

Modernising Media or Modernist Medium? The Struggle for Liberal Learning in Our Information Age

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My modest task in this chapter is to explore how critical self-examination may grow out of an acknowledgement of the challenges of authentic communication, and, conversely, how current tendencies to promote inauthentic communication constitute one of the chief threats to this examination. These tendencies I associate with postmodernisation, here understood as a redoubled wave of innovation under the conditions of what some have called late-capitalism. Self-examination on the other hand I associate with what Michael Oakeshott calls 'liberal learning', a prelude, we may hope, to *Bildung* (Oakeshott, 1989).

Traditionally, we have affirmed the value of liberal learning by making it the central concern of many of our institutions of secondary and higher education. Yet today, these institutions are under pressure to speedily revamp themselves. Motivating this new wave of modernisation, or postmodernisation in the sense above, is the rise of the 'information society', one based on the power of advanced communications technology. This development is leading many to proclaim that secondary and higher education must function in ways compatible with this technology, such as by emphasising distance education. Postmodernisation thus raises questions about the capacity, and the commitment, of these educational institutions to continue to foster liberal learning. Can this technology adequately support this learning? Will the latter still be able to flourish in such altered institutional settings?

I worry that it will not, because what stimulates such learning is radical questioning of our deepest assumptions, and such questioning is apt to be obstructed by the very technology of the mass media, including the World Wide Web. This problem, I believe, should commit supporters of liberal learning to take more political responsibility for the context of their learning, and to root that learning in critical explorations of communicative and representational media. To make this case, I shall begin by summarising how the development of media technology, especially the Web, is affecting institutions of liberal learning, particularly in higher education. Legitimising this development are a number of principal interests; among them is that in distance-spanning, communicative and representational immediacy. However, this interest requires that the conditions of this sense of immediacy, the medium, recede from

view. Unable to clearly scrutinise the make-up of his or her online experiences, the liberal learner's capacity for radical self-examination is thus seriously constricted. To surmount this limitation, then, we should instead cultivate liberal learning out of a more critical attitude toward its media, an attitude found, among other places, in the modernist arts.

How does the growth of new information technologies pressure institutions of higher education to postmodernise? Consider the picture of this postmodernisation drawn by Arthur Levine, a scholar of higher education and current President of Teachers College, Columbia University, in a number of writings, perhaps most succinctly in his essay, 'The Soul of a New University' (Levine, 2000). Levine proceeds from the common wisdom that a new society is in the process of forming; he observes that such a society necessitates a different kind of education for its citizens. 'Information economies require higher levels of education and more frequent education' (Levine, 2000). These requirements increasingly bring to institutions of higher education students bearing correspondingly different kinds of needs: 'More of the student body may be part time, working, and older,' and they are liable to demand educational arrangements that underscore 'convenience, service, quality, and affordability' (Levine, 2000). How should these institutions best serve these students? The answer, it seems to many, is to put higher education online.

The reasons for this fall into two categories. First, with respect to quality, online education appears to provide a more vivid, more compelling experience of educational content to students than traditional classroom instruction. As we have learned from Dewey and others, what better way is there to teach something than to furnish students with opportunities to interest themselves in that thing, and interact with it, in authentically meaningful, lifelike ways. If you were trying to make a point about what it was like to live in the Renaissance, for example, you would strive to bring that point home by helping students actually experience what makes it significant. This, online education promises to do to an unprecedented degree, by virtue of its powers of 'virtual reality'. As Levine puts it:

The time is coming when . . . instead of telling students about 15th century Paris, for example, we will take them there. And when a student can smell the smells — which must have been putrid, walk the cobblestones, go into the buildings, how will a stand-up lecture compete (Levine, 2000).

Second, with respect to convenience, service and affordability, online education's advantage over conventional instruction is even more pronounced. Its technology enables educators to reach many more people at considerably less expense. It drastically reduces the need for the college physical plant, with its classroom capacity restrictions, its rigid scheduling, its maintenance needs and its singular, immobile location. Freed from the confines and fixity of the classroom, the student need travel no further than to the terminal in the next room, at a time more of his or

her choosing. As long as the technology is kept widely affordable, online education stands to make liberal learning much more inclusive. And for schools, of course, all this amounts to a welcome windfall: online education promises to boost enrolment income, while slashing delivery costs.

So is this education the best way to meet the needs of the new college and university student of the information age? My reservations concern the issue of quality, which I take to be decisive. A convenient education of dubious quality is hardly an education at all. Now as sketched above, the claim to educational excellence rests chiefly on the power of online education to stimulate the experience of communicative and representational immediacy. Of course, there are bound to be online education programs that forgo this experience; still, its appeal as a potential selling point seems clear. In Levine's scenario, one would feel, more than ever, as if one were really there in fifteenth-century Paris, and as if one were instantaneously sharing this street with the rest of the class. This seems easily imaginable, and truly exciting. I also concede that for the purpose of learning some lessons, such as understanding what fifteenth-century Parisians cared about, greater degrees of immediacy *can* translate into more effective teaching. The question I want to focus on is whether it translates into more liberal learning.

To develop a critical perspective on this sense of immediacy, I'm going to try to establish an analogy between the fifteenth-century Paris program above, and what the critic Clement Greenberg, discussing twentieth-century art, calls kitsch. The burden will be on me to show that this analogy turns not so much on someone's judgements of taste regarding these works, judgements which could be extraneous to these works' educative potential, as on an estimation of how well they teach us to attend to the world, on the sensitivity and thoughtfulness they inspire in us. First off, then, what does Greenberg mean by 'kitsch?' Focusing on his famous essay, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (Greenberg, 1985), we find the term elaborated with reference to a specific kind of experience, that of an 'ignorant Russian peasant' looking from an icon to a painting by the nineteenth-century painter, Repin, and taking a particular kind of pleasure in the latter:

He turns next to Repin's picture and sees a battle scene. The technique is not so familiar—as technique. But that weighs very little with the peasant, for he suddenly discovers values in Repin's picture which seem far superior to the values he has been accustomed to finding in icon art; and the unfamiliar technique itself is one of the sources of those values: the values of the vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic. In Repin's picture the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures—there is no discontinuity between art and life, no need to accept a convention and say to oneself, that icon represents Jesus because it intends to represent Jesus, even if it does not remind me very much of a man. That Repin can paint so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator—that is miraculous.

The peasant is also pleased by the wealth of self-evident meanings which he finds in the picture: 'it tells a story' . . . The icons are so austere and barren in comparison. What is more, Repin heightens reality and makes it dramatic: sunset, exploding shells, running and falling men . . . Repin is what the peasant wants, and nothing else but Repin. It is lucky, however, for Repin that the peasant is protected from the products of American capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell (Greenberg, 1985, pp. 27–28).

A rich, and provocative, passage. Presently I shall try to pick out the main qualities that make Repin's painting, according to Greenberg, a work of kitsch. But first, a word about the provocative part of the 'ignorant peasant' in this discussion. Greenberg makes it hard to avoid identifying Repin's kitschiness with peasant taste, and thus very hard not to read the passage, and the rest of the essay, as contriving an aesthetic justification for disdaining one's social inferiors. Given, therefore, this all-too predictable tendency to merge the drawing of aesthetic distinctions into the reinforcing of class ones, which the passage appears to (kitschily) typify, use of a term like kitsch should invite suspicion. Nevertheless, just as morality need not lapse into moralism, especially if the subject of moral judgement is oneself and not others, so I will try to suggest how, following Greenberg judiciously, we may use his idea of kitsch to understand a part of our own discontent with cultural and learning material we are offered, rather than pronounce on the tastes of the masses.

Back, then, to the meaning of the term. In the passage, the following features form the core of the peasant's experience. The first is the unfamiliarity to him of the picture's technique: how the picture produces its effects remains occult. Second, there is the powerful impression the picture makes on him of 'the vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic,' powerful because it demands practically no effort on his part. And third, there is the metaphorical association of this pictorial vividness with an event in the world outside the picture that is especially meaningful and dramatic, and thus befitting of our awe. Now these experiential features may in turn be redescribed as ways that the work shapes the viewer's attention. We can also acknowledge that what shapes our attention is not only the work's formal features, but aspects of its social context. Generalising from this example, then, kitsch, as Greenberg is using the term, comprises those works, in characteristic contexts, that focus our attention not on the work's techniques that shape our attention, but on things, people, and events represented and communicated in the work that are immediately self-evident, and on the expressive link between the vividness of this picture and the special significance of what is depicted. Kitsch moves us with its power to transport us immediately, if illusorily, into another world more alive.

Compare this experience of Repin's painting with the experience of the computer program of fifteenth-century Paris. Just as the peasant's interest in Repin's technique is limited to its magicalness, so we may

imagine that few students will have much interest in how the program works, or what it is composed of, beyond what are the correct buttons to push. Instead, both the peasant and the student are mainly mesmerised by the pictures' lifelikeness. And in both instances, the intensity of this vividness will be linked to some dramatic point, whether the fury of battle, or the primitiveness of the Parisian sewer system. Common to the painting and the program, then, is the kitsch experience of seeming immediacy.

Of course, I have been describing this experience rather matter-of-factly, when we all know that kitsch has derogatory connotations. Yet what is problematic about this experience remains unclear. Since we are moved to marvel at these works, why should we not affirm the value of their achievements? What could be a more powerful stimulus to liberal learning than these miraculous visions?

The problem, Greenberg finds, is that for these works to produce this experience, they must conceal its conditions; immediacy depends on a hidden medium. He criticises this screen for lending itself to social forces of manipulation; in addition, I criticise it for impeding true liberal learning. The grounds for his criticism become clearer when we contrast kitsch with avant-garde art. He develops this contrast out of a comparison of Repin's painting with one of Picasso's:

Ultimately, it can be said that the cultivated spectator derives the same values from Picasso that the peasant gets from Repin, since what the latter enjoys in Repin is somehow art too, on however low a scale, and he is sent to look at pictures by the same instincts that send the cultivated spectator. But the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter. They are not immediately or externally present in Picasso's painting, but must be projected into it by a spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the 'reflected' effect. In Repin, on the other hand, the 'reflected' effect has already been included in the picture, ready for the spectator's unreflective enjoyment. Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*. Repin pre-digests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art. Repin, or kitsch, is synthetic art (Greenberg, 1985, p. 28).

Once again, the contrast between Repin and Picasso, a contrast that I am claiming has its uses, is accompanied by another between an ignorant peasant and a cultivated spectator that threatens to reduce the whole issue to snobbery or worse. This is unfortunate, and objectionable, but also unnecessary. In line with my earlier suggestion about thinking of kitsch as naming a kind of disappointment in one's own experience, I find it more illuminating to identify the 'peasant' and the 'cultivated' as alternate moods in oneself, rather than as separate, unequal classes. Who has not approached an artwork, particularly after a long week,

looking for an experience of escape? And who has not, comparatively speaking, responded in different circumstances to such works more carefully and critically? Furthermore, it is important for my purposes, though not necessarily Greenberg's, that we also do not confuse the distinction between these representatives of kitsch and avant-garde art, with the question of who is, *tout court*, the better painter. I am comfortable with allowing that Repin's artistry may be considered the equal of Picasso's. What interests me are the different ends their talents serve, and the educational significance of those ends.

Both Repin and Picasso, accordingly, elicit an interest in the values of 'the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic'. But whereas Repin's path to these values is one of 'unreflective enjoyment' of the painting's elements, Picasso insists on reflection on these. He draws our attention to the physical medium of painting—e.g. to the weave of the canvas, the size of the frame, the viscosity of the paint, etc—and to the traces of the artist's interactions with that medium, in order that we may puzzle out anew how these interactions can represent and communicate a world, how they cause meaning. I shall return to this later. For now, the key contrast is that between being impressed by a world instantaneously rendered by invisible artistry, and being impressed by artistry that, after attracting and sustaining contemplation, suggests a world: between an experience of vivid immediacy, and one of a medium's intimations. Kitsch, for my purposes, is not so much bad as formulaic art calculated to trigger automatic, unthinking reactions; avant-garde or modernist art is less good art than art that stresses process, which takes time for thinking.

The invisibility of the medium, then, that's the rub. It is this that makes kitsch a vehicle for 'all that is spurious in the life of our times' (Greenberg, 1985, p. 25). Why? Because instead of challenging individuals to look at, and think about, the work's actual elements and their workings, the hidden medium focuses our attention instead on an external world which is already completely recognisable, and so which evidently requires no further examination. As a result, this medium precludes critical reflection. This is why kitsch can both exploit and mask certain ambiguities that serve market and political forces. It dresses up commercial considerations—what will sell—as aesthetic ones—what will best capture the truth and beauty of an experience. On the one hand, it represents 'pop culture', that of the interests and tastes of a majority drawn from all walks of life, and regularly celebrates its own accessibility, often by mocking the pretensions of 'high culture'. On the other, this pop culture can resemble nothing more than an advanced, secular opiate, designed to reconcile its audience to the world as it is, and thus to an anti-popular, class society. These duplicities are rooted in a central one: kitsch captivates us with an experience of immediacy, by occluding from our awareness the machinery of that captivation. What makes it fundamentally contradictory, and inauthentic, is the fact that it lives to fly from what gives it life. And so its success can only be imaginary.

To the extent that online education prides itself on the experience of immediacy, it, too, is denying its conditions, its medium. And while such a denial may not matter for some kinds of grammar and vocational learning, it seriously obstructs liberal learning. Grammar and vocational education often rely on what Philip W. Jackson calls 'mimetic learning,' the verifiable transfer of a clearly defined piece of knowledge or know-how from the teacher to the student (Jackson, 1986). Yet this kind of learning has only an ancillary role, at best, in liberal learning.

Consider one of Oakeshott's characterisations of the latter: he calls it 'an invitation to disentangle oneself, for a time, from the urgencies of the here and now and to listen to the conversation in which human beings forever seek to understand themselves' (Oakeshott, 1989, p. 41). This passage sheds light on a number of key features. First, liberal learning responds to an invitation that one is free to accept or reject; it is indeed the kind of learning that is proper to the free person. Second, to engage in it, we must temporarily detach ourselves from our given, demanding world; this occurs when each of us submits ourselves to questions whose answers cannot be found finally in the world, but only in ourselves. Third, in spite of the fact that the answers lie within, the questions can only be fully articulated in conversation with fellow seekers, equals, not authorities. But fourth, these questions about how one should understand oneself remain always prior to one's communication with others—how can one fully understand another if one does not yet understand oneself?—and accordingly render such communication, if it is to be authentic, necessarily provisional. These traits of liberal learning all depart from the central stresses of mimetic learning. The latter learning emphasises the bit of information to be transferred; the former, the question to be submitted to. The latter presumes that the bit's possessor is in a privileged position to direct him or her who lacks the bit; the former recognises that ignorance is what we share. And the latter is confident that the transfer can be verified, so that the teacher can advance to the next bit; the former acknowledges that any transfer remains precariously subject to an ongoing self-examination, self-questioning, that the transfer cannot itself resolve. Mimetic learning can furnish one with facts that help spur and deepen questions of liberal learning, but it is not itself such learning.

In essence, liberal learning is a process of Socratic questioning for self-examination. Now imagine trying to foster this kind of radical questioning online. How seriously and critically can one examine oneself if one is prevented, by the nature of the online experience, from examining what supports that self-examination, namely, its medium? How can one have online experiences that stimulate reflection—if that technology is designed to manufacture experiences of immediacy that curtail reflection? However useful this technology is for other kinds of learning, therefore, according to one important and relevant measure of educational quality, particularly the quality of our secondary and higher education—that of being able to foster liberal learning—we should find online education distinctly wanting.

A better way to support liberal learning would be to root it in a critical examination of its media. In this respect, the example of modernist art is helpful. Modernism has been usefully defined by Marshall Berman as 'any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization', and as 'a struggle to make ourselves at home in a constantly changing world' (Berman, 1982, pp. 5–6). The art that fosters this kind of understanding of what it means to live in a modern world has largely been abstract. Why is this the case? Greenberg starts to explain by linking the rise of abstraction to that of an interest in an artwork's medium:

This is the genesis of the 'abstract'. In turning his attention away from subject matter or common experience, the poet or artist turns it upon the medium of his own craft. The non-representational or 'abstract,' if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental, but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common, extraverted experience has been renounced, can only be found in the very processes or disciplines by which art and literature already imitated the former. These themselves become the subject matter of art and literature (Greenberg, 1985, p. 23).

Previously, the features of Western art appeared to be clearly necessitated, ruled, by the project of representing and communicating familiar, natural subject matter. We all know what it means to call a painting 'representational,' or a novel 'realist.' Abstraction, in contrast, is signalled by the appearance of features that float free of this project, provoking in us a very basic perplexity. How should we understand these marks, or what the work as a whole is about? The temptation is to dismiss such works as lawless, arbitrary, and so invalid because incapable of sustaining and rewarding serious attention to its features. To dispel this temptation, the work needs to demonstrate a responsiveness to 'some worthy constraint or original'. In the modern era, this becomes the work's medium.

Why? A first reason is that although realist art continues to generate complex forms of experience that resist easy assimilation, it also serves as a principal source of the formulas harnessed by kitsch. Renouncing realism is thus one way of protecting at least one's own artistic activities from serving as fodder for the entertainment industry.

A second, more positive reason is that abstract art's project of exploring how work with a particular medium of representation and communication, including the history of its language, can create new forms of beauty, stretches our perceptiveness and understanding. Because such artworks do not have a subject matter that is self-evident, they challenge us to examine them closely in a situation where we are largely at sea. They teach us to be patient with general uncertainty, even unintelligibility, but still to attend carefully to the ways strange hints of meaning and beauty emerge out of care for the medium. Indeed, I would quarrel a little with Greenberg's claim that abstract art ought not to be

arbitrary and accidental. Developments since his essay, epitomised, say, by the enormous influence of John Cage, suggest that we may understand such art as demonstrating how we may honestly acknowledge contingency, ambiguity, and incommunicability, yet still live by beautiful grace. They show us a possible ethics of modernity.

Obviously, I'm sketching quite freely here: not every artwork that we would call abstract fits this characterisation easily, and the limits of the characterisation need to be determined by closely examining a number of such works. But I hope that enough of this account rings true to suggest that abstraction is rooted in a renunciation of immediacy and an appreciation of medium, and that this appreciation can suggest how we may live attentively and thoughtfully in changing, unstable, modern times. If this is so, then it should be clear that modernist, abstract art is a fecund field for liberal learning. Such works suggest that questions of how we should represent and communicate our experience—particularly if we want to avoid forms of seemingly immediate communication and representation that lend themselves to exploitation—naturally arouse critical reflection on who we are and what we stand for.

How should we support liberal learning in the information age? I have been suggesting that liberal learners need to take more responsibility for the social context of that learning, for preventing that context from turning into one hostile to such learning. Today, institutions of secondary and higher education are being pressured to shift much of their efforts to online instruction. In the face of this, we should strive to make the case heard that as long as the advantages of online education are based on its power to provide a superior sense of immediacy, then this education is ill-suited for liberal learning. As an alternative, we should try to develop self-examination, and the nurturing of inwardness, out of a questioning of learning media. In this respect, our liberal learning could find some guidance in works of modernist art.

By struggling to preserve liberal learning in this way, we may come to a more acute sense of its gaping absence in the dominant entertainment culture of our information society. For some time, it has been in retreat; now one of its last refuges is being stormed. Perhaps this will embolden us to question, finally, the cost of this society to our humanity. And so to find that humanity once again.

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