

The Bullshit Cartoon Abstract: In Praise of Creative Academic Writing

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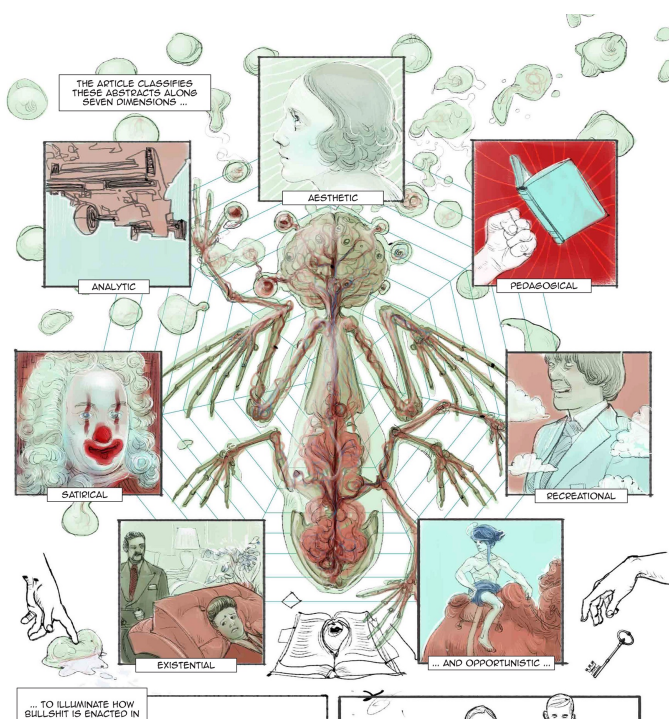
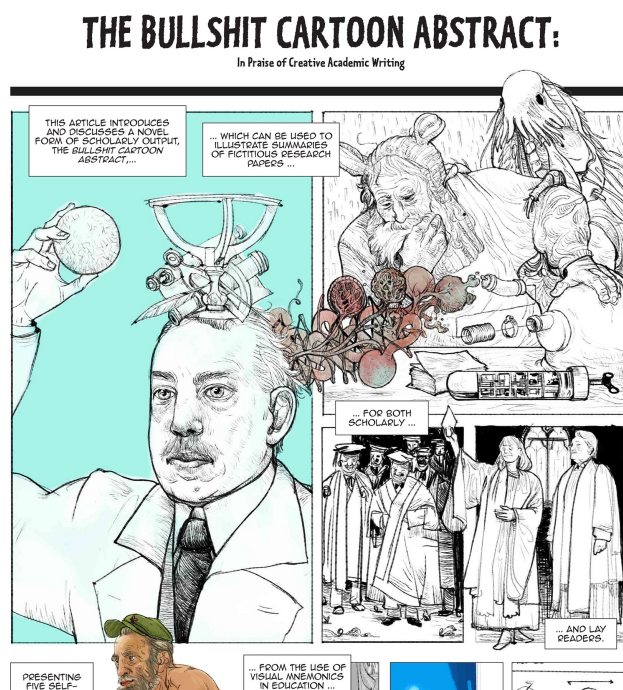
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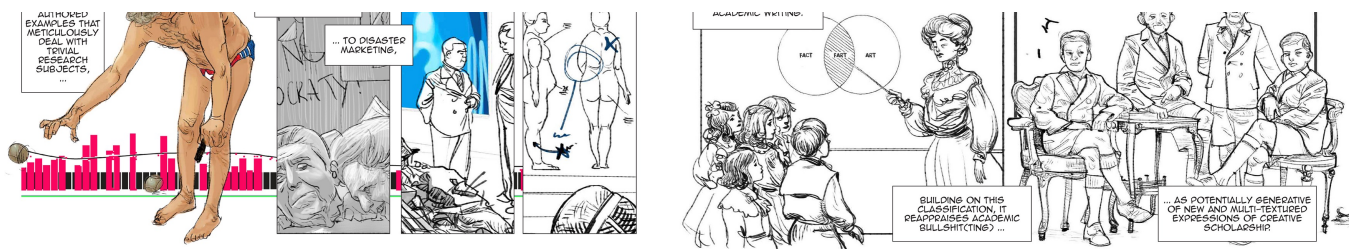
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Abstract: This article introduces and discusses a novel form of scholarly output, the *bullshit cartoon abstract*, which can be used to illustrate summaries of fictitious research papers for both scholarly and lay readers. Presenting five self-authored examples that meticulously deal with trivial research subjects, from the use of visual mnemonics in education to disaster marketing, the article classifies these abstracts along seven dimensions (analytic, aesthetic, existential, satirical, pedagogical, recreational, and opportunistic) to illuminate how bullshit is enacted in academic writing. Building on this classification, it reappraises academic bullshit(ing) as potentially generative of new and multi-textured expressions of creative scholarship.

Keywords: abstract, bullshit, cartoon, communication, creativity, scholarship.





The Bullshit Cartoon Abstract: in praise of creative academic writing. Click to expand.

Well before the advent of post truth and alternative facts, scholars have been drawn to the concept of bullshit. In his 1986 essay *On Bullshit*, the American philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt writes that bullshit is all around us. Although “everyone knows this,” scholars have failed to grasp what bullshit is, why it exists, and what function it serves.^[1] In an attempt to address these lacunae, Frankfurt defines bullshit as speech intended to persuade without regard for truth. Distinguishing bullshit from lying, he argues that “[i]t is impossible for someone to lie unless he thinks he knows the truth.”^[2] The liar thus operates with an intention to deceive by trying to conceal the truth, but without rejecting truth entirely. The bullshitter, by contrast, seeks to confuse and mislead, thereby undermining truth itself.

Frankfurt’s seminal thoughts on bullshit have influenced the direction of scholarly engagement with the topic to this day: from philosophy, communication, and rhetoric to social studies of bullshit in organizations and business.^{[3][4]} While much of this work is critical of bullshit and bullshitters for their blatant disregard of fact and logical coherence, Frankfurt and others duly recognize the creative dimensions of bullshitting. Many consultants, politicians, and advertisers are successful because they are highly skilled rhetoricians who are able to say something about anything by saying nothing.

In academia, where scholars gain reputation by publishing lots of peer-reviewed articles and books, and by obtaining research grants, the ability to bullshit matters a great deal. As Eubanks and Schaffer contend, “the reward system encourages the academic writer to misrepresent him- or herself by emphasizing if not exaggerating the influence of what he or she has written.”^{[5][6]} This pressure to bullshit is exacerbated by the “managerialization” of research in a global knowledge economy, which pushes researchers to publish as much as possible as quickly as possible, while demanding that the work produced is also highly original. Critics contend that the net result of this ingrained “functional stupidity” may well be the uncontrollable proliferation of “bad science,” with ever more mundane and fragmented research parading as groundbreaking.^[7]

Acknowledging these pressures and the role of academics as producers of bullshit, this article states the case for a more appreciative inquiry of bullshit and the place it occupies in contemporary scholarship – broadly defined as academic research, learning, and communication at the level of higher education. Bullshit is more than an unwanted byproduct of academic work; it can be an *existential moment*, as scholars struggle to cope with academia’s contradictory demands. It is an *aesthetic*, as there is beauty to be found in things disconnected and discordant, and because bullshitting is a form of persuasive art. It is a *heuristic* for students and scholars who seek to learn or brush up their academic writing skills. As this article highlights, it is also an *opportunity* for academics to resist, play, and perform. In short, multiple dimensions to bullshit may be discerned, which open onto a deeper appreciation of scholarly endeavor.

To induce these experiences and create a space for them, we introduce the *bullshit cartoon abstract*. True to the abstract writing form, the bullshit cartoon abstract provides readers with a concise summary of a scholarly paper by outlining the paper's focus, methods, and findings. The relationship between text and truth, however, is unclear or dubious, as is the article's scholarly purpose or value. This description builds on Frankfurt's understanding of bullshit as a discourse that bears little or no relationship to reality.

The text is accompanied by artistic illustrations, reflecting a broader trend to develop innovative ways of advertising and promoting research using visual communication to enhance academic and non-academic audience engagement.^[8] These artistic qualities are a significant selling point, making the abstract itself look good, or even better than the actual research paper. As a graphic and literary form, the bullshit cartoon abstract plays into the need to stand out from other research in the age of data storage and retrieval, with relevant information stowed away in massive bibliographic databases populated by countless digital object identifiers, keywords, and other required data tags, and with full texts of scientific articles often locked behind expensive paywalls. As such, it can influence the way that knowledge is being composed, indexed, noticed, and engaged with, presenting itself as a creative technology that scholars should be paying attention to, if not making clever use of.

We develop these points below, illustrating how the bullshit cartoon abstract invites multi-textured, analytical, and sensorial readings of academic work that probe the relationship between knowledge, art, and performance.^[9] We argue that it is important to identify bullshit and consider its epistemic, social, and moral implications in academia, which claims to hold (scientific) truth, or at least provide collective access to it. Exploring academic bullshit can help us think more clearly about the value of scholarship as the modern academy is professionalized and mediatized, with research increasingly oriented towards commercial ends, and the meaning of truth itself is publicly disputed. Opening a public debate about these issues can in turn stir academic innovation by moving scholarship beyond its narrow focus on content towards scholarship as art and experiment.^[10] These debates would include questions about the relationship between art, research and knowledge, science popularization, and the role of publics in science. They would also touch on the graphic form, science visualizations, and comics, which have been historically sidelined as "non-scholarly," requiring justification as to why these and other emergent forms (sounds, events, exhibits, interpretive dance contests, new media literatures) can be worthy of scholarly engagement.^[11]

To put these considerations in due perspective, we first present five self-authored bullshit cartoon abstracts covering various topics. Subsequently, we examine the dimensions of our work and incite discussion on the place of bullshit in contemporary scholarship. We conclude by drawing together bullshit, knowledge, and stupidity and by voicing our appreciation of the interconnection between all three in academic endeavor.

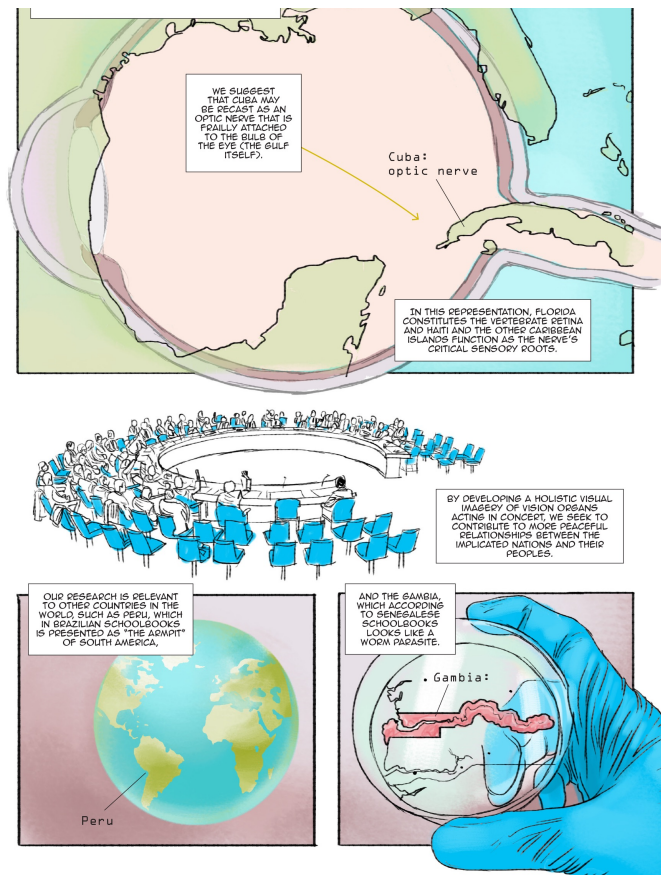
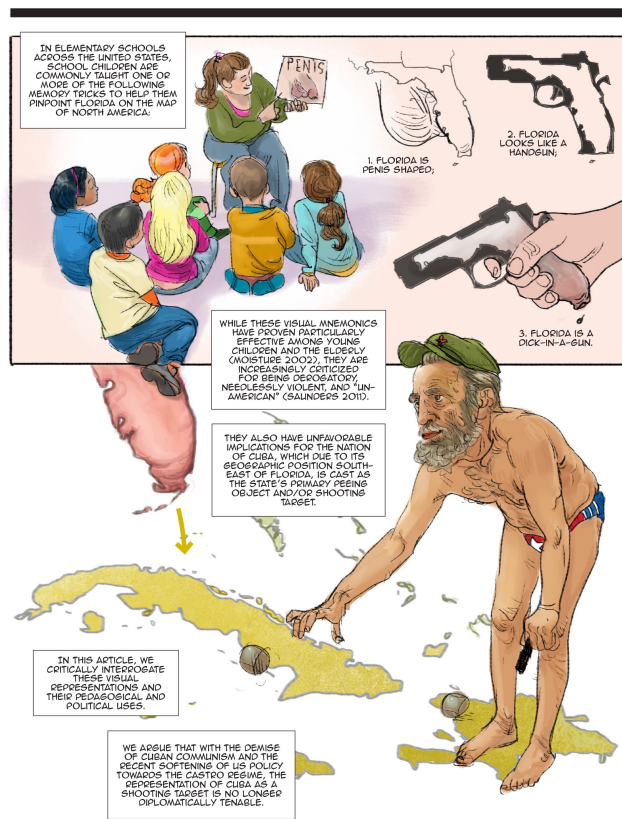
PERFORMING BULLSHIT

The five self-authored bullshit cartoon abstracts in this section are presented sequentially without further explanation to encourage the reader to fully engross in the bullshit experience. They are subsequently analyzed in the remaining sections of this paper.

FROM SHOOTING TARGET TO VISION ORGANS:

New Mnemonics for Florida, Cuba, and the Gulf of Mexico at Large

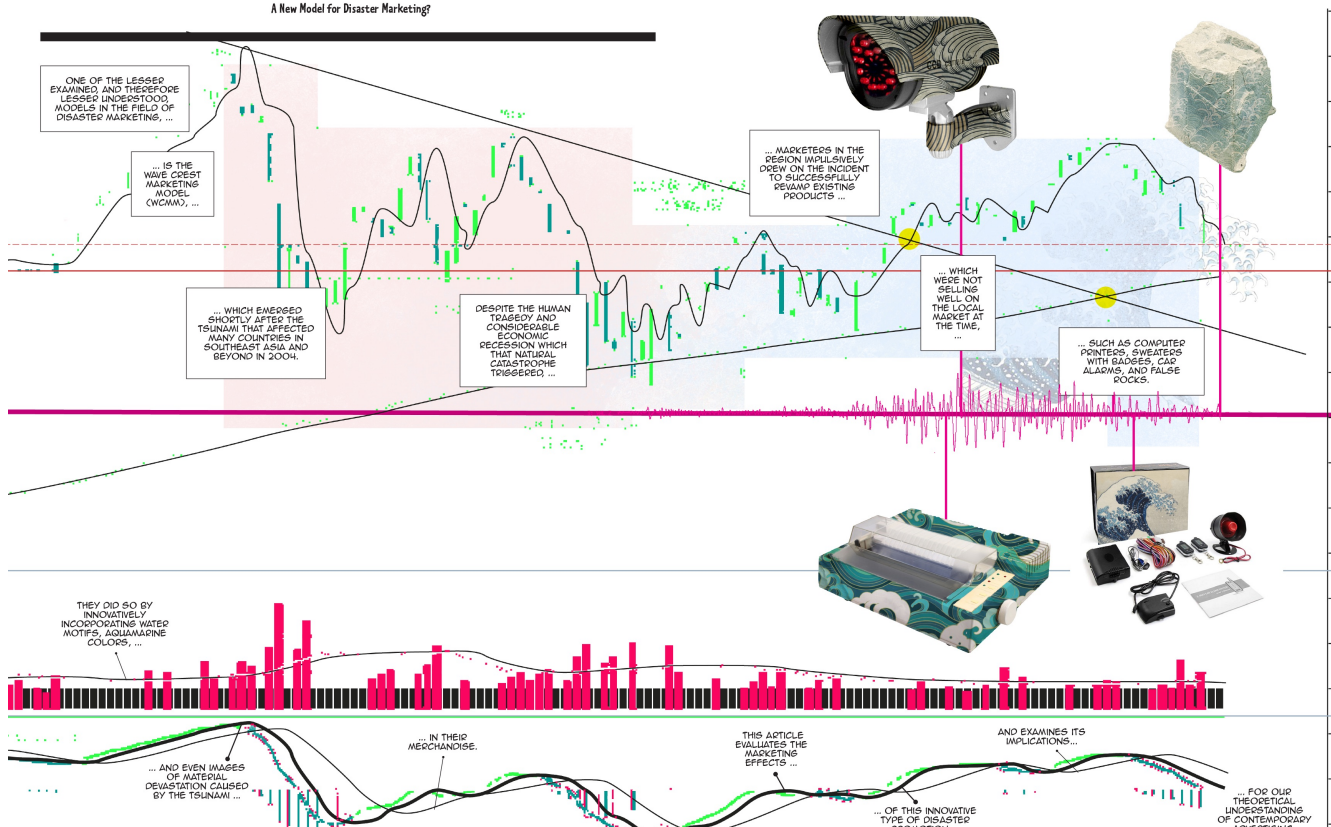




From Shooting Target to Vision Organs: New Mnemonics for Florida, Cuba, and the Gulf of Mexico At Large. Click to expand.

RIDING THE WAVE CREST:

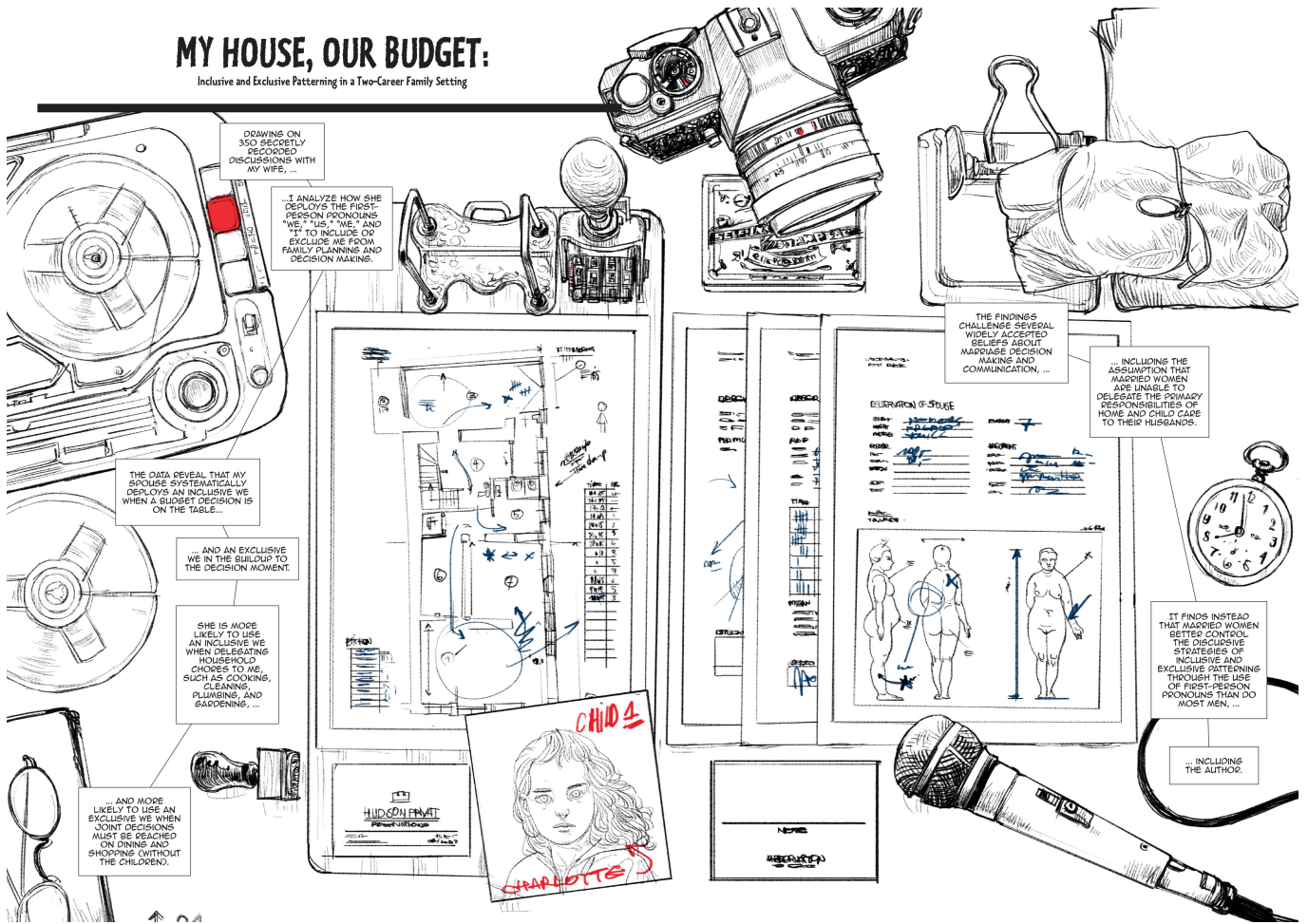
A New Model for Disaster Marketing



Riding the Wave Crest: a New Model for Disaster Marketing? Click to expand.

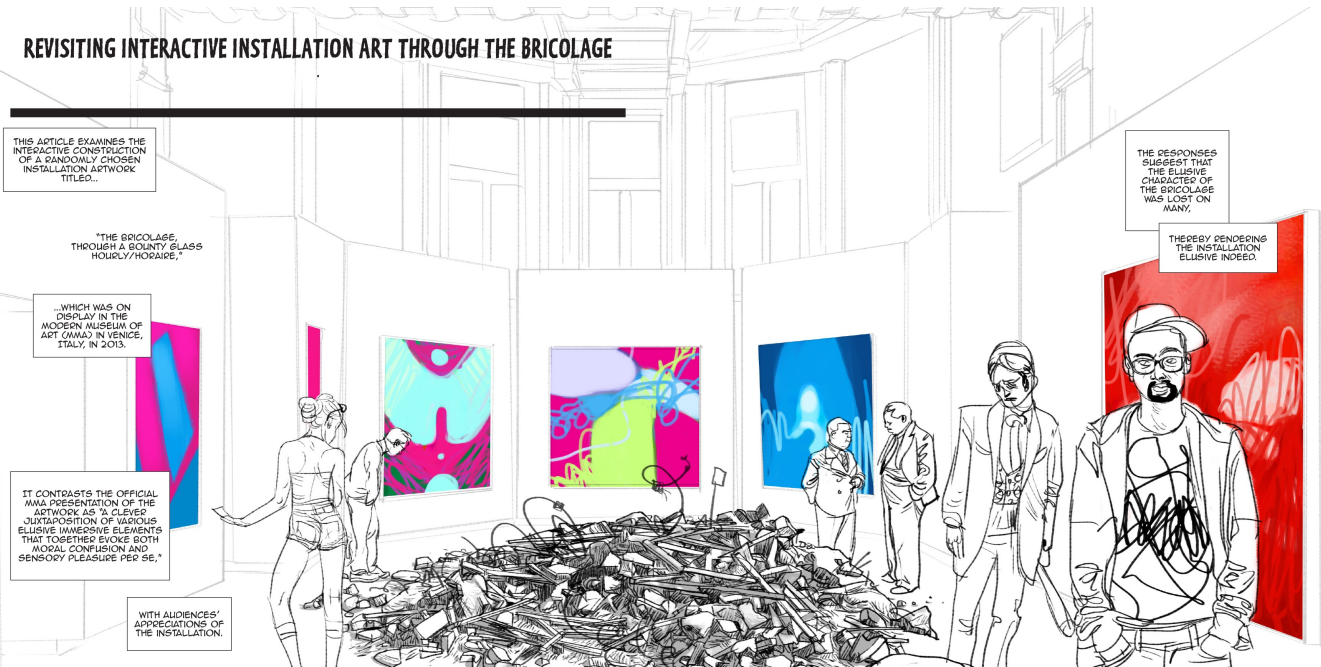
MY HOUSE, OUR BUDGET:

Inclusive and Exclusive Patterning in a Two-Career Family Setting



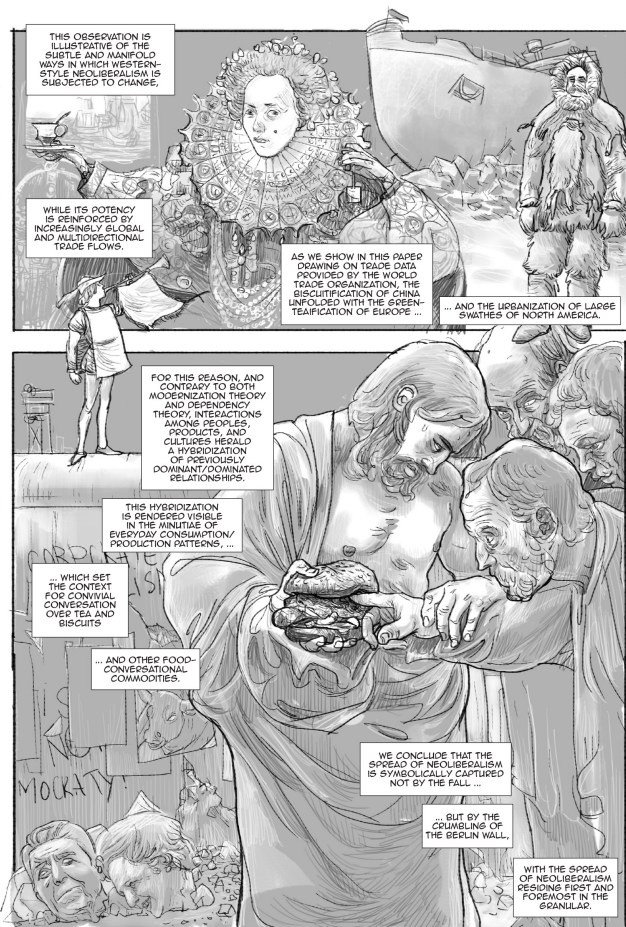
My House, Our Budget: Inclusive and Exclusive Patterning in a Two-Career Family Setting. Click to expand.

REVISITING INTERACTIVE INSTALLATION ART THROUGH THE BRICOLAGE





Revisiting Interactive Installation Art through the Bricolage. Click to expand.



Has History Ended? The Fall of the Berlin Wall Revisited in the Context of Everyday Neoliberalism. Click to expand.

META-BULLSHIT

The five presented abstracts can be classified along several dimensions to illustrate multiple forms through which bullshit is enacted in scholarly communication. Although this classification is not exhaustive, it is sufficiently varied to urge researchers to look beyond the abstracts' surface and develop a sensitivity towards academic bullshit.

1. *Analytic*. This dimension invites critical reflection on bullshit by nurturing our capacities to recognize and “unmask” bullshit as deceptive misrepresentation, careless work, or the production of falsities. In this view, the bullshit cartoon abstract may be criticized for demonstrating an “indifference to how things really are” (in Frankfurt’s words) or for its “unclarifiable unclarity” (to

- paraphrase Gerald A. Cohen), as what is being said cannot be clarified or made intelligible.^[12] While this line of inquiry is important, it fails to recognize the more productive dimensions of bullshit; a point to which we turn below.
2. *Aesthetic.* The bullshit cartoon abstract may be understood as a way of celebrating beauty and freedom above utility in a context of information overload. This reading moves beyond a narrow focus on content towards form and performance, for instance through the creation of aesthetic experiences of information that produce queasiness, as well as surprise and delight, or drain our energy. As it is sensual and expressive, it potentially opens onto artistic elation. One way of establishing such readings is by crafting alternative imaginaries and “imaginary solutions” that provide new evidence and insights, such as those generated by the optic nerve in the abstract on mnemonics for Florida.^{[13][14]}
 3. *Existential.* This dimension invites us to come to terms with our failures. How can we fail better, as we write about tedious subjects, which no one cares to notice because they are bland, uninspiring, and laden with jargon? Following Stephen Marche, failure does not mean “failure on the way to a higher goal or on the way to delayed success, which is how business executives would define it.”^[15] To fail better and more gracefully is so essential because ultimately, there is no such thing as success. As academics and writers, we publish *and* perish. As André Spicer notes, “the great majority of discourses that are produced within organisations are stunningly non-constitutive of organisational reality.”^[16] These discourses comprise academic publications, which no one, aside from a few experts perhaps, really care about.^[17]
 4. *Pedagogical.* For students and teachers, the bullshit abstract may serve as a heuristic in composition classes, as it sensitizes us to the discursive codes of academia and the scientific writing style. Learning these codes is essential for scholars who want to promote themselves and their work in an academic system that rewards publication to further one’s career.^[18] This is particularly important at a time when the imperative to “sell” oneself is so potent and the writing style of social scientists, among others, is routinely poor and continues to deteriorate.^[19]
 5. *Satirical.* The bullshit cartoon abstract can be used to highlight the nonsense, pretense, and pomposity often found in academic writing, particularly as scholarship is often perceived as pretentious. One is instantly reminded here of Alan Sokal, who in 1994 submitted a bogus article to the cultural studies journal *Social Text*, which the journal’s editors accepted and published^[20]; and recent hoaxes designed to expose poor scholarship in grievance studies and related research fields.^[21] The value of such satire is not so much its prank value (which is intellectually and ethically questionable, and which can be misappropriated by groups such as the alt-right for anti-democratic ends), but that it gives us pause to think about the issues that plague scholarship today, such as the place of truth and integrity in research, and how to hold science to public account.^[22]
 6. *Recreational.* Ironically, the bullshit cartoon abstract may achieve what abstracts are designed to do, but for the wrong reasons: entice readers into reading or obtaining the full paper, as readers become enthused by what is lacking, for instance a clear scholarly purpose. The bullshit cartoon abstract’s nonsensicality renders it unpersuasive or insignificant and therefore a potentially pleasurable experience. Seen in this manner, it signifies a possible – if momentary – escape from the confines of scholarship, sense, and reason. As an “unusually trivial achievement,” it probably will not, and should not, be reproduced in “improbable” science humor outlets, such as the *Journal of Irreproducible Results*.^[23]
 7. *Opportunistic.* From a concern with career development, any opportunity to publish something about anything, or nothing, should be exploited, as academia thrives on a range of evaluation

metrics (e.g., impact factors), which are quantified and accelerated. As most academics addresses the “implicit non-reader” without hope of reception,^[24] publishing abstracts (rather than full papers) relieves authors from the tedious task of having to write more than is strictly necessary. It is also a convenient way for them to meet the growing demand of “societal research relevance,” as it frees up precious time to engage in public outreach activities via social media and participate in science festivals.

Having outlined various dimensions of the bullshit cartoon abstract, it is now possible to map them by way of a Meta-Bullshit Spider Evaluation ToolTM. This tool and its dimensions are presented in figure 1 below.

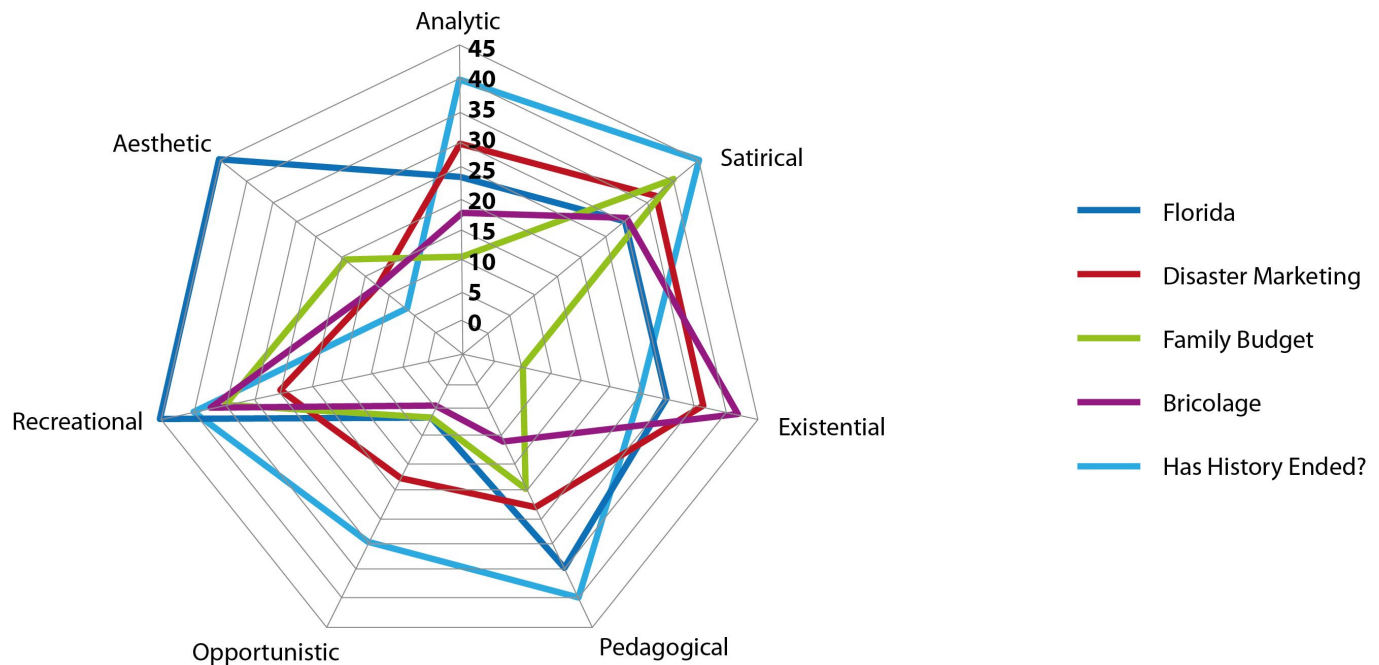


Figure 1. A visual map of the bullshit dimensions in five bullshit cartoon abstracts (Florida, Disaster Marketing, Family Budget, Bricolage, Has History Ended?) using the Meta-Bullshit Evaluation Spider Evaluation ToolTM.

The aim of this mapping activity is to shed light on the many facets of the academic bullshit cartoon abstract and identify potential tensions, contact points, and overlaps between them. For instance, the analytic dimension in the abstract on disaster marketing may be juxtaposed with the aesthetic aspirations in the abstract on Florida, which counterbalance the propensity towards the existential in the abstract on family budgets. This visual meta-analysis allows us to reflexively probe our own bullshit inclinations. As it can be applied to the study of academic bullshit more broadly, it may serve as a first, tentative step towards facilitating a better understanding of how scholarship, stupidity, and bullshit interconnect in our present “post-truth” age; a point to which we now turn.

DEEPENING BULLSHIT

In presenting bullshit through several examples and analyzing it through the Meta-Bullshit Spider Evaluation ToolTM, we have sought to lay bare an important foundation of knowledge in contemporary scholarship – bullshit itself. Loosely drawing on François Jullien, we argue that bullshit, by definition, “pays little heed to the borders our various disciplines like to draw.” As the embodiment of excrement, bullshit is “at the origin of all things possible and so links them.”^[25] This condition invites us to engage

with new questions, surprises, *epistemes*, and ontologies.

As scholars and artists, we are particularly pressed to consider why knowledge, in the form of facts, information, or skills continues to receive unqualified praise from academics, policy makers, industry leaders, journalists, and wider publics, whereas ignorance and stupidity are considered epistemically unattractive and ethically questionable.^[26] Arguably, this widespread contempt for stupidity has contributed to the rise of our present post-truth state, as it represses even the most authentic expressions of failure, indifference, and cosmic purposelessness. In rejecting these sentiments, it condemns its own existence, leaving us with very little to hold onto.

These considerations clarify why we are pressed to find bullshit within our work rather than look for it elsewhere. By sharing scientific research that is imagined, incoherent, or nonsensical, we seek to make ignorance visible, as well as potentially generative and rewarding. A useful reference here is Isabelle Stenger's "the idiot" – a character in her work on "cosmopolitics," who perplexes by assuming a posture that is indeterminate. He cannot, and does not, adhere to prescribed conventions, hence slowing things down.^{[27][28]} When appreciated as "an idiot," the bullshit cartoon abstract "fools around" with the structures and institutions of science, thus confronting the "enlightened false consciousness" of academics who "incorporate as a survival factor a permanent doubt about their own activities."^{[29][30]} The most cynical dimensions of the bullshit abstract (existential, opportunistic) are offset by a desire to turn away from these unhappy affects and engage in a (re)creative dialogue with peers.

The bullshit abstract thus encourages exploration of alternatives to the dominant modes of scientific knowledge production, which are rooted in structural underfunding, social Darwinian beliefs in research excellence, and nefarious forms of ignorance. By probing "what is," it enacts a sort of *agnotology* – the study of ignorance as a social and cultural product, which considers "how and why various forms of knowledge have 'not come to be'" and how other forms *could*."^[31]

It also adds a dimension to experiments in post-truth scholarship that are now coming to fruition; as academics and activists mobilize conceptions of post truth to question or transform "alternative facts" by engaging in creative and critical social experiments.^[32] Our work deliberately centers on scholarship, as scholars need tools to think through, and productively engage with, their own (un)truths in an increasingly competitive knowledge economy. As we have sought to illustrate, the bullshit cartoon abstract is such a tool. For academics and artists alike, it is an untapped source of inspiration and a cause for jubilation.

ABSTRACTING BULLSHIT

This article takes a multi-dimensional approach to academic writing and communication through the prism of bullshit. It introduces the bullshit cartoon abstract as a means of exploring this multidimensionality, beyond rational-analytic interpretation only. It invites scholars to probe their own bullshitting inclinations, accepting that they are at times too entranced by the glitter of ideas to remain completely honest with themselves and the worlds they inhabit. They may create concepts for the sake of aesthetic pleasure, omit information to conceal their impotence, and overstate research findings to entice readers into obtaining a full copy of the paper they have just written (or have yet to produce). The abstract format plays a vital, but often overlooked, role in each of these bullshitting acts. Given its purpose of indexing, communicating, and selling one's work, it occupies a central place in contemporary

scholarship, enabling and expediting more bullshitting in and across academic disciplines. It thus merits sustained attention, as do its rhetorical functions and the efforts and pressures that go into disseminating academic work.

The five bullshit pieces presented above are a good starting point for further reflection along these lines, as they induce both critical and sensuous readings of academic work. The latter acknowledge bullshit as a source of unusualness and energy; and hence, its potential to transform dominant notions of academic truth, authority, and plausibility. By pointing to the often-overlooked aesthetic, creative, and opportunistic impulses in academic communication, academics may better understand and perform their roles as researchers and writers in view of the pressures they face today, such as reputation management, the injunction to publish, and the urge to remain relevant and perpetually purposeful.^[33] This article is an invitation to all researchers, scholars, and intellectuals to explore the vast opportunities bullshit offers for “thinking out of the box” (and in it), for mutual learning, and for academic self-renewal and innovation.

IMAGE REQUESTS

Free high-resolution TIFF files of the bullshit cartoon abstracts are available for noncommercial use only. We permit the use, sharing, and reproduction of the images in any format as long as you give appropriate credit to the authors and to the source (*Hyperhiz*). To obtain high-res TIFF files, please contact the first author at this email address: michiel.vanoudheusden(at)kuleuven.be

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ABOUT

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