

ABSTRACTION IN ART: AESTHETIC EXCELLENCE OR ELITIST FARCE?

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There seems to be an inverse relationship between how subjective a piece of artwork is and the extent to which it may be referred to as 'political' in its messaging. In the contemporary, post-USSR era, the direction of art seems to be in favour of the former - whereby works have assumed an abstract character. It is left to the audience to decipher its meaning, and generally speaking the greater the number of interpretations the higher the level of prestige and price tag. In this way, art has centred the individual - his a priori exposures, experiences, worldviews, preferences, and relationships all determine the manner in which he injects 'meaning' into his observations.

The consequences of this cannot be overstated, with the most obvious being the promotion of a general culture of narcissism. Individuals are encouraged to place their own perspectives above all others behind the shield of 'lived experiences' - true for me, valid for me, important for me. Second, it has stripped art of its fundamentally communal and aspirational nature: a vehicle for expression that anyone - regardless of their class, caste, gender, creed, religion, or sexuality - could tap into as a means of resistance, provocation, or camaraderie. In its stead, a certain 'high culture' has gradually come to dominate the creative domain - with the vast majority of producers and consumers of the arts hailing from elite backgrounds. This 'aristocratisation' of the sphere has functioned as a mechanism for depoliticisation, reducing it to an empty pastime for a small segment with ample leisure time. Furthermore, the hyper-subjectivity of artwork has eliminated the need for sensemaking; any and all interpretations are now fair game. Indeed, 'high classes' love to endlessly debate with one other on interpretative direction. The irony of this must, in passing, be underscored: all 'meanings' are valid, but a mindless game of one-upmanship on the various possibilities is also part of the course - in which no one has the courage to point out that the Emperor may not have any clothes at all. Unfortunately for participants, the winner of this contest is decided in advance: the inference of the individual with the highest preexisting social status always comes out on top. With no message

or objective, the 'value' of crafts, music, films, paintings, theatrical performances, etc. is assigned on the basis of who appreciates it: endorsements are now currency. Rationales unnecessary.

For instance, Elon Musk coming out and declaring that a particular piece of artwork resonates with him will - as a matter of course - drive up its price. Elites will then jostle with another to acquire it, bidding increasingly higher prices in an effort to signal their wealth and/or status to peers - regardless of whether or not they have the faintest idea of what it means. They can rest assured, however, that this is not a conspicuous purchase by any means. Au contraire, most approach the transaction as an investment in an asset that will continue to appreciate over time.



Figure 1. The Bored Ape, NFT bought by artist Eminem for USD 450,000 to kickstart an entire 'line' of ape art that fans are now 'collecting'.

In this way, a perverse 'market logic' now dictates the landscape – with the arbitrary personal preferences of individuals with access to financial capital determining which works are elevated. If this is difficult to conceptualise, consider the recent rise of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) – pieces of digital 'artwork' that are endorsed by billionaires and used as stores of value in a mindless speculative trading game. For all intents and purposes, these can be seen as tools for simple fundraising that impressionable (and frequently misinformed) young individuals are manipulated into buying in order to prove their loyalty and dedication to a particular celebrity. At an aggregate level, it is akin to 'trickle-up' economics: with resources flowing from the bottom and middle tiers of society to the upper echelons. Is this art?

In bygone times, particularly prior to the 1980s, art served a powerful societal function – educating people, enriching the cultural fabric, and inspiring entire socio-political movements. This is not to romanticise the art of that period and imply that all its works were of impeccable quality, but that they were relatable to ordinary, non-propertied citizens and had an 'animating' effect within communities. One did not need to have a formal degree in the arts to understand them. Art carried a central, unambiguous message that assisted audiences in understanding their place in the world rather than disorienting them further. As an example, Frida Kahlo's *Moses* – a painting she released in 1945 – depicts a newborn baby surrounded by a series of 'forces' that (attempt to) influence it: from political thinkers to religious leaders as well as historical movements and cultural traditions. Through a detailed, multilayered depiction, Kahlo achieves a tremendous amount with this artwork – showcasing the vast complexity of the human condition and the constant 'wrestling' (social, emotional, physical, and intellectual) that it must engage in over the course of a life. Another case is of Soviet painter Alexander Samokhvalov's *Kirov Greeting a Parade of Athletes*, in which the USSR's emphasis on physical fitness and its intimate linkage to economic productivity is illustrated via athletes in a town hall being received by enthusiastic supporters – with a massive billboard of Lenin in the background. Closer to home, the *Gyarah Murti* – sculpted by Devi Prasad Roy – is a series of statues depicting Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March, in which he is seen leading a group of individuals from various sociocultural and religious backgrounds in a seminal event that led to the independence of the subcontinent from British rule. The idea here is of highlighting the struggle that went into the independence movement, Gandhi's unique ability to inspire via non-violent protest, and a commitment to inclusivity in terms of the path ahead: powerful ideas that capture an important moment in time and seek to remind contemporary Indians of the sacrifices their ancestors had to make.

Art today is a random splatter of paint on a canvas, a handful of bricks piled onto one another, and geometric patterns with colourful backgrounds. Films are incoherent, musical lyrics comically childish, and literature



Figure 2. Kirov Greeting a Parade of Athletes - Alexander Samokhvalov (1935)

merely describing, in a detached fashion, random assortments of events that the narrator is subjectively experiencing. There is little to no 'direction' to which it flows, and the idea is to simply let it 'absorb' in one's mind without asking too many questions or attempting to make sense of the details. Art must, it is claimed, be consumed for 'its own sake' – and not turned into an instrumental activity with a defined purpose. In this way, a retreat from reality – a paranoid escapism – is promoted, whereby people are discouraged from engaging with the world around them, of which they are a part. What remains is a set of abstractions in one's mind and spirit. In many instances, it is claimed that these will serve as a means for discovering one's 'true nature' in an elaborate 'inward journey' to the recesses of the psyche. While this may sound exciting, there is an ideological backdrop to the phenomenon: in which a hyper-fixation on one's internal elements (whatever that means) is peddled – functioning to fragment society in an already atomised world.

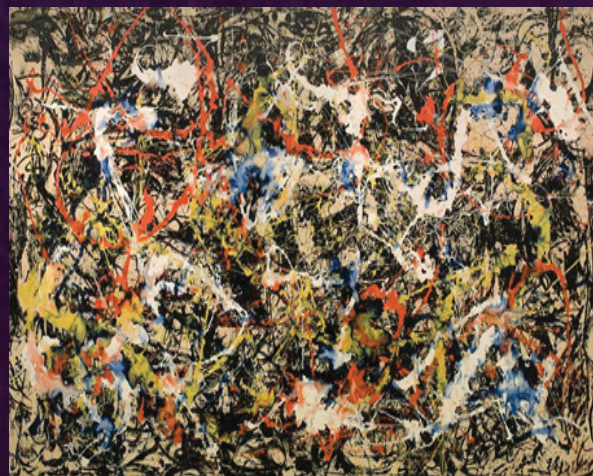


Figure 3. Convergence - Jackson Pollock (1952)

This naturally tends to foster a culture of anti-politics, whereby the primary vehicle of ‘change’ is presented not as political struggle but self-regulation and improvement. Jordan Peterson, pop-psychologist and influencer extraordinaire, espouses the same in his global bestseller *12 Rules for Life* – in which rule numero uno is ‘Clean Up Your Room Before Criticising the World’. This is a general pathology within the domain of therapy today. Rather than looking at socioeconomic or political factors that may be responsible for disturbed mental health, myopic recommendations on how one can optimally ‘cope’, ‘consider how they may be worsening the problem’, or simply ‘adjust their interpretation of the situation’ are made. As famously pointed out by Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, however, what if one’s room is a mess precisely because of factors external to the household?

Abstract art first surfaced in the late nineteenth century, as a response to the ‘absurdity’ of the world. This was the period in which the ideas of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche were making the waves, particularly his emphasis on perspectivism – a philosophical approach premised on the notion that ‘objective reality’ is ultimately a question of subjective interpretation. One of his more popular quotes, frequently circulated on social media today – particularly among youth segments – is, “You have your way. I have my way. As for the right way, the correct way, or the only way, it does not exist.” A prescient note that encapsulates his overarching school of thought, and the reason why he is frequently referred to as the father of postmodernism, the ideology that went mainstream in the 1980s and argued for a total rejection of meta narratives. A central theme of this current of thought is flippancy as a vehicle for enhancing one’s freedom: the shunning of cultural practices, historical traditions, religious duties, and ‘rules’ most broadly conceived – with the justification that these are arbitrary restrictions based on power relations in the final analysis. This is an outright rejection of second-order thinking, whereby deeply rooted historical details are rejected on hand simply due to there being no evident use for them in the immediate present. Christian theologian G. K. Chesterton comments on this phenomenon in his book, *The Thing*, and it is worth quoting at length: “There exists in such a case a certain institution or law; let us say, for the sake of simplicity, a fence or gate erected across a road. The more modern type of reformer goes gaily up to it and says, ‘I don’t see the use of this; let us clear it away.’ To which the more intelligent type of reformer will do well to answer: ‘If you don’t see the use of it, I certainly won’t let you clear it away. Go away and think. Then, when you can come back and tell me that you do see the use of it, I may allow you to destroy it.’” Put another way, an emphasis is made on ‘deconstruction’ for its own sake as the default assumption is that ‘the old’ is necessarily flawed – even if one cannot articulate the specific (potentially useful) reasons for why it exists in the first place. In contemporary times, a ‘rebellious spirit’ is proposed: in which individual preferences trump all – not least of all in artistic expression.

This is what paved the way for the rise of abstract art, which centred the artists’ unfiltered feelings at the time of creation rather than serving as a measured analysis of, engagement with, or response to the empirical reality that they were dealing with in their lives. A quote from Josef Albers, one of the most well-known art educators of the 20th century, captures the extent of this sentiment: “Abstraction is real, probably more real than nature. I prefer to see with closed eyes.”

It is important to note that the critique of abstract art is not one that dismisses aesthetic subtlety – which differs from pretentious obfuscation. Take the recent Hollywood blockbuster, *Barbie*, as an example – a film that, for all its political messaging, ultimately proved unmemorable due to its in-your-face nature that left no room at all for mind-wandering. By explicitly spelling out its various (quite noble) messages, the experience felt intellectually insulting: like a helicopter parent patronisingly bombarding her children with long laundry lists of instruction for a fairly uncomplicated task. By adopting this approach, the film self-sabotaged: reducing itself to an infantile character. This is perhaps what the opposite of ‘aesthetic subtlety’ looks like. In contrast, Saim Sadiq’s *Joyland* – whilst also themed around ideas of abuse, exploitation, and entrenched power structures – was much more refined in that it not only relied upon but centred subtlety as its communicative strategy.



Figure 3. *Joyland* (2022)

Through well-timed silences, exchanged glances, non-verbal cues, cynical humour, witty innuendos, vocal inflections, and impeccable lighting/camera work, the film was able to powerfully capture the dynamics and consequences of patriarchal norms in Pakistani society whilst inviting the audience into a kind of intellectual dance via provocation – meeting them halfway. In this manner, whilst both films can be seen as ‘political’, the latter will likely fare significantly better in terms of standing the test of time – the reason for which is an acknowledgment and appreciation of viewers as active, thinking participants rather than passive spectators. This notwithstanding, both films – whilst differing from one another in degrees of subtlety – can at least claim to be fostering some sort of change in society, which ‘abstract’ art can never accomplish.

This latter category is fundamentally perverted: hidden within ivory towers for a privileged few to gather around for little besides vacuous entertainment and class solidarity. The associated depoliticisation and relegation to narcissistic indulgence can never be forgiven – and future art historians will surely look back and scoff at this trivialisation of what was once a powerful medium that brought communities together for progress and prosperity.

In the Global South, where state funding for art is few and far between, artists have been forced to adopt Western traditions enconced in abstraction – as their representatives, frequently multilateral ‘donors’, are the only avenues that can be engaged with for substantive financial support. The net effect is an art landscape that is not only devoid of any messaging but also entirely divorced from the sociocultural milieu. Rather than seeing this as yet another reason to produce nonsensical work that ‘reflects the bizarre nature of the world’, the arts community must initiate a wide-ranging conversation on how a reset can be made possible.

As philosopher Roger Scruton aptly puts it in his book, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*: “Art moves us because it is beautiful, and it is beautiful in part because it means something. It can be meaningful without being beautiful; but to be beautiful it must be meaningful.”

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