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(Partisans)
Kick the Corpse:
*Post-Truth and
the Contemporary Art World*¹



The terms “alt-facts” (alternative facts) and “post-truth” have recently gained popular currency as part of political debates in the mediasphere; the former associated with the presentation of narratives by American President Donald Trump and members of the White House staff countering supposedly ‘fake news’ reported in the liberal-leaning media, and the latter censure by the political mainstream of Trump’s often self-evidently unsubstantiated and highly mobile take on reality. The abbreviation “alt-facts” derives from an interview given by Trump spokesperson Kelly Anne Conway to NBC’s *Meet the Press* on 22 January 2017 in which she sought to defend White House press secretary Sean Spicer’s demonstrably false claim that crowds in attendance at Trump’s presidential inauguration had exceeded that of former president Barack Obama, as a presentation of “alternative facts”. Conway later sought to clarify her use of the term by redefining it as “additional facts and alternative information”.

Between 22 and 26 January 2017 there was a 9,500% increase in sales of George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which rose to number one in the USA Amazon bestseller list. *The New York Times* attributed this precipitous increase in sales to descriptions of Conway’s use of the term “alternative facts” as “Orwellian” in both mainstream and social media. A distinct pre-figuring of “alternative facts” can be found, in relation to Orwell’s use in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* of the terms “reality control” and “newspeak” to signify propagandist rewritings of historical fact.

The term “post-truth” was first coined in 1992 by playwright Steve Tesich, to signify the emergence of a presidential culture in the USA after the 1970s Watergate scandal in which factual counter-argument has been habitually dismissed and detailed policy debate replaced by appeals to subjective feeling. Tesich’s use of the term “post-truth” resonates strongly with Walter Benjamin’s identification of an aestheticisation of politics by the Nazis during the 1930s, involving ritualised appeals to populist sentiment rather than reasoned political argument;² a development also recognised by Georges Bataille in relation to his founding in 1935 of the short-lived group *Contre Attaque*, at whose meetings Bataille proposed resistance to fascism through co-ordinated violence and populist myth-making on the communist left. Also prefiguring and informing the emergence into popular consciousness of post-truth political culture is poststructuralist postmodernism’s immanent problematisation of all truth-claims and meta-narratives. Although deployed *inter alia* as a means of questioning established modernist authority, the sceptical vision of signified meanings advanced by poststructuralism can also be understood to extend to the mobile workings of capitalism itself. Indeed, by the 1990s, poststructuralist discourses had been openly assimilated by neo-liberal capitalist culture as an underpinning to its advocacy of pluralistic difference. Viewed in this light, Trump emerges not as the originator but merely as the crude populariser of an always-already pervasive state of post-truth.

The current combined use of the terms “alt-facts” and “post-truth” is indicative of an extreme hardening of party-political differences in the USA between Democrats and Republicans. That hardening has been accompanied by an up-swelling of radical socialist/anti-capitalist protest opposed to Trump as well as an emboldening of the far right/“alt-right” whose attitudes align with aspects of Trump’s national-exceptionalist political vision; an alignment signified by the appointment of arch alt-rightist Stephen Bannon as White House chief strategist. Political polarisation in the USA along with the prefiguring of alt-facts by Orwell’s use of the terms “reality control” and “newspeak” and the resonance of post-truth with Benjamin’s identification of an aestheticisation of politics give credence to an increasingly widespread view that we have returned to the starkly bifurcated left-right political landscape of the early twentieth century. This view extends beyond politics in the USA not only to other Western(ised) democracies where differences between left and right have become increasingly pronounced in recent years, but in addition the rise of nationalist authoritarianism within post-socialist states such as the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.

Contestations of facts and of the truth in the public sphere are, of course, nothing new. Politics in Western(ised) democratic societies is defined by such antagonisms. Authority over interpretation of the truth of what ‘is’, is conventionally understood to ground the moralising ‘ought’ of democratic political debate irrespective of partisan propaganda and spin. Since antiquity Western(ised) democratic politics has consequently looked towards the *parrhesiastes* as someone who speaks truth freely to power in public without recourse to distortive rhetoric. Such truth-telling is not only understood to garner moral authority through its evident sincerity but also, crucially, its public risk-taking in the face of a potentially vengeful authority. With the advent of alt-facts and post-truth however, there has arguably been a discernible shift in the public grounding of democracy. Where there was previously a residual faith in *parrhesia* (sincere enunciation of the truth), there are now significant doubts that democratic politics can be vouchsafed by such speech-activity.

Trump may have appealed successfully to populist sentiment among American voters by seeming to cut through neo-liberal establishment rhetoric—that is to say, by nominally occupying the position of the *parrhesiastes*. But in doing so he has by no means upheld notions of political truth-telling historically associated with that role. His mobile take on truth is not so much economical (in the now old-fashioned *Spycatcher* sense³) as conspicuously and often farcically distant from any reasonable interpretation of facts. Moreover, as an independently wealthy non-career politician Trump’s public intervention on political orthodoxy has been unusually low-risk. In spite, or more accurately because of accusations of sexual misconduct and financial impropriety, which together would have holed any other presidential candidate below the waterline, Trump has been able to project himself in relation to his existing celebrity status as some sort of an authentic everyman (no doubt by appealing to the narcissistic fantasies of many of those who voted for him).

The shift towards an alt-facts/post-truth (post-*parrhesia*) political culture has not come about simply as a result of Trump’s triumph at the polls, but in addition widening doubts over the factual as well as moral authority of the supposedly progressive outlook claimed by so-called neo-liberal elites, whose advocacy of inclusive pluralism/multiculturalism under globalisation can be seen as the latest dissembling projection of an otherwise perfidious capitalist spectacle. To which one might add continuing failures by the socialist left to break back into the democratic political mainstream, not least because of abiding majority concerns over financial competency and the historical tendency of socialist regimes, elected or otherwise, towards authoritarianism.⁴

Cut loose from its conventional anchorage in truth-telling and in the face of an increasing economic precarity, with deep social divisions as well as the emergence of ever more restrictive post-panoptical societies of control, democracy is now an open arena for the highest bids in terms of unsubstantiated assurances given to the electorate of their future security and prospects. *Faux* democracies, such as those of the Russian Federation and Turkey have long-since operated along similar lines. With Trump's election the supposed bulwark of Western democracy has lurched spectacularly in the same direction. Any absolute differentiation between electoral democracy and authoritarianism—other than as a matter of the superficialities of process—under present conditions is fast receding. No wonder China claims the moral ascendancy of its own brand of socialist democracy. In that context those perceived as having dangerous populist tendencies such as disgraced 'princeling' politician Bo Xilai can at least be pre-emptively excluded from the political arena. In the USA it is down to the Republican administration to wrangle the notoriously wayward Trump in office. (I speak ironically.)

The role of the *parrhesiastes* has, as Michel Foucault indicates, always been a problematic one in relation to democracy in view of the possibility that immoral speakers posing as truth-tellers may lead the people into tyranny.⁵ At present, credible distinctions between good and bad political faith are far from being assured (if indeed they ever were). It is therefore by no means clear how the position of the 'true' *parrhesiastes* might now be resurrected in the majority imagination.

On the face of it, renewed radicalism on the left and right are not only starkly opposed to one another but also generationally to a previously ascendant poststructuralist-inflected neo-liberalism. That trinity of oppositions is, however, by no means assured in practice. As previously indicated it is possible to view the post-truth tendencies of the radical right as a partial apotheosis of a more general discursive indeterminacy revealed by poststructuralist postmodernism—a deconstructivist 'dark side', if you will. At the same time, neo-liberalism is itself undeniably enmeshed with the assimilation of poststructuralist discourses in support of a global politics of difference. The radical left is by its very nature historically resistant to the profound uncertainties revealed by poststructuralist postmodernism—looking as it does to a more pragmatic common sense resistance to evident social inequalities under capitalism. However, after postmodernism it too now intersects with persistent traces of poststructuralist thought and practice, including in relation to assertions of spectrum identity. As such, it therefore arguably aligns itself, depending on one's political viewpoint, with a performative assault on binary patriarchy, or a paradoxically authoritarian colonisation of female space.

Further to which progressive left-leaning attitudes often remain supportive of the inclusive pluralism associated with neo-liberalism. Exemplary in this regard are many of those on the left who continue to object to Brexit in the UK (the overriding appeal of the European Union being its projection of an inclusive transnationalism) in spite of the EU's evident pursuit of many of the economic aims of neo-liberalism. In spite of appearances, what has emerged is not a fundamentally polarised political landscape, but instead one commensurate with debates related to the concept of contemporaneity, within which ostensibly opposed but in practice imbricating political-cultural visions are understood to inconclusively resist and negate one another's authority.⁶

So what of the contemporary art world in this regard? Majority attitudes within the contemporary art world are ostensibly on or towards the left of the political spectrum. This tendency is generally symptomatic of the continuing dominance within the contemporary art world of Western post-Enlightenment conceptions of aesthetic modernity that have, for the most part, gravitated historically towards progressive/transformational politics on the left through shifts from romanticism to modernism and then to postmodernism. As a consequence, the contemporary art world has

almost automatically become a focus for liberal poststructuralist postmodernist attitudes supportive of multiculturalism as well as a renewed oppositional resistance to social inequality under capitalism. As numerous commentators have pointed out, alignment between the contemporary art world and progressive politics on the left is heavily qualified by persistent associations with capital. Peter Bürger's highlighting during the 1970s of the recuperation of modernist art by the market place after WWII strongly informed postmodernist criticism of the avant-gardes as a supposed locus of progressive-dialectical criticality.⁷ Nevertheless, since the advent of postmodern neo-liberalism during the 1980s, there has been an increasingly established coincidence between the workings of the market and the critical value ascribed to contemporary art. Indeed, coincidence between the market place and the critical value of contemporary art is now so potent that it can be understood to resonate indirectly with Damien Hirst's assertion that art (particularly during times of economic uncertainty) is "more powerful than money".⁸

Contemporary art's close association with capital has not only supported a huge growth in the number of professionalised artists, curators and other art workers world-wide, it has also given rise to a vast globalised infrastructure of museums, festivals and private galleries, including, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, within post-socialist states. There is consequently a heightened state of mutual dependency between art and capital that simultaneously supports and negatively recuperates art's seemingly progressive engagement with society. It is simply not in the self-interest of the contemporary art world to fundamentally unsettle its close relationship with capital; too many privileged jobs are dependent upon the continuity of that relationship.

This paradoxical state of mutual dependency was eminently negotiable in relation to a previously dominant postmodernist neo-liberalism, under which the contemporary art world could dissemble its entanglement with capital by appealing to the notion that it was in fact deconstructively subverting the pernicious effects of the latter. Institutionalised traces of artistic postmodernism, not least in relation to the politics of identity, remain. Nevertheless, in the face of a now roundly discredited neo-liberalism claim by the contemporary art world that it is subversively resistant to capitalism can be seen as profoundly ironic. Further to which, it is by no means clear that the contemporary art world is fully disengaged from politics on the right. As a recent article published on the art world website *Hyperallergic* reveals, art collectors and museum patrons were among the biggest donors to Trump's inauguration.⁹ Such financial connections are indicative of a wider dissembling of bourgeois-conservative attitudes within the contemporary art world under the guise of left-leaning liberalism.

There have also been recent signs within the contemporary art world of flirtation/engagement with alt-right thinking against the grain of established liberal attitudes. Exemplary of this tendency is the speakers' program of the LD50 Gallery in London, which attracted in February 2017 violent resistance from leftist groups because of its inclusion of alt-right speakers.¹⁰ Such heterodox interventions can of course be interpreted as a desire to maintain dissensual criticality beyond the politically correct managerialism of the contemporary art world. However, they also inevitably give credence and perhaps indicate allegiances to highly questionable prejudicial discourses.

There has, of course, been a much vaunted "return to politics" within the contemporary art world after postmodernism (otherwise known as the "social turn"), often involving Marxian informed public protest and community engagement, ostensibly opposed to neo-liberalism and the rise of the radical right. This return to critical opposition on the left is also problematic however. In seeking to directly oppose the divisive effects of neo-liberalism and its associations with artistic postmodernism, socially-engaged contemporary art has set its face against the critical insights of poststructuralism and

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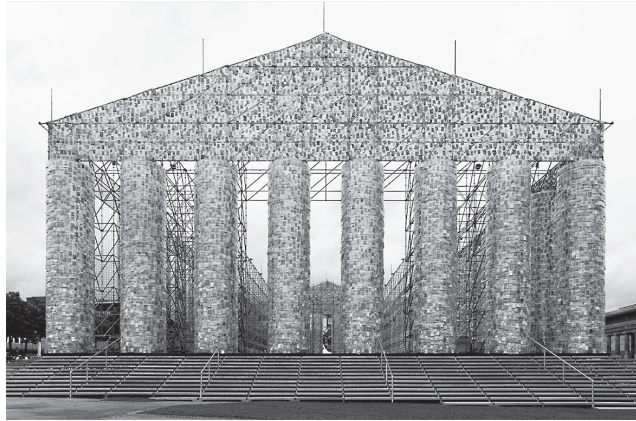
in particular a demonstrable deconstructivist problematisation of all truth claims and associated meta-narratives. Upheld instead is a return to much simpler and more easily digestible dialectical framings of truth and moral-political value in support of supposedly radical social intervention (one might include the readily self-deconstructing idealism of Alain Badiou's neo-modernist inaesthetics and Jacques Rancière's appeals to an equality of *dissensus*).

Here, there is arguably an unnecessary conflation of the institutionalisation of poststructuralist-inflected discourses in support of neo-liberal managerialism and a controlling political correctness, and the far more critically virulent/saprophytic counter-authoritarianism of deconstruction. The political (re)turn in the art world after postmodernism may thus be interpreted as a misleading reassertion of already highly problematic dialectical-critical assumptions. Further to which, while there are habitual assertions of art's oppositional social-critical efficacy within the contemporary art world, little actual evidence of that efficacy beyond, perhaps, short-lived localised examples can be shown. As Guy Debord sought to make clear in advance on the institutionalisation of postmodernism, direct critical opposition to authority is automatically recuperated as part of the affirmative logic of capitalist spectacle.

What, therefore, pertains within the contemporary art world—as in the “post-truth” political sphere more generally—is an inconclusive circulation of imbricating/mutually-negating discursive positions; one that not only encompasses assaults on the usual suspects of neo-liberal capitalism and the far-right but also attempts to revivify a previously discredited oppositional radicalism on the left. With regard to the contemporary art world's heightened dependency on capitalist spectacle, that circulation seems less like a genuinely progressive contestation than a mutually assured holding pattern providing appearances of criticality, while shoring up a symbiosis of financial and cultural capital. There is what might be seen in metaphorical terms as a collective (partisan) kicking of corpses that projects a twitching parody of life onto by now thoroughly exhausted political outlooks (“*Do the Mussolini... headkick!*”).

In the midst of what is currently an ostensibly highly polarised political landscape, perhaps something far less easily intelligible is emerging. As Foucault indicates, problematisation of *parrhesia* is a persistent adjunct to democracy. It is also, he suggests, a locus of the possibility of productive political transformations in relation to the singularity of prevailing historical conditions.¹¹ What could well be taking place in interaction with profound shifts in what used to be referred to as the socio-economic base and a wider natural ecology under globalisation is the un-nameable formation of a reconfigured socio-political landscape to which established post-Enlightenment political discourses on the right and left can only be applied superficially (Fredric Jameson's framing of an un-chartable postmodernism prefigures this assessment but with a perhaps ultimately redundant recourse to Marxian thought¹²).

As the unfolding of historical events attests, socio-economic change is almost certainly not an absolute guarantor of a progressive millenarian transformation of capitalism as hoped for by the left (viz. Paul Mason¹³). Gilles Deleuze's late career analysis of societies of control already indicated the redundancy of such hope.¹⁴ Something worse than late capitalism, in at least some respects, is likely to arise. We may also be witnesses to the waning of the long durée of artistic romanticism as a mainstay of post-Enlightenment criticality—of which artistic postmodernism was a last gasp. Heightened convolutions within an absurdist contemporary art world would suggest as much.



Notes

¹ This title derives in part from the lyrics to Cabaret Voltaire's song 'Do the Mussolini (Headkick)', 1978

² Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt eds, *Illuminations*, New York City: Knopf Doubleday, 1968

³ The phrase "economical with the facts" was used famously during the trial of the former MI5 agent Peter Wright in relation to the publication of his memoir *Spycatcher*; <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/7547558/Peter-Wright.html>; accessed 21 April 2017

⁴ In spite of unexpectedly winning an increased number of seats at the 2017 UK general election, Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party, for example, remains no closer to power in terms of vote share than defeated New Labour under Gordon Brown in 2010. This electoral 'success' was achieved in large part through Corbyn's undeniable charismatic self-presentation as a *parrhesiastes*. However, while resonant with an increased share of hopeful middle class and youth votes, Corbyn's truth-telling was dismissed by a still doubtful majority (albeit reduced) who continued to place their political allegiances elsewhere. One wonders at the irony of Corbyn's rapturous post-election reception at this year's Glastonbury festival, which carried distinct traces of the aestheticisation of politics identified by Benjamin. Populism rather than nationalism has become the order of the day, even of the left

⁵ See Michel Foucault, 'Discourse and Truth: the Problematisation of Parrhesia', Six lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, 1983; <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>; accessed 21 April 2017

⁶ See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, London: Verso, 2013

⁷ See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1974]

⁸ See Sean O'Hagan, 'Damien Hirst: "I still believe that art is more powerful than money"', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2012; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/mar/11/damien-hirst-tate-retrospective-interview>; accessed 28 April 2017

⁹ Benjamin Sutton, 'Art Collectors and Museum Patrons among Biggest Donors to Trump's Inauguration', *Hyperallergic*, 20 April 2017; <https://hyperallergic.com/373504/trump-donors-art-patrons/>; accessed 28 April 2017

¹⁰ See May Bulman, "'Far-right' gallery in London forced to close because it 'keeps getting attacked'", *The Independent*, 15 March 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/far-right-gallery-art-hackney-ld50-london-attacked-shut-down-lucia-diego-nick-land-andrew-osborne-a7631971.html>; accessed 28 April 2017

¹¹ See Michel Foucault, 'Discourse and Truth: Problematisation of Parrhesia', op cit.

¹² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1992

¹³ Paul Mason, *Postcapitalism: a Guide to Our Future*, London: Allen Lane, 2015

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze, 'Postscript on the Societies of Control', *October* 59, 1992, pp. 3-7