

James Hyman's The Battle for Realism

I have been looking forward to reading [The Battle for Realism](#) and I finally decided to, at the least, start it the evening before my vacation since it deserves my attention. One of the 'verticals' that I read in is Cold War history, one area in my graduate studies, this with Brian Loring Villa. As an aside, I have come to realize that this was an "academization" of earlier attraction / allure (Garcia again) to the fictional "spy" characters as portrayed in both novels and motion media that I shared with my older brothers and my father. Who knew that all those late nights trying to stay up to midnight to watch James Bond movies on television with my dad would play out like this? FYI - this was pre-videotape / NetFlix for those who don't understand what I just wrote.

From the cover flap: *The author proposes that realism in Europe during the early Cold War years occupied a radical vanguard position and stood in opposition to the competing claims made for American abstract expressionism. He examines two distinct visions of realism—social realism and Modernist realism—and explores their political implications and ideological significance.*

One recent work that intersects diplomatic and art history that led me to Hyman is Mark Greif's [The Age of the Crises of Man](#). While Greif discusses literature and not visualization, it is the same space for me. Clement Greenberg's work on abstract expressionism is of relevance as is the social realism of Continental artists. I finished Greif as I began work on Peggy Guggenheim so it is still fresh in my mind.

Working Philip Guston and Cy Twombly in here was difficult but very intellectually rewarding. Hint - it was in Rome, not Venice.
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Greif writes about Saul Bellow's 1944 *Dangling Man* (Ibn Sina - floating man - knowledge by presence- *al-insan al-muta'alliq*) and Ralph Ellison's 1952 *Invisible Man* as works of literature that exemplify this "crises" stemming from the awesome destructive nature of the bomb and the insignificance of man in the face of science. The bomb and Auschwitz showed us ourselves better than art could. But this was what art was supposed to do best?

So from what I gather, Hyman is writing about how realism manifested itself in British painting both by British artists such as Bacon, Freud and Coldstream but also artists in Britain and how both of these groups interacted with the streams of thought from outside within this Cold War rubric of bipolarity. This also includes how British artists retained their Britishness but under the umbrella of American preponderance of power. I am reminded here of the [All Too Human](#) exhibit that I saw at the Tate in early 2018. More on this later, I *think* that the Slade school plays in here with Coldstream.

So without too much ado before I write the entire article – my larger argument is that art was now political not because of the power of art as propaganda as Greenberg and others portrayed it or how they saw how they could utilize it, seeing its power both in the New Deal but also for mass mobilization in Cold War Europe and by the Soviet Union, but it was a pragmatic turn – art could no longer hold itself to as a tool of truth and or beauty so its absorption into the particular mode of liberal capitalism promoted diplomatically by the US in Europe enabled its critical use as a diplomatic tool against the Soviet bloc. New Deal collectivism became the *novus homo* abstract expressionist *auteur* which later was visualized as cowboys in American and Italian film, samurais in Japan.

Science threatened that specific key element of the visual art storyline in the late 1940s just as photography threatened key elements of studio canvas paintings in the 19th century. Others modalities of visualization such as impressionism in the 19th century and abstraction were highlighted, leaving realism to the technology of the lens rather than the brush. Movies would later occupy much of this visual cultural space of propaganda, shifting the narratives of legitimacy for the brush elsewhere. I'll stop here since it is already too disconnected and isn't assembled properly.

At some point I will actually write this piece on Rauschenberg and Twombly in Rome and the Cold War but I will just leave this here to remind myself.



Source: <https://www.idonthaveacoolname.com/james-hymans-the-battle-for-realism/>