any other obsession or pursuit that offers immediate gratification in place of the hard work of creation. Deliberately choosing unhappiness, by failing to fulfill obligations or sabotaging relationships, can also be a form of Resistance. Creators may try to attract attention and distract themselves from their work by generating interpersonal drama and angst.

One way in which Resistance can manifest is through addiction. Many artists have been addicts, including novelist Ernest Hemingway, poet Anne Sexton, jazz singer Billie Holiday, and comedian John Belushi. In fact, addiction is so common among artists that there is a popular myth that substance abuse fuels creativity, or is necessary for creativity. Researchers, however, have found that this is not the case. Neuroscientist David Linden of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, for example, strongly disputes that addiction spurs creativity. [3]

In fact, there's a good bit of evidence that creators become *more* creative after they stop using drugs or alcohol. Bob Dylan released his most famous work, including the albums *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde*, after kicking his heroin addiction. Similarly, actors Anthony Hopkins and Drew Barrymore reinvigorated their careers after recovering from addiction. [4]

According to Chris Burn of the Castle Craig rehab clinic, addiction is often a response to the fear that one will no longer be able to create, rather than the fuel of creativity. When artists fear that they cannot write their next novel or paint their next collection of work, they may turn to drugs or alcohol to distract themselves from their anxiety. [5] Addiction then is an outgrowth of Resistance, which generates self-doubt, uncertainty, and fear.

Key Takeaway 3

Resistance is a good thing, insofar as it assures the artist that he or she is pursuing a worthwhile path.

Analysis

When an artist is afraid of pursuing a project, that means that it is the right thing for the artist to pursue. Resistance is greatest when the artistic endeavor is important, necessary, and central to spiritual growth. Resistance is most powerful when an artist is most in love with a project, or most invested in it. Therefore, Resistance is not just a barrier. It is also a tool that tells a creator when he or she is on the right path.

Radha Marcum, a journalist, poet, and editor, argues that even writer's block can be a positive rather than a negative. According to Marcum, when a writer is blocked, it means that the writer is trying to say something new and different. When a writer is simply repeating clichés or working with familiar ideas, he or she can move forward confidently. Setting off in new directions is dangerous and difficult. Writer's block means that the writer is trying something no one has done before. [6]

Writer's block can also be a sign that the writer is pushing towards, or reaching for, a new level of excellence. When a writer's standards go up, he or she may have trouble fulfilling them, or be worried about being unable to fulfill them. Resistance, in the form of writer's block, shows the writer that he or she is working towards a new level of craft and accomplishment.

Key Takeaway 4

To defeat Resistance, a writer must think like a professional, not an amateur. This means working hard enough to overcome obstacles and temptations.

Analysis

A professional is someone who is fully committed to his or her art, and treats it as a full-time calling. While an amateur creates for fun, a professional creates with determination. The professional works no matter whether he or she is inspired or motivated. This is the only way to overcome Resistance. Work negates Resistance, and the professional is devoted to work in a way that the amateur is not.

Julia Cameron, creativity guru and author of *The Artist's Way*, agrees that work and dedication is important to pushing against Resistance. She recommends the use of morning pages. Artists, she says, should sit down every morning and write three pages about whatever is in their heads. The pages should be private; they are not to be shown to anyone. [7]

Cameron says that this stream-of-consciousness exercise helps to crystallize creative thoughts and work through anxieties. It is also a way to get writers to write without worrying about whether the result is good or bad. Writers need to evaluate and edit their own work. When they become too invested in that evaluation, they can become derailed by Resistance. The morning pages are a way to get down to work as a professional.

Key Takeaway 5

Professional artists separate themselves from their work. Although this sometimes means being paid for artistic work, the professional artist never sells out.

Analysis

Professional artists also work for money; they see art as a business. For professionals, art is a job to be done, rather than the entirety of who they are. This means that they can accept criticism and setbacks without considering them personal rebukes.

But just because professionals will work for money does not mean that they will do anything for cash payment. Artists should not compromise their vision for money. Nor does it mean that the professional will become rich, or even that the professional will necessarily be paid for his or her work. Rather, working for money, or with the intention of getting paid, is a way to create the correct professional relationship to one's art, a relationship that is committed and diligent, but not overly emotional.

One writer who cultivated a professional attitude towards his work was the nineteenth-century British novelist Anthony Trollope. In his autobiography, Trollope explained that he set himself to begin writing at 5:30 a.m. every day, and that "it was my practice to allow myself no mercy." [8] He would then write three hours every day, at a pace of 250 words every 15 minutes. When he was done, he set out for his day job in the office of the postal service. If Trollope finished a novel at, say, 6:30 a.m., he would immediately begin the next one and continue writing until 8:30 a.m. no matter what. [9] In this manner, Trollope completed more than 45 long novels, including such famous works as *Barchester Towers* (1857) and *The Small House at Allington* (1864), as well as travel books, essays, biographies, and stories.

Trollope kept meticulous records of his novel sales. For instance, in his *Autobiography* (1883) he noted that he received a £100 advance on

Barchester Towers. Over twenty years, *Barchester Towers* and one of Trollope's other popular books, *The Warden* (1855), together earned the author more than £700. [10] This may not sound like a lot today, but an author who earned £100 in Trollope's time would be on a par with someone earning several hundred thousand dollars today—so Trollope was very successful. [11]

Was Trollope greedily focused on money when he wrote down all these sums in the story of his life? No; he was merely acting as a professional. Writing for him was a business, and he treated it as such. This doesn't mean he wasn't creative. On the contrary, by being so businesslike and focused, he managed to create steadily, day by day, a huge amount of work which is still read and admired more than 150 years after his death.

Key Takeaway 6

The universe supports creativity, and will help the artist succeed if the artist puts in the work.

Analysis

There is a spiritual force that supports creation and creators. This can be thought of as a natural phenomenon, or as God, or as angels. In any case, when a creator begins to work, there are invisible powers that support and sustain him or her. The Greeks personified these powers as the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, each of whom was responsible for a different art.

Comics creator Alan Moore, who wrote *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, has argued that creativity and spirituality are closely linked. Moore himself is a practicing magician, and has taken as his personal deity and muse an ancient Roman snake-God called Glycon. Moore has argued that imagination, creativity, spirituality, and even science are all linked in a single whole. Moore points to scientist Albert Einstein, who created his theory of relativity after experiencing a kind of inspired vision, in which he saw himself flying along beside a beam of light. Similarly, James Watson, who co-discovered DNA, figured out its spiral structure after dreaming of a staircase. [12]

As Moore has said, “Art, language, consciousness and magic are all aspects of the same phenomenon.” In other words, magic and art fit together. The language of the world is creativity, and the practice of art is itself a spiritual endeavor. For Moore, the muses are as real, or more real, than the words they inspire. “Magic,” he says, “in our formulation, seems intimately involved with creativity and with creation, in whatever sense we mean those terms.” [13] Thus, making art means interacting with and being supported by powerful universal forces.

Key Takeaway 7

Individuals are divided into an earthbound, mundane, insular Ego, and a broader, spiritual Self.

Analysis

Psychologist Carl Jung divided each individual into Ego and Self. The Ego is the part of identity that is focused on the real world and material existence. The Self is the spiritual aspect of the psyche, which is connected to the collective unconscious and to the universal. The Self is connected to God, and to the forces of creativity. The Ego is stuck in the body, and mistrusts artistic creation. The Ego is the site of Resistance. Artists must learn to live in the Self.

Many people spend their lives trapped in the Ego, without a sense of the greater breadth of the Self. They are locked into a limited view of their own identity; they cannot see the broader world, or Self, around them. This is analogous to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato's famous discussion of circumscribed human consciousness in his allegory of the cave.

Plato says that human beings live their lives like people trapped and chained in a cave. The prisoners' heads are immobilized so they can only look straight ahead. There is a fire behind them, and when people pass before the fire, their shadows are cast on the wall. All the prisoners see or know is the shadows flickering before them; that is what they think is reality. Thus they mistake shadows for truth, just as in Jung's formulation, the Ego thinks that this world, defined by bodies and death and material success, is the only world there is. Jung and Plato both suggest that spiritual truths are real, while the apparent and observable world is not. [14] Artists whose psyche expands to include the spiritual dimension of existence, such as William Blake, are like those who are able to turn from the shadows and look at reality.

Key Takeaway 8

Professional artists are not concerned with hierarchy. Instead, they focus on territory.

Analysis

Artists should not be focused on hierarchy, or on worrying about whether they are better than others, or are more famous or successful than others. Instead, artists should focus on mastering their own territory or turf—the place where they are experts, or have control or mastery. For instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s territory was the gym; the territory of Tiger Woods is the golf course. The jazz musician Louis Armstrong’s territory was his trumpet. He put in the time and effort to master his instrument, and his dedication to his trumpet sustained his creativity. By setting aside hierarchy for territory, an artist turns away from the opinion of the world and focuses on art for its own sake. When the artist dedicates him or herself to a specific territory, that territory returns the positive energy needed to overcome Resistance.

The poet Emily Dickinson was famously unconcerned with fame and hierarchy. She shared her poetry with friends and family, but she made little effort to publish or gain notoriety throughout her life. As she grew older, word of her work spread, and a poem or two appeared anonymously in newspapers and collections. [15]

The author Helen Hunt Jackson was irritated with Dickinson for refusing to publish. She told Dickinson, “You are a great poet—and it is wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud.” [16] But Dickinson continued to value territory over hierarchy. She was dedicated to the task of writing poetry, not to measuring herself against others or accommodating other people’s desires for her mode and manner of production. She did not wish to be famous, as it would have interfered with her life and work. “How dreary-to be-Somebody!” she wrote in one of her most famous verses.

“How public-like a Frog— / To tell one’s name—the livelong June— / To
an admiring Bog!” [17]

Author's Style

Steven Pressfield compares writing to war. His style reflects his view of writing as a virile, gritty, and no-nonsense endeavor. His sentences tend to be short and direct. There are also sentence fragments throughout the book. He also uses repetition to batter and emphasize his points. For example, he writes, “We’re bored, we’re restless. We can’t get no satisfaction.” This repetition of “we,” “we,” “we,” concluding with the swaggering line from the Rolling Stones, summarizes Pressfield’s colloquial style.

The book is divided into dozens of two- or three-page sections, each of which covers one small topic or subtopic quickly and efficiently before moving on to the next. Chapter headings are blunt and dramatic, for example: “Fear,” “The Authentic Self,” “Resistance and This Book.” This offers the reader the sensation of tromping swiftly and surely from one important issue to the next, overcoming Resistance and making progress.

The subdivisions, and the simple prose, make *The War of Art* a satisfyingly swift page-turner. Many readers will be able to complete the entire book in a single sitting. But the resolute simplicity can also be wearying and misleading. There’s not much time to focus on any one topic, which can lead to uncomfortably unsubstantiated assertions, as when Pressfield suggests that embracing one’s inner artist can cure cancer. In its determination to be forceful at the expense of nuance, *The War of Art* can focus too much on the war, and not enough on the art.

Author's Perspective

Steven Pressfield joined the Marines in 1966. After finishing his service, he embarked on a bewildering array of jobs and part-time work. He worked as an advertising copywriter, truck driver, teacher, and bartender. He struggled to sell screenplays and novels for 17 years before he made his first sale. During that time, he experienced failed relationships and homelessness. His first major success was the novel *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, published in 1995 and adapted into a major film directed by Robert Redford in 2000.

The author's military experience informs his book; he repeatedly compares writing to fighting on a battlefield. His own story of hardship and triumph also shapes the book's central message that writing is difficult, but that perseverance and spiritual determination will eventually be rewarded.

The glimpses of Pressfield's personal story add depth and conviction to his writing advice. At the same time, the book is so embedded in his own perspective that it may not be relatable to some readers. Not all writers battle the kind of blocks that plagued Pressfield. And many writers give up on writing, not because they have been defeated by inner Resistance, but because they lack support and money. Pressfield's own story as a writer is romantic and dramatic. This contributes to his belief that his romantic and dramatic view is universally applicable, even though many writing careers are substantially more mundane.



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# Resources

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