

In Defense of Kitsch: Or, On the Art of Deciphering the Truth of Desire

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I very much appreciate Annie Schultz’s work in *Kitsch Life: Aesthetics of Misinformation*, and have become increasingly inspired by thinking about the pedagogical possibilities of an “aesthetic of misinformation”—I thank her for that!¹ At the risk of rendering myself vulnerable to accusations of over-sharing, being insufficiently philosophical, or by exposing my own *lack*, I enter into this provocative conversation with two of my early encounters with kitsch. It is my hope that by revealing aspects of my economic and emotional history (aspects of lived reality too often given short shrift in education and aesthetics), I might help tease out more of what is at stake in the encounter with art and (mis)information.

I grew up in a home adorned with “Live Love Laugh” wall hangings, macramé owls, monogram throw pillows, and “Bless This House” cross-stitch patterns, which (much to my chagrin) my mother displayed with care and pride. Having spent much of her youth in an orphanage, I imagine these affordable adornments provided her with an opportunity to finally feel at home. And while I have always found her taste troubling, I am not sure it betrays “an unwillingness” on her part “to express [her] sentiments in a more meaningful way;” I suspect her (poor) taste is more indicative of her class background and lack of access to education than a deficient connection to her core values, *but who can say for certain?*

I was in ninth grade when I learned the word kitsch; I had discovered Judy Chicago’s, *The Dinner Party*, which was denounced as bad art, cast off as mere kitsch. Kitschy or not, the work was formative in the development in my feminist consciousness. I felt empowered by it, since it helped me recognize that representations of women’s sexuality and contribution to history were absent from the stories I was exposed to in school, at home, and the popular imaginary, not because they were nonexistent or insignificant, but because of

a long history of oppression, exclusion, and resistance. Forty years after its derided reception, it is now an icon, permanently housed in the Brooklyn Museum, the center piece of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, equipped with its own curricula, lesson plans, teacher guides and .²

I share these two vignettes because they highlight the way art, class, and politics are inextricably linked, and how our intersectional race, class, and gender based histories shape our engagement with aesthetics and information. My class background certainly framed my initial visceral response to Schultz's piece, which, I admit, I read for the first time rather defensively. Who has the authority to determine whether or not one's taste, value system, or identity are authentic or not? Who determines what counts as art and what counts as kitsch, and how do their economic and political investments figure into the equation?³ It seems clear that what constitutes kitsch in one historical context can become high art in another, and vice versa. Further, is there not revolutionary power in kitsch? Is it possible that the word kitsch came into common parlance after the mass revolutions in Europe during the 1850's to denounce the tastes of the nouveau riche and maintain rigid class distinction? Finally, were all these questions all about my mother? I had to wonder.

In engaging with Schultz' text, I was wrestling with some powerful affects, and I hope that by inviting them into the conversation, I can illuminate some of what may be happening as people invest in dangerous misinformation campaigns. It seems to me that affective responses to art and information are the most powerful force in shaping belief, the search for legitimate sources of authority, and our capacity to craft (more and less) reasonable arguments. To be honest, I think my first reading of Schultz's paper was, borrowing from Sedgwick, who borrowed from psychoanalysis, a little paranoid.⁴ Briefly put, "paranoid reading" is defensive and self-protective, quick to deduce whether something is *either good or bad*, leaving little (if any) room for ambiguity. "Reparative reading" on the other hand, is additive, and seeks to recognize complexity and ambiguity; it aspires to improve rather than dismiss. Both forms of reading are important and inescapable. Learning to distinguish and move between them is a skill that may be useful as we invite students into dialogue about their encounters with

art and (mis)information.

In pushing myself to read Schultz reparatively, it struck me that Benjamin's reading of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction was both a little paranoid *and* reparative. For he did not only lament the loss of aura and authenticity in his encounter with new technologies, he also lauded it: "For the first time in world history," he wrote, "mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.... Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics."⁵ Rather than being largely hid away in expensive and inaccessible exhibitions, artistic creation could now be marshalled to revolutionary ends. "The camera," he wrote for example, "introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."⁶ Chaplin's images of a mechanized dehumanization could invite the people to begin to question the rules of society and their lot in life, revolutionary potential indeed!

While there is much to lament about our social imaginary, I think that much of our popular culture does a better job than either "high" art or education in representing complex categories of identity, diverse lived realities, and, citing Tyson Lewis, "the affective role of agitational aesthetics in the online fascist recruitment of youth."⁷ A cutaway episode of *Family Guy*, for example, invites us to better understand why people continually invest in cheap, kitschy products, projects, presidents, and information that ultimately undermines them. The episode in question features the familiar, futile quest of Wile E. Coyote trying to capture the Road Runner with the shoddy, kitschy products of ACME that ceaselessly blow up in his face. Time and again he fails and yet he is unrelenting in the quest. Why is Coyote so dedicated to his own self-destruction?

Could it be the *enjoyment* of the chase? Read psychoanalytically, enjoyment is an unconscious drive to transgress in excess, and ultimately fail in a quest—precisely so that one has one.⁸ We might think of Coyote's investment in not catching Road Runner as a losing game aimed at covering over his lack, his alienation, and under explored desire. We might wonder how investment in commodified identities and misinformation works similarly, for what happens next in the episode is telling: Coyote actually catches Road Runner! His

exaltation is short lived, however. The next sequences show he is miserable, abject, unkempt, day drinking, watching crappy television, working in a greasy diner, and resolving to end it all—until he manages to find a new project. The episode ends with his conversion to Christianity and efforts to spread the word.

Nietzsche once said the only true Christian died on the cross. I am not sure if Coyote loves his neighbor, or, even more importantly, his enemy, but it certainly does not seem to be the case for either the social justice warrior or the mom of liberty, *but can we know for certain?* Coyote, however, certainly appears to be living less destructively. I like to think that he has shifted from enjoyment to deciphering the truth of his desire, thereby creating a more meaningful, less destructive way of life.

It seems to me we all have a little Coyote in us. Whether we flew on a plane to get to this conference, invest wholesale in new AI technologies, or wear MAGA hats at Trump rallies. Many of us here are kind of like the sophists too, I might add—are we not traveling and teaching philosophy for money?⁹ In any case, we certainly do not seem to be mobilizing the necessary collective action that might save the planet, calling on reason instead to save the day—is it clear that it can not? How else do we explain all of the ecological destruction and ongoing violence against people, plants, and animals? It is precisely because reason fails that I see potential in an aesthetics of misinformation, but not one that maintains or covers over class distinction.

I will close by saying that perhaps we could work to amend high art, with its investment in a brutal, bloody, largely unaddressed colonial history, much as we need to take pop culture and kitsch a little more seriously.¹⁰ Can we learn to read art and information with both reparative and paranoid reading strategies? By way of answering Schultz's provocation: is it truth or authenticity that is at stake in this post-truth crisis? I suggest that authenticity can only be located by deciphering the truth of one's desire, and not ceding it.

REFERENCES

- 1 Annie Schultz, "Kitsch Life: Aesthetics of Misinformation," *Philosophy of*

Education 80, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.029>.

2 Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1974–79, Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 1463 × 1463 cm, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York City, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party/.

3 I happened to be in New York City last month to witness the Museum of Modern Art shut down by a Free Palestine Action, where protestors outed the Board members who directly fund the occupation via arms manufacturing, lobbying, and corporate investment, and they used what might be categorized as kitschy flyers and pamphlets to share their information and struggle.

4 Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

5 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zahn (1935; repr. New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 1.

6 Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 19.

7 Tyson Lewis, “The American Agitator Goes Digital: Understanding The Affective Role of Agitational Aesthetics in the Online Fascist Recruitment of Youth,” *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* (2023).

8 Todd McGowan, *Enjoyment Left and Right*. (United Kingdom: Sublation Media, 2022).

9 See Andrew Cockburn, “The Pentagon’s Silicon Valley Problem: How Big Tech is Losing the Wars of the Future,” *Harpers*, accessed February 2, 2024, <https://harpers.org/archive/2024/03/the-pentagons-silicon-valley-problem-andrew-cockburn/>.

10 Titus Kaphar, “Can Art Amend History?,” TED, accessed February 2, 2024, https://www.ted.com/talks/titus_kaphar_can_art_amend_history?language=en.