Notes on organisational kitsch*

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Introduction

Postindustrial literature argues that industrial societies have entered a new phase in the social-economic process in which the commodity as the discrete object of production is being displaced by systems of information and theoretical knowledge. One result of this shift in emphasis has been to view organisations as producers and purveyors of information and knowledge within society (e.g. Bell, 1974; Salaman, 1979). There is, however, a step beyond this position which suggests that it is not merely information or knowledge that is transmitted along organisational-societal circuits but signs and symbols (e.g. Baudrillard, 1981). Furthermore, organisations may be seen not just as producers of signs/symbols but as nodal points where the production and consumption of signs/symbols come together. In this view, the consumption of the sign is as important as its production. In fact, production/consumption may be seen as logical inversions of each other (Baudrillard, 1981). Crudely put, one might say that organisations have to ensure that people want what they produce and in this process people themselves are ‘produced’ in order to ‘consume’. A more sophisticated expression of this idea is contained in the concept of repetition as found in

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psychoanalysis and hermeneutics. Lacan (1977: 63) expresses the essential process of repetition as follows: ‘Human Language ... constitutes a communication in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form’. Thus when a subject states ‘You are my wife’, he marks himself with the seal of wedlock and designates himself as a husband. Language always included its own reply and in this way repeats itself.

Lacan offers other examples of repetition: (1) according to Pascal, Jesus revealed to his followers: ‘You would not be looking for me if you had not already found me’ (ibid: 83), and (2) La Rochefoucauld’s remark that few of us would experience love if it had not already been explained to us (ibid: 41). This also characterizes the producer-consumer interaction. The significance of repetition is that it reveals an essential gap or ‘nothingness’ at the centre of human experience; there is no substantive origin at the beginning of our history which we can say with absolute confidence is the source of all knowledge and faith – this origin has to be constructed and, what’s more, constructed to look as if it were the authoritative fountain-head. This as if process is what we usually call ‘anthropomorphism’.

Anthropomorphism, it will be recalled, is a process in which man understands the world as being for him; the world exists for him and that is its meaning; anthropomorphism projects ‘an unabandonable solidarity between the human spirit and the world’ (Robbe-Grillet, 1959: 99). Postmodernism questions this unilateral seal between human meaning and the world by denying its assumed predestined ‘naturalness’. The concept of Humanity (and its correlates of reason, soul, spirit, etc.) is a meta-fiction whose function is to comfort, reassure and make the world safe for man. In place of anthropomorphic unity, postmodernism substitutes a process of division or separation which dares to assert that the world does not exist for mankind, that it makes no signs to man, and that it has nothing in common with him (Robbe-Grillet, 1959). In short, there is nothing in the world that is intrinsically pro-human or anti-human. All human meaning and unity is constructed and imposed on that which is without intrinsic meaning and unity. The world – including man – is simply there.

We find anthropomorphism at work wherever we find distance or separation. The work of anthropomorphism is directed to denying the gaps of division by
instituting the idea of Humanity or the human subject as its own origin. ‘Humanism believes that man is at the centre of his own history and of himself; he is a subject more or less in control of his own actions, exercising choice’ (Mitchell, 1982: 4). Man is already there, from the beginning. It is this position that Heidegger (1977: 133) criticizes as a ‘moral-aesthetic anthropology’ which seeks at all points to secure the authority and certainty of the human subject as a pre-given, accomplished fact. ‘Anthropology’, Heidegger writes,

... is that interpretation of man that already knows fundamentally what man is and hence can never ask who he may be. For with this question it would have to confess itself shaken and overcome. But how can this be expected of anthropology when the latter has expressly to achieve nothing less than the securing consequent upon the self-secureness of the subiectum? (Heidegger, 1977: 153)

In this way, man hides from himself the fact that he has no known and certain origin, that he is a ‘fiction’ which is continually constructing itself. Postmodernism challenges this position and claims it is an ideology rather than a scientific conception; we cannot describe what man is without first asking how he comes into being. A major task of postmodernism, therefore, is deciphering the ways in which the human subject is constructed.

The Czech writer Milan Kundera (1984: 248) calls the anthropomorphic urge: a categorical agreement with being. According to Kundera, its ‘aesthetic ideal’ is kitsch.

**Kundera on kitsch**

Kitsch is a German word that emerged in the middle of the 19th Century and eventually entered all Western languages. Its original meaning has been lost. Today it refers to bad taste or ‘rubbish’, usually in the arts, design or literature. But originally it was intended to describe a fundamental aspect of experience: that of denying what is unacceptable in human experience. Kitsch is that which turns the disturbing into something that is pleasing and pacifying.

Some idea of Kundera’s view of kitsch may be got from the following quotations:
Kitsch has its source in the categorical agreement with being. But what is the basis of being? God? Mankind? Struggle? Love? Man? Woman? Since opinions vary, there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international.

Since the days of the French Revolution, one half of Europe has been referred to as the left, the other half as the right. Yet to define one or the other by means of the theoretical principles it professes is all but impossible. And no wonder: political movements rest not so much on rational attitudes as on the fantasies, images, words and archetypes that come together to make up this or that political kitsch. (Kundera, 1984: 256-257)

The very beginning of Genesis tells us that God created man in order to give him dominion over fish and fowl and all creatures. Of course, Genesis was written by a man not a horse. There is no certainty that God actually did grant man dominion over other creatures. What seems more likely, in fact, is that man invented God to sanctify the dominion that he had usurped over the cow and the horse. Yes, the right to kill a deer or a cow is the only thing all of mankind can agree upon, even during the bloodiest of wars. The reason we take that right for granted is that we stand at the top of the hierarchy. But let a third party enter the game – a visitor from another planet, for example, someone to whom God says, ‘Thou shalt have dominion over creatures of all other stars’ – and all at once taking Genesis for granted becomes problematical. Perhaps a man hitched to the cart of a Martian or roasted on the spit by inhabitants of the Milky Way will recall the veal cutlet he used to slice on his dinner plate and apologize (belatedly!) to the cow. (ibid: 285)

Even though Genesis says that God gave man dominion over all animals, we can also construe it to mean that He merely entrusted them to man’s care. Man was not the planet’s master, merely its administrator, and therefore eventually responsible for his administration. Descartes took a decisive step forward: he made man ‘maître et propriétaire de la nature’. And surely there is a deep connection between that step and the fact that he was also the one who point-blank denied animals a soul. Man is master and proprietor says Descartes, whereas the beast is merely an automaton, an animated machine (...) When an animal laments, it is not a lament; it is merely the rasp of a poorly functioning mechanism. When a wagon wheel grates, the wagon is not in pain; it simply needs oiling. Thus, we have no reason to grieve for a dog being carved up alive in the laboratory. (ibid: 288)

Another image comes to mind: Nietzsche leaving his hotel in Turin. Seeing a horse and a coachman beating it with a whip, Nietzsche went up to the horse and, before the coachman’s very eyes, put his arms around the horse’s neck and burst into tears. That took place in 1889, when Nietzsche has removed himself from the world of people. In other words, it was at the time when his
mental illness had just erupted. But for that very reason I feel his gesture has broad implications: Nietzsche was trying to apologize to the horse for Descartes. (*ibid:* 290)

(4) In the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of the heart reigns supreme. When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object. The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing, they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.

Those of us who live in a society where various political tendencies exist side by side and competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch.

When I say ‘totalitarian’, what I mean is that everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end up by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously); and the mother who abandons her family or the man who prefers men to women (...)

In this light, we can regard the gulag as a septic tank used by totalitarian kitsch to dispose of its refuse (*ibid:* 250-252).

These quotes come from Kundera’s novel, *The unbearable lightness of being.* The ‘lightness’ here is the lightness of non-kitsch; kitsch itself having the cloying heaviness or immobility of a syrup that bogs you down. Actually, the novel is really an exploration of the concept of *repetition* which it examines in the guise of Nietzsche’s ‘myth of the eternal return’. Kitsch is that which glosses over the disturbing ‘gaps’ that the process of ‘return’ or repetition...
generates (Freud’s, 1962, essay on ‘The uncanny’ explores and analyzes the same idea). The above quotes indicate some of the main characteristics of kitsch: its ‘human’-centredness; its foundation in ‘mass emotion’; its defence against the unusual, the troublesome and the difficult (it refuses critical thought); its immediacy and transparency. Kitsch deals in certainties and simple truths, especially those that ‘provoke collective tears’ (Kundera, 1984: 254).

There is apparently no escape from kitsch: ‘No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of the human condition none of us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely’ (ibid: 256). But we can learn to recognise it and ‘as soon as kitsch is recognised for the lie it is, it moves into the context of the non-kitsch, thus losing its authoritarian power and becoming as touching as any other human weakness’ (ibid).

**Social science and kitsch**

At this point it may be useful to introduce a few comments on the place of kitsch in the social sciences, where it has a long history.

Comte, the ‘father’ of sociology (incidentally, ‘father’ itself is a suspiciously kitsch term, if only because it excludes a ‘mother’ of sociology), served his intellectual apprenticeship in the inebriating kitsch of Saint-Simonian technological ‘utopianism’. Comte’s sociology and philosophy are rampant with anthropomorphism; its guiding kitsches are Humanity, the Soul, Love, the Unity of Mankind, etc. In the ideal ‘understanding’ of Comte, all our thoughts are made homogeneous and unified. ‘Unity is also accomplished in the whole soul, since the intellect, henceforth conscious of its laws and of its essential functions, subjects itself to the heart, to be directed by love’ (Lévy-Bruhl, 1903: 341).

Moving nearer to organisational studies, we find that kitsch (a cooler, more pragmatic kitsch this time) oozes its way through those ‘theories’ of management we call the Human Relations school. In particular, Elton Mayo’s (1945) *The social problems of an industrial civilization* is a little goldmine for the student of social science kitsch. Its three main themes (ironically, not necessarily in accord with each other) are: (1) the loss of community with the
arrival of industrialism – kitschic because of its nostalgia for a lost paradise, (2) the need to replace this loss with a practical spirit of co-operation and harmony, especially in the workplace – kitschic because it regards social contradiction, difference and conflict as a form of social illness rather than as part of the intrinsic ‘logic’ of human reality, (3) organisational efficiency is the key to societal efficiency (and indeed to return to Mayo’s title -to a whole ‘civilization’) – kitschic because a management problem is kitschified into (and thus made more acceptable) a human and social problem.

Anthony (1977) offers other examples of organisational and management ideologies which are clothed in kitsch. He quotes (from Bendix) the GEC’s (USA) handbook of Employee Communication whose purpose is ‘to endow this mythical personality which the employee calls “the Company” with the qualities of friendliness, consideration, fairness, and competence’ (Anthony, 1977: 2). But perhaps the most instructive examples that Anthony provides come from the contributions of organisational social scientists who in a double ‘recuperation’ (management < behavioural science < worker) deftly claim man for productive organisation via the elaboration of humanistically-oriented theories of management and organisation (see Anthony, 1977, esp. Chapter 11). The theories will exemplify the recuperation or appropriation process previously noted in the production-consumption interaction, for the definition attributed to the worker is one that has been ‘produced’ by the organisational system for its own ‘consumption’. Significantly, such theories are often expressed in terms of ‘human needs’. As Baudrillard (1981) argues, the concept of ‘psychological need’ is ideological and is an extension of the language of ‘labour power’ that emerged with modern functional systems. The idea of ‘psychological need’ (and perhaps especially the so-called ‘higher needs’) is put forward as a means of attaining ‘satisfaction’ or ‘need-pleasure’ but this, it can be argued, is no more than a kitschic veneer for the production-consumption dialectic:

with all its hedonist illusions, need-pleasure masks the objective reality of need-productive force. Needs and labour are therefore two modalities of the same exploitation of productive forces’. (Baudrillard, 1981: 83)
Kitsch, as we noted, makes the disagreeable agreeable; kitschic ‘theories’ make men feel agreeably presentable to themselves. They are like Kundera’s character, Tereza, who looked into the mirror:

It was not vanity that drew her to the mirror; it was amazement at seeing her own ‘I’. She forgot she was looking at the instrument panel of her body mechanisms; she thought she saw her soul shining through the features of her face. She forgot that the nose was merely the nozzle of a hose that took oxygen to the lungs; she saw it as the expression of her nature. (Kundera, 1984: 41)

*Kitsch changes the merely functional into an object of narcissistic adoration.*

**Baudrillard on functionalism and kitsch**

Earlier, I suggested that, within the organisation-society matrix, organisations *produce* signs and symbols rather than commodities or information. Further, I suggested that the process of production was mirrored inversely in consumption. It is now necessary to state, along with Baudrillard, that the process of consumption in modern society is really the ‘consumption’ of signs/symbols. One might say that the whole of modern society revolves around the production/consumption of signs, etc. In other words, signs/symbols represented the ‘informational body’ of society. Levi-Strauss (1971) said much the same thing of primitive communities which make ‘goods to think with’. We too can say that the mass-produced goods of industrial society are *good* to think with and not merely good to consume. We can go further and suggest that the ‘idea of a good to think with’ has a moral-aesthetic dimension (to use a term of Heidegger’s); in other words, that the goods we produce are not merely of use value but somehow represent to us certain ‘good’ (i.e., moral-aesthetic) properties while rejecting the ‘bad’ or unacceptable ones. Functionalism is therefore never merely just functional but is functionally ‘good’ for society. Part of Baudrillard’s hypothesis is that the ‘goods’ (the acceptable signs) of society are produced in the form of kitsch. Now a ‘good’ may also be viewed as an aspect of reality that assuages the ‘anxiety and depression that (the) public experiences’ (Lyotard, 1984: 75) – this is simply another way of expressing the function of kitsch as that which makes the unacceptable acceptable. In this role, the kitschic ‘good’ satisfies the moral-aesthetic requirements of *unity, simplicity and communicability*
Let us repeat that the process of constructing ‘goods’ according to the moral-aesthetic properties of unity, simplicity and communicability extends to-the ‘production’ of people. It is not simply that people are also objects of production; these ‘objects’ are also ‘goods’ (or ‘bads’) that speak and act the ‘correct’ (or ‘incorrect’) signs. What makes the person a ‘good’ is his/her degree of ‘correctness’ to the system’s norms; hence it is appropriate to say that a quality control mechanism is at work in the functioning of social systems. We could also argue that this is part of the larger problem-of how a society perceives itself as a ‘subject’. It does so, we hypothesize, by a process of division (here I wish to suggest a relationship between ‘vision’ (i.e., perception) and ‘division’, already noted by others, e.g., Lacan), such as we have observed in the production of ‘goods’ (vs.’bads’), applied to its various resources (social, economic, etc.) and which transforms the latter according to the production-consumption formula discussed above, to construct a system of integrated ‘objects’ or ‘goods’. The following figure suggests a pattern for this process:

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It is not too difficult to see how formal organisations fit into such a scheme as figure 1 and how they would operate as the main mechanisms for presenting society to itself via the production of perceptible ‘goods’. In a mass society, these ‘goods’ have to possess the kitschic qualities of immediacy, transparency and the comfort of instant reassurance. Baudrillard shows how this process can occur with the transformation of the Sun into a ‘leisure good’:

_The Sun:_ The vacation sun no longer retains anything of the collective symbolic function it had among the Aztecs, Egyptians, etc. It no longer has that ambivalence of a natural force – life and death, beneficent and murderous which it had in primitive cults or still has in peasant labour. The vacation sun is a completely positive sign, the absolute source of happiness and euphoria, and as such it is significantly opposed to non-sun (rain, cold, bad weather). At the same time as it loses all ambivalence, it is registered in a distinctive opposition, which, incidentally, is never innocent: here the opposition functions to the exclusive benefit of the sun (against the other negativized sun). Thenceforth, from the moment it functions as ideology and as a cultural value registered in a system of oppositions, the sun, like sex, is also registered institutionally as the right to the sun, which sanctions its ideological functioning, and morally registered as a fetishist obsession, both individual and collective. (Baudrillard, 1981: 98-99)

The Sun is recuperated from Nature and made to serve as a kitschic object in a functional system. It exemplifies a process that is distinctively modern – the extension of human and social engineering to the whole world, Nature included. Nature, which in ancient times was a source of awe and reverence as well as the yardstick by which man understood his essential finitude, is now de-natured into an environment of reassuring signs. We tend to speak of Nature less and less and environment more and more because, as part of that environment, we testify to the efficacy of the production-consumption process which cocoons us from the strange and disturbing which Nature (including ‘human nature’) represents. The transformation of Nature into environment is that more general context referred to by Kundera in his indictment of Descartes’ fateful characterisation of man as ‘maître et propriétaire de la nature’ – more precisely, it is kitsch which disguises itself as ‘objectified knowledge’. Nature is dead, says Baudrillard (1981: 202), having been ‘reconstituted’ (‘as one says of orange juice that has been dehydrated’) as environment. And one might say that man, too, is dead since he is subject to the same systematic neutering as Nature; man, too, is
reconstituted as his own ‘useful’ environment. In all this, *the function of kitsch is to make the merely functional into an object of narcissistic adoration.*

**references**


Mayo, E. (1945) *The social problems of an industrial civilization.* Boston: Graduate School of Business Administration.


the author

Robert Cooper (1931-2013) was a prominent theorist of organization, known for introducing postmodernism and post-structuralism to organization studies. He has also been highly influential in process studies of organization. After writing and publishing poetry in his early years, and a PhD at Liverpool University, he held academic positions at various English universities – Aston, Lancaster, Keele – finally ending as an honorary Professor at the University of Leicester.