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Abstract Expressionism as Anti-Aesthetics

Abstract

Beginning with a definition of “bullshit” in academic vernacular where standards of verification are broken down, general examples are provided in aesthetics and politics. A highly successful example of bullshit in the art industry is explored, that of abstract expressionism in the US, noting its support from the CIA. Reviewing the context and style illustrates that abstract expressionism is an anti-aesthetic produced by parasites, an easy target for such bullshit manipulation.

Keywords

Abstract Expressionism, CIA, Formal Pragmatics, Critical Theory, Bullshit

Defining Bullshit

The vernacular “bullshit studies” has become an increasingly important academic pursuit in a world increasingly under the rule of style over substance, of marketing over reality, of media manipulation, fragmented knowledge, and inequalities of power. Starting with Frankfurt’s essay and subsequent book, “On Bullshit” (1986, 2005), the activity was defined as intentional speech where the purpose is to persuade, without any regard for truth or falsehood. Frankfurt is interested in the difference in motivation between a liar and a bullshitter in this regard; the liar knows what is true but makes an effort to hide it. In this regard, bullshitters are more dangerous than liars because the truth may be discovered when a liar is exposed. However, when bullshit is exposed, then the damage, a loss of the concern for truth over falsehood, has been done.

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Applying the concept to an anthropology of employment, David Graeber (2018) identifies many meaningless jobs that are psychologically harmful and carry significant negative externalities. In particular, Graeber takes up Keynes' prediction that advanced industrial nations like Great Britain or the United States would achieve a 15-hour working week by the end of the 20th century. The typical excuse that this has not occurred is that the working population has chosen more personal commodities in preference to fewer working hours. This choice, of course, stands in stark contradiction to the proportion of incomes spent on necessities over optional consumables selected for sheer pleasure. Instead, Graeber promotes the concept that entire industries are dedicated to expanding administrative tasks with other ancillary industries that are, in fact, unnecessary rather like Parkinson's law (Parkinson 1955). Graeber makes the profound point that not only are these "bullshit jobs" part of late capitalism's drive to disrupt labour, it is also damaging to the psyche of the workforce who know that they are not making a meaningful contribution with their work.

Considering the use of pseudo-science and misuse of statistics, Carl Bergstrom and Jevin West (2020) identify how data messaging, spurious correlations, and increasingly poor levels of reproducibility give ample opportunities for bullshit in mathematics and science. Whilst these are often complex subjects that require significant and increasing knowledge to navigate through the morass of data, it is faster and easier to accept data that seems to confirm one's pre-existing biases and, failing that, following herd opinion. It is far more difficult and challenging to identify statistical causal relations which are contrary to these selection biases. In doing so, Bergstrom and West make a very important contribution to the field of bullshit studies; that whilst some bullshitters are malicious and toxic in their behaviour, many of the advocates of bullshit are not even aware that they are doing it, acting as patsies to those manipulating public opinion, either for their own political power and economic wealth or because they just want to watch the world burn. Worse still, Brandolini's law applies, also known as the Bullshit Asymmetry Principle: the amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude more extensive than that needed to produce it (Williamson 2016).

Bullshit in Aesthetics

With these definitions in mind, it is reasoned that the field of aesthetics should surely be a rich area for such inquiries as the very creative act must involve some degree of elaboration from a purely empirical expression. The

aesthetic use of such fiction has traditionally been considered acceptable for the therapeutic use of highlighting other motives through metaphor and metonym. Herbert Marcuse, in particular, combining psychoanalytic and social criticism, notes the positive role of the fantastic to illuminate unconscious desires in a conscious utopian manner. "Phantasy plays a most decisive function in the total mental structure: it links the deepest layers of the unconscious with the highest products of consciousness (art), the dream with the reality; it preserves the archetypes of the genus, the perpetual but repressed ideas of the collective and individual memory, the tabooed images of freedom" (Marcuse 1972, 108). The utopian, however, is intrinsically at odds with "the reality principle," the objective requirements of living. Nevertheless, Marcuse also notes that one can examine the difference between what *could* be the case and what *is* the case, and to the extent that unjust social relations cause this difference, one can identify "surplus repression."

A significant differentiation is made by Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School, on the continuum between "high art" and "commodity art," distinct from the typical differentiation between "high" and "popular" culture, or "high" and "low" art. In the latter examples, the distinction is more a case of an imbalance in cultural capital, to use the concept espoused by the empirical studies by Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's perspective, the innate qualities of the aesthetic expression are biased by ownership of cultural tastes by an aesthetic elite, who determine what does and does not constitute "high" art. This elite derives its power from the positional advantage of *habitus*. This advantage is not necessarily based on financial wealth and can very well be based on specialised educational discipline and levels, community, a profession that provides an aesthetic vocabulary that is unavailable to those without such a positional advantage, although one can refer to recent material on the theme of «réalisme globaliste» (Le Brun 2018) that assesses the collusion between the financial world and contemporary art. Cultural capital is metaphorically equivalent to capital in economics; the owners seek further accumulation, determine its use, and depreciate.

In contrast, the Frankfurt School perspective is more directly tied to the political economy of the production and reproduction of culture, primarily through the industrial age's technology. "High art," from this perspective, is that which is produced under conditions with reduced constraints (e.g., political, economic, conventional, etc.), whereas "commodity art" is that which is produced for profit, using a mass production process, and to a mass audience. This perspective is beneficial for understanding bullshit in art. It is especially evident in the manipulative use of aesthetics in commercial and

political advertising for profit and power, respectively. "Movies and radio need no longer to pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish that they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors' incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed (Horkheimer, Adorno 1993, 121).

An appropriate comparison can be drawn here with Hannah Arendt's differentiation in *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) between the "*animal laborans*," a state that human beings are closest to the animal world and are without an aesthetic dimension to life, the activity of "work" defined as the interaction between the natural world and human artisanship, the creation of lasting things, with an end, a final good or service, which includes artistic commodities and commerce, and finally "action," where praxis is distinguished from fabrication (*poiesis*), the highest expression of *vita activa*, verified by disclosure to others. In this sense, the distinction between Frankfurt School "mass art" and "high art" has equivalence in Arendt's art as "work" or as "action." The former in both cases is conducted as a type of employment, and in the latter independently of such concerns.

Bullshit in Politics

In her classic and insightful essay, "Lying in Politics," Hannah Arendt (1973) notes that the various maneuvering, deceptions, and falsehoods that are common in political life are perceived by those outside of the system as a sort of "arcanum" of the political world. Writing in the context of the release of the "Pentagon Papers," Arendt makes the savage observation that the politicians seemed to think that the war could be won by public relations and perception in their own country, a profession that, in the modern era, is associated with national-propaganda efforts during the First World War (Bernays 1978). In contrast, the truth was very different on the front-line reality, which inevitably asserts its ontological primacy.

As mentioned, there is a difference between the liar and the bullshitter. "Lying in politics" has been replaced mainly by "post-Truth" politics, where "alternative facts" are meant to exist, and the difference between "fact" and "opinion" breaks down, at least partially encouraged by postmodern relativists. Orientated around appeals to emotion, confirmation bias, and tribalism, the notion of a post-truth environment has become so prevalent that it was selected as the Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year in 2016. In an environment of information overload and increasingly working poor, truth-

orientated investigative journalism, decades-long research, and expert institutions are quickly challenged by a fallacious meme on Facebook. In an environment where power in democracies is determined by majoritarianism, rather than the considered deliberation of the public sphere coupled with civil protections and a reflexive pedagogy, it is perhaps not so surprising to understand on a systemic level why post-Truth politics has become such a problem. A plausible alternative of democratic deliberation is noted by Carlos Nino (1992) as providing better moral grounding of decisions. With empirical confirmation, James Fishkin (2009) notes that deliberative democracy improves results when people offer informed judgments about public policy. Of course, a better-informed public is not in the interest of those who benefit from a post-Truth political environment.

Abstract Expressionism as Aesthetic and Political Bullshit

As the name suggests, abstract expressionism synthesizes the two preceding aesthetic movements incorporated in its name. The abstract component drew from several schools, such as Cubism, Futurism, Dada, or Bauhaus, the latter two a reaction to both the direct experience of WWI (Dada) and its aftermath (Bauhaus). The emphasis here was a move away from figurative and representational art, inspired by new information and communication technologies, along with discoveries in science. The expressionist component emphasized the importance of subjectivity, of moods, over the representation of reality. Both abstract art and expressionist art are anti-realist but with different vectors. The former abstracts away from reality and towards a more stark, often mathematical, highly disembodied model, whereas the expressionists emphasized the highly embodied, emotional states. At times the two could even be combined, such as with Cubism, where form could be the expression.

Nevertheless, the purpose here is not to provide a history of the precedents but rather to describe how the combination of abstract expressionism resulted in bullshit political art, the removal of the aesthetic for political purposes. Of course, the history of aesthetics occurs within a broader social context. For example, the Australian Heidelberg School, or Australian Impressionism, with its sweeping and open landscapes, was a movement of artists from British origins who were undoubtedly overwhelmed by the size, harshness, and sparse population of the continent. It is also recognized that European surrealism was strongly inspired by the nightmare experiences of the First World War and the “broken men” who wandered the streets in its

wake. For abstract expressionism, its birth was the aftermath of the Second World War, the significant number of European artists that had settled in the United States, a pre-existing artistic community in the United States that was strongly influenced by liberal, radical, and socialist perspectives (Social Realists, American Scene, The Regionalists, American Abstract), and the rise of the Cold War.

This combination has the effect that Abstract Expressionism was identified as an opportunity by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. Art museums, and The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), were heavily influenced by their corporate sponsors, which provided an opportunity for indirect funding to serve an ideological purpose. There were explicit ties between MOMA directors and US government agencies, of which the following are some prominent examples (Cockcraft 1985, Dasal 2020):

Nelson Rockefeller was president of MOMA in 1939 and 1946, and between those years was coordinator of the US government's Office of Inter-American Affairs and then assistant secretary of state for Latin American affairs.

John Hay Whitney was chair of MOMA's Board of Trustees and worked with both the Office of Strategic Services and had their own charity revealed as a conduit for CIA funds (Kenworthy 1967).

René d'Harnoncourt headed the art section of the Office of Inter-American Affairs in 1943 and then became vice-president and director of MOMA in 1949.

Porter A. McCray also worked at the Office of Inter-American Affairs during the war and would go on to become a member of the coordinating committee of MOMA from 1946 to 1949, director in 1952, and headed the International Council of MOMA in 1956.

Thom Braden was MOMA's executive secretary from 1948-49 and then joined the CIA in 1950 and supervised cultural activities from 1951 to 1954.

Julius Fleischmann was a director of the International Council of MOMA in 1956 and funded a major exhibition at the Tate in the UK through the Fairfield Foundation, a charitable front established by the CIA's Congress for Cultural Freedom.

In noting these explicit ties, Cockcraft (1985) argues: "In the world of art, Abstract Expressionism constituted the ideal style for these propaganda activities. It was the perfect contrast to 'the regimented, traditional, and narrow' nature of 'socialist realism.' It was new, fresh, and creative. Artistically avant-garde and original, Abstract Expressionism could show the United States was culturally up-to-date in competition with Paris. This [approach]

was possible because Pollock and most of the other avant-garde American artists had left behind his earlier interest in political activism." This explains how it was possible that people typically associated with a radical libertarian left could become unwitting dupes for a capitalist agenda; the depoliticisation of their art and the removal of denotative realism or connotative metaphor. Whilst the artist, in the mind of the abstract expressionist advocates, was meant to represent an ideal worker who is not alienated from their labour as they have control over their expression (Rosenberg 1948), this observation was transformed from social alienation (distinguishing between the wage-labour of craft or advertising in capitalism) to individual freedom. Barnett Newman serves as a very important example, as his radical political opinions and commitment to artistic freedom were very evident. There can be little doubt of his desire that the artist should be free of "all state capitalism and totalitarianism" (Newman 1990). Yet, when considering artistic production, utopian individualism replaces embodied contexts:

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European painting. Instead of making 'cathedrals' out of Christ, man, or 'life,' we are making it out of ourselves, out of our own feelings. The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history (Newman, 1991).

While social reality and politics heavily influenced expressionist and abstract art, Abstract Expressionism allegedly eschewed this in favor of existential-individualism. The term "allegedly" is quite deliberate, as is the context, funding, and promotion of this individualism with a pretense of being without social relations, and therefore anti-social. It was simply a cover, allowing for an aimless and parasitic counter-culture to flourish and even entice what could otherwise be created in society's and individual's aesthetic. Shapiro and Shapiro (2000) describe this as the "politics of the apolitical," meaning, of course, silence in the face of injustice but loudness in personal immaturity, a reflection of the youthful cultural mores of the time expressed in novels such as Jack Kerouac's *On The Road*, or film scripts such as Stewart Stern's *Rebel Without a Cause*. Nancy Jachec (1991) argues that abstract expressionists found themselves in a political trap whereby they could either choose a totalitarian socialism or a democratic capitalism, even if their preferences were for a democratic socialism. "In light of the statements these artists made about their work, it is clear that they opted for democracy, choosing to operate within the existing capitalist structure. These were the tactics of

despair." A weakness of this argument is that it would imply that the artists in question were aware of the source of their patronage (who were quite aware of what they were doing) who exploited the opportunity.

Understanding how such bullshit aesthetics could achieve relative success also requires a review of the style. The object of abstract expressionism encouraged the removal of aesthetic representation from any association with human reality, with the avant-garde lifestyle and the acquisition of *objet trouvé* being a necessary precursor. It is, in fact, quite remarkable that people to this day struggle with the aesthetic interpretations of the product of "ready-mades" and their ilk, instead of looking at the aesthetic experience of actually finding the object in the first place, something that Breton understood: "manufactured objects raised to the dignity of works of art through the choice of the artist" (Iversen, 2004).

Whereas one finds meaning in both abstract and expressionist art, in Abstract Expressionism meaning is removed from the artistic object in favor of the subjective experience of the production itself (e.g., "action painting") but not the outcome. There is, for example, no evident meaning in Jackson Pollock's Red Composition (1946), Number 1A (1948), nor in Barnett Newman's, Onement 1 (1948), nor in Franz Kline's Painting Number 2 (1954) to cite some famous examples. They provide neither a representation of place, time nor mood. What aesthetic expression did exist was in the production, not the product: "The new American painting is not 'pure art,' since the extrusion of the object as not for the sake of the aesthetic... Many of the painters were 'Marxists' (WPA unions, artists' congresses—they had been trying to paint Society. Others had been trying to paint Art (Cubism, Post-Impressionism). The big moment came when it was decided to paint... Just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from Value—political, aesthetic, moral... what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg, 1952).

Indeed, there is a willful and deliberate desire to remove expression from a product and abstract from any connection with a meaningful representation. As Rosenberg correctly noted, it had no value—political, moral, or aesthetic—in terms of the product. Perhaps in this regard, the products Abstract Expressionism has more in common with Malevich's school of Suprematism, which rather than providing the zero point from which art develops as he argued, but rather the negation of the aesthetic altogether in the product. Of course, the Supremacist journal was initially titled "Nul," and in the empirical universe, zero does not exist, whereas in mathematics, it is a placeholder for the absence of a value. The main point being, of course, is to

reiterate that the product had no aesthetic value, the value was in the experience of the artist, and that experience was an individualistic and hedonistic aesthetic subculture.

Of course, there is a delightful irony, as such “valueless” art still commands exchange-value. When Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow, and Blue III* was slashed by a knife-wielding vandal (and arguably a Situationist artist) who wished to “take revenge on abstract art” in 1986, the Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum, after five years, spent \$450,000 on what was described as a “bad copy” in restoration (Anderson-Reece, 1993). One may refer back to John Ruskin criticism of James McNeill Whistler’s semi-abstract piece, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket* (1874), which Ruskin criticised Whistler in the words: “I have seen, and heard, much of Cockney impudence before now; but never expected to hear a coxcomb ask two hundred guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public’s face.” Whistler was sufficiently offended by the criticism to sue Ruskin for libel; whilst he won the case, he was awarded only a farthing (Kim 2018). However, the greatest achievement has been by Jens Henning, who received 534,00 Danish kroner (\$83,000) from the Kunsten Museum of Aalborg and sent in as this article was being revised two blank canvases. Well aware of their actions, the artist entitled the pieces “Take The Money and Run” (ABC 2021), subversively undermining the thesis of Le Brun but also providing a degree of abstraction even beyond Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) and an individualist expression through action. Through ironic negation, this is the ultimate conclusion of abstract expressionism.

Aesthetics without Lies or Bullshit

“Bullshit” is defined in accordance with the literature as a form of speech that can be distinguished from lies by breaking down the dichotomy between truth and falsehood. In aesthetics, the creative act involves some degree of elaboration of purely empirical representations, but at the same time also is meant to be a sincere expression of the author’s internal state, that is, it engages in truthfulness. Bullshit in art, rather than being a misrepresentation, is where there the aesthetic product does not contain any aesthetic value, and the artist becomes part of a parasitic subculture, quite literally, a con-artist who pretends that their works represent some deeper meaning when in fact they negate meaning. In politics, too, one witnesses a great deal of bullshit expressed for manipulative purposes for the acquisition of power rather than normative values. The argument presented here is that, based on

financial and positional evidence, is that the movement of abstract expressionism, without their knowledge but with their complicit engagement in an apolitical subculture, were part of a wider project to use bullshit in art and politics to confront and defeat the lies embodied in socialist realism as part of a cultural agenda in the wider Cold War.

None of this criticism of Abstract Expressionism is meant, of course, to endorse its opposite, that of Socialist Realism. The deadening restrictions of that art form served an inexcusable justification for the totalitarian politics, whatever stylistic merits individual examples have. Consider, for example, the content of the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers (Zhdanov et al. 1977) with its demands for aesthetic products to be proletarian, figurative, and politically partisan. The fact that artists neither received such impressions of reality nor were they allowed to express what they witnessed or experienced without fear of censorship or worse is an example of lying in politics through the medium of the aesthetic. On the other hand, Abstract Expressionism is an example of bullshit in aesthetics through the medium of politics. Indeed, while Socialist realism arguably did provide better art, in a figurative sense and terms of technique, the success of Abstract Expressionism—and there can be no doubt of that (c.f., Sandler 1970)—illustrates the relative power that bullshit has over lies.

Given this involvement of politics in art, whether through the lies of Socialist Realism, the bullshit of Abstract Expressionism, or the meaningless of mass commodification of art, one must wonder whether there are conditions in which the aesthetic dimension of life can be expressed with at least a degree of independence from such constraints. Indeed, there have been proposals in the past, most notably in the *Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art* (Breton, Rivera 1938). Here, Breton and Trotsky, explicitly arguing for a socialist order in economic relations, also were arguing anarchism in the aesthetic world:

If, for the better development of the forces of material production, the revolution must build a socialist regime with centralized control, to develop intellectual creation an anarchist regime of individual liberty should from the first be established. No authority, no dictation, not the least trace of orders from above! Only on a base of friendly cooperation, without constraint from outside, will it be possible for scholars and artists to carry out their tasks, which will be more far-reaching than ever before in history.

It should be clear from the above that there is no suggestion here that aesthetics should be subject to political controls and interventions. Whatever criticism is levelled at abstract expressionism or socialist realism, or any other style of art, is made in terms of aesthetic criticism and institutional

associations with politics, rather than political censorship such as notoriously advocated in Plato's Republic (Plato 1908, 401b, 595a, etc.). Indeed, the very opposite is proposed; rather than the political direction and censorship by governmental authorities (e.g., socialist realism) or the more subtle promotion through indirect funding mechanisms (e.g., abstract expressionism), a substantive independence is requisite on a social theoretical level. In this regard, two elements from Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984) are suggested; first, the theory of action, and secondly, the rationalization complexes of formal pragmatics.

The theory of action is a complex of social and non-social activities against their orientation. The most apparent actions are those orientated towards 'success.' Habermas (1984, 284-287) elaborates this complex to include "communicative action," that is, social action orientated towards reaching an understanding. However, there is a gap in the non-social actions orientated towards reaching an understanding, which is not explored by Habermas but is included here. This action is a particular type whose implementation is not judged by success but rather by the enhanced capacity to reach an understanding through non-social means. That is, through institutional rules (social technologies) and equipment (physical technologies) that allow for the conditions towards an ideal-speech situational in the first case (e.g., a social security system, freedom from censorship in aesthetic pursuits) and the ability to transmit data to and from recipients over space and time in the second.

Situation/Orientation	Orientated to Success	Orientated to Understanding
Non-Social	Instrumental Action	Mediative Action
Social	Strategic Action	Communicative Action

The second element from Habermas used here are the rationalization complexes of formal pragmatics, which states what sort of verification or falsification can be made against a particular proposition concerning world-relations, which have connections and points of difference with their neighbouring complexes. It is not necessary to elaborate all the complexes in this inquiry, but rather to narrow down to the complex of aesthetic expressions, that is, the production of objects which exist in the physical world but whose expression is validated by the depth and sincerity of the artist.

World Orientations and Verification in Formal Pragmatics

Unverifiable Metaphysics	Physicalist, Symbolist, Idealist Theology		
Verifiable Reality	Logical and Empirical Philosophy		
Orientations/Worlds (verification)	1. Objective or "The" External World	2. Intersubjective or "Our" Social World	3. Subjective or "My" Internal World
1. Propositions of Truth - Sciences (correspondence)	Scientific facts	Social facts	Unverifiable
2. Propositions of Justice - Laws (consensus)	Unverifiable	Legal Norms	Moral Norms
3. Propositions of Beauty - Arts (sincerity)	Aesthetic Expressions	Unverifiable	Sensual Expressions

Elaborated from Habermas (1984, 239).

In the 20th century, two significant schools of artistic endeavor were subject to the political predictions of lies and bullshit, Socialist Realism on one side and Abstract Expressionism, of which the latter was able to capture utopian desires for artistic freedom for individuals but with the removal of aesthetic value from the product. If future artistic endeavors are to be protected from both lies and bullshit, then the conditions for an ideal speech situation, or "action" as in Arendt's condition, in aesthetic life must be generated. This condition must mean independence of artistic expression both in the sense of negative liberty (artists are free from the constraints of censorship) and positive liberty (artists are provided sufficient means to engage in production in art). Until then, any artistic product is likely to be distorted in its content, which makes validation of propositions, raising the sincerity of unconscious dreams to the consciousness of a finished product, a matter of difficulty.

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