

« Le Meilleur des mondes »

Kitsch and Humanity in Michel Houellebecq's *La Possibilité d'une île*

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Kitsch is considered a matter of opinion and a category, frequently employed to designate *somebody else's* art or taste. It is rarely a characterization we would volunteer regarding our own aesthetic preferences. Used patronizingly, dismissively or even in a derogatory fashion, it denotes artistic achievements of an inferior grade and is thought of as a superficial, much-too-easily-accessible variety of aesthetic representation. Thus, it's that much more surprising that Michel Houellebecq, an author who posits himself as anything but mainstream and conventional, would proclaim that his ambition is to create a kitsch body of work:

Idéalement, je devrais réussir à devenir kitsch. Quand c'est vraiment réussi, l'art consiste à produire de nouveaux clichés, donc si ce que je fais est vraiment réussi, cela devrait être considéré comme une source de kitsch. Oui, ça serait la vraie réussite. Un nouveau kitsch dépressif peut-être. J'ai bon espoir. (Naulleau 80)

Even though this statement has earned Houellebecq the sneer of the academic reader, we find kitsch at the core of his second-to-last novel to-date, *La Possibilité d'une île* (2005). There, it symbolizes an ethical and aesthetic sensibility of such lasting appeal as to become the foundation for a new religion and new type of humanity.

In order to flesh out some of the reasons behind this extolling of kitsch, we will first of all take a look at the passages in which examples of it appear. Subsequently, we will explore the evolution the original kitsch artist, Vincent, goes through as he puts his ideas in motion and drafts a new religious movement. In conclusion, we will see how Houellebecq ends his novel by suggesting that despite its overly simplistic and unsophisticated tendencies, kitsch as it exists in the world of today might be just the thing that makes us human.

Let us begin by briefly introducing the author and the novel. Michel Houellebecq occupies (for reasons which, some would argue, have very little to do with purely artistic merit), a rather singular place in contemporary French letters. A master of self-promotion, he is a man who rejoices in finding himself in the midst of scandal. A great commercial success and a darling of literary Paris, he has been skillful in making people *talk about him*.ⁱ Some have wondered whether his novels have literary merits outside of their ability to instigate a debate. Others have openly ridiculed him and questioned his talent as a writer.ⁱⁱ The harshest critics attribute his eminence to the creation of *romans à these* of dubious literary quality, defined by pre-fabricated, formulaic writing, a "spoon-feeding" of unoriginal, banal ideas, a manipulation of society's most basic instincts and intentional failure to spark independent reflection and analysis.

There is some truth to all of these accusations. Despite all the discursive and judicial heat they have generated, I myself am unconvinced of Houellebecq's first three novels' chances of withstanding the test of time. However, there is little doubt that he is an author, finely

attuned to the needs and reactions of the rapidly shrinking body of people who read books. One of the reasons behind his considerable commercial success is his skillful blending of a variety of literary genres. *La Possibilité d'une île*, for example, consists of two separate but intertwining and complementary accounts, combining biography, science fiction, millennial, apocalyptic, and utopian writing. The first one takes place in the present while the second occurs in the future. The original storyteller, referred to as Daniel 1, traces the story of the birth and ascent to power of a new religious sect, the Elohimites. The latter lures its followers through the promise of eternal life, fulfilled several hundred years later, when science finally catches up with the dream of immortality. Using frozen DNA, the Elohimites who die are reconstructed within 24 hours and return to life bearing the majority of the physical and mental features of their predecessors. Depending on their generation, they are designated by a number following their names. Thus Daniel 1's autobiographical narrative is accompanied by the commentary of two of his neo-human successors – Daniel 24 and Daniel 25. They recount stories of life in solitude and confinement within the limits of an isolated compound where they are only in the company of faithful canine companions. Even though the clones resemble their predecessors physically, certain human traits have atrophied in their personalities. It is significant that the biggest changes have occurred on the level of the emotions, priorities and attachments: those that seem to rule and define our human existence end up completely erased in the successive generations.

In the world of solitude and isolation Daniel 24 and Daniel 25 describe, interaction between the Neo-humans is carried out via a computer, following a strict mathematical code. There is no room for the slightest creative deviation. Thus, naturally, one of the larger themes *La Possibilité d'une île* explores is the future of individual artistic production. Through the glum picture of a future with virtually no creative impulses, Houellebecq raises the question of the role of the artist in our own society. What might appear surprising at first glance is that, despite appearances, the author believes strongly, perhaps even naively, in the social responsibility of writers and in literature's capacity to change the world for the better: "[O]n souhaite dépasser le cynisme. Si quelqu'un aujourd'hui parvient à développer un discours à la fois honnête et positif, il modifiera le monde" (Lovecraft 111), he points out in *Lovecraft*. Hence the important paradox which we find at the core of Houellebecq's writing: In the midst of all the horror, despair and negation his novels and poems abound in, you know that you are, at heart, in the presence of a *moraliste* of the French Augustinian variety (Arnauld, Pascal, La Rochefoucauld). In *La Possibilité*, this moralist is none other than the artist himself.

Vincent Greilsamer, one of the most notable characters of the novel, is a man whose attitude echoes a similar position. A painter, he is also one of the very few human beings for whom the original narrator has unbound respect. Daniel's admiration for Vincent is in part due to the differences between the two men. A *bona fide* cynic and a comedian of acerbic wit, Daniel would observe early on what makes his relationship with Vincent so special:

J'étais naturellement un homme qui connaissait la vie, la société et les choses; j'en connaissais une vision usuelle, limitée aux motivations les plus courantes qui agitent la machine humaine; ma vision était celle d'un observateur acerbe des faits de société, d'un balzacien medium light; c'était une vision du monde dans

laquelle Vincent n'avait aucune place assignable, et pour la première fois depuis des années, ... je commençais à me sentir légèrement déstabilisé. (PI, 148)

Daniel scrutinizes Vincent constantly and quickly becomes wise to his calm refusal to change himself so as to better adapt to his surroundings. During an outing to the beach, the two of them find themselves in the proximity of a Miss Bikini Contest (the competitors themselves described in the best tradition of a Lolita-inspired fantasy – half-waifish, half devilish and extremely sexual). Looking around, Daniel sees that the audience, the jury and the announcer are nothing but eternal *kids*, individuals, profoundly invested in a never-ending quest for pleasure. In a humorous turn of phrase, the stand-up comedian in him would remark, “[Vincent] était à peu près autant à sa place dans cette animation de plage que Samuel Beckett dans un clip de rap” (PI, 257).

Paradoxically, despite his refusal to adjust to the demands of mainstream society, Vincent is perhaps the only individual in the novel thoroughly comfortable with himself and ready to live life on its own terms. Nothing about the world is capable of enticing him to participate in the activities his fellow-humans typically enjoy: “Nous étions dans le monde normal ... le monde des *kids* définitifs [...] Il n’y avait rien là qui put réellement inciter Vincent à reprendre sa place dans la société” (PI, 257). If Greilsamer destabilizes somebody like Daniel, it is perhaps in large measure due to the fact that, as a true artist, he does not feel the need to engage in a violent exchange with his surroundings. Instead, he seeks salvation in a world he has created himself.

Vincent lives in his dead grandparents’ house. His home is a museum of bygone days. Nothing has been changed in the décor since the 1930s. We imagine Vincent’s grandparents to have been the type of *petite bourgeoisie* philistine urban dwellers upon whom authors from the beginning of the Twentieth century (somebody like Louis-Ferdinand Céline in particular) heaped such vehement sarcasm. Judging by the descriptions of the furniture and the numerous souvenirs and mementos scattered around the home, we can safely assume that Vincent was raised in a household that would invariably provoke the sneer of the sophisticated reader. The house exhibits all the signs critic Robert Solomon isolates as pivotal to the definition of kitsch: “The furnishings and decorations are “cheap” (a word that often performs multiple functions in discussions of kitsch), because it is mass-produced and “plastic,” because it is the sort of item that would and should embarrass someone with a proper aesthetic education” (Solomon 3).

Vincent is not in the least embarrassed by the kitsch aspects of his home. What’s more, he has incorporated the style into his art. In the basement of his very typical Parisian suburban house, he has attempted to create a perfect world in the form of a huge art installation geared towards recreating a universe in which words such as love, goodness, tenderness, loyalty and happiness still have a meaning (PI, 152). The project is very elaborate and eclectic. It represents different corners of the world and is inspired by various customs and traditions. Despite its being very sophisticated from a technological point of view, Vincent’s installation glorifies a world very much at odds with modern reality. Called “Le meilleur des mondes,” it is an assembly of hundreds of scintillating, comforting and attractive images. To quote the description of just one scene:

Un train entrant en gare dans une station d'eaux en Europe centrale. Les montagnes enneigées, dans le lointain, étaient baignées par le soleil; des lacs scintillaient, des alpages. Les demoiselles étaient ravissantes, elles portaient des robes longues et des voilettes. Les messieurs souriaient en les saluant, soulevant leur chapeau haut de forme. Tous avaient l'air heureux. (PI, 151)

The passage above is one tiny part of a vast visual puzzle, based around a glorified past and filled with sweet images of people getting married, celebrating, getting together as family. The settings are serene and harmonious. The lights are soothing. The whole installation radiates a sense of innocence, purity and bliss which remind us of Robert Solomon's definition of sentimentalist, or "sweet" kitsch: "a term of ridicule and abuse, connoting superficiality, saccharine sweetness and the manipulation of mawkish emotion. [...] Fly paper for the Philistines, who in their ignorance flock to [its] sweet perfection" (Solomon 2). While "sweet" is always a matter of opinion, there is no denying that in Vincent's installation, we are confronted with a world in which everything has its logical place, a universe characterized by eternal peace and tranquility, and from which danger, ugliness and violence are notably absent.

Vincent's installation would be utterly ludicrous and devoid of merit had the artist pretended that he believed in the possibility of such a universe actually existing. This is not the case at all. On the contrary, he is fully cognizant of the retrograde overtones of his work, and of the possibility that it may be misinterpreted as a failure to inscribe himself within the framework of the true "modern artist". However, I'd like to argue that the kitsch elements that define it have been carefully crafted in order to provoke a two-fold critique of the so-called "contemporary world". On the one hand, Vincent chooses to glorify a life that is completely and irrevocably gone. He does so by employing the most conventional, easily recognizable and overall unsophisticated symbols possible. On the other hand, by choosing to base his art around nostalgic and renegade notions from the past, Vincent is, much like Houellebecq, distancing himself from the artistic avant-garde of his own day and age.ⁱⁱⁱ In a universe obsessed with moving forward, he chooses to eulogize the past, and do so while employing rather easily recognizable and overall kitsch metaphors. This is a brazen move, equivalent to stating that he is not at all interested in being identified with art such as it exists in his day and age and which, to quote Daniel once again, by and large extols the attractions of evil. Even though the narrator is speaking of the state of French cinema, the same can be attributed to the general state of affairs:

La reconnaissance artistique, qui permettait à la fois l'accès aux derniers financements publics et une couverture correcte dans les médias de référence, allait en priorité ... à des productions faisant l'apologie du mal – ou du moins remettant gravement en cause les valeurs morales qualifiées de "traditionnelles" par convention du langage. ... La mise à mort de la morale était en somme devenue une sorte de sacrifice rituel producteur d'une réaffirmation des valeurs dominantes du groupe. (PI, 49-50)

Quite categorically, Vincent refuses to be a part of these predominating values. We might be somewhat tempted to dismiss Vincent's work as kitsch as it displays the kind of sugar-coating and idealization we frequently associate with this category, however, I would like to argue that, several pages before the description of Daniel's visit to the studio, Houellebecq has warned us against being too quick to jump to that conclusion. The perspicacious reader will recall that, when prompted to comment upon the Elohimite prophet's skills as an artist (he is much given to painting naked women with nauseating anatomical exactitude), the painter retorts, "Tout est kitsch, si l'on veut. La musique dans son ensemble est kitsch; l'art est kitsch, la littérature elle-même est kitsch. Toute émotion est kitsch, pratiquement par définition; mais toute réflexion aussi, et même dans un sens toute action. La seule chose qui ne soit absolument pas kitsch, c'est le néant" (PI, 145-6). Thus the very act of artistic creation, be it kitsch or not, becomes an act of refutation of nothingness. For Vincent, this act is also a chance to escape the violence of existence: "Je suis un tout petit enfant infirme, très malade, et qui ne peut pas vivre. Je ne peux pas assumer la brutalité du monde. Je n'y arrive tout simplement pas" (PI, 155).

It is probably owing to this somber recognition and wholehearted espousal of his own inadequacy that Vincent would be, as we shall subsequently see, "the Chosen One". Following the prophet's sudden death, he succeeds him and becomes the next Elohimite leader. It is no coincidence that the first great visionary of the movement is an artist and one can't help but expect the same "kitsch" art that had hitherto been the sole purpose of Vincent's existence to quickly find itself at the core of the new society. The ascent to power does provide an outlet for his imagination and creativity, but it also has some unexpected results. Vincent's ideas evolve and move away from the kitsch of the previous years. His blueprints for the sect's main temple symbolize this transformation. Initially designed by his father, the first prophet, it was above all memorable because of its almost caricatural ugliness. The new project bears testimony to the Elohimite departure from vulgarity and gratuitous kitsch and their embracing of art and science. Fascinated by the new plans for the Embassy, as the building would become known later, Daniel would spare no praise in his description:

Nous étions entièrement dans les blancs, du cristallin au laiteux, du mat à l'éblouissant; cela n'avait aucun rapport avec une réalité possible, mais c'était beau. Je me dis que c'était peut être la vraie nature de l'art que de donner à voir des mondes rêvés, des mondes impossibles, et que c'était une chose dont je ne m'étais jamais approché, dont je ne m'étais jamais senti capable; je compris également que l'ironie, le comique, l'humour devaient mourir, car le monde à venir était le monde du bonheur, et ils n'y auraient plus aucune place. (PI, 298)

However, as the passage above plainly illustrates, there is something almost inhuman and cruel in the blinding whites and pure lines of the new temple. The Embassy is so sophisticated that many years would pass before the project comes to fruition. However, when it does, art and religion would become one.

Vincent is not just an artistic creator and architect but, literally, a man who engineers the race of the Neo-humans. He sketches the bodies of the people from the future. Humanity

itself becomes an extension of his artistic project. The Neo-humans are modeled after a series of his highly stylized drawings, in which males and females are drawn without any genitalia. Since they are cloned from pre-existing DNA, they have no use for their reproductive organs. In the Western religious tradition, we are used to generations of artists representing man and preserving his image for posterity through imitating and celebrating God's creation. In Houellebecq's novel, however, the artist gives birth to man directly. What *La Possibilité d'une île* seems to suggest, then, is that the artist would, sooner or later, become God.

If the Elohimite church and teaching constitute a logical and expected step in human development, what are we to make of the unexpected ending of the novel? Daniel 25, the obedient and disciplined narrator, critical of all deviations from the norm and uncomfortable with any overt displays of affection on the part of his female correspondents, appears to be a most predictable and dependable chronicler of his day and age. He seems highly unlikely to venture outside of the prescriptions of his religion, spelled out by the Supreme Sister. He appears thoroughly content with his lot, which he describes as a life of perfect serenity:

Selon la Sœur suprême, la jalousie, le désir, et l'appétit de la procréation ont la même origine, qui est la souffrance d'être. C'est la souffrance d'être qui nous fait rechercher l'autre, comme un palliatif; nous devons dépasser ce stade afin d'attendre l'état ou le simple fait d'être constitue par lui-même une occasion permanente de joie; ou l'intermédiation n'est plus qu'un jeu, librement poursuivi, non constitutif d'être. Nous devons atteindre en un mot à la liberté d'indifférence, condition de possibilité de la sérénité parfaite. (PI, 367)

Yet, one day, this well-adjusted Neo-human ups and quits the enclosure in which he was supposed to spend his days on Earth. Accompanied by his faithful dog (the only creature capable of unconditional and unswerving love according to all Daniels), he sets off on a journey. When Daniel 25 leaves his compound, his ultimate goal is to join other renegade clones and bands of wandering lesser beings, disdainfully referred to as Savages and distinguished by their humanity. These people are the ones who never joined the Elohimite cult and were, instead, left to procreate and live life as they had for centuries before the sect came around. The last Daniel's decision to quit the system is inspired by a haunting need for a more intense experience which he struggles to understand and put into words, yet whose urge he readily follows. The impulse which drives him is something we, as humans, recognize easily: the strife to live a fuller, more exciting life: "Je ne sais pas exactement ce qui m'attend, mais je sais que j'ai besoin de vivre davantage" (PI, 375), in the words of his fellow-renegade female clone who likewise quits the protective enclosure and sets off on a journey towards human beings. This sentence contains the key to understanding the novel. It effectively summarizes the ultimate irony of human and new-human existence. Centuries after the seemingly fantastic goal of attaining virtual immortality has been achieved, the immortal New-humans are unhappy with their lot. They strive to return towards the very society that their ancestors so desperately tried to change. Thus, it would be quite accurate to say that after all the centuries of progress and work towards accomplishing the Elohimite ideal, Daniel's last living clone abandons all

achievements and the security which comes from living a completely protected existence. He is propelled out of his compound by an emotion that is purely human – the desire to save himself from a crushing loneliness and establish human contacts. It is as though history has come full circle, and the desire to be surrounded by others has once again proven to be the most powerful human instinct. And, even though we no longer have installations and artwork as backdrop, there is little doubt that the emotion which overwhelms the renegade clones is a sentiment akin to our traditional understanding of kitsch: Even though the Neo-humans are genetically incapable of desiring another being or another type of life, they feel “une nostalgie du désir, l’envie de l’éprouver a nouveau, le désir d’être irradiées, comme leurs lointaines ancêtres par cette force qui paraissait si puissante” (PI, 416). For all the snickering and disbelief Vincent’s magic basement provokes in the Twenty-first century reader, we all seem to glorify the times of simple pleasures and fears which define us as human beings.

Without a doubt, there are finer contemporary French authors than Michel Houellebecq, people more skilled in their narration, more subtle in their discernment and criticism of contemporary issues, and much less abrasive in their choice of themes. Questionable chances of artistic longevity notwithstanding, there is no doubt that Houellebecq is very good at depicting and putting into words exactly how his contemporaries have turned out. To quote a better-intentioned critic,

Il annonce la couleur, qui sera pâle assurément, pâle et blême comme l’époque, éclairée aux néons des supermarchés, des galeries marchandes, des halls d’aéroport, des centres commerciaux, des parcs d’attractions, des zones commerciales périphériques, des halls d’immeuble, des rues des villes nouvelles, des plate-formes de bureaux. Pâle et blême comme cette lueur projetée sur ces centaines des milliers de visages rivés à leur ordinateur. Pale et blême comme le sont ces multitudes de dépressifs en manque d’amour, d’anxieux en quête de sens, d’exaspérés de tous poils qui hantent les cabines des psychothérapeutes. (Bardolle 56)

Decidedly, it is owing to the gift of observation and synthesis Bardolle insists upon in the quote above that Houellebecq has been so successful in striking a chord with his contemporaries. What’s more, these are contemporaries who, it has been proven, have little or no use for literature. When I first became acquainted with his work, I was reminded of Bouguereau, the most extolled and commercially successful French painter of the Nineteenth century. The similarities have little to do with the external characteristics of their oeuvre. Houellebecq does not display much of the technical virtuosity that made Bouguereau famous. However, both exhibit significant skill in discerning and responding to the trends and needs of their very volatile and capricious artwork and literary markets, respectively. In reflecting upon the link between kitsch and science-fiction, I came across John Canada’s assessment of the French painter, featured in his now-classic textbook on modern art: “The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between

conception and execution. The trouble with Bouguereau's perfection is that the conception and the execution are perfectly false. Yet this is perfection of a kind, even if it is a perverse kind" (Canaday 154). Paraphrasing this apt and succinct observation, I think it would be safe to say that the greatest merit of "Houellebecq's kitsch" lies in its ability to reference an idealized all-of-a-piece version of humanity that is problematic and perhaps exaggerated, but ultimately, compellingly and disarmingly human.

Notes

ⁱ Ever since he first rose to fame with his essay on H.P. Lovecraft, Houellebecq has used controversy to ensure his name is well-known to the general (and frequently non-reading) public. His antics include his proclaimed sympathy for Stalin, his opposition to abortion, his dramatic quitting of the Editions Flammarion for rivals Fayard. His open mockery of *Le Guide de Routard* and his parody of the nudist colony "L'Espace du Possible" in his second novel landed him in court. He also launched a vehement critique of Islam – carried out in exceptionally poor taste, let it be said in passing, which kept him at the forefront of attention for months. For a more in-depth look at Houellebecq's biography, Denis Demonpion's *Houellebecq non autorisé: Enquête sur un phénomène*, op.cit. provides some excellent insights.

ⁱⁱ To quote but one critic, Jean-Loup Chiflet: "Houellebecq est un auteur qui fait parler. Michel Houellebecq n'est pas un écrivain à style, mais un écrivain à thèmes. Idéal pour des dîners en ville ou les conversations de bistro ou se pratique notre sport national: parler d'un livre sans l'avoir lu" (Nauleau 86).

ⁱⁱⁱ In a number of his interviews, as well as in his fiction, Houellebecq stresses his interest in the concerns and preoccupations of our day and age, and his readiness to paint as accurate and elaborate a picture of the "here and now" as possible, all the while emphasizing his refusal to be labeled an *avant-garde* author at all cost. In his second novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), for example, he argues that "Je ne me situe ni pour ni contre aucune avant-garde, mais je me rends compte que je me singularise par le simple fait que je m'intéresse moins au langage qu'au monde."

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