



Non-Artistic Kitsch

Edited by
Michał Szostak

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“*Non-Artistic Kitsch* offers a provocative and illuminating exploration of the ubiquitous and often understated influence of kitsch in various aspects of human and organisational life. Re- and deconstructing kitsch in various realms and disciplines, this book delves into the multi-faceted and complex nature and culture of kitsch and how it influences and is influenced by individuals, organisations, and society. The reader is invited into a fascinating journey into the world of tacky taste and complexities of kitsch. With profound insights from renowned experts, this stirring book is both entertaining and enlightening and provides a critical understanding of the power of various forms of kitsch and kitschification.”

—Wendelin Küpers, *Professor of Leadership and Organization Studies, Karlsruhochschule International University, Germany*

“Kitsch has long been regarded as an important concept in aesthetics but its significance for other fields has remained unexplored. Shifting attention from kitsch as being a stylistic property of the object to being an affective and epistemological property of the response to the object opens up its relevance for a huge new range of fields. Szostak and his colleagues brilliantly map this new non-aesthetic terrain in this long-needed but still exciting volume. It will be essential reading for anyone interested in how common sense and common sensation become easy formulae for failing to engage reality. The contributors clearly show how essential a critical mindset is for establishing authentic relationships with the world and each other, a precondition for better futures.”

—Stephen Andrew Linstead, *Professor of Management Humanities, School for Business and Society, University of York, UK*

“A thoughtful exploration of kitsch that considers the pros and the cons of creating kitsch in a variety of non-artistic domains. As we strive for mastery in whatever we do, the question of kitsch is helpful in getting us there.”

—Steven S. Taylor, *Professor of Leadership & Creativity, Business School, Worcester Polytechnic Institute, USA*

“Is the commercialisation of education kitsch? Are situated political games kitsch? Are certain aspects of religious liturgy kitsch? Through a wide range of cases, the book challenges organisational scholars and students to critically explore the aesthetic category of kitsch - widely debated in philosophical aesthetics - in everyday organisational practices and thus provides an interesting and significant contribution to the study of the aesthetic dimension of organisational life.”

—Antonio Strati, *Professor of Sociology of Organizations, Department of Sociology & Social Research, University of Trento, Italy*

“This book introduces a novel and comprehensive theory of kitsch, extending its application from aesthetics and art to various scientific domains. The book is an expression of an extremely thorough, multi-faceted, and interdisciplinary research effort, and the discussions contained therein are comprehensive. I believe that the topic of kitsch in management is new, cognitively interesting and important from the point of view of both theory and practice, regardless of national culture or region of the world. It is a very current issue. The author invited high-class specialists in the given subject to collaborate. The prefaces written by outstanding researchers in humanistic management are invaluable. A must-read for scholars, practitioners, and anyone fascinated by the intersection of kitsch and modern management.”

—Regina Lenart-Gansiniec, *Professor of Management, Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University, Poland*

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FOREWORD I: TOWARDS A DE-KITSCHIFICATION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

A PHILOSOPHY OF THE SOCIAL

Classically, philosophy was the same as the pursuit of knowledge—for Aristotle (2009), natural sciences dealt with abstract ideas relating to being as well as its concrete manifestations, whereas philosophy was the ability to perceive and understand the foundations of knowledge. Even though fragmentation of science is perhaps its dominant trait today, the tradition of holistic epistemology is alive and well in philosophy as well as in social sciences (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2023). For example, from the perspective of philosophy, Stefan Amsterdamski (1981) advocated for recognising the philosophical dimension in all knowledge. From the standpoint of management science, Ghislain Deslandes (2013) argues that management contains philosophical reflection, particularly concerning the following concepts: power, the self, responsibility, practice, communication and intuition. The key to holistic epistemology, education and practice is to embrace reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009).

ART

A reflexive approach to knowledge requires imagination. According to Charles Wright Mills (1959), sociological imagination is the specifically human ability to see social reality from a wider perspective in its temporal, structural and systemic context. By using it, one can transcend the sense of inevitability of the everyday entanglements and of the social self. It becomes possible to see wider mechanisms and dynamics at work, as well

as broader structural patterns. Problems that cannot be solved on an individual level—in fact, a majority of social and political problems—are solvable if approached with sociological imagination. A systemic mode of learning becomes available together with new directions for seeking solutions. Sociological imagination offers a perspective of thinking and doing research in social sciences, but it also has practical solid implications: it gives hope for the liberation of the individual by offering an opportunity to understand the connections between what is individual and what is general and historical. Sociological imagination is a state of mind that connects people and transcends individual boundaries. Attention—practical and scientific—is directed in a way that enables action at the social level. It gives a sense of moral meaning.

Bengt Flyvbjerg (2001) proposes that social sciences engage in phronetic research, which focuses on values and evaluative judgements, considering phenomena in their context. Considering the following questions should mark the point of departure: (1) Where are we going? (2) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is this development desirable? (4) What, if anything, should we do about it?

Such research helps to deal with the complexity of the social. It needs both scientific rigour to be applied and intuition and contextualisation. For this purpose, art can be helpful as a *dispositif* of communication as well as an epistemic lens which enables us to better understand totalities by helping to assemble knowledge fragments into something equipped with meaning (Guillet de Monthoux, 1993). Such a perspective does not shy away from ambiguity. Indeed, it provides a dynamic and holistic lens that can be applied to diverse situations (Strati, 1992).

For the use of art in this epistemic role, it is essential to be able to use active imagination. According to Gaston Bachelard (1969a), it transports the person in the “space of *elsewhere*” (p. 184), that is, withholding a greater complexity: the world now “can be the seed of a world, the seed of a universe imagined out of a poet’s reverie” (Bachelard, 1969b, p. 1). By applying active imagination, “we touch the ultimate poetic depth of the space [...]” (Bachelard, 1969b, p. 6).

It is a genuinely phronetic perspective, which “gravitates about a value” (Bachelard, 1969a, p. 171), human and allowing images and events to appear not by the law of causality which we are used to from the material space, but by the law of attraction and association that occurs between the mind and phenomena.

KITSCH

Kitsch in social sciences is the opposite of imagination: it flattens out perception, de-complexifies and stereotypically interprets phenomena (Kostera, 1997). Used as a management dispositif, it has the power to streamline and subordinate by seduction (Linstead, 1993). In social science, it can be said to be an epistemic-equipped tool with similar power. It produces an un-problematised epistemic mode promoting and even enforcing linearity, avoiding values, and de-humanising the social. It enforces relentless categorisation and dualisms; it replaces creation with repetitive generation (thus bringing about the illusion that art can be replaced by generative AI and that management can be algorithmic). It presents everything in terms of inevitability, lacking of alternative, as well as something ultimately boiling down to the individual, their talent, merit, work, identity, opinion and image. It compresses the complexity of strategy to the linearity of the brand and its market position. It hides any wider structural patterns and banishes them from view, focusing on rankings and individual choice. In particular, epistemological kitschification blocks the interest in all the questions listed by Flyvbjerg, making power invisible and thus inevitable. Epistemic kitsch disconnects from any wider context, starting with the temporal, via spatial, structural and all the way to the spiritual. It portrays attention and consciousness as something that does not exist in social science, both being far to multidimensional even to be seen in the flat representations of the en-kitsched (Kostera, 1997). Ultimately, it robs social science of meaning.

Like the biodiversity of our planet is steadily reduced under neoliberal capitalism, so is also the diversity of the social imaginary rapidly decreasing. Byung Chul Han (2015) speaks of a *society of burnout* through the destruction of everything that differs and the imposing of a tyranny of the same. The conditions of intensified entropy cause dramatic loss of all kinds of diversity and lead to systemic stupidity (Stiegler, 2013). Instead of developing new ways of learning and understanding, neoliberal science presents itself as a fulfilment of impulses to consume (dogma of innovation, metric optimisation, impact) and loss of memory through discontinuity. The system has regressed “toward reactive behaviour and the survival instinct, which induces, in the desiring beings that we are, the reign of the drives” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 4).

DE-KITSCHIFICATION

De-kitschification of social science is urgent and necessary. The key is, again, to be found in a holistic approach and reflexivity. Going beyond the seeming linearity and inevitability of power and bringing back values and imagination can shatter the illusion of insight offered by the flat surfaces of kitschified science. The cost of doing so may amount to the loss of prestige, but it is worth reminding the etymology of the word “prestige”:

1650s, “trick, illusion, imposture” (senses now obsolete), from French prestige (16c.) “deceit, imposture, illusion” (in Modern French, “illusion, magic, glamour”), from Latin praestigium “delusion, illusion”. (Harper, 2024)

It is no accident that the word “prestidigitator” holds the same etymological roots and in the world of stage magic, “prestige” means the payoff in an act of stage magic. “Prestigious” means:

1540s, “practicing illusion or magic, juggling; deluding, deceptive,” from Latin praestigiosus “full of tricks,” from praestigiae “juggler’s tricks,” probably altered by dissimilation from praestrigiae, from praestringere “to blind, blindfold, dazzle”. (Harper, 2024)

Epistemic kitsch enables the consolidation of power by making it disappear in a trick of scientific stage magic. Meeting with genuine, living art in genuine space can, according to Johan Asplund (2016), feed and regenerate human imagination (which he calls aspect vision) and counteract its opposite. The mystery of encountering the artist’s moment of revelation and participation in something greater than market mechanisms is an intense learning experience. That meeting sheds new light on everyday life and gives us an opportunity to stand before the embodied presence of the artist, and the work itself constitutes a physical place through which a presence passes, the door between something bigger than ourselves and our senses. This is insight: beyond the threshold lies knowledge infused with meaning, to which sociological imagination can take us.

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FOREWORD 2

A couple of years ago, a well-known and hugely popular UK daytime TV presenter of a daily programme called *This Morning*, Philip Schofield, revealed in the press that although married, he was gay and had had an affair with a much younger male crew member on the show. He had known this person since they were 13 and had helped them get work in television. Schofield's brother had just received a prison sentence for paedophilic crimes, and although he disowned him and denied any wrongdoing himself, Schofield immediately resigned his position. His co-presenter, Holly Willoughby, stepped aside from the screen temporarily.

When she returned a couple of days later, she began her address to the public with words the press described as “eyebrow-raising.” Holly's on-air statement began with “Right, deep breath,” before asking her audience: “Firstly, are you OK? I hope so.”

She then went on to say that maybe, like her, the viewers felt “shaken, troubled, let down, and worried” for “the wellbeing of people on all sides of what is going on.”

She added: “You, me and all of us at *This Morning* gave our love and support to someone who was not telling the truth. Who acted in a way that they themselves felt that they had to resign from ITV and step down from a career that they loved. That is a lot to process.”

She concluded with an appeal for “healing” and concern for the mental health and well-being “of everyone,” a return to “the place of warmth and magic that the show holds” and hope that “we can find strength in each other.”

A major national daily paper—one popular with the programme’s audience—polled its readers as to whether they were convinced by this statement. Out of 3000 responses, 2645 felt it was *not* genuine, some thinking it “ridiculous” and others deriding the show’s apparent ‘self-importance’.

What Willoughby, who later herself attempted to become the sole lead presenter rather than the sidekick she had hitherto been, and ended up leaving when audience ratings fell, presents us with here is an example of “failed kitsch.”

Kitsch is any form of expression that simplifies reality and motivates a formulaic response that invokes a standardised sentiment rather than a feeling because we are conditioned to *already know* from the signal what response is socially required, although it appears natural. This ideally happens in some context where we see others responding in the same way, and we experience the comforting, reinforcing feeling that everyone else feels the same way as we do, that we are normal and hence good, and we give each other a fake or imaginary hug that seems natural.

In fact, the other presenter that day *did* give Holly such a fake hug on the cue “bring it in,” claiming they would get over it because they were a “family,” which they clearly were not—unless you count the one actual family member who was in prison and was not going to be “brought in.”

What *were* they thinking?

Well, it would appear that Willoughby and the team wanted to distance themselves from Schofield but to appear to be sympathetic human beings whilst doing so. They needed, therefore, to find or manufacture a bond with their audience. The world of TV presenters themselves is not their audience’s reality but the imaginary world in which they create the audience’s reality. Willoughby and her writers assumed audience naivety, overweighting the impact their entertainment activities had on their viewers’ psychology and underweighting the awareness that twenty-first-century TV audiences have that there is always something going on behind the scenes and that it is frequently not wholesome as recent exposes of Jimmy Saville and Rolf Harris spectacularly demonstrated. Kitsch allows us all to pretend that everything *is* OK, believing that it *will be* whilst knowing that it probably is *not*. The moment that we become ironically or even cynically aware and acknowledge that, the kitsch facade collapses. In the *aesthetic* understanding of kitsch, this awareness can become part of kitsch itself, bordering on camp; in the understanding of kitsch as experiential, as a modality of response to modernity that can be readily politicised, it cannot

be so. Kitsch is, as Umberto Eco (1986) put it, “faith in fakes” or, as Theodore Adorno (2005) coined it, “authentic stupidity.” This relevance to today’s world of popular culture is shown in the fact that writer/novelist Sir Ben Elton has chosen Adorno’s title for his current stand-up comedy tour. As Elton pioneered British political comedy in the 1980s and paved the way for postmodern stand-ups like Stewart Lee, we know that this is not accidental and has a very serious point to make.

Willoughby uses several moves to create a semblance of authenticity in relating to the audience, the first and perhaps most obvious failure being the opening, “Are you OK?”

One viewer said that this reminded them of the HR administrator who does not care how you are and would, without compunction, ignore you tomorrow as long as they can show for the record that they asked you, and you, wanting to end the embarrassment as quickly as possible, replied “Yes.” Various comic and serious commentators asked each other, “Are you OK?” at the beginning of other unrelated segments for a savage satirical effect. The speech became known as the “Are you OK?” speech, and its incongruity was disastrous. No one wanted to know how anyone was, and everyone knew it.

Nor was the presenters’ world ever going to be mistaken by the viewers for their world. No one had anything much at stake in it. Presenters move on, or are moved on, for good reasons and bad. Nothing they do will disrupt their viewers’ lives much, if at all—it certainly will not affect their mental health. For them, it was a fake world, and any concern it expressed for them was recognisable as fake.

Kundera observes that the “tear” shed by kitsch comes in pairs: the first tear is the knee-jerk sympathy evoked by seeing a coded emotive object—puppies, kittens, babies, etc. The second tear is the empathic recognition of community, that others are moved as we are by the sympathetic object. In this case, neither tear falls: the “Are you OK?” fake sympathy rings hollow, so hardly anyone was moved. In fact, they laughed. The second tear, then, became a peal of laughter as Willoughby’s tacky hubris became a joke that everyone shared.

This vignette underlines how prevalent kitsch remains as a concept that extends beyond the boundaries of the art world and even the culture industry. It also shows that whilst “authentic stupidity” may still proliferate, consumers of culture have become increasingly discerning readers of kitsch without becoming absorbed into bourgeois art-worlds, and the potential for critique at large is as valuable a resource for social analysis as

the avant-garde. It is, therefore, imperative conceptually and practically that kitsch receives consideration beyond the boundaries within which it has customarily received the most attention.

The second book in this series by Michal Szostak and colleagues associated with Collegium Civitas in Warsaw does exactly this. *Non-artistic kitsch* is more broad and interdisciplinary than its predecessor but focuses on the social sciences rather than the aesthetic and artistic fields with which kitsch is most often identified. It covers kitsch in politics, religion, education, terrorism, language, different forms of communication and the hyperkitsch. It recognises that kitsch, as important as it is aesthetically, is not simply a matter for art theory but is related to a way of responding to the world—or not responding, a “living death”—that makes it an essential dimension of modernity and a central topic for social research as disciplined inquiry—whether strictly conceived of as social “science” or not. Kitsch is a transdisciplinary topic that requires us to think across boundaries—indeed, to dissolve those boundaries—as it evolves. This book gives us a rich resource, demonstrating how kitsch is operationalised outside the art world within diverse fields of social inquiry whilst continuing to learn from both the sources of ideas and the practical fields where kitsch is active.

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John Reuben Davies, PhD, is Associate Director of Arts Lab at the University of Glasgow, UK, where he leads interdisciplinary research collaborations for the College of Arts & Humanities. He specialises in liturgy, ecclesiastical history, and Church History, having read Theology at Durham University and completed his doctorate at the University of Cambridge. His academic career includes positions at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, the University of Edinburgh, and the University of Glasgow. Davies' research has focused not only on medieval ecclesiastical organisation, the cult of saints, hagiography, liturgical history and theology, but he has also worked on projects relating to religious cultural heritage in India. Davies has been a member of the Liturgy Committee of the Scottish Episcopal Church since 2009, serving as Convener from 2015 to 2020, and is a member of the steering committee of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation. His significant contributions include editing *The Innes Review: The Journal of Scottish Catholic History (EUP Journals)* and publishing a critical edition of *Regiam Maiestatem, the earliest extant treatise on Scottish law*.

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Introduction

Michał Szostak 

CONTEXTS AND RESEARCH PROCEDURE COURSE

Dictionary definitions of kitsch focus primarily on describing features of a kitsch artefact—something appealing to popular and low taste, often being of poor quality, considered to be ugly, lacking in style, or false—rather than the kitsch phenomenon as a whole (‘Kitsch’, 2024a). Dictionary synonyms of kitsch are rubble, waste, sewage, and scrap (‘Kitsch’, 2024b). Since it is not easy to define a kitsch, theorists prefer reviewing the characteristics of a kitsch artefact, underlying its fundamentality, imitativeness, exaggeration, and hysteria (Banach, 1968; Wilkoszewska, 2007). From a historical point of view, the most common themes of aesthetic kitsch include patriotism, religion, eroticism, and politics. It can be said that the essence of kitsch is an exceptional quality that evokes emotions without intellectual or aesthetic effort (Dede, 2021). This practical intensification of kitsch in the art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasised satisfying the taste of the mass audience through cheap and quick quasi-artistic production in place of full-fledged artworks (Calinescu, 1987; Greenberg, 1985). The traditional perception of kitsch has been

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