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Total Eclipse of the Heart: Bullshit, Sincerity, and the Aesthetics of Rock Music

Laura M. Bernhardt (David L. Rice Library, USI), 2024

Introduction

What's this all about, then?

- Disclaimer: This is a work in progress!
- The basic deal: Let's figure out what's going on with bullshit, kitsch, and rock music by exploring the work of one of the most *extra* rock composers/producers of the 1980s (a notably excessive period), the late Jim Steinman.
- Today's plan:
  A Brief Introduction to
  Bullshit (Harry Frankfurt style)
  A Side Trip Into Kitsch with Eva Dadlez
  Meet Jim Steinman, the "little
  Richard Wagner" of Rock & Roll
  Bullshit, Kitsch, and Rock:
  It's All About *Performance*
- A Side Note on AI-Generated Images

The very definition of BS: a Gemini-generated image for an imaginary movie poster, allegedly in the style of Saul Bass

Bullshit and Sincerity

What is this bullshit?

On Bullshit (Harry Frankfurt, 2005); *On Truth* (2006)

Central characteristics of bullshit
(as distinct from outright lying):

- Indifference to truth [it is possible to bullshit with entirely true statements, and without the intent to deceive by providing false information]
- Manipulative; aimed at eliciting a response [my take: fundamentally *performative* in nature]
- "Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about." (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 63)

Examples from others:

- "Bullshit jobs" (Graeber, 2019) and the social value of the *appearance* or *performance* of working/being busy
- Recommendation letters, grant proposals, and other *pro forma* performative communications (Richardson, 2011)

Also: in a world flooded with bullshit, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to know even oneself.

Another Gemini ersatz Saul Bass poster, this time for the imaginary movie version of Frankfurt's monograph

"Insofar as this is the case," Frankfurt suggests, "sincerity itself is bullshit." (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 67)

Bullshit vs. Kitsch; Dadlez vs. Kinkade

"Kitsch and Bullshit as Cases of Aesthetic and Epistemic Transgression" (Dadlez, 2018); Dadlez uses Thomas Kinkade's paintings to exemplify kitsch

- "Kitsch is to aesthetics what bullshit is to epistemology" (p. 59)
- "Kitsch sidesteps the aims of art in the same way that bullshit sidesteps the aims of justifiable assertion" (p. 59)
- Taking up Kulka's (1996) characterization of kitsch as the lazy elicitation of stock emotions in an unambiguous presentation that adds nothing "to enrich our associations regarding the depicted objects or themes." It is pseudo-art (Dadlez referring to Dutton, p. 62)
- "Kitsch presents itself as art. Bullshit presents itself as being about the world. Neither one is what it tacitly purports to be." (p. 63)

So: Is Steinman's work more properly understood as bullshit, kitsch, or neither?

A Thomas Kinkade painting. Oooooh. Ahhhhh.

Welcome to Hell! Here's your hairspray.

Jim Steinman, Eternal Teenager

Let's talk about Jim Steinman (1947-2021).

- Wrote/produced for Meat Loaf, Bonnie Tyler, Air Supply, Celine Dion, Sisters of Mercy, et al.
- Contributed to film soundtracks (*Streets of Fire*, *Footloose*, etc.)
- Wrote lyrics and music for musical theater; collaborated with Andrew Lloyd Webber
- The "little Richard Wagner" of rock; huge Phil Spector fan ("Wall of Sound" in production)

Most importantly for my purpose, thoroughly acquainted with bullshit, performance, while being passionately committed to a genuineness in excess:

- "In a way, lying is a kind of creativity [...] I've done a lot of great stuff that started out as pure faking or lying. A lot of the lies I made I had to live up to." (Karp, 1997)
- Prefers theater, "thrives" on live audience response (Karp, 1997)
- "I disagree that [music's] only role is pleasure, that's just a by-product. Its main role for me, like all the arts, is to provide heightening and amplification. It should intensify everything. I think music should be like plugging yourself into a Marshall amp, it amplifies people, it amplifies images and allows people to see they can be amplified themselves." (Steinman's website)

Jimsteinman

A recent image of Jim Steinman and Bonnie Tyler

Total Eclipse of the Heart

Is this Bullshit?

Is this Kitsch?

What would it mean to think of this sort of music as *sincere* in its excessive expression?

Bonnie Tyler - Total Eclipse of the Heart (Turn Around) (Official Video)

The Totality of Bullshit

"Bullshit is not a lie and kitsch is not forgery"

"Like bullshit, kitsch does not consistently transgress the limits that distinguish the authentic from the false but plays with them. Both kitsch and bullshit exaggerate and they are often simultaneously too superficial and too explicit. They do not simply hide the truth. Bullshit is not a lie and kitsch is not a forgery. This means that both kitsch and bullshit are not false, but merely fake and phony attempts to establish a new reality" (Botz-Bornstein, 2016, p. 2).

While there may be a lot of bullshit involved in rock & roll, and while there may be kitsch (arguably the *video* for "Total Eclipse of the Heart" is kitsch, even if the song might not be), there is a decent case to be made in the rock context for a form of sincerity that is not reducible to bullshit.


An uncomfortable AI regurgitation of Kinkade, as rendered by Gemini

Thanks for Playing!

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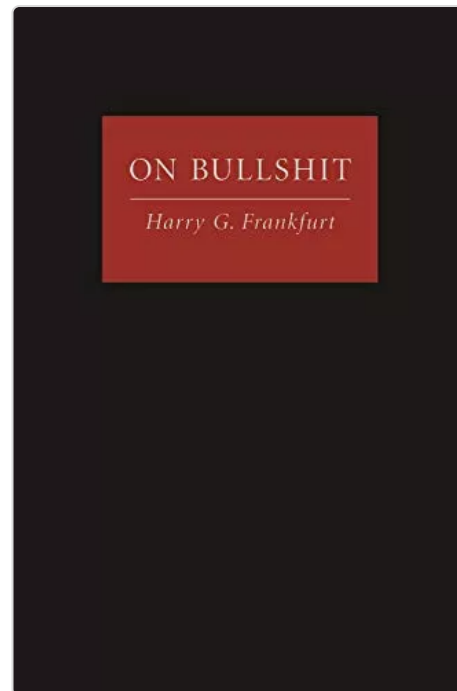
The cover of Frankfurt's monograph On Bullshit

The Music of Jim Steinman: A Sampler

Hit singles:

- Bonnie Tyler
  "Total Eclipse of the Heart"
  "Holding Out For A Hero"
- Meat Loaf
  "Two Out of Three Ain't Bad"
  "Paradise By The Dashboard Light"
  "I'd Do Anything For Love (But I Won't Do That)"
- Air Supply
  "Making Love (Out of Nothing at All)"
- Celine Dion
  "It's All Coming Back To Me Now"

Film music:

- *Streets of Fire* (1984)
  "Nowhere Fast"
  "Tonight Is What It Means To Be Young"

Musical Theater:

- *Whistle Down the Wind* late 1990s (music by Andrew Lloyd Webber; lyrics by Jim Steinman)
- *Tanz der Vampire/Dance of the Vampires*, on Broadway in 2002 (a duet version of "Total Eclipse of the Heart" appears in this show, along with several other songs repurposed elsewhere)

Complete Listings of Steinman's Credits

- Steinman's Catalog (Songview listing via BMI)
- Steinman's profile at the Songwriters Hall of Fame

Poster/cover image for special edition Blu-Ray of Streets of Fire, which you should absolutely watch

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