



Art as a Realisation of Deconstruction: A Deconstruction of PragerU's video '*Why is Modern Art so Bad*' and an investigation into how art embodies principles of deconstruction.

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Abstract

Digital platforms have revitalised the right-wing argument that modern art not only lacks technical excellence but also contributes to the moral degeneration of society. In response to the purported immorality of modern art the right has exalted the virtues of classical Western art. Although this problematic position has been attacked from multiple academic angles, the technique of deconstruction is perhaps best suited to pull apart the faulty logic underpinning this argument. The aim of the following text is to employ the mechanism of deconstruction to prove that neither modern nor classical art can claim supremacy over the other. PragerU's short five-minute videos are emblematic of the right's ongoing attempt to increase the popularity of their positions through online engagement. Accordingly, the specific cultural text this essay will deconstruct is a PragerU video presented by Robert Florczak discussing his views on the state of modern art, entitled 'Why is Modern Art so Bad?' (2014). The deconstruction concludes that since the value of an artwork is derived from the personal experiences of both its creator and audience, Florczak's attempt to constrain the elements of artistic expression within an arbitrary hierarchy is not only immoral but damaging to the institution of art as whole.

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Introduction

Deconstruction elaborates on the contradictions of oppositional binaries to undermine the hierarchies which function through said oppositional binaries. Simply put, deconstruction may be thought of as philosophical ‘mechanism’ used to challenge unjustified hierarchies by exploiting the logical inconsistencies they operate under. The following text deconstructs a short video titled ‘Why is Modern Art so Bad?’ (2014), created by PragerU and presented by the artist Robert Florczak. The video explores Florczak’s denouncement of modern art. He argues that since modern art is not upheld to a universal aesthetic standard, the quality and subsequent moral value of modern art has been diminished. According to Florczak, modern art consists solely of untalented forms of personal expression. He insists that contemporary art can only be redeemed by restoring objective standards in the creation and appreciation of art. This text holds that the binary opposition created between classical art and modern art is based on logical inconsistencies, and therefore art cannot be constrained within the hierarchy presented by Florczak.

Deconstruction

Deconstruction avoids definition (Derrida, 1988:141); yet it may be considered a philosophical ‘mechanism’ through which to

investigate and challenge modernist structures¹. Understood through this framework the goal of deconstruction is to expose and therefore undermine oppositional hierarchies presented within cultural texts (Derrida, 1981:41). A cultural text is any object, behaviour, or action which can inform an audience about the cultural beliefs of a community. Jacques Derrida acknowledged certain hierarchies and norms are required to structure human experiences in a sensible manner, yet he simultaneously recognised that many hierarchical institutional structures of the contemporary world had become unduly rigid. Novel and insightful meanings can only be brought to the fore once the hierarchies embedded within institutional structures have been destabilised. The destabilisation of institutional structures demonstrates that most hierarchies are not produced by nature but are instead artificial constructs imposed upon the world by humanity to better make sense of reality (Culler, 1985:86). Oppositional binaries are usually upheld to protect the interest of those who benefit from established hierarchies. Redefining the limits of meaning to incorporate the views and interest of individuals who have been marginalised by traditional hierarchies serves as the ethical impetus behind deconstruction (Culler, 1985:159).

¹ This working definition, although crucial to achieving the aims of this text, disregards the multitude of differing yet valid iterations deconstruction may inhabit. Deconstruction is also a political mode of engagement as well as mental framework through which to understand the world. The

definitions of deconstruction are as expansive and elusive as the principles to which they allude. Accordingly, the definition of deconstruction put forth by this text has been chosen for its functionality, its truth value being of secondary concern.

Hierarchies become destabilised through the double-movement of deconstruction. Once a binary opposition has been identified within a text, deconstruction employs the logic of the hierarchy against itself, thus undoing the binary opposition in the process (Derrida, 1981:41, 57). Logical inconsistencies inherent to the hierarchy are uncovered through concurrent analytical procedures, which both reverse and displace the concepts upon which the hierarchy depends. This double-movement showcases that the concepts which are defined as oppositional within the hierarchy, are best expressed in differential terms. Redefining terms within a differential relationship implies that the meaning of each term is determined by how it differs from every other term, without assigning undue importance to any one term within the system (Culler, 1985:88).

Logocentrism

All hierarchies rest upon the assumptions of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence (Culler, 1985: 92; Derrida, 1997: 106). Logocentrism stems from the ‘metaphysics of presence’ which assumes a concept, referred to as the logos, is fully present and free from relationality. The concepts that are brought into association with the logos are construed as derivatives or adulterants of the logos (Culler, 1985:93). Reinterpreted through the terminology of logocentrism the privileged concept within the hierarchy is called the logos, whilst the subordinate concept takes the form of the fall.

Derrida argues that the notion that any term can be considered the origin of meaning is a fallacy. He believes no term can have a positive meaning through which the meaning of all other terms in relation to it are determined (Derrida, 1988:150; Derrida, 1997: 90). In truth, the logos is a socially constructed concept underpinned by a complex network of differentiated terms. The inconsistencies of logocentrism creates a tension within oppositional binaries, which in turn undercuts the naturalisation of hierarchies (Culler, 1985:96). Deconstruction begins by identifying the instances within the hierarchy where the promotion of one concept to the detriment of others creates this tension. This manoeuvre requires a careful examination of how the argument roots itself in the ascendancy of one term (the logos), and thereafter formulates a second term (the fall) as the inverse or distortion of the first.

“*Why is Modern Art so Bad?*” (2014), even by the title of the video alone, establishes a hierarchy between modern and classical art. Florczak dismisses modern art as being devoid of talent and meaning, whilst endeavouring to uphold the superiority of classical art. He contends that the excellence of art was once derived from universal standards, but the aesthetic relativism of modernity has eradicated the artistic sensibilities of the art world. Whereas the beauty of classical art revealed transcendental truths and enriched the moral fabric of society, the lewd nature of modern art only serves to shock and disrupt. The creation of

classical art was determined by a strict set of institutionally prescribed standards, which compelled artists to create universally acclaimed art. By contrast, modern art is pure self-expression, and thus incapable of conveying meaningful truths about the human condition. Florczak constructs a hierarchy in which classical art serves as the *logos*, and the fall is taken by modern art.

Florczak's hierarchy depends on several oppositional binaries. Each binary pits the principles of classical art (the *logos*) against the elements of modern art (the subordinate term). As a result, the hierarchy situates naturalism and technical expertise in superior positions over abstraction and conceptual frameworks. Classical art is predominantly naturalistic, meaning that classical art sought to faithfully emulate nature. Imitating the qualities of nature through artistic mediums requires the artist to possess an extensive repertoire of technical skills. The beauty of classical artworks comes from their capacity to masterfully render natural objects. Florczak locates the origin of transcendental truths which emanate from classical art within this beauty. Conversely, modern art tends towards abstraction and conceptual forms of art. Abstraction creates art which is entirely free from natural representation. Conceptual art rejects the importance of technical skills, instead a conceptual art piece derives its value from the intellectual framework under which it is created. To account for these differences, the hierarchy set up by Florczak must define these differing elements in opposition to one another.

Consequently, abstraction is portrayed as a distortion of naturalism, and conceptual frameworks are made subservient to skilful technique. The ascendancy of classical art and its principles must subjugate all elements of modern art to remain logically consistent and maintain the position of the *logos*.

Reversal

Once the hierarchy has been exposed, the volatility which arises from the contradictions underlying the hierarchy must be exploited through a reversal of terms. A reversal seeks to reveal how the subordinate term determines the conditions within which the binary operates. Inverting the oppositional binary unveils that the primacy of the *logos* is derived from contingent factors, which can be overturned (Culler, 1985:85).

Elaborating upon the logic of the supplement advances the reversal of the hierarchy. A supplement is considered a lesser term which is brought into association with the *logos* as an additional or concluding element to the self-contained and fully realised meaning of the *logos* (Culler, 1985:103). However, the possibility of addition or finalisation indicates that the *logos* is incomplete, and its meaning depends upon the supplement. The oppositional binary only becomes meaningful through the introduction of the supplement. Therefore, the hierarchy becomes inverted since the supplement has come to supplant the *logos* as the source of meaning (Culler, 1985:106).

Through his utilization of phrases like “*the thousand-year ascent towards artistic perfection*” Florczak betrays the fact that he holds a teleological view of art history. He states that master artists created works of genius by “*improving upon the work of each previous generation of masters*”. However, the teleological ascendance of artistic excellence was disrupted by the rebellious Impressionist movement of the 19th century. The Impressionists pushed against the aesthetic standards of the French Academie des Beaux Arts and demanded greater artistic freedom (Rewald, 1961:64, 65; Brodskaja, 2005:9). The French Academie des Beaux Arts had been instrumental in standardising and institutionalising classical forms of artistic expression, through devaluing all art which did not conform to classical ideals. The Impressionist seeking to explore avantgarde methods of art creation rejected the restrictive rules of the French Academie des Beaux Arts. Alongside this artistic freedom came the aesthetic relativism which purportedly halted the technical proression of art (Brodskaja, 2005:26). Impressionism, and the modern art it would come to inspire, is therefore an addition or supplement to the historical legacy of classical art. Yet, if Impressionism was able to supplement classical art, this implies that classical art had its limitations. Impressionism’s drive to reintroduce personal expression into the creative process, suggests that the rigidity of universal standards failed to capture key elements of the human experience. Modern art improved upon the legacy

of classical art by distorting it. Even Florczak concedes that the first generation of Impressionist created art of “*genuine merit*”. Although, teleological progression can resist the occasional setback or subversion, it seems unlikely that art would systematically improve for all human history only to be subverted at the dawn of modernity, never to see any sort of improvement again. Either Florczak must adopt a more nuanced perspective on the progression of art history or reassess the impact of impressionism and modernity on the quality of art. If Florczak wants to maintain a consistent argument without surrendering his teleological convictions, he must admit that modern art is not a disruption of artistic ascendancy but instead the cause of its progression.

Another critical strategy which brings to light the contingent elements of the logos is the identifications of grafts. Grafts are expressions of intertextuality; or put simply, a graft calls into question the logic of an argument by bringing into focus the intersection between divergent discourses which inform the meaning of the text. Grafting illustrates the impurity of all discourse since the introduction of a different context reshapes the meaning of the text under investigation (Culler, 1985:135). The process of grafting can incorporate a potentially infinite amount of external context into the reading of the text; effectively expanding the context of the text until any purported origin of meaning within the text becomes irrelevant. Meaning must thereafter

be found within the iterability of the text; that is with each new imperfect exploration of the text a new, yet significant, meaning is produced (Culler, 1985:150). The type of graft in use is identified by the technique it uses to invert the hierarchy.

A common type of grafting occurs when the focus of the reader's analysis centres upon a marginalised graft already contained within the text. Using this graft, a thorough investigation of a quotation or footnote within the text can come to redefine the meaning of the text entirely. The reader's interpretation of the text comes from a secondary feature of the text, and not the main body of the text itself. The source of meaning is reversed from the main text towards its marginal elements (Culler, 1985:140).

In arguing for the importance of objective artistic standards, Florczak quotes the art historian Jakob Rosenberg as follows: “(*quality in art*) is not merely a matter of personal opinion but to a high degree . . . objectively traceable”. Although at an initial glance this quote may seem to support Florczak's argument, the presence of an ellipsis indicates that the quote is incomplete. The full quote states, “Artistic value' or 'quality' in a work of art is not merely a matter of personal opinion but to a high degree a matter of common agreement among artistically sensitive and trained observers, and to a high degree objectively traceable (Rosenberg, 1976:24)”. Rosenberg does indeed

believe that the quality of art can largely be objectively determined. Nevertheless, this objectivity is not derived from any universal standard. Instead, Rosenberg asserts that the 'objective' standards by which the quality of an artwork is judged, arises from the social conventions of the art community. Near the end of 'Why is Modern Art so Bad' Florczak says that the low quality of modern art cannot entirely be blamed on artist themselves. Rather, he contends that the art community's endorsement of modernity is the cause of artistic regression. Yet since artistic standards are determined by social conventions, and the art community's current conventions are informed by modernity, then modern art must be judged as superior in comparison to classical art. Rosenberg's quote which Florczak puts forth as evidence for his argument, unintentionally disproves the logic of the classical-modern art hierarchy he has constructed.

Another marginal element of 'Why is Modern Art so Bad' that ought to be more closely examined, are the artworks which Florczak mentions in passing. One artwork which seems to elicit the most frustration from Florczak is only ever described as a 340-ton rock outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The title of the artwork, *Levitated Mass*², is never even named. He compares *Levitated Mass* to Michelangelo's statue of *David*, claiming that by transforming the raw

² Information regarding *Levitated Mass* was obtained from an article written by Carolina Miranda (2015).

material of a rock into the beautiful figure of a masculine man, *David* is the more artistically brilliant art piece and therefore contains more transcendental truth. However, *David*, by following the tradition of naturalism inherent in classical art, is an imitation of nature. The word imitation implies that artworks created under naturalism are a lesser copy of nature itself; these art pieces reproduce a false iteration of nature. By comparison, Michael Heizer, the creator of *Levitated Mass*, holds no such pretence. Heizer does not attempt to mimic nature, he simply introduces nature to the context of the gallery. Florczak holds that an artwork is only valuable in so far as it is able to convey truth. Following the logic laid out by Florczak, since *Levitated Mass* is the more real representation of nature, it must also be deemed to be the more valuable artwork. Even the attempt to establish what constitutes the more 'real' representation, exposes the contradiction of Florczak's argument since no representation can be truly real. The exploration of how Florczak contrast *Levitated Mass* with *David* showcases that modern art, by moving beyond the limitations of naturalism, can convey truths which elude classical art.

Grafting can also be accomplished by placing a foreign text onto the same page as the text under analysis. Through dual paragraphs or quotation, the foreign text destabilises the distinction between the internal and external. The meaning of text under analysis is shown to be susceptible to the influence of a foreign text. Subsequently, the

metaphysics of presence is once more disproven since neither text can be seen as completed entities by themselves (Culler, 1985:136).

In *'The Barbarism of Representation'* Barbara Fischer and Luís Madureira describe how the New Right of America employ fascist language in their discourse on modern art. Often the New Right obscure their fascist rhetoric behind more palatable concerns such as the public funding of the arts. However, the end goal remains to regulate people's artistic expression, and by extension control the cultural narrative of the nation. Fischer and Madureira (1994:42) argue:

“Underlying the Nazis' politicization of 'good taste' is a restrictive interpretation of modernism's conscious efforts to distance its production from dominant discourses. In the Nazis' simplistic reading, the dominant or 'average' is aesthetically valorised; it becomes the topos of the beautiful, of truth itself. Modernism's interrogation of these received conceptions of beauty and truth is thus dismissed not only as 'ugly' and 'degenerate', but as the very negation of the real. These dismissals are invariably performed in the name of the stolid taxpayer. They are always authorized by the 'sound' and 'healthy' values of the 'average' citizen, according to which 'modern art' is judged as 'aberrant', 'trashy' and valueless in the first place—a logic which is also operative in the

American right-wing's assaults on 'modern art'".

Now compare Fischer and Madureira's argument to the following extract from *'Why is Modern Art so Bad'* (PragerU, 2014):

"Not only has the quality of art diminished, but also the subject matter has gone from the transcendent to the trashy. Where once artists applied their talents to scenes of substance and integrity from history, literature, religion, mythology, etc., many of today's artists merely use their art to make statements, often for nothing more than shock value".

Florczak is not a fascist, yet once brought into contact with discussions on the fascist view of art it becomes difficult to overlook how the aim of his argument shares several similarities with those of fascism. The Nazis deemed the beauty of classical German artworks to be the inevitable product of the masculine Aryan intellect, whilst they viewed the progressive and provocative modern art movements as the outcome of a perverted Jewish intellectualism (Fischer & Madureira, 1994:44). Similarly, all the artists Florczak celebrates as the masters of classical art are white European men³. The works of the artists he mentions are beautiful, yet the fulness of human truths can never be entirely encapsulated in a canon of Western art dominated exclusively by white men. In contrast to

the typical canon of classical art, the modern art world is far more cosmopolitan. By dismissing modern art as disingenuous and degenerate, Florczak unwittingly advances the fascist narrative that truth and beauty belong only to white men. More specifically he promotes the idea that only white men possess the skills required to create truly great art. Denying an individual their capacity to express truth based on arbitrary factors such as race and gender is morally unjustifiable. In contrast, modern art, by favouring personal expression, uplifts the viewpoints and tastes of a diverse set of people, and accordingly can capture in greater nuance the many varying truths of the contemporary world. Modern art celebrates all individuals' right to freedom of expression. Hence, it is the inclusivity of modern art which might have the greater claim to morality and truth.

Displacement

Deconstruction cannot conclude with the inversion of the hierarchy, rather the strategy of deconstruction must proceed to displace the structure which upholds the hierarchy by redefining it in differential, instead of oppositional, terms (Culler, 1985:85). Without the second concurrent step of displacement, the binary opposition, now simply expressed in an inverted formulation, will continue to become naturalised. Displacement disrupts the naturalisation of hierarchies by placing them within a differential

³ Florczak praises the following artist as creative geniuses: Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Monet, Renoir, Degas, and Bierstadt.

system of meaning. Defined within a purely deferential system of meaning both the logos and subordinate become detached from any form of stable original meaning or truth. Without a stable origin, logocentrism becomes an impossibility and the fundamental structure upon which the hierarchy hinges becomes undone (Bertens, 2001:115, 117).

A differential system of meaning is characterised by *différance* and trace. *Différance* is an interplay between the meaning-giving act of differentiating terms from one another, and the gaps in understanding which exist amongst these differences (Derrida, 1981:27, 38). Accordingly, terms do not possess any self-contained positive meaning; instead, the meaning of a term is negatively constructed by the traces of other terms that become associated with it. These associated terms are similarly only constructed by the traces of more associated terms. Thus, terms consist entirely of traces (Derrida, 1981:27, 38). Traces are the differences of one term that inhabits the meaning of another term (Culler, 1985:99). *Différance* also point to the deferral of meaning. The system of differences from which meaning stems is dynamic since no term contains within itself the entirety of its own meaning and must continually defer meaning towards the traces of other terms. Derrida concludes that within a deferential system of meaning one can never arrive at a final complete meaning (Cilliers, 1998:42).

Derrida employs the deferral of meaning to deconstruct hierarchies. He held that communication and meaningful analysis depend on 'pockets of stability' within the above-mentioned deferential system. The stability stems from social conventions which temporarily endow communally agreed upon meanings unto terms. Hierarchies become naturalised by mistakenly assuming these temporary 'pockets of stability' stem from a permanent meaning-giving origin (Cilliers, 1998:43). Instead, hierarchies themselves are products of the deferential system of meaning, and therefore are also subject to deferral of meaning and can never become fully naturalised. Derrida, by discrediting the metaphysics of presences, challenges the contemporary reader to reconsider the theoretical framework which gives rise to the hierarchies that structure their lives (Cilliers, 1998:45).

Art also produces truths within a differential system of meaning. Art avoids definition, yet it may be considered to be the physical manifestation of immaterial concepts through creative visual means. Viewed through this lens, an artwork operates as a 'mechanism' which conveys partial pieces of the artist's interior truths to an audience. Although the choices made by the artist limit the possible interpretations of an artwork, the experiences a viewer might take away from their encounter with an artwork remain infinite. In his attempt to restrict art to a set of universal standards, Florczak also endeavours to control the experience of the viewer. He insists that the beauty

of classical art imparts upon the viewer universal truths, and for this to be the case every viewer must undergo the same experience when viewing classical art. The possibility that classical art can engender a universal experience unto the viewer is dismissed by the very fact that the text currently being read disagrees with Florczak's views on classical art. Furthermore, if the meaning of an artwork in part relies upon the experience of the viewer, then all art is in a sense modern because the audience views the artwork through a lens informed by modernity.

Truth is not found in the artwork itself, nor in the intention of the artist or the experience of the viewer. Art exists in the gaps between creation and appreciation; its meaning is found in the space that separates the artist from their art, and the art from its audience. Art's refusal to be contained by universal truths is central to its capacity to express personal and intimate truths. Classical and modern art are both different modes of personal expression, and the only immorality within the art world is attempts made to limit these forms of self-expression.

Conclusion

Modern art is a reaction to the limitations of classical art. Florczak tries to deny the advances made by modern art by decrying it as talentless self-expression. Truth and beauty in art are one in the same for him. Therefore, only art upheld to the highest visual standard contains meaning. More worryingly, Florczak inevitably reverts to logic

congruent to fascistic notions of art. His argument, like many arguments on the Far Right, woefully misunderstands art. The truth of an artwork rests not in its visual elements, but rather stems from the relationships between the artist, the artwork, and the viewer. The creation and appreciation of art depends on self-expression. If excellence is only bestowed to classical art, it would bring the progression of art to an end. Florczak's views do not only limit the creation of modern art – it also limits the advancement of all art. Art must remain an evolving concept capable of containing a multitude of personal truths.

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