

## Kitsch Life: Aesthetics of Misinformation

Annie Schultz

*Flagler College*

Reading paraphrases of paraphrases of paraphrases, one starts to feel as if there is something a little hollow and shiftless about the ease with which phrases such as “white supremacist, homophobic, classist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, capitalist patriarchy” are trotted out. We get the right words, strung together like marquee lights, but not the structural analysis that puts them in relation to one another.

—Merve Emre, *The New Yorker*<sup>1</sup>

Kitsch is used in contemporary parlance to refer to art objects, design styles, or entertainment media that is generally of low quality, overly sentimental, and lacking in artistic merit. You know kitsch when you see it: “Live Love Laugh” wall hangings, pink flamingo yard ornaments, macramé owls, monogram throw pillows, and “Bless This House” cross-stitch patterns. Some items described as kitsch take on more specific cultural meanings; for example, Cassius Marcellus Coolidge’s painting of the dogs playing poker, titled *A Friend in Need*. Kitsch has also taken on a more serious and intentional meaning in the art canon: the art of Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons are two examples. These are considered serious artists and their art, while clearly kitschy, holds high value (you have to be rich to own an original Warhol or Koons). These examples illustrate that kitsch as an aesthetic category can serve more than one function: it can be used to stir sentimentality, provoke humor, or engage in meaningful cultural commentary (as in the work of Warhol or Koons). The difference in motivation in the production of kitsch art is worth analyzing. On one hand, Warhol and Koons are conscious of the kitschiness of their work and are utilizing the aesthetic of kitsch as a tool toward producing thought-provoking art. On the other hand, the makers of the “Live Love Laugh” sign and the people who hang iterations of this sign in their homes are probably not trying

to be kitschy; they are likely attempting to be authentic but in so doing betray an unwillingness to express their sentiments in a more meaningful way. The choice to turn to readymade phrases written in calligraphy by another hand on a piece of fake wood-composite exposes a lack of attention to one's core beliefs and how those beliefs are represented through personal aesthetic.

This paper enters the conversation on misinformation in philosophy of education—specifically, adding to the media literacy conversation—by exploring how aesthetics can help us understand the consumption and adoption of misinformation; particularly, how the philosophical history of fake, counterfeit, and cheap art can give us a language for the mass-produced ideological schemata that has become characteristic of the digital information age.<sup>2</sup> What does it mean for information, ideology, and beliefs to be kitschy? Just as kitsch art connotes inauthenticity and mass production, kitschy information is generally of low quality yet vaguely mimics authentic reasoning. The digital mediascape has made available a readymade set of ideological archetypes that one can adopt as quickly, easily, and thoughtlessly as a fake midcentury lamp on Amazon.<sup>3</sup> I argue that misinformation—information that is incorrect but with a tinge of accuracy and therefore believability—makes all of reality a kind of kitsch: a cheaper and easier version of belief systems<sup>4</sup>. I employ the language of art appreciation—quality, value, and authenticity—to think through how misinformation informs ideology.

I argue that the aesthetics of misinformation encompasses more than the look, feel, or sound of information. Political ideology and individual aesthetic presentation have become emmeshed: one signals one's political loyalties with imagery and personal branding. Moreover, this imagery and branding appears in archetypal groupings that are often rigid in their ontological boundaries. For example, one is not merely a left-of-center democrat; one is a social justice warrior. One is not merely a concerned parent; one is a Mom of Liberty. One is not merely a woman who works; one is a Girlboss. Aesthetics and misinformation are operative concepts in all the aforementioned political archetypes because, in the post-truth political landscape where identity cannot be disentangled from political groups, you better look the part; what you wear,

the places you go, the company you keep must all align with the party platform you subscribe to. These types are all based on schemas of convenient yet dubious “truths” that render lived experience simple and digestible. Life is a story with a linear narrative, these types seem to suggest, and if we just play a clearly defined role, we will reach an ending that makes sense.

In what follows, I first recount a brief philosophical history of inauthentic art, suggesting kitsch as the contemporary endpoint of fake, counterfeit, and cheap art. I then draw out the moral and intellectual implications of the consumption of kitsch and how these implications apply to political ideologies. Finally, I propose that an aesthetics of misinformation is a helpful addition to the existing pedagogical aims of information literacy.

### IMITATION AND INAUTHENTICITY

Philosophers have been on the lookout for imitation and inauthenticity since the ancient world. Indeed, the charge against Socrates that eventually led to his execution was using rhetoric to corrupt the youth with bad ideas. However, discussions about imitation and inauthenticity have always had a particular potency in the context of art. Art is the ultimate creative act, so the idea that someone might put forth an inauthentic work of art and claim authenticity is especially offensive. Another reason inauthenticity in art is regarded as such a high crime is because of the power of art to stir emotion and provoke thought. It is no wonder then that Plato was so suspicious of imitation of all kinds.

In Plato’s *Sophist*, a group led by a so-called “Eleatic Stranger” explain the difference between a Sophist and a philosopher, wherein a Sophist presents false or pretend knowledge, and the philosopher is the authentic seeker of wisdom and truth. In the dialogue, the Stranger delineates what he calls different kinds of imitative art: the first is *eikon*, translated as “copy” and described as “the art of likeness-making—generally a likeness of anything is made by producing a copy which is executed according to the proportions of the original, similar in length and breadth and depth, each thing receiving also its appropriate color.”<sup>25</sup> The second type of imitative art, that which *derives*

from the *eikon*, *eidolon* (image): “that which being other is also like;” in other words, the *eidolon* is something that is similar or the same in appearance as the original.<sup>6</sup> *Eikon* and *eidolon* are related in that the latter is the result or product of the former. The third type of imitative art defined by the stranger is the *phantasma* (appearance): the *phantasma* appears “not even like that to which they profess to be like.” *Phantasma* only bear a resemblance to the original but are not a willed *eikon*. Therefore, the Stranger makes a distinction between “likeness-making” art and “phantastic” art.

We know from *Republic* that Plato was suspicious of imitation, and therefore thought the State should outlaw creative arts such as poetry and painting. In the Jowett translation, the tragedians and other artists are referred to by Socrates as the “imitative tribe,” and, more than just producing copies of the forms, these “imitations are *ruinous* to the understanding” of their audience.<sup>7</sup> Socrates defines an imitator as a “creator of appearances.”<sup>8</sup> For example, Socrates asks Glaucon, “Which is the art of painting designed to be—an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear—of appearance or of reality?” Glaucon replies, “of appearance.”<sup>9</sup> Socrates replies:

Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them ... For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.<sup>10</sup>

What Socrates is concerned with here is not that the painter is producing an image of a figure who is not actually there, but that the image will operate as a *phantasma* and fool vulnerable people who might look upon it and mistake the painting for reality. The production of an image and its potential to be phantastic is a problem for Plato because it obscures the truth, which is the ultimate end of all strivings.

Plato's dialectic of imitation resulted in not only a distinction between authenticity and reproduction when it comes to art, but also moral condemnation of imitation. In her overview of aesthetics of the fake, Andrea Meracci draws on Plato's condemnation of imitation or falsification:

The conflict between appearance and reality ... [which] leads not only to the awareness that one can have a distorted reproduction of reality ... but also to a scenario in which the fake is assumed to be a possible reading of reality as a whole—overall, as Plato states in the allegory of the cave, a false idea of the world. What remains of Plato's condemnation of fake is obviously a vision (moralistic according to some authors) that considers the *pseudos* as a project of the global falsification of reality, a falsification that has to do not so much with the production of objects, as with the production of fluctuant and humoral opinions.<sup>11</sup>

Here, the fake or *pseudos* refers not only to inauthentic objects—a forged work of art or plagiarized poem, say—but an entire inauthentic worldview. Echoes of Plato's admonishment of the art of imitation resound in later discussions of authenticity in art and the moral implications of counterfeit art, and, eventually, mass produced art.

I will turn briefly to Leo Tolstoy's late-nineteenth century essay *What is Art?*, Walter Benjamin's twentieth century essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, and, finally, J. H. Kupfer's discussion of the moral implications of cheap art.

Tolstoy judges the merit of art not on the subject matter or content of the work, but on the authenticity, clarity, and sincerity of the feeling transmitted from artist to spectator. Tolstoy writes of art: "To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and, having evoked it in oneself, then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling so that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, "the more individual the feeling transmitted

the more strongly does it act on the recipient.”<sup>13</sup> Sincerity and authenticity determine the success or impact of the work of art for Tolstoy. Insincerity or inauthenticity destroy the success of the work. Tolstoy goes on:

As soon as the spectator, hearer, or reader, feel that the artist is infected by his own production and writes, sings, or plays, for himself and not merely to act on others, this mental condition of the artist infects the recipient; and, contrariwise, as soon as the spectator, reader, or hearer, feels that the author is not writing, singing, or playing, for his own satisfaction—does not himself feel what he wishes to express—but is doing it for him, the recipient, resistance immediately springs up and the most individual and the newest feelings and the cleverest technique not only fail to produce any infection but actually repel.<sup>14</sup>

Tolstoy espouses here that the second the spectator gets a whiff of insincerity—that the artist is not driven by a truly authentic feeling individual to himself—he is repelled by the work; he determines the art to be bad and moves on. However, Tolstoy seems to underestimate his first point about how we are so easily infected by the perceived emotions of others, and he seems to overestimate our ability to determine sincerity. Tolstoy begins his essay by explaining that we experience the emotions that we perceive others to be experiencing. For example, “one man laughs and another, who hears, becomes merry; or a man weeps and another, who hears, feels sorrow. A man is excited or irritated, and another man, seeing him, is brought to a similar state of mind.”<sup>15</sup> While this is surely true—human beings are empathetic and socially motivated creatures—I do not think we can easily detect insincerity in the performance of emotion. For example, it is relatively normal for a person to cry while watching a sad movie. The actors in the movie might be expressing an authentic emotion but they are likely pretending, too. And even though we know that they are probably pretending (it is just a movie), we still might be moved to tears. Our susceptibility to be influenced by the emotional displays of others and our fallible ability to determine inauthenticity ought to be considered in tandem.

The appeal of what Plato calls the *pseudos* and what Tolstoy calls *poddelka* (counterfeit) is, in Meracci's words, "a sort of *ante litteram* x-ray analysis of kitsch."<sup>16</sup> However, where Plato and Tolstoy differ is, again, according to Meracci, "in Plato's work, the counterfeit is not so much a perceptual error or an illusory appearance, as a strategy to create only an aesthetic pleasure, an act of enjoyment (and indeed Plato might agree on this point)."<sup>17</sup> For me, it is the etymology of kitsch that I think connects it to Plato's imitative arts and Tolstoy's inauthentic art: it is a German word likely adapted from the seventeenth century words *kitze* and *keütze*, referring to a shovel for mud and kitschen which meant to scrape together, the word kitsch then referring to "the low quality of a hastily executed piece of work."<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* speaks to the hasty and shallow qualities of art objects that are mechanically reproduced. Benjamin argues that the rise in mechanical reproduction technology changed the public experience of art: "the whole sphere of authenticity is outside the technical," he writes.<sup>19</sup> Unlike both Plato and Tolstoy, Benjamin is not concerned about spectators or consumers being deceived by imitation or counterfeit; rather, he is concerned about the alienation that occurs between artist and audience, when what Benjamin calls the *aura* of the work has been made inaccessible by mechanical reproduction. Prior to the reproducibility made possible by machine technology, an *original* work of art "preserved all of its authority."<sup>20</sup> The "unique existence" in a particular place and time is, for Benjamin, where the authenticity of an original work comes from; it maintains the *aura* of its production: the echoes of the context of the work's original production.<sup>21</sup> The reproducibility of art led to an alienation of the spectator from the work:

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the do-

main of tradition ... An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol.<sup>22</sup>

Another example of this loss of *aura* for Benjamin is the evolution of live theatre to film. According to Benjamin, the actor behind the camera is alienated from their audience in a way that destroys the authenticity of emotive connection and the audience become absent-minded spectators contra the participation of the audience of live theatre.<sup>23</sup>

Just as Benjamin argues that an original work of art retains the *aura* of the spatial and temporal moment of its production, the same might be said of an idea that leads to a belief or ideology. When one encounters a new piece of knowledge or has a new experience, the belief associated with that knowledge or experience has an authenticity that a belief adopted from an idea that has been pre-packaged and disseminated by someone else does not have. Where Benjamin argues that art that has been separated from traditions of technique is weak in authenticity, we might say that ideas separated from the processes of reason and deduction are similarly weak in authenticity.

In his discussion on aesthetic experiences as moral education, J. H. Kupfer focuses particularly on what he refers to as “cheap art” as a contrast to the moral value of an authentically aesthetic experience. According to Kupfer, cheap art “tells us what to think and feel.” It fosters familiar or comfortable feelings only, offering “variations in magnitude but not in form.” In this case, perception is replaced with recognition. The emotions experienced when viewing cheap art are comfortable and familiar and their inception and meaning are immediate. In other words, “it does not pull on deeper layers of our experience.” Kupfer points out how important the development of “new emotional patterns” is to growth.<sup>24</sup> Contrary to charting new emotional patterns, cheap art merely stirs and soothes our existing ones, stifling growth. Emotions “are not deepened” by so-called cheap art because the emotions “are not anchored in a sphere wider than ourselves.” In other words, in order for an experience to be authentically aesthetic, it must widen our perceptual



and emotional capacities outward. For Kupfer, “the vulgar has value only as a stimulus, so that we actually appreciate nothing more than our own patently excited state.”<sup>25</sup> Good art, on the other hand, invokes a change in us “because what we bring to the work of art, our fund of experience, is reordered by our interaction with it.”<sup>26</sup>

### BEYOND LITERACY: AESTHETICS AND AFFECT

Existing scholarship on aesthetics of misinformation is often limited to the analysis of visual presentation and semiotics of digital media messaging.<sup>27</sup> We need more than so-called information literacy to understand how people are impacted by misinformation. Misinformation is not only on the page or the newsreel, it is in whole ways of being in the world—complete schemata of both presentation and ontology.

In their article “Media Education and the Limits of ‘literacy.’ Ecological Orientations to Performative Platforms,” T. Philip Nichols and Robert Jean LeBlanc interrogate media literacy pedagogy and suggest an alternative approach grounded in ecology rather than literacy.<sup>28</sup> Nichols and LeBlanc define media literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages across media contexts.”<sup>29</sup> The authors present two dimensions of media literacy as encompassing common approaches to media literacy pedagogy. The first dimension “offers consumption-oriented strategies for analyzing texts, demystifying ideologies, and vetting truth-claims in print and digital media.”<sup>30</sup> The second dimension “offers production-oriented practices for creating messages that refute misinformation, challenge dominant narratives, and reflect marginalized narratives.”<sup>31</sup> Used concurrently, these two approaches ostensibly prepare students to not only navigate the digital media landscape, but also to take a critical stance toward hegemonic messaging in media.

One problem I sense with this approach, and Nichols and LeBlanc take this stance as well, is that it is not a given that these approaches will be implemented in the service of justice. Someone could take a critical stance toward hegemonic media messaging and determine that climate change is a hoax, to take an example put forth by the authors. By promoting a posture of what

Nichols and LeBlanc call “generalized skepticism,” credible information might be dismissed as propaganda.<sup>32</sup> Both ends of the political ideological spectrum employ a “critical” approach to information and end up in different places: a Social Justice Warrior is critical of hegemonic messaging and determines that internalized racism, homophobia, and misogyny undergird all decision-making just as a QAnon believer is critical of the deep state and determines that the wealthy urban elite use social justice rhetoric to distract from their maleficence. Both sides have employed critique as their media literacy methodology. Therefore, it is not clear that interpretation and analysis will arrive at anything approximating “truth.”

An approach to deciphering information in digital media that emphasizes literacy alone seems to perpetuate rather than challenge what I am calling “kitsch life” because it offers a readymade or pre-packaged approach to interpreting the world; it positions ideologies as caricatures that need only be sorted into clearly delineated categories of thinking. Unlike the deep thought and moral contemplation that Kupfer suggests a true aesthetic experience stimulates, a kitschy approach to interpreting information hastily applies stock terminology to speech and presentation. Moreover, media literacy’s focus on the production and consumption of *texts* (that is, news articles, television segments, podcasts, political commentary disseminated on YouTube and other media platforms) overlooks the ways in which misinformation seeps into what Nichols and LeBlanc call media environments and milieu.<sup>33</sup> Adorno, in *The Authoritarian Personality*, suggested that it was media *environments* rather than messages that made individuals susceptible to totalitarian propaganda. Indeed, when thinking on the aesthetics of fascist leaders, none relied on text-based messaging alone to garner power and influence: they created festivals and choreographed group marches; age and gender-based social clubs; flags and banners. Historian of thought, George Mosse, has written extensively on the aesthetics of fascism because misinformation and disinformation are not only or even mostly disseminated via text-based mediums; they are embodied and performed; they are in how we act and relate to others as well as what we write and speak; they are in our clothing and food choices as well as our social media

posts.<sup>34</sup> A Mom of Liberty does not just consume literature that bolsters her thinking and share her thoughts on social media; she also attends meetings and interacts with like-minded others in *environments* that impact her affect and sense of self.

Nichols and LeBlanc propose what they call a “media ecology” as a thicker interpretive approach to information. The authors suggest that a media ecology offers an “avenue for attending to the *performative* politics of media” and identifying “performative dynamics of the media *environment*.”<sup>35</sup> An emphasis on environment rather than literacy “gestures towards a reciprocal relationality between representational media and the social landscape.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, representation is inseparable from ways of living and being.

My proposal that *aesthetics* can help us understand misinformation finds additional support in the related area of affect studies. Kayla Keener suggests that the mediascape’s use of affect in information curation allows so-called facts to be *felt* or *embodied*, nullifying the consumers’ drive to engage in critical discourse or even to simply check the “facts” against other sources.<sup>37</sup> According to Keener,

within this new mediascape, fake news is immune to ideological debunking or fact checking ... Instead, affective attachment and felt realities, or a ‘gut reaction’ to the news with which one comes into contact, become viable alternatives to empirically based discourse.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, “fake news and other ideologically inflected news sites and stories modulate affect by ‘feeling right.’”<sup>39</sup> Brian Massumi likewise points out that perceived facts can be felt or embodied rather than arrived at by reasoning, where realities are felt: something “will have been real because it was *felt* to be real.”<sup>40</sup> This affective confirmation bias renders information “unfalsifiable” and “immune to fact checking” because “affective facts function as a form of common sense, which ‘feels coherent’ and ‘becomes intuitive.’”<sup>41</sup>

This “felt reality” is in line with my own idea of ready-made, kitschy identity schemata. For example, one might take for granted the truthfulness

or logic of someone who dresses like them or frequents the same kind of establishment, relying on “vibe” rather than reason to establish agreement or disagreement. The danger in such an approach to information processing is its ease; it is much easier to simply identify a person or group with a presentation—clothing, behaviors, manners of speech, and so on—that aligns with a woke liberal democrat or a libertarian skeptic than to carefully evaluate each talking point one by one to determine reasonableness. This is precisely why kitsch art is often easier to consume than “high art;” kitsch art satisfies a longing for familiarity and simplicity, whereas high art is often unfamiliar and disruptive to understanding, requiring intellectual work to digest.

### CONCLUSION

To conclude, I want to make the final point that kitsch life is not a partisan problem; it is not the case that the ideologies of one political party or interest group are systemically kitschy and others are not. I would venture to reason that most information encountered on algorithm-driven digital platforms, regardless of political motivation, is ready-made or prepackaged, predigested even, by someone whose motivations have little to do with truth or authenticity.<sup>42</sup>

I have illustrated in this paper that the philosophical area of aesthetics has something to offer the study of misinformation, but in a way that stretches beyond the analysis of website layout and visual rhetoric. As all of the thinkers I have engaged with suggest, information—both intellectual and intuitive—exists in auras, environments, and milieus, not only in text. The makers of social media platforms, content-creators, and influencers seem to be clued into this: the language of digital media platforms—posting, liking, sharing—all sound like aesthetic curation. There are no icons to click called “analyze,” “interpret,” or even “mull over.” As the Marshall McLuhan adage goes, “the medium is the message.”

The epigraph at the start of this paper articulates the vapidness of the use of politically-charged terms for performance and presentation. Merve Emre writes:

Reading paraphrases of paraphrases of paraphrases, one starts to feel as if there is something a little hollow and shiftless about the ease with which phrases such as “white supremacist, homophobic, classist, ableist, xenophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, capitalist patriarchy” are trotted out. We get the right words, strung together like marquee lights, but not the structural analysis that puts them in relation to one another.<sup>43</sup>

Buzzwords that flicker and pop like marquee lights might work to attract attention, but without the threads of reason to bring them together, they are just kitschy wall-hangings. If these terms are dislocated from an authentic source of intellectual explanation and prepackaged by someone else’s consciousness in a clipped piece of digital media, the sentiment is hollow.

To turn once more to an analogous situation in art, someone might say of the seemingly random paint splatters of Jackson Pollock’s *Number 1*, “he’s just throwing paint at a canvas; I could do that! What makes this art?” It is not the seemingly random paint splatters that make Jackson Pollock’s *Number 1* great art; it is the way the splatters are arranged on the canvas in relation to each other and Pollock’s ideas and inclinations that moved through his consciousness, prompting him to create the painting. The authenticity of *Number 1* is the convergence of an original idea, a spatial and temporal location, a technique, and meaningful intention, or, in Benjamin’s terms, an *aura*.

Much has been written across mediums and disciplines about how we should navigate information in the post-truth era, but is it really *truth* that is at stake, or is it *authenticity*?

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