

The Power and Ambivalence of Pedagogical Kitsch*

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1. Kitsch beyond art theory

Kitsch is a term commonly associated with art; a work of art is “kitsch” when the artist, the audience or, most commonly perhaps, the piece of art itself becomes involved in the work as if it is something of great value when in fact it is quite worthless. Despite its origins in art theory, kitsch has come to take on a wider aesthetic and ethical significance (cf. Moles 1972; Giesz 1971; Bollnow 1995). It is now used not just as a label for any form of expression, artistic or otherwise, that creates an air of reverence around the tawdry, trashy, simplistic, superficial, and trivial. “Kitsch” also puts a finger on the experience of getting caught up in kitsch either as its producer or consumer. Fascist kitsch, for instance, refers not only to the arresting synaesthetics of fascist public assemblies but also to what it means to become an involved *participant* in one, just as the *enjoyment* of a schmaltzy rendition of Bach’s “Well-tempered piano” is as much kitsch as the rendition itself. In this sense, kitsch pertains more to a certain attitude of expression than to any specific content expressed, to a manner of presentation or a manner of interpreting a presentation rather than the qualities of the thing presented. Further, this implies that, despite its association with the low end of home decoration and personal adornment – glow-in-the-dark Elvis posters, Hawaiian shirts, “big hair” and the like – kitsch is an *emotional* shortcoming rather than a lack of skill or technical proficiency. In the right hands, Hegel can be just as kitschy as a Harlequin romance. Kitsch can thus be very technically demanding indeed.

In a typical aesthetic experience, the emotional response to the object is in the background. In kitsch, the emotion becomes the *focus*. Enjoying a work of art is one thing, but desiring to enjoy a work of art and then enjoying that enjoyment is an experience that is well on its way towards kitsch. The observation that kitsch involves this kind of self-deception led Giesz (1971, p. 65) and Bilstein (1990, p. 422) to describe it as “untruthful” or “untrue”. Moles (1972), more pointedly, thought that enjoyment of enjoyment characteristic of kitsch implied “a negation of the authentic” (p. 7). The centrality of moods in kitsch, then, should come as no

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surprise. If kitsch, as Giesz (1971) and Bollnow (1995) both put it, involves at least a willingness if not a desire to “get into the mood”. Kitsch requires moods and creates moods. Kitsch may involve what Giesz (1971) called “synaesthetic excess” (p. 50): an all-encompassing multi-media experience, way too much of a good thing, when the message is too clear, and where no expressive or aesthetic stop has not been pulled out (cf. also Killy 1978). It is for this reason, surely, that words such as “sop”, “saccharine”, “mawkish” and “schmaltz” are, if not synonymous with kitsch, then sub-varieties thereof.

Whereas Daniele Lievi was probably right to state that it is easy to detect kitsch as long as you are not producing it yourself, it seems that not all forms of kitsch are in fact that easy to detect. It might not be a big deal to detect schmaltzy versions of kitschy products, statements, expressions of beliefs and feelings, but there are more sophisticated forms of kitsch. Kitsch that may satisfy academic desires for profoundness and high sounding analysis, kitsch for the educated person, so to speak. Gelfert (2000) refers to this form of academic kitsch as “kitsch of intimidation” (*Einschüchterungskitsch*) and “kitsch of sublimity” (*Erhabensheitskitsch*). Gelfert (like others) takes Adorno’s writing style as being prototypical of this kind of kitsch. Adorno’s writings have often been attacked as being puffed up and arrogant. In the publication to the so-called “*Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*” (Adorno et al., 1976), Karl Popper attacks what he called “talking trivialities in high-sounding language” (p. 296), and referring to Habermas he was angry enough to state: “I find it so difficult to discuss any serious problem with Professor Habermas. I am sure he is perfectly sincere. But I think that he does not know how to put things simply, clearly and modestly, rather than impressively. Most of what he says seems to me trivial; the rest seems to me mistaken” (p. 297). There are ways to categorize this kind of academic kitsch. Inflated (“aufgeblasen”) language, for instance, is an offence which consists of using a spoken *form* out of proportion to the *content* of what is being communicated, whereas *schmaltzy* kitsch is the *inability* to find, use or produce an *appropriate form* to communicate some content. Thus, trivial forms of “schmaltzy” kitsch can and should be distinguished from the various forms of “educated” or “sophisticated” kitsch (“Edelkitsch”).

In both versions, however, kitschy *expressions* or *impressions* suffer from an absence of heterological understanding. The synaesthetic excess of a kitschy mood renders its meaning so blatantly obvious that the possibility of multiple interpretations is almost completely precluded. The “absence of contradiction” in kitsch, as Kunert (1984) put it, is what makes kitsch so effective as an irrational technique of persuasion or rhetorical device. This feature of

kitsch goes some distance toward explaining not just why fundamentalism and demagoguery in all its forms are prone to kitsch but also what makes it highly morally precarious. Kitsch knows and acknowledges only itself. It also helps to explain why the natural antidote to kitsch is irony, a standpoint which is sceptical of the very idea of a correct interpretation and which, accordingly, is never really willing to get into the mood.

Summing up, at least six characteristics or criteria of kitsch can be distinguished, although they might not all need to be met in order for something to count as being kitschy:

1. Kitsch is the manner in which an object is *represented* or the manner in which such a representation is *interpreted*. (The birth of a child is not kitsch, but the birth announcement card might very well be kitschy...)
2. Kitsch is the *enjoyment of one's own enjoyment*. (The producer or receiver of kitschy narratives or expressions/products is mainly interested in himself as a producer or receiver of the content in question)
3. Kitsch is an *emotional shortcoming*. (In fact, kitsch might be due to a lack of an "éducation sentimentale" – and already therefore be of educational interest)
4. *Kitsch requires a mood and moods are produced through kitsch*.
5. *Kitsch is prone to excessive synaesthetical experience* (this might be especially true for religious or political mass events, but, of course, also for the "romantic candle light dinner" or educational happenings such as presentations at the ECER (?))
6. *Kitsch is morally precarious* (cf. Broch 1977, 1997) because it tends to preclude the possibility of the basic ontological distinction between the awareness of some thing and the thing itself, thus ruling out the possibility of more than one single or right interpretation. That is the reason why kitsch is so prone to fundamentalism in all its forms: religious, political, psychological, educational and so on (cf. Reichenbach 2003).

2. Kitsch and humanistic psychology in the field of education

Max Planck once stated: "There are things we can find agreement upon, and then there are important things". This assertion might well be exaggerated but it nevertheless provides an opportunity to remind ourselves of the problematic aspects of important issues on which everyone agrees. We would like to argue that the field of education was very much influenced by politically correct ideologies of humanistic psychology, which we regard as example of kitschy agreement or conformity, as a style of thinking about and interpreting educational matters that has found widespread acceptance among pedagogical practitioners and (unfortunately) also theorists and researchers. With respect to the "humanistic" perspective,

Carl Rogers (1902-1987) surely was one of the most influential psychologist in the fields of education; his thoughts and writings also led to a pronounced mass production of pedagogical kitsch.

Many years ago, Israel Scheffler (1960) argued that the language of education consists of three uses or linguistic modes: definitions, slogans and metaphors. Pedagogical slogans and the use of politically correct metaphors of course dominate many educational discourses and are an important factor in rendering them kitschy. Metaphorology seems to be an interesting approach to the understanding of the aesthetic precariousness of educational discourse. In opposition to traditional theories, recent metaphorological analyses (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980) have argued that it is in fact impossible to use ordinary language in a non-metaphorical way. Unfortunately, not even the term “education” is usually treated as a metaphor in the educational discourses; and central pedagogical concepts are normally – and misleadingly – ontologized.

In pedagogical traditions inspired by humanistic psychology, the use of language seems to be especially susceptible to *ontological metaphors*. It thereby produces various kitschy but nevertheless usually convincing views. The most noticeable metaphors used in Rogers and Freiberg’s „Freedom to learn“, for example, are, among others, the talk of a „being whole” or a “whole person”, “being real” or “becoming a fully-functioning person”. Needless to say, “wholeness” cannot be experienced but is an aesthetical concept by nature, wholeness can only be imagined (cf. Welsch 1996). Rogers like many others, psychologists or otherwise, also works with a typical *orientational metaphor* (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980). That is to say, the *inside-outside distinction*: the “inside” represents the “real reality of the self”, whereas the “discovery of the self” means to come into contact with the “truth” of the self. As Hans Blumenberg (1999 & 1999a) speculated in his analysis of the metaphors of the “naked truth” and the “power of the truth”, the power of the metaphor of the “truth of the self” might be explainable in terms of a putative “moral duty” to discover it. Such metaphors are at the same time romantic and emancipative. However, as Matei Calinescu (1987) pointed out, kitsch thrives on *aesthetic infantilism*. It should not be necessary to say that the aesthetics of humanistic psychological concepts does not seem to be very sophisticated but rather simple. It is “democratic”, so to speak, and does not want to overcharge the consumers with ambivalence or equivocal interpretations.

The widespread humanistic metaphors for “development” (“development” is itself a metaphor, of course) such as “growth”, “journey”, “pathway”, “adventure” or “process of self-discovery” are in one way or another also to be found in John Dewey’s work, for instance. While it is harder to find schmaltzy versions of kitsch in Dewey’s work, already a quick look at the titles of some of the chapters of Rogers’ “Freedom to Learn” throws a unambiguous light on the emotional aesthetics the reader has to expect and will have to endure:

- Chapter 1: “Why do kids love school?”
- Chapter 3: “As a teacher, can I be myself?”
 (“How can I become real”, p. 51; “Pathways to Self”, p. 53)
- Chapter 5: “A French teacher grows with her students”
- Chapter 6: “Administrators as facilitators”
- Chapter 9: “Becoming a facilitator”
- Chapter 10: “Ways of building freedom”
- Chapter 12: “Is there discipline in person-centred classrooms?”
- Chapter 16: “The goal: The fully functioning person”

Typically, the kitsch of humanistic psychology – as the kitsch of any other ideology – is providing and producing an *unmistakeable morality*. It would be a pleasure to analyse statements such as: “Because I feel that our educational institutions are in a desperate state, and that unless our schools can become exciting, fun-filled centers of learning, they are quite possibly doomed” (Rogers & Freiberg 1994, p. 170). Or: “You may be thinking that facilitator of learning is just a fancy name for a teacher and that nothing at all would really change. If so, you are mistaken. There is no resemblance between the traditional function of teaching and the function of the facilitator of learning” (p. 170). In other words, in large parts of “Freedom to Learn” educational options are typically presented in black-and-white terms. For instance, we read in the first chapter that there are *two kinds of classrooms*: “classes in which the students are consumers of information” (i.e., “tourist classrooms”) and “classes in which students are producers of ideas” (i.e., “citizen classrooms”) (p. 8). Students whose needs are being met by caring and creative educators (in “citizen classrooms” of course) love school without exception (p. 23). In the second chapter, *two kinds of learning* are depicted: learning that does not involve feelings and personal meaning, and learning that is significant to the learner, meaningful, experiential (p. 35), so-called “whole-person learning” (p. 36). In the vast majority of American schools, and at all educational levels, the chances for *whole-person learning* are in Rogers’ estimation very small. The reasons for this awful truth are, according to Rogers and Freiberg, that the curriculum is prescribed, the assignments for all students are similar, there's almost only one mode of instruction, standard tests externally evaluate all

students by the same criteria, and grades, and the measures of learning progress, are instructor-chosen (p. 37).

In opposition to these bad sides of schooling and teaching, Rogers discusses what it means to create a “facilitative classroom”. It is shown how teachers can become “real”, and that “self-discovery” is a “lifetime journey”. To find one's “real self”, so the assumption goes, is in the first place a process, a direction, and not some static achievement (p. 65). The challenge of schooling is the task of “being fully alive in the classroom” (p. 66).

In chapter 8 we read: “*Teaching* means 'to instruct'. Personally, I am not so much interested in instructing another in what she should know or think, though others seem to love to do this”, and: “Teaching is, for me, a relatively unimportant and vastly overvalued activity” (p. 151). The devaluation of curricular content in the face of a changing modern world leads to the assumption that schools have to rely on “process” rather than on “static knowledge” (p. 152): “To free curiosity, to permit individuals to go charging off in new directions dictated by their own interests, to unleash the sense of inquiry, to open everything to questioning and exploration, to recognize that everything is in process of change – here is an experience I can never forget” (p. 153). The facilitation of learning and the aim of education are seen as one process, the “way in which we might develop the learner and the way in which we can learn to live as individuals” (p. 153). Schooling and education are discussed almost exclusively with respect to the interpersonal relationship. The qualities that facilitate learning are “realness” in the facilitator, “prizing, acceptance, trust”, and “empathic understanding” (pp. 154-158), in other words, “a trust in the human organism” (p. 160). When these qualities and attitudes are learned and the “student is *trusted* to develop” (p. 167), the climate of learning is enhanced. Then it is no longer accurate to call teachers “teachers”, these teachers have become “catalyzers, facilitators, energizers; they give students freedom and life and the opportunity to learn. Most important, they are co-learners with students” (p. 167).

3. The power and ambivalence of (pedagogical) kitsch

Saul Friedländer who analysed kitsch in Nazi-“art” (1999) stated – and this was not to give an impression of paranoia – that we, all of us, are “surrounded by kitsch”, all the time and everywhere. This presentation focussed on Rogers’ “Freedom to Learn” but, of course, you can find kitschy representations everywhere in the pedagogical field and in all educational discourses. Admittedly, it is easy to detect kitschy aspects in older texts (this is a type of

kitsch called “corniness”) and it is all too easy to run down a prominent author like Rogers. Moreover, he is already dead and cannot defend himself.

The choice of Rogers, however, was no accident: humanistic psychology has had a great impact on educational discourse, theory, and, most of all, practice. This influence was progressive, liberal and emancipative. It focussed on well-being, authenticity, relationships and positive encounters, and the “freedom” to learn. It is against the simple necessity of learning processes which were not chosen voluntarily, against coercion, rote learning, hierarchy, authority, deception and pure economic exchange in inauthentic relationships.

The kind of moral certainty that the humanistic psychological approach to education affords, provides great power and triggers positive and helpful actions: in other words, *kitsch is motivating*. It provides a framework for practical judgment in education, giving the teacher a clear ideal of how the student/teacher relationship should be and how they should understand their own role and what the whole educational enterprise should aim for. It provides clear answers for complex and controversial questions. Whereas kitsch is always problematic, it also helps the teacher to make sense of his professional life. In opposition to educational theory and philosophy, where kitsch is always a sign of bad work, kitschy teachers and educators are probably often among the best. Whether they’re right or wrong from a theoretical point of view, they, at least, have a clear moral vision.

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