

Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London, 1994). See also Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern*, 1983–1998 (New York, 1998) 138–43.

12 As defined in Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York, 2002), which develops at greater length many of the themes of the present essay.

13 The telltale slogan of 'intersubjectivity' (invented by the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz) is the giveaway clue to the humanist character of these ideologies. My critique of them is not particularly inspired by any defensive pre-emption of language-based critiques of Marxism, for the Habermassians demonstrated long ago that class struggle was itself a communicational structure; see Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, 1971) 283.

14 Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1970) 99. It is important to add that for Althusser a mode of production has no single temporality but rather a system of distinct and interlocking times.

15 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe', *Poésies*, ed. Lloyd James Austin (Paris, 1989) 99.

16 Sophocles, *King Oedipus*, in *The Theban Plays*, trans. E. V. Rieu (New York, 1986) 68.

17 See note 8, above.

18 It is the central theme of Deleuze's philosophy (and is presupposed, perhaps in a slightly different way, by Jean-François Lyotard's work). Both acknowledge the priority of Sartre's early 'Transcendence of the Ego'.

19 In the posthumous television interviews, *L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze*.

20 But see, on the 'anarchist' tendencies of the Deleuze/Guattari books, Jameson, 'Marxism and Dualism in Deleuze', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, no. 96 (Summer 1997) 393–416.

21 See Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Suddenness: On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance*, trans. Ruth Crowley (New York, 1994) as well as *Das absolute Praesenz* (Frankfurt, 1994) and *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens* (Munich, 1983), on Jünger.

Fredric Jameson, extract from 'The End of Temporality', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003) 695–718.

Peter Halley Abstraction and Culture//1991

Surprisingly, most of the current discussion of abstraction continues to focus on the idea of abstraction as a stylistic device or invention, borne out of artists' formal concerns; it treats abstraction as a phenomenon whose history can still be traced as a series of stylistic changes within the language of modernist art itself. Further, abstraction continues to be seen as a superior language of emotional expression, in which the 'free' play of 'pure' colour, form and gesture enable artist and viewer to commune on an emotive or spiritual 'plane' beyond the narrative and representational.

Somehow, it must be said that to limit our understanding of the meaning of abstraction (or anything else) to an incantatory recital of its own formal history is a denial – a denial of the myriad connections between culture and other histories and between the artist and the world.

In thinking about this most rarified of visual languages, it seems we intellectually retreat into the cloister of high culture; we deny that abstraction is a reflection of larger historical and cultural forces, we deny that the phenomenon of abstraction only gains meaning to the extent to which it does reflect larger forces and is embedded with their history.

In fact, as early as the 1930s, Meyer Schapiro made this perspective clear with remarkable precision. 'Abstraction', he wrote, 'reflected the economic mechanization of consciousness' in our culture, our submission 'to some external purpose' that was 'indifferent to the individual'.

But after Schapiro came Barr and Greenberg, whose efforts relocated abstraction in a tightly-locked garden of Kantian design where cultural power has been all too content to keep it for all these years.

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Part of this problem is that we have lost sight of abstraction's relationship to historical events themselves. Most importantly, there are essential distinctions to be made between pre-war and post-war abstraction. To some extent, our contemporary vision of pre-war abstraction as utopian, inventive and

experimental may well be true. But as Barnett Newman wrote about the post-war period:

You must realize that ... we felt the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing – flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello. At the same time we could not move into the situation of a pure world of unorganized shapes and forms, or colour relations, a world of sensation. And I would say that for some of us this was our moral crisis in relation to what to paint. So that we actually began, so to speak, from scratch, as if painting were not only dead but had never existed.

The moral and historical crisis to which Newman refers is essential to our understanding of what constitutes abstraction today. This crisis was as consuming to a European artist like Beuys as it was to the American Newman. We can see the pre-war as a time of historical innocence during which abstract art played out the technological and cultural imperatives that governed it with seemingly unconscious spontaneity. In the post-war era, a re-examination of this utopian exuberance and historical innocence became imperative.

Similarly, with the war, the spiritualist yearnings and sensate hermeticism of previous abstraction came to an end. Post-war abstraction was to be dominated by one overriding response to culture: spirituality and phenomenology supplanted by alienation as the guiding impetus behind abstraction.

An analogy can be made to Julian Jaynes' imaginative book *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Jaynes argued that the mode of thought that we call consciousness arose in Greece around 1000 BCE as a result of cataclysmic volcanic activity that disrupted social patterns in the ancient Mediterranean world. Similarly, the cataclysm of World War II and invention of the Bomb at war's end can be credited with shocking abstraction into a new arena of consciousness. (Regrettably, the materialism and anti-intellectualism that largely held sway in the 1980s has done much to erode this post-war self-consciousness and ethical imperative.)

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But how is abstraction related to larger social forces and intellectual trends in our century? In fact, abstraction in art is simply one manifestation of a universal impetus toward the concept of abstraction that has dominated twentieth-century

thought. In every area of intellectual endeavour, the twentieth century has seen the idea of abstraction replace empiricism, the guiding ideology of nineteenth-century thought and culture.

Abstraction is based on the idea of the organization of discrete, specific incidents into more generalized, repeatable patterns. In the visual arts, this has led to the idea that specific visual incidents can be represented by generalized forms, which eventually free themselves from their actual phenomenological source. Abstraction in the visual arts is also based on the idea that the interrelationship between parts in a work of art is more important than their individual symbolic identity. As we will see, this emphasis on linguistic relationships is echoed in other areas of twentieth century thought as well.

It is important to remember that the visual principles of abstraction are not confined to high-art practice, but rather extend to all aspects of our visual culture. Abstraction appears no less in commonplace popular forms than it does in the works of Kandinsky, O'Keeffe or Kelly. Thus, if one thinks of the ubiquitous codified signs that direct travellers to baggage, toilets or tobacco shops in the contemporary multilingual airport, one observes that these representations of the male or female body, or of a piece of luggage, or a cigarette, employ a highly abstract language of generalized shapes that are completely removed from specific representation as well.

Similarly, a comparison between a mid twentieth-century comic strip like *Peanuts* or *Felix the Cat* and nineteenth-century political caricature reveals that while the nineteenth-century caricaturist exaggerated the specific empirically-observed traits of his subject (a large nose, blotchy skin, etc.), Charlie Brown or Felix are abstract representations of codified *gestalts* of a little boy or cat, providing only diagrammatic visual patterns. This impulse to cartoon abstraction is essential to our entire visual culture. It has advanced so far in recent years that even in the movies, which still purport to film specific events, the actual human characters have begun to mimic the codified abstract world of their cartoon cousins. (*Back to the Future*, *Batman* or *Total Recall* are good examples of this phenomenon.)

Clearly, these same principles govern non-visual areas of culture as well. As Jean Baudrillard has stated it, the model, that is to say the abstract model, takes precedence over the specific in all areas of contemporary life. Thus, in the academic world, the psychologist, the economist or the sociologist seek to establish the existence of generalized patterns of behaviour that then act as a lens through which to view specific incidents. The aberrant individual must be classified as

psychopathic, sociopathic or borderline. The economy (itself an abstraction) must be categorized as in growth or recession and its output measurable.

Much of the pioneering work in recognizing the impact of these notions of systemization and categorization, it should be remembered, was done by Michel Foucault. His examination of the systematization of medicine and mental disorder are crucial studies. As a simple and poignant example, one remembers that his later work on sexuality is itself a modern phenomenon.

In the same way, modern physics and biology are also governed by a highly codified concept of the combination and breakdown of neutral abstract units (be they sub-atomic particles or strands of DNA). This emphasis on the linguistic structure of matter, wherein the behaviour of matter can be seen as obeying grammatological laws based on the recombination of abstract elements, has its exact equivalent in the workings of abstraction in the visual arts.

The phenomenon of abstraction is reflected in technology no less than in intellectual production. Marxian thought has posited that ideology is the key to understanding consciousness; however, as technology has assumed a more and more autonomous role in affecting social structure, it seems essential that it be examined as a power to be reckoned with, a power that is equal in importance to ideology. A number of social theorists have pursued this tack, including Mumford, Giedion, Ellul and Debord. In addition, there is today a good deal of social history being written that recognizes the effect of technological change on culture. One might mention Wolfgang Schivelbusch's book *Enchanted Night*, which is a history of artificial illumination in the nineteenth century, or Stephen Kern's *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, which examines the effects of technological change in travel and communications on the arts in the Cubist era.

In this century, technology has itself become more abstract, and it has transformed the world we live in into an abstract environment. Technology in this century has essentially separated itself, step by step, from any relationship to what is commonly thought of as nature: the horse is replaced by the mechanical automobile, the candle by the electric light, etc. Technology has steadily become more and more autonomous, as muscle is replaced by steam, then by electricity, then by nuclear power. When we come into contact with automobiles, electric lights, air conditioning and telephones, we enter a world in which we are no longer tied to the natural forces that these devices replace. We enter a world where technology becomes autonomous from nature, and our environment itself becomes abstract, both visually and physically.

In addition, the rapid changes made in travel and communications in this century have pushed us exponentially into a world that no longer depends on the 'real' or 'natural' time or space. We take it for granted that we can speak with someone halfway around the world or that it takes just a few hours to travel thousands of miles. Such disjunctions in space and time have also created a world that is both malleable and free from natural referents.

If we examine the daily life of a middle-class person in the United States or Europe, we get a picture of an existence of extraordinary hermeticism. People live in sealed houses or condos in highly controlled landscapes. They travel in the sealed environment of the automobile along the abstract pathway of the highway to equally artificial office parks and shopping malls. When one speaks of abstract art, it is essential to remember that it is only a reflection of a physical environment that has also become essentially abstract.

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Whenever Andy Warhol spoke about death, or sex, or any other troubling emotional situation, he would say, 'It's so abstract.' While the history of post-war abstraction reflects these intellectual and technological changes, abstract art has by no means constituted simply their chronicling or representation. Rather, post-war abstraction is characterized by a certain emotional refusal brought about by alienation. If post-war abstraction chronicles anything, it is the emotional blankness, emptiness and numbness of an abstract world where social relations have become as untethered as technology has.

In her important work on suburbia, *The Moral Order of a Suburb*, M.P. Baumgartner has written that we live in a world of 'moral minimalism' and of 'weak bonds', where people would rather leave a situation than face social confrontation, where families change houses so that each member can have his or her own separate room and avoid contact with one another. At the same time, we live in a world where the brutal yet unreal effects of commodification have intensified rather than lessened, where status is determined by one's ability to attract dollars, and abstract economic changes can instantly shatter the imagined security of the individual.

Thus, abstraction really has nothing to do with aesthetic concerns, nor can it be formally characterized by the use of specific shapes, techniques or configurations. A Car Crash by Warhol, a Joke by Richard Prince, or a Filler by Meyer Vaisman - all reflect the same empty anguish that characterized the work of Rothko and de

Kooning, that continued in the stoic hermeticism of early Stella or Ryman, or in paintings like *No by Johns*, and in the serio-comic meditations of Nauman or Smithson. Abstract art is simply the reality of the abstract world.

Peter Halley, 'Abstraction and Culture', *tema celeste* (Autumn 1991) 56–60; reprinted in Peter Halley, *Recent Essays 1990–1996* (New York: Edgewise Press, 1997) [author's typographic setting retained].

Sven Lütticken *Living with Abstraction//2008*

The Abstract World

For his 2002 *Poster Project* commemorating the attack on the World Trade Center, Hans Haacke produced an edition of monochrome white posters from which the silhouettes of the Twin Towers had been cut out; these were glued onto New York poster walls, with the underlying printed matter partly visible in the negative volumes.¹ For the [prototype] design of his 'negative' poster, Haacke used an advertisement for a Broadway production from *The New York Times Magazine* as background, and on the city's poster walls it was likewise fragments of ads that were visible in the towers' silhouettes – often ads for shows, films or records. Thus Haacke's *Poster Project* enacted a dialectics between commodity and structure, between spectacle as visual appearance and the abstract machine sustaining and producing it. Although ostensibly commemorating 9/11, the project in effect questioned the destroyed building itself; in creating a montage of commodity-images and a blank frame, Haacke articulated the split between capitalism's visual façade and its aniconic infrastructure. However, this opposition is anything but absolute. After all, as the effectiveness of Haacke's negative silhouettes shows, in the Twin Towers the ultimate abstraction of capitalism's deterritorialized flows had taken on an iconic character, and on the other hand Marxian theory has argued that commodities themselves are pseudo-concrete manifestations of abstract exchange-value: as Terry Eagleton put it, 'the commodity erases from itself every particle of matter; as alluring auratic object, it parades its own unique sensual being in a kind of spurious show of materiality'.²

Marxism always analysed capitalism as a process – as liberatory as it is violent and destructive – that abstracts people and goods from feudal social bonds, replacing them with the abstract bond of exchange value. This means that all modern – commodified – art is fundamentally abstract, regardless of whether it

consists of squares and rectangles or represents cute kittens: 'As uninteresting as obsolete postage stamps, and offering as little variation as these, literary or artistic productions are now signs of nothing but abstract commerce'.³ But is there any sense in which formal abstraction in art can reflect, and reflect on, this regime of abstract exchange? In 1937, Meyer Schapiro argued that there are problems with theories that derive abstraction in art either from the forms of industry or from 'the abstract nature of modern finance, in which bits of paper control capital and all human transactions assume the form of operations on numbers and titles', since abstract art did not emerge in the most industrially advanced nations or in the main centres of finance – and moreover, many early abstract artists positioned their work squarely in opposition to what they perceived as the *materialism* of modern society.⁴

One way out of this quandary was offered by Adorno's sophisticated argument that formal abstraction is the result of a new 'interdiction' of representation that stemmed from the imperative for the work of art to absorb its 'deadliest enemy, exchangeability', resisting abstraction by representing it negatively.⁵ Abstract art is thus positioned as perhaps the modern art par excellence – its 'windowless monads' showing the abstract nature of society by refusing to represent its glimmering surfaces, or even its dark underside, giving back a blank stare rather than attempting to adjust traditional representation to a post-traditional world. However, this negative theology of abstraction – of which Gerhard Richter's reading of the gestural abstraction of *art informel* as befitting a post-traditional world is another instance – has increasingly been challenged by practices that seek to give a more precise social and political meaning to abstract structures.⁶ Curiously, this development occurs at a time when capitalism seems to abstract itself beyond recognition, into a post-visual, 'conceptual' phase in which the relevance of formal abstraction becomes ever more doubtful; if the commodity was always pseudo-concrete and abstract to the core, at least it had a material manifestation. In the 1970s, Baudrillard used the 'binary' towers as signs for the transition from a regime of production to one of pure semiosis, of capital becoming coded information circling the globe – the ultimate abstraction.⁷ Can such abstraction still be made visible, however inadequately, now that Baudrillard's double icon is gone?

Abstract Art against Abstract Thought

Starting in the 1980s, Peter Halley decoded abstract art as being 'nothing other than the reality of the abstract world': abstraction in art was 'simply one manifestation of a universal impetus towards abstract concepts that has dominated twentieth-century thought'.⁸ Historically, things are far more complicated; for Adorno, modern art is precisely about resistance to the concept