

# Art as Political Discourse

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*Much art is committed to political causes. However, does art contribute something unique to political discourse, or does it merely reflect the insights of political science and political philosophy? Here I argue for indispensability of art to political discourse by building on the debate about artistic cognitivism, the view that art is a source of knowledge. Different artforms, I suggest, make available specific epistemic resources, which allow audiences to overcome epistemic obstacles that obtain in a given ideological situation. My goal is to offer a general model for identifying cognitive advantages for artworks belonging to distinct artforms and genres (e.g. satire, visibility-raising artworks, caricatures, and so on), in a way that can account for each artwork's historical and cultural specificity. More speculatively, however, my account also comments on the ancient struggle between philosophy and the arts as competing modes of persuasion, and expands our notion of legitimate political discourse to include a greater plurality of discursive genres.*

## 1. Politically Discursive Art

Gerhard Richter's portrait of his uncle wearing a Nazi uniform, *Uncle Rudi* (1965), addresses the subject of intergenerational guilt in Germany; Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) critiques patriarchal oppression through a story set in a dystopian future society; Public Enemy's hip-hop album *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) tackles institutional racism in the USA; Jasmila Žbanić's film *Esma's Secret* (2006) narrates the story of a rape survivor raising her child, broaching this difficult subject in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars. We can categorize such works as politically discursive art, in the sense that they are recognizably about a political issue: audiences receive such works as contributions to a debate in the public sphere. While in the first half of the twentieth century, the very idea of political content in art had to be defended—for example, in W. E. B. Du Bois' defence of anti-racist art (Du Bois, 1926) or in Walter Benjamin's defence of 'tendentious art' and the role of the author as 'producer' (Benjamin, 1934/1999)—in our own time, art has become an undeniably political forum. From TV series to hip-hop albums, from feminist 'craftivism' to environmentalist land art, the artist's licence to display overt political tendencies through her work is hardly in doubt.

Nevertheless, what role such politically discursive art performs may be questioned. For example, should we say that Atwood's novel merely *reflects* feminist criticism of patriarchal society, or does it add something to that criticism in a way that a feminist theorist might? *Fear of a Black Planet* may motivate one to notice the racism experienced in the United States, but does it itself contribute to political discourse about racism in a way that a manifesto might? The question I propose to address, accordingly, is this: can politically

discursive art contribute something distinct to political debate on specific topics, or does it simply rehearse positions arrived at in other disciplines?

Before we tackle the question, a brief methodological note is in order. The background to my enquiry will be ideas of deliberative democracy: broadly speaking, the thought that political debate takes place within a public sphere, within which different modes of communication are available to participants. The key question for theorists of public reason in deliberative democracy—such as John Rawls, Amy Gutmann and Jürgen Habermas—is what deliberative norms will ensure outcomes that are both fairly arrived at and are likely to be correct. To establish art's contribution to discourse, I therefore suggest that we compare political art with argument-driven forms of public debate, which are typically presented as ideal within a well-ordered public discourse. Admittedly, some readers will find this set-up as already *too optimistic* about the merits of deliberative democracy. Indeed, the connection between art and politics has been much more readily studied within critical theory traditions such as the Frankfurt school and poststructuralism, which begin with a radical scepticism of the public sphere—viewing it as already deeply compromised by unequal power relations and false consciousness—and then posit art as a kind of counterweight to that sphere (the work of Theodor Adorno is perhaps most representative here). To put my cards on the table: the picture I build here will, by contrast, allow for considerable faith in the public sphere in modern democracies, although I hope the relationship between my position and some of the valid worries traditionally expressed in critical theory will become clearer later in the paper.

I begin the investigation by pointing to a related view in contemporary aesthetics—cognitivism about art—in order to formulate the problem of parity between art and non-art discourse. I delineate my view—that art yields discursive knowledge—from views that it yields experiential or practical knowledge. Then, in Section 3, I will offer a case *against* parity in the political context. Making use of John Rawls' and Jürgen Habermas' accounts of public reason, I will construct an argument for the pre-eminence of the objective style of political discourse. In Section 4, I will resist that case, arguing that there are instances where the very attempt to inhabit the objective style may leave us worse off epistemically and that, in those cases, political art can be epistemically superior. I illustrate my argument with two examples in Section 5, before addressing objections in Section 6.

## 2. The Problem of Parity

Artistic cognitivism is the claim that art makes available non-trivial knowledge, in a way that is particular to it as art. Several philosophers have argued for cognitivism by pointing out an *overlap* between artistic and systematic forms of justification: works of art, just like systematic discourse, can provide thought experiments (Camp, 2009), can offer examples of virtue and vice (Carroll, 2002), can encourage inductive reasoning from examples to general conclusions (Putnam, 1978), can appeal to emotions to motivate arguments (Nanay, 2013) and can clarify concepts by offering particular applications for them (John, 1998). We might designate these philosophical efforts as formulating an 'argument from overlap': art is a source of knowledge, because artistic devices overlap with methods that

we, as philosophers, already recognize as conducive to knowledge. This may be easily translated into a political context. Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) may be thought of as a carefully constructed thought experiment of a life lived under extreme misogyny; Public Enemy's *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) may be said to conceptually clarify the concept 'systemic racism' by giving clear examples of it. By using such legitimate devices of political discourse, each artwork thereby furthers our understanding of the political issues it tackles.

So, art clearly can contribute to political discourse. However, the initial problem that artistic cognitivism sought to address, chiefly in the 1990s and 2000s, was the question of whether art could yield any valuable knowledge *at all* (Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, pp. 324ff, 68, 84–5, 402ff). With that worry by now largely laid to rest, a further problem arises: the problem of *epistemic parity* between art and non-artistic disciplines. Consider this analogy. You are having a drunken late-night conversation about politics with a particularly brilliant friend. Even though that conversation does not conform to the rigours of academic discourse, it is presumably possible to learn much from it. While desultory and digressive, the conversation might still contain valid argumentation and truthful assertions, even singular moments of inspiration. Still, it is also true that you would have acquired the relevant knowledge more efficiently were your friend not inebriated and could have organized her thoughts more systematically. The worry now is that art is just like your brilliant, drunken friend: overlap does not guarantee parity. Since non-art political discourse has only one aim (to deepen our understanding of political issues), it can absorb any mechanism found in art (such as detailed thought experiments or emotionally forceful examples) and apply them exactly as needed without getting distracted with other aims (such as plot pacing in fiction, or rhyme in hip hop). While the arts may do well, and *even very well*, at progressing knowledge, there remains a possibility that the arts will always be *worse* at securing knowledge than theoretical disciplines. This is the problem of parity.

In choosing how we deal with the problem of parity, the cognitivist about art encounters an interesting fork in the road. The first option is to propose that there exist *special kinds of knowledge*, which art is especially good at securing. Some philosophers have put forward the idea that art offers *experiential* insights (e.g. Gaut, 2007, pp. 141–202; Green, 2010; Walton 1990, pp. 25–30, 34–35, 95, 211), or that art yields *practical* moral wisdom (e.g. Carroll, 2002; Gaut, 2007, pp. 163ff; Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 148–67). Now, the exact nature of these claims varies from philosopher to philosopher, and some of them can be interpreted as also leaning towards the 'overlap' claims mentioned above. But the important point is this: insofar as one insists that experiential and practical knowledge arrived at through art are truly *distinct* from the more propositional knowledge pursued by argumentation, then it is easy to overcome the problem of parity. Art then reigns over its own realm of non-propositional, *non-paraphrasable* insight (cf. Nussbaum, 1990, pp. 4–5), while systematic intellectual disciplines are left confined to their own domain.

To insist on a clear distinction between different domains of knowledge, however, strikes me as unsuitable for the *politically discursive* artworks. Politically discursive works broach a thesis, a point or a subject that is clearly legible from the purview of other disciplines (it is for this reason that these works have been disparagingly called 'tendentious' or even 'didactic' works of art). Art criticism around Richter's *Uncle Rudi*

routinely points to the subject of intergenerational guilt in Germany, and the reception of Atwood's *The handmaid's tale* points towards a critique of patriarchal relations. But such subjects are fully debatable through political science or philosophy. Therefore, if artworks make genuine contribution to our understanding of such subjects, their contribution cannot be of a radically different kind, and must be interrogable by systematic disciplines.

For this reason, I propose to take a different path, and to insist that political art and systematic disciplines are after knowledge of the *same kind*. The kind of knowledge in question will, to a large degree, be *propositional* (it will include statements about how the world is, or how it ought to be), but we need not get too caught up in the propositional-practical-experiential distinction, sometimes imported into philosophy of art from analytic epistemology. Two other clarifications are more important. First, by invoking the term 'knowledge' in the political context, I mean to assume that *some* epistemic progress can be made in the realm of politics, although this allows that there may be areas of uncertainty that we shall never fully settle (we may never know what a perfect society looks like, but we now know that feudalism is not it). Secondly, a contrast seems to obtain between *discursive* propositional knowledge, such as knowledge about the nature of tolerance, and *mundane* propositional knowledge, such as knowing that 'it is raining outside'. We can obtain mundane propositional knowledge simply from perception or from testimony. *Discursive knowledge*, by contrast, is a matter of more complex processes of justification. A subject can be said to have understood *more*, say, about the nature of patriarchy, if she has considered a greater number of theories and facts, and worked through her conceptual schemas. The knowledge we are after is arrived at by more intellectually exerting routes than simply looking through the window or asking the teacher.

Against this background, we must push our analysis of art further than the 'argument of overlap' did. The task is to address the problem of parity anew, to show that art is not a *second-best* path to knowledge, and to do so *without* invoking a distinct sphere of knowledge. In other words, we are back in the midst of Plato's ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy in Plato's original formulation, that is, their quarrel over the *same* domain—the domain of politics—where what matters is truth, justice and careful thinking (cf. [Plato, 2000](#), X 607b5–6).

### 3. The Pre-eminence of the Objective Style

In the analogy above, *art* corresponded to the intoxicated friend. But that correspondence is not in fact an obvious one. Why should the drunken friend not be, say, political philosophy or political science?

The anti-art assumption seems to be a natural one to make from within philosophy itself. Especially in analytic philosophy, we have come to value a certain measured style that comprises perspicacious structuring of arguments, clear signposting, definite conclusions, systematic presentation of evidence, elimination of the author's distinct voice and autobiography, lack of flourishes and digressions, avoidance of ambiguity, and other such

stylistic properties. We may call such a style the ‘objective style’ of discourse. We find one manifesto-like defence of it in Timothy Williamson’s *Philosophy of Philosophy*:

We need the unglamorous virtue of patience to read and write philosophy that is as perspicuously structured as the difficulty of the subject requires, and the austerity to be dissatisfied with appealing prose that does not meet those standards. The fear of boring oneself or one’s readers is a great enemy of truth.

(Williamson, 2007, p. 288)

Following this line of reasoning, art would almost certainly count among the enemies of truth; after all, few artists set out to bore their audiences. However, it is not yet clear what exactly might justify our preference for the objective style when we speak of political discourse. After all, discourse that is so boring and unglamorous that nobody has the patience to engage with it would hardly convince anybody. To mount an argument in favour of the objective style, we need to reflect on the proper procedure of acquiring knowledge through a political debate. A suitable philosophical portrait of such a process may be borrowed from democratic discourse theory in its original form; here I shall draw on two best-known exponents, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.

While following different political programmes, both Rawls and Habermas have defended the notion of public reason: the idea that the legitimacy of political rules depends not simply on the agreement of actual citizens, but on what would be agreed by *suitably idealized* rational subjects. For Rawls, only ‘reasonable’ subjects form the constituency of public reason. These are the subjects who can temporarily bracket their own interests, position, substantive opinions or religious views, as suggested by the veil of ignorance of Rawls’ ‘original position’ (Rawls, 1997, pp. 769–73; Rawls, 2005, pp. 22–23, 47–59). Habermas’ early theory of communicative rationality similarly stipulates that those engaging in public argumentation must assume an ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas, 1970; for elaboration, see Brand, 1990, pp. 11, 19–24, 28–29). Here, subjects do not seek to coerce each other’s opinions (what Habermas calls ‘strategic action’) but jointly aim to find inherently good solutions (‘communicative action’) (Habermas, 1984, pp. 87–88, 94–96). As with Rawls’ reasonable subjects, the participants in an ideal speech situation weigh different political options impartially, such that ‘the structure of [the participants’] communication rules out all external or internal coercion other than the force of the better argument’ (Habermas, 1990, pp. 88–89). Neither Rawls nor Habermas is primarily concerned with the question of what rhetorical *style* should be employed under the idealized conditions of political discourse they describe. And yet, the picture they paint tends towards the objective style.

In *Political Liberalism*, for example, Rawls suggests that reasonable subjects ought to abide by the duty of civility to one another—that is, be willing to explain how their political preferences derive from impartial concerns (Rawls, 2005, pp. 217). He also introduces the requirement that they should do so in an accessible way (Rawls, 2005, p. 162n28), and elsewhere calls for ‘public occasions of *orderly and serious* discussion of fundamental questions and issues of public policy’ (Rawls, 1997, p. 772, my emphasis). Rawls gives the measured and impartial style in which the Justices of the Supreme Court should ideally give their opinions as an exemplar (2005, pp. 235ff). Habermas, comparably, insists that

all forms of public reason be free of the attempt to manipulate the other party, and should in principle be justifiable in the ideal speech situation of giving reasons and yielding to better arguments: ‘Even the most fleeting of speech-act offers, the most conventional yes/no responses, *rely on* potential reasons’. (Habermas, 1996, p. 19; cited in Allen, 2012, p. 356) For this reason, as one commentator noted, Habermas demands that speakers in the ideal situation should avoid insincerity, self-contradiction and inconsistent use of terms and irony (Panagia, 2004, pp. 832–33).

What is here stipulated is a certain *match* between *idealized* political subjects and the *manner* of their deliberations. Reasonable participants in public discourse, as we saw, have a duty to expurgate idiosyncratic epistemic obstacles: their individual biases, their desire for dominating others, and so forth. They affirm this commitment to reasonableness by addressing themselves only to those epistemic obstacles that are indelible and shared: obstacles such as the inherent difficulty of the arguments involved, the unavailability of evidence or the vagueness of shared concepts (these are what Rawls calls the ‘burdens of judgment’; Rawls, 2005, pp. 56–57). For such obstacles, the objective style of reasoning will be best-suited. The objective style separates the speaker’s idiosyncratic position from the content of her arguments and, by eliminating such features as wilful self-contradiction or lack of seriousness, the objective style is also the most accessible—that is, easiest for other reasonable participants to follow.

This rationalist picture of public reason is, it ought to be noted, no longer as dominant in political theory as when Rawls and Habermas first formulated it. Some proponents of deliberative democracy have become more open to forms of communication that go beyond argumentation, especially when considering the real, rather than idealized, conditions of democratic deliberation (Polletta and Gardner, 2018). The case I intend to formulate for political art is broadly aligned with such developments. That being said, the rationalist model is still at the core of democratic deliberation theory (cf. Goodin, 2018) and, even in its expanded format, provides a foil for artistic forms. Art does not fit snugly with its demands: ruminative paintings about guilt do not even offer clear-cut conclusions, and hip-hop albums do not abide by the ‘duty of civility’. So, let us, for now, distil the rationalist model of public reason into an argument for the pre-eminence of the objective genre, and consider the implications such an argument has for works of political art.

The first premise of the argument here is that, at the commencement of any political enquiry, reasonable subjects should aspire to the idealized condition of speech. They should try to reduce their individual epistemic obstacles as much as possible: bracket their biases, but also brace themselves against boredom and distraction. What degree of idealization we should expect of real-life participants can be debated (cf. Vallier, 2018, §2.4); however, it seems clear that the subjects should aspire to be as impartial and public-minded as possible. Let us call such an aspirational state—the state with the fewest possible epistemic obstacles—the state of discursive rationality. Importantly, the first premise need not stipulate that participants in public discourse should ever *actually achieve* that state, merely that it is something we should aspire towards. And that seems self-evident: the state with the fewest epistemic obstacles is the one we should aspire towards.

The second premise is that the objective genre is best-suited to a subject in the state of discursive rationality. This also seems plausible. By perspicuously structuring arguments

and impartially laying out evidence, the objective style is directed precisely at the remaining, indelible obstacles of any enquiry. The objective style makes no concessions to laziness, or to biases, or to being easily distracted, or indeed to the propensity to be moved by anything other than the force of the better argument. The various features typical of the arts, such as plot pacing, concerns with rhythm or creation of thoughtful aporias, on the other hand, are not directed at the indelible epistemic obstacles—namely, the difficulty of arguments or unavailability of evidence. Precisely those devices that separate art from objective discourse are, then, at best superfluous and at worst distracting.

What follows from these premises—that we should aspire to discursive rationality, and that the objective style is best-suited to that state—is a certain elite position for the objective genre. The reasonable subject and the objective style of discourse are a good fit; they are the model enquirer and the model medium of any intellectual investigation. It may be observed that, in reality, the rhetorical styles in public debates are a lot more mixed (there are, for example, more subjective forms of journalism and more personal modes of public address). But the compass of epistemic prestige in political discourse will point towards the stylistically objective elements, just as Williamson suggests for philosophy in general. There is, then, no parity between objective political discourse (philosophy, political science, serious journalism, and so on) and the arts.

Still, this argument does not imply that the proper attitude of the philosopher towards the arts should be one of disparagement; rather, it should be a kind of patronizing encouragement. The arts, as we saw, overlap with other forms of public discourse. They may therefore serve those public discussants who, due to some circumstantial weakness or disadvantage, cannot quite aspire to the state of discursive rationality (cf. Polletta and Gardner, 2018, pp. 72–3). For somebody easily *bored*, for example, Atwood's gripping narrative in *The Handmaid's Tale* may be a useful introduction to ideas about anti-patriarchy. For somebody daunted by the turgid texts on social justice, rap albums may provide a more engaging way to think through oppressions of racism. Equally, we might say that introductions to philosophy (but not serious texts) may take a literary form, such as Jostein Gaarder's *Sophie's World* (1991) or Timothy Williamson's own *Tetralogue* (2015). The arts may, then, play a sort of didactic, kindergartently handmaiden to philosophy. For discursive knowledge of the highest kind, we must still ascend to the clear-sighted industriousness of the objective style.

#### 4. Plurality of Rhetorical Modes

Our aim now is to defuse the argument for the pre-eminence of the objective genre. I propose that we take no issue with the second premise: that the objective genre is best-suited to subjects who have already arrived at the state of discursive rationality. I like to imagine such subjects as the souls in Dante's *Paradiso*, the non-omniscient but ideally rational beings, who would probably have little use for political art of any sort. I propose that we dislodge the first premise instead and claim that *aspiring* towards the state of discursive rationality—bracketing one's biases and so forth—is *not always* the epistemically best thing to do at the commencement of an enquiry. This may seem counterintuitive, but there is an

important ambiguity at work here. If we conceive of ‘aspiration’ as merely ‘the desire to be in’, then we ought to agree with the first premise: the state with the fewest epistemic obstacles is the epistemically most desirable. However, if we conceive of ‘aspiration’ as ‘an attempt to inhabit’, then the premise becomes less obviously appealing. We must ask, in other words, whether, for people like ourselves, there might not obtain situations where the effort of hoisting ourselves up to that exalted position would *backfire*, create new epistemic obstacles or fail to dispel the ones that exist. We will have to fill in some details here. Who are ‘people like ourselves’? What sorts of beings might stumble and scratch their knees when reaching for the highest echelons of rationality?

Recent social epistemology has pointed out various ways in which epistemic obstacles form part of our social background: injustice may be woven into publicly available concepts (Fricker, 2007, pp. 18–27), into our sense of identity (Stanley, 2015, pp. 196–201; elaborating on Stebbing 1939, p. 33), and may be inherent in psychological attitudes like closed-mindedness or dogmatism (Cassam, 2019, Chapters 2–4). If we accept that such obstacles are pervasive and recalcitrant, there is a genuine question as to whether taking a deep breath, pointing them out, ‘bracketing them’, and then proceeding with the rigorous objective style is always the optimal way for their overcoming.

To see what I have in mind, consider a few examples; these are gathered from philosophical and political science literature. Political scientists Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler have reported on the ‘backfire effect’ in political persuasion (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010). This occurs when a participant in a debate is offered evidence that contradicts her preferred belief; curiously, offering such new evidence can backfire in the sense that the participant then doubles down on her belief rather than revises it in accordance with the new data. Nyhan and Reifler observed this effect in the context of the Second Gulf War, when pro-war subjects, who believed in the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in Iraq, were presented with evidence to the contrary. Afterwards, the subjects curiously reported a *higher* certainty in the existence of WMDs (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010, pp. 314–15; analogous findings were established on the left of the ideological spectrum as well). What is curious for our purposes is that the corrective evidence in these experiments was invariably presented in the objective style: as impartial, factual news reports. And yet, such calm, evidence-driven counter-arguments have led the subjects to hold even tighter onto their beliefs, when we would expect them to lower their credence, or for it at least not to change.

To give a different case of how the objective style of discourse may fail us, consider Robin McKenna’s (2019) recent exploration of subjects’ weakened ability to obtain new justified beliefs, when these beliefs are *consistent* with the subject’s ideological position. For example, McKenna argues that subjects who identify with liberal and environmentalist values are less critical of studies that support the existence of climate change. While climate change, of course, exists, not all reports on all aspects of it will be factually correct, and liberal-environmentalist audiences are more likely to go along, uncritically, with such faulty studies. As a result, we seem less capable of obtaining new knowledge on issues we politically identify with, even if our views happen to be broadly correct (McKenna, 2019, pp. 758, 763–65; analogous cases can be found elsewhere on the political spectrum). Again, it seems, the objective, scientific presentation of evidence by itself



provides no additional help to our critical faculties. When strong political commitments are in place, it seems that we are only too happy to be led down the route that gets us to the desired conclusion—without applying due critical pressure on the way.

In all these cases we find what Adrian Piper has called the state of ‘pseudo-rationality’: the semblance of rational coherence that we inhabit to justify the beliefs we are committed to (Piper, 2013, pp. 289–96, 312–16). Piper’s point, as I understand it, is that such subjects need not engage in deliberate sophistry; they do not merely *cynically* use arguments to further a point they do not believe in, as Habermas at some point suggested (Habermas, 1984, pp. 295ff). In fact, the subjects might quite sincerely attempt to bracket their biases and reason impartially; it is only that by doing so, they still weigh evidence or apply focus in a biased way. Our adherence to the objective style may be perfectly well-meaning, but this does not guarantee that our epistemic processes will proceed impeccably.

If one acknowledges such cases, the crucial question becomes: what, if anything, might help? What would snap a person out of their state of pseudo-rationality? As the examples given above demonstrate, simply trying harder, and more doggedly pursuing rational argumentation, will not always work. In those cases, we might speculate, an interlocutor’s sarcastic remark may make us see that we have sacrificed truth to argumentative rigour. Or, perhaps, a joke, or, a plaintive tone of voice, or, alternatively, creating some healthy ruckus, slamming the table, saying, ‘come on now, I know you are smart, but look at the facts!’. What—if *anything*—will lead to epistemic progress and acknowledgement of the facts will depend on the specific dynamics of the situation. Anybody who has engaged in protracted intellectual gymnastics over a heated political issue—or even in a debate over whose turn it is to do the dishes—will be, I take it, familiar with this phenomenon to an extent. For a given epistemic obstacle to be noted and overcome, what sometimes needs to happen is a *shift* from the objective style into another rhetorical mode.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to again acknowledge that great schism in twentieth-century Western political theory: between those who have extolled rational deliberation as the best tool for political emancipation, and those who have treated the objective style itself as irredeemably corrupted by power relations. Rawls and Habermas, as well as most first-generation analytic political philosophers, may be counted within the first camp; ideology-critical traditions, from Theodor Adorno and Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler, within the second. While I do not mean the present paper to spill into the intractable territory of this rift, it is worth pointing out that our discussion at this point allows for a middle path between these extremes: a pluralist position. *Sometimes*, a sincere aspiration to discursive rationality and the objective style *will* offer the best available means to overcome social epistemic obstacles. But that need not be universally the case. To dislodge the argument for the pre-eminence of the objective style, we need not do anything as ambitious (and counterproductive) as deconstruct all instances of objective-style thinking. Our criticism of the objective style can confine itself, more modestly but also more precisely, to isolated cases—those where objective-style thinking fails epistemically.

This, I suggest, is the chink in the armour of objective style through which we can address the problem of parity. Attempting to inhabit the state of discursive rationality is not *always* a good idea. This claim, it strikes me, is modest enough; but if it is true, we

still need to take a few more steps to secure parity between artistic and objective genres. We need to demonstrate a sort of match: show that precisely *in those cases* where objective style fails, artistic devices can help overcome epistemic obstacles. That, if you like, is the general model. But to secure parity with any particular genre of art, or indeed any particular work of art, the discussion must now become more piecemeal and responsive to culturally specific contexts; philosophy must here join hands with history of the arts and art criticism. I will merely offer two, necessarily brief and schematic, illustrations.

## 5. Political Art in Context

To illustrate how parity may be achieved, I will use two examples of politically discursive art belonging to the recent Anglophone popular culture. Due to the United States' status as the global cultural hegemon, these examples do not require much of an introduction, which in a brief philosophical paper will have to be accepted as a somewhat unpleasant advantage of US hegemony. I should also say at the outset that I do not take these to be necessarily the most accomplished works of political art. Indeed, some of their very discernible faults will allow us to show how art participates in the public attempt at reaching discursive knowledge, but may (just like discourse in the objective style) both contribute to and detract from it.

Consider first the satirical works that were popular in the 2000s, such as *Borat* (2006) and *Brüno* (2009) created by Sacha Baron-Cohen, or *South Park* (1997–) and *Team America* (2004) by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. These works have an excessive, grotesque, Rabelaisian quality to them. Just as François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* disparaged all strata of the sixteenth-century society through grossness and absurdity, these modern satires mercilessly lacerate a variety of political positions and characters. They denigrate both the ideals that their liberal audiences perceive as 'bad' (domestic and imperialist forms of US chauvinism), and those they may perceive as 'good' (environmentalism, multiculturalism, pacifism). For example, *Team America* derides US hawkish foreign policy—personified in the disastrously bumbling 'world police' taskforce—but it also lampoons the idealist, pacifist option, represented by a gang of dumb Hollywood actors. The primary target of *Borat*, meanwhile, is certainly the casual chauvinism of some Americans, whose openly expressed xenophobic reactions are shown in the film's final cut. However, I depart from the interpretations that see *Borat* as unequivocally subversive of xenophobia (for such an analysis, see Zupančič, 2008, p. 33). The depiction of the film's protagonist as promiscuous and crude also channels stereotypes about third-world immigrants, and the film, I think, therefore *is* also at odds with a more liberal sentiment, which would censor such depictions as offensive. In short, these satires are decidedly non-partisan (and perhaps non-partisan to a fault); instead of picking a side, they denigrate all political positions that dominated the public sphere at the time of their making.

I shall not attempt a more detailed description of such neo-Rabelaisian satires, although one could certainly chart their relationship to other established genres of satire (e.g. Horatian, Juvenalian, Menippean, Dryden-esque and so forth) or to other subversive comedies (cf. Griffin, 1994; Zupančič, 2008). For now, let us isolate just one artistic feature

common to these works: the *indiscriminate disparagement* of opposing political positions. This feature is not something that we typically find in works written in the objective style, nor can we imagine it being easily imported into it. The objective style generally seeks to put forward one position at the expense of another and to do so respectfully. So, what could be gained epistemically by such an artistic device, by such a flurry of low blows?

The epistemic benefit of neo-Rabelaisian satire should be understood against the specific background of a polarized political space. As we saw in the previous section, subjects who strongly identify with a given position may find the objective style less suitable for the critical revision of their beliefs. Objective-style corrections may backfire, while objective-style confirmations may be accepted uncritically. Whenever such a highly polarized political situation obtains any *loosening* of the subject's identification with her political camp may become epistemically useful. Neo-Rabelaisian satire, at its best, achieves just that. Within the world of *Team America*, the liberal viewer finds it just as uncomfortable to identify with the sanctimonious Hollywood actors as she does with the mindless military interventionists. *Borat* is perhaps something of a limit case, because here even the political beliefs that are foundational to democracy—such as the belief that xenophobic stereotypes are a bad thing—are temporarily suspended in the portrayal of the protagonist. Now, at a wrong place, at a wrong time, in the wrong hands, this may certainly result in dangerous cynicism, but, at an appropriate moment, neo-Rabelaisian satire can aim at something that the objective-style discourse has trouble with: it can weaken the subject's over-confidence in their own position. By temporarily softening our attachment to *any* of the contestant positions in the public sphere, this form of satire can recalibrate the critical capacity needed for the proper processing of arguments and evidence.

For my second (and quite different) example, consider what we may call visibility-raising artworks: works that foreground the experience of oppressed and culturally underrepresented social groups. The recent television series *Pose* (2018–) is one such work. The series is set in the ballroom subculture of the late 1980s New York, which was largely run by LGBTQ and gender-non-conforming people of colour. If we think about what epistemic obstacles visibility-raising artworks are up against, one uncontroversial proposal would be: *essentialization*. This we may define as a tendency to explain somebody's entire person—their motives, emotions, capabilities and ethos—by reference to a *type* they are perceived as belonging to. Overtly negative stereotypes are a clear case of essentialization, but essentialization may also inhere in subtler forms of xenophobia; for example, stereotypes that attribute a seemingly positive property, such as a Black person's 'sense of rhythm' or a gay man's 'artistic sense' (cf. Piper, 2013, pp. 438–39). Edward Said describes this phenomenon succinctly in his study of Orientalism:

[In an Orientalist mindset,] [w]e are to assume that if *an* Arab feels joy, if he is sad at the death of his child or parent, if he has a sense of the injustices of political tyranny, then those experiences are necessarily subordinate to the sheer, unadorned, and persistent fact of being an Arab.

(Said, 1978, p. 230)

As an epistemic obstacle, essentialization can lead to various false beliefs about other persons, indeed, with dire political consequences. Adrian Piper describes such essentialization

as xenophobia; as she puts it, xenophobia ‘reduces the complex singularity of the other’s properties to an oversimplified but conceptually manageable subset’. (Piper, 2013, p. 422).

Objective-style discourse certainly has a role to play in overcoming essentialization, by, for example, showing that stereotypes are empirically groundless. Nevertheless, we may suggest that objective discourse, in its very structure, makes it hard to contemplate individuals in their distinctiveness. Objective discourse must posit abstract groups even as it calls for those group’s emancipation. Therefore, even if one were to well-meaningly say that ‘LGBTQ individuals have faced challenges of such-and-such nature ...’ one already predisposes the listener to view each individual’s singular nature as primarily understood through their membership of that group. Of course, one may attempt to ameliorate that effect by various qualifications within objective discourse (*‘some LGBTQ people have tended to ...’*). Note, however, that a format like the television series does not have the problem of positing groups with essential characteristics built into its structure, like the objective style does. In a TV series, we simply follow the fate of individual characters, and are not given a set of theses about them as a social group.

That is not to say that every television series is wonderfully good at this; earlier episodes of *Pose* are, I believe, less successful at dispelling essentialization. These involve several clichéd, soap-opera storylines, such as the mentor-student rivalry of Blanca and Elektra, so that the only salient feature in an otherwise predictable situation remains the social type of the protagonists. However, as the series progresses, characters increasingly emerge in their individuality. Blanca’s reaction to her HIV diagnosis is particularly complex, evolving from despair, to a sense of purpose and often-employed gallows humour. All this makes Blanca, as played by Mj Rodriguez, stand out as an individual, whose actions the audience cannot simply reduce to that of a ‘typical’ transwoman. If essentialization is an epistemic obstacle that prevents us from obtaining discursive knowledge about other persons (cf. Piper 2013, pp. 421ff), then the long narrative format of the contemporary TV series, when intelligently employed, carries certain specific advantages over the objective-style discourse about minoritarian subjects.

These examples fill in, I hope, the general from of the argument for parity between politically discursive art and objective-style discourse. In each case, the argument does not require us to represent some kinds of knowledge as exclusive to art alone (the ‘unparaphrasable knowledge’ path); nor does it require a full takedown of the objective style (the critical theory path). Instead, we need to point at specific situations where the objective discourse fails us, where it becomes haunted by spectres of pseudo-rationality, of which dogmatism and essentialization are but two. Whenever this happens, it is to art that we can look for possible corrections.

## 6. Artworks and Arguments

There are a few objections that will hopefully bring my position into sharper relief. Firstly, one might object that there is no necessary link between the artworks I have discussed and their epistemic benefits. Surely, it is possible to imagine an objective-style article that successfully convinces the audiences to be more critical of their own position (my first

example) or to behold persons in their singular nature (my second). Indeed, that is true. However, as we saw at the outset of this paper, it seems patently wrong to think that *any* epistemic shift can be achieved *exclusively* through either art or through objective discourse. Such exclusivity cannot obtain because objective and artistic discourses overlap. Works of art may sometimes point to general trends or facts, and works written in the objective style may sometimes incorporate satirical turns of phrase, detailed descriptions and so forth. The question here is what epistemic obstacles and benefits tend to inhabit different rhetorical modes. The arts can overcome forms of pseudo-rationality that the objective style suffers from, just as, undoubtedly, the objective style can excise epistemic obstacles that it would be more arduous to remove through the arts.

Another objection may point to the epistemic weaknesses of the individual artworks I have described. Artworks, of course, can create epistemic obstacles as well as offer resources. For example, while the neo-Rabelaisian satires may invigorate our critical capacities, as I suggested, one could certainly protest that they can also *weaken* our critical capacities with their use of crude stereotypes. With regards to my other example, *Pose*, I have suggested the series removes the epistemic obstacle of essentialization. But one may protest that I have unduly privileged the epistemic interests of the hegemonic (white, heteronormative) audience when I should have also considered the epistemic interests of the people represented in the series. The epistemic needs of an oppressed group may be quite different from those of the mainstream; as Paul C. Taylor has argued in *Black Aesthetics*, for example, a positive self-understanding of an oppressed group might depend on creating opportunities for authenticity and belonging, as much as on battling stereotypes and essentialization (Taylor, 2017, pp. 132–52).

Such polemical points strengthen, rather than weaken, the case for the cognitive value of political art. Criticisms of specific artworks on epistemic grounds may be justified, but we ought to think of such criticism as analogous to objections and counter-arguments that any philosophical essay is likely to invite as well. Discursive knowledge is rarely settled conclusively in a single contribution, and its goal is not a state of dogmatic certainty that would admit no further objection or thought. Artworks (just as works of objective-style discourse) show themselves to be a part of the cognitive enterprise precisely in virtue of inviting objections or re-interpretations.

Such discursive responses to artworks can be offered through art criticism, but also through the development of artistic forms themselves. For example, certain recent television series perform a similar loosening on their audience's strongly held, 'right-on' beliefs as neo-Rabelaisian satires did in the early 2000s, but they do so by creating morally unsettling, flawed protagonists, rather than by employing crude stereotypes (I here have in mind works like Michaela Cole's brilliant television series *I May Destroy You* (2020)). There is cognitive progress here, in the sense that art now avoids artistic devices, which, on reflection, we think left us epistemically worse off, or unduly muddled the public debate. The correction here is analogous to, say, a shift in the concepts we use in the objective style, or to a shift in arguments we offer.

If artworks can be thought of, in this way, as engaging in a common polemic, this also helps to clarify the difference between attributing *discursive* knowledge to artworks, as I have done, as opposed to claiming distinctly *experiential* or *practical* domains of knowledge

for art (see Section 2 above). It seems unlikely to me that the artworks I have discussed impart significant experiential or practical knowledge. For example, we do not go up to victims of political oppression and say ‘I know how it must feel; I have read many novels about oppression’, nor do we consult artworks in preparation for some distinctly practical challenge. If you also find such claims counterintuitive, then it may come as a relief that the current position does not imply them. There is no claim here that some distinct know-how or wisdom is acquired, nor that artworks are substitutes for lived experience. Artworks are simply contributions to a public debate. Those that are best at it will leave their audiences with beliefs better attuned to how the world is, in ways that would not have been possible had those audiences engaged in the objective-style debate alone.

We ought to think, then, of serious political art as much more tightly interlaced with our ‘non-art’ ways of thinking about the world. To achieve a parity between these ways of thinking, I have suggested, we must show how pseudo-rationality rises up in one rhetorical style, and is then met by countermeasures in another. This is the general model; more fine-grained accounts would demonstrate how this works for specific artistic genres or even specific artworks or movements. Acquiring discursive knowledge in a politically changing world is a dynamic process, which requires shifts from objective to artistic registers and back again; indeed, it requires constant reinvention of rhetorical and artistic modes. But while this means that the objective style of enquiry is displaced from its preeminent place in democratic deliberation, philosophers ought not to feel too despondent about it. Public discourse requires a plurality of communicative styles: not a hierarchical procession with the objective style at the helm, but a concert of rhetorical modes that all have distinctive roles to play.

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