

## Article

# On the Genealogy of Kitsch and the Critique of Ideology: A Reflection on Method

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**Abstract:** This paper examines similarities and differences between the genealogical approach to social critique and the Marxist critique of ideology. Given the key methodological aspects of Michel Foucault's genealogy—the fusion of power and discourse and the Nietzschean notion of the aesthetization of life—the paper argues that Hollywood kitsch maybe interpreted as a new *dispositif*. A key task of the genealogy of kitsch is to analyze the effects of fake Hollywood narratives: how they form and normalize us, what kind of subjectivities they produce, and what type of social relations they create. *La La Land*, a 2016 American musical, is discussed as a way of illustration. Theorists of the Frankfurt School also advanced their critiques of the popular culture and its forms of kitsch; yet they followed Marx and his conception of ideology. The paper concludes that the differences between genealogy and the critique of ideology are philosophical. Foucault rejected the Marxist conception of history and the notion of ideology as false consciousness. Kitsch, for a genealogist, is formative rather than repressive; it makes people pursue banal dreams. For a Marxist critic, popular culture as a form of ideology dulls our critical capacities and, therefore, leaves the status quo of alienation intact.

**Keywords:** Foucault; genealogy; kitsch; critique of ideology; Marx; power; discourse; Hollywood

## 1. Introduction

Philosophical discussions on the nature of social critique have oscillated between two intellectual camps over recent decades. Risking a great simplification, I am tempted to call these two camps postmodernist, on the one hand, and Marxist and neo-Marxist, on the other hand. By postmodernism, in a somewhat old-fashioned manner, I mean the social critique inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and other French poststructuralists. The philosophical impact of Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogical projects to social theory has been recently overshadowed by the reemergence of neo-Marxist critical theory. Given the bankruptcy of the legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism today, the skepticism towards the Marxist concept of ideology inspired by Nietzsche and Foucault needs to be reexamined. In particular, we need to understand the philosophical reasons why Foucault rejected the notion of ideology and how this rejection allowed him to advance his genealogical critique of power and its discourses, the critique which was different from the then dominant Marxist critique of power and ideology. Postmodern theorizing was at its peak during the rise of neoliberalism in the 1990s when capitalist growth was stable while the welfare state institutions were still intact. To advance a Foucauldian critique of discursive power regimes, as opposed to a Marxist critique of ideology, was then a novelty: the concept of ideology, as Foucault argued, presupposed a necessary opposition to the existence of truth, which, following Nietzsche, he chose to disregard. The rejection of the notion of ideology seems to be less convincing today.

Thus, in this paper I want to re-examine the points of convergence and divergence between the genealogical approach to social critique and the Marxist critique of ideology. I examined elsewhere how Nietzsche's and Foucault's genealogies might be extended and used to critique different forms of kitsch

and how they shape society and our individual identities (Bielskis 2005). The key methodological aspects of Michel Foucault's genealogy are the fusion of power and discourse and the Nietzschean notion of the aesthetization of life. Given these philosophical premises, the paper argues that Hollywood kitsch maybe interpreted as a new discursive regime. A key task of the genealogy of kitsch then is to analyze the effects of fake Hollywood narratives. Theorists of the Frankfurt School, on the other hand, also advanced their critiques of popular culture and its forms of kitsch, but they followed Marx, rather than Nietzsche, in their critiques of popular culture as ideology. However, despite these philosophical differences, there are significant similarities and convergence between Foucault's genealogy and the Marxist critique of ideology. Furthermore, to understand Foucault's work adequately is impossible without reference to Marx and to the Marxist debates of the time. A key task of this paper will focus on articulating them as well as explaining how the genealogy of kitsch and the critique of ideology can supplement one another in the attempts to analyze and resist dominant power relations.

## 2. On Genealogy and Its Key Methodological Aspects

Foucault's remarks on Wilhelm Dilthey's distinction between understanding and explanation are a good place to start in order to understand the key methodological principles of Foucault's genealogy. Foucault's ironic tone towards Dilthey's insistence that human sciences should not follow the logic of explanation in natural sciences and his claim that "understanding is the mythical figure of a human science restored to its radical meaning as exegesis" (Foucault 2000b, p. 258) are instructive. Foucault was skeptical towards, to put it in Paul Ricoeur's words, "the hermeneutics of faith". He did not consider it important to uncover the original meaning of texts through their careful exegesis. Similarly, Foucault was not interested in continuing the flow of meanings of historical texts by applying them to the present as Gadamer proposed. Rather he followed Nietzsche in thinking that the main task of his critical analysis was to establish what function discourses serve in normalizing and forming us as subjects of existing institutional power relations. Furthermore, Foucault followed Nietzsche's claim that the essential features of interpretation are "shortening, omitting, filling-out, inventing, falsifying" (Nietzsche 2006, p. 112). He argued that

There is never, if you like, an *interpretandum* that is not already *interpretans*, so that it is as much a relationship of violence as of elucidation that is established in interpretation. Indeed, interpretation does not clarify a matter to be interpreted, which offers itself passively; it can only seize, and violently, an already-present interpretation, which it must overthrow, upset, shatter with the blows of a hammer. (Foucault 2000b, p. 275)

Furthermore, we should not understand Foucault's genealogy as a heavy-handed theoretical methodology with deductively established first principles, which are then applied to the analysis of existing power relations and social institutions. In an interview, Foucault described his way of working as an experimentation whose aim is the transformation the self:

I am an experimenter and not a theorist. I call a theorist someone who constructs a general system, either deductive or analytical, and applies it to different fields in a uniform way. That isn't my case. I am an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself and in order not to think the same things as before. (Foucault 2002, p. 240)

Given that Foucault saw one of the key aims of genealogy "to be otherwise", to transform oneself against the odds of normalization and existing discursive power structures, the notion of writing as a transformative activity is instructive here. He saw writing, among other things, as a means of changing oneself. Writing as a way of being otherwise thus becomes the key genealogical activity. Yet change here has no teleological structure. Foucault refused to conceptualized "being otherwise" and the transformation of the self through the notion of an ethical *telos*—a universal moral standard to measure our lives with (as in Kant) or a eudaimonious life possible only by practicing virtues (as in

Aristotle). Equally, Foucault also refused to conceptualize transformation in the simplified Marxist terms of universal collective liberation. Rather he understood change employing such concepts as the techniques of the self, experimentations with pleasure, and the aesthetization of one's life. Commenting on the second volume of the *History of Sexuality* Foucault argued that the main aim of the Stoic ethics was an aesthetic one: it was based on "the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence", something which was not "an attempt to normalize the population" (Foucault 2000a, p. 254).

The theme of aesthetization of one's life is essential for us to understand Foucault's project of genealogy. It is akin to Nietzsche's dictum of giving style to one's character spelled out in the famous paragraph 290 of *The Gay Science*. There Nietzsche urges us to give style to our individual characters by incorporating both our weaknesses and strengths in such a way that the whole—an individual character and the way it is lived through on the daily basis—would embody "the force of a single taste" (Nietzsche 2001, p. 164). It requires "long practice and daily work", but also strength and power to submit to the constraints of a single style. Interestingly, Nietzsche adds that it is of secondary importance whether the style is good or bad; what matters is that it is "one taste". Thus, although the stylization of one's life has the function similar to that of ethics (i.e., its aim is to have power over oneself; to cultivate one's nature by imposing stylistic constraints on it; to follow one's own law), it is entirely an aesthetic endeavor: when the work is completed it should delight our eyes. Beauty, writes Nietzsche, promises happiness while ugliness "makes one bad and gloomy" (Nietzsche 2006, p. 75; Nietzsche 2001, p. 164).

Foucault elaborates this insight in *The History of Sexuality*. He argued that one of the pillars of Greek ethical discourse was focused on the theme of constituting "a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence" (Foucault 2000a, p. 255). Juxtaposing genealogy and the aesthetization of life to Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of authentic life, Foucault argued that, instead of aiming to be "true to our true self", we "have to create ourselves as the work of art" (ibid., p. 262). On the basis of the aesthetics of self-creation he then invoked the notions of the *ars erotica*, *scientia sexualis*, and *enkrateia*. In the historical analysis of sexuality, Foucault showed a sharp contrast between the ancient art of sexual enjoyment (*ars erotica* as he called the discourse on sex in diverse cultures of Japan, China, India, and Rome; in *ars erotica* "truth is drawn from pleasure itself") and scientific discourse on sexuality where truth telling becomes an obsessive imperative. The Christian practice of confession stands between the ancient practices of *ars erotica* and the modern fixation on the pseudo-scientific truth telling of *scientia sexualis* which medicalizes and pathologizes sexual behavior. In short, Foucault, whether rightly or wrongly, saw sexuality in modern Europe as being normalized and structured through (pseudo)scientific discourses rather than through creative attempts to imagine and invent the new forms of sexual experience. Thus, Foucault (when discussing the issue of gay culture) could say that what is needed is not liberation based on discovering the truth about one's homosexuality but the invention of new forms of pleasure and creativity.

Yet the most important methodological aspect of Foucault's genealogy is his novel approach to power and discourse as intimately linked to one another. His dictum that in political philosophy the kind's head should still be cut off is a good starting point for us to enquire into the complexity of Foucault's approach. Indeed, it is precisely this claim—political philosophy and the focus on power as its key concept should not be erected around the problem of law, prohibition and sovereignty—that distinguishes Foucault's genealogy from the Marxist critique of ideology. Étienne Balibar once remarked that Foucault's theoretical productivity may be understood "in terms of a genuine struggle with Marx" (Balibar 1992, p. 39). Indeed, part of this struggle was Foucault's philosophical rejection of the Marxist conception of power. Although for Marx the issue of power could not be conceived outside the forces and relations of production, his understanding of social power still presupposed and relied on the existence and the functioning of the state. That is, even if "true" power always lies beyond the centralized institution of the state, the state is essential in enforcing the dominant social form through the solidification of capitalist property relations. In Marxist view, power is always the

power of the dominant class whose dominance is possible due to the fact that it *legally* owes and actually controls the means of production. For Foucault, such approach still depends too much on the juridical-repressive hypothesis which, oddly enough, Marxism shares with the liberal tradition of political philosophy. Although in different ways, both Marxism and liberalism see power as repressive and as linked to the state. For liberals, as long as the state power is exercised to protect individual rights, its repressive coercion is right and just, while for Marxism political power functions, on the one hand, by reinforcing and protecting the social power of the bourgeoisie and, on the other hand, through the repression of dissent of the working class.

By theoretically fussing power and discourse Foucault rejected the Marxist conception of political power as merely repressive. He also rejected the simplified version of Marxist historical materialism according to which the economic base of society determined its ideological superstructure. Although Foucault never explicitly disputed Marx's claim that the base of power lies in the capitalists' ownership of the means of production and in their actual control of the economy, he nonetheless rejected the simplistic hierarchy between the base and the superstructure. Foucault also rejected the notion, so prevalent in the nineteenth century, that the key functioning of power in modernity was to produce and enforce a hierarchically structured and centralized social whole. He decoupled discourse and truth from the economic base and in *The Order of Things* argued that Marx, far from producing the paradigmatic shift in sciences, continued and elaborated a "Ricardian type of economic theory" (Foucault 1970, 2000b, p. 270).

More importantly, by rejecting Marx's Hegelian philosophy of history, its humanism and the subordination of the domain of ideology to the economic base, Foucault elaborated his decentered and pluralistic conception of power. Power thus understood presupposes that the struggles for emancipation cannot have a utopian finality which, once achieved, will bring about a society freed from repression and alienation. It also meant that power should be analyzed in the Nietzschean terms of subjectivity production and normalization. Foucault's pluralistic account of power as intimately linked to discourse and the multiplicities of its meanings effected in his highly original analysis of different power institutions supported by and supporting discursive regimes. It spanned *from* the enquiry of prisons and the transformations of punitive disciplinary practices aimed at the "soul" rather at the body; the history of sexuality and how normalizing discursive regimes produced new sexual identities and new experiences of pleasure *to* his study of governmentality and new forms of biopolitical power.

Power rarely functions without the mediation of language, thus discourse is always part of power games, its strategies and tactics. As a professor of the history of systems of thought, Foucault was always interested in the effects language and discourses have in shaping us. Yet, as a number of commentators made it clear (Kelly 2014), although he took on board aspects of Marx's materialism, his materialism was of a certain kind. Foucault's Nietzschean turn made him acutely aware of how discourse and language shape and produce our material and bodily existence. Thus, Foucault's genealogical inquiry into the workings of power is not that of a traditional political realist *à la* Hobbes or Thucydides: what matters are not real wars and battles with swords, guns and bloodshed. Rather the battleground becomes language itself. The discourses and their meanings power produces are to be studied by a genealogist not for the sake of themselves. The question of truth of their propositions is not the primary object of a genealogical inquiry and hermeneutics is not its method. The meaning of a discourse is studied from outside: its effects, rather than truth value, are what matter. Yet genealogy is a historical inquiry (thus history for Foucault is of paramount importance), because it is history rather than "human nature" that creates us and "bears us". Humanity is a historical project and precisely because it is so, genealogy as a historical enquiry is so important. As Foucault put it himself:

Here I believe one's point of reference should not be the great model of language and signs, but that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of war rather than that of language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no 'meaning', though this is not to say, that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is

intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis of down to the smallest detail—but this is in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics. (Foucault 1980, p. 114)

### 3. The Genealogy of Kitsch

I have argued that kitsch should be understood as a *dispositif* which, together with its key network of institutions, shapes our identities and bodily experiences (Bielskis 2005, p. 65–85). *Dispositif* is a regime of intelligibility consisting of “strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge” (Foucault 1980, p. 196). A regime of intelligibility or discursive regime then is a set of institutions and power structures enabling certain types of knowledge to be both intelligible and authoritative. A text or a narrative is not necessarily a *dispositif*. It has to have a network of institutions due to which the text becomes important: institutions and institutional power gives authority and effectiveness to the text. Without the institutions of power, a text would have no impact, no material importance, no effects and bearing on us. Foucault’s genealogy, and the notion of *dispositif* in particular, focusses on the link between knowledge and power. It focuses on the politics of truth. The question then is on what basis can we say that kitsch is a new *dispositif*? Furthermore, why kitsch?

The aesthetic aspect of genealogy briefly discussed above allows us to see the genealogical significance of art, bad art, taste, and bad taste. If the key aim of genealogy is to aid the disruption of existing discursive regimes and power structures and open the space of freedom for us to be otherwise, to create ourselves as artists create their works of art, then the institutionalized forms of ugliness, their dissemination and their *effects* become of great importance. A simple definition of kitsch is that it is an exemplification of bad taste and bad art. Following Kant’s discussion on taste and art, we can assert that signifying something as kitsch necessarily implies a judgement of taste. Both art and kitsch therefore are honorific terms (Barrett 1973). Yet kitsch, as a concept and cultural phenomenon, has a number of characteristics. It is banal; its portrayal of life lacks reality and truthfulness; it simplifies and sentimentalizes the objects it depicts; it does not have stylistic integrity; it is devoid of necessary reflectivity so essential to art; it flatters and seduces its consumers; it serves and fosters escapism; and, finally, it aims at popularity and commercial success through its fake imagery, narrative and form. One of the most popular and often consumed genres of kitsch is low-quality Hollywood films.

Hollywood kitsch is a *dispositif* because of its pervasive narratives and because of the complex network of powerful institutions which both transmits these narratives and reinforces them. Hollywood production and distribution companies, film studios, cinematography schools, promotion and advertising firms, TV, newspapers, cinemas and other media channels are some of the institutions in the service of the daily production and consumption of Hollywood kitsch. Hollywood film industry is a multibillion-dollar business which creates powerful myths and dreams and in so doing shapes our identities, our material existence, the way we imagine ourselves, and interact with others. Its influence and power can also be illustrated by the simple fact that Hollywood production, rather than European cinema, dominates in major European cinema theaters. Given its pervasive influence, the genealogy of kitsch thus understood becomes an important task for a genealogist.

To advance the genealogical critique, of course, does not mean to assert that all Hollywood films are kitsch. Thus, as stated above, the genealogy of kitsch requires an initial judgement of taste: the choice is to analyze only those cinematographic examples that do not meet the aesthetic criteria of good films. Yet good films are rare. Thus, given the sheer volume of Hollywood production, it will not be a mistake to assume that the majority of films ordinary people watch in cinemas or at home meet at least some of the characteristics of kitsch mentioned above. The key to the genealogy of kitsch, however, is not the judgement of taste *per se*, but how these fake narratives form us, how they normalize us, what kind of subjectivities they produce, and what type of social relations they create. That is to say, although the examination of the lack of aesthetic qualities of kitsch is a constitutive part of the genealogy of Hollywood kitsch, the far more important and indeed difficult task is to analyze the possible *effects* of these discourses of kitsch.



I have argued that one of the key narratives of Hollywood kitsch is the inverted ascetic ideal of romantic love (Bielskis 2005, p. 68–76). In *On the Genealogy of Morality* Nietzsche introduced the concept of ascetic ideals. The traditional ascetic ideal of Christian Europe was God. Belief in God meant living a life subordinated to God, that is to say, to nothingness according to Nietzsche. Yet the nihilism of the traditional ascetic ideal had *effects* which produced a specific kind of human being and life, the life of *ascesis*. The ascetic existence meant living a life of suspended bodily functions—no sex, no bodily pleasures, fasting, in short the life of mortification of body in order to please God and in so doing purify the soul. What mattered for Nietzsche as a genealogist was to analyze both the historical transformations of the traditional ascetic ideal once God was out of the picture *and* the effects these transformations and embodiments of the ascetic ideal had produced on us. By spelling out the historical transformations of the ideal which now fill the empty space of God—Truth in the case of sciences; neutrality, objectivity, and Facts in historiography (i.e., the belief that history can recover objective truth about the past); the avoidance of life, fame and marriage in and for the sake of philosophy; in arts Christian God *à la* Wagner or the disinterestedness of the judgement of taste (as in Kant)—Nietzsche shows how these ideals shape us. In short, Nietzsche's ascetic ideals—the bastards of the dead God—are in a way similar to John Searle's status functions: they are the symbolic places of authority, the signifiers, which, no matter what their content is, dispense power and in doing so shape and structure our lives.

The ideal of romantic love as portrayed in Hollywood kitsch is a further transformation and inversion of the traditional ascetic ideal. It provides meaning to our consumer lives in our secular capitalist societies. The value form penetrates the social body: nearly all our social relations have become commodified. It is a dystopia turned into a grim reality. In the neoliberal dystopia everything should be a commodity and everything should be bought and owned. In addition, since fully commodified social life (it is indeed an impossibility) is meaningless because everything (and everyone) can be exchanged due to its exchange value (and because there is and cannot be a thing that has absolute value), there ought to be an ideal which transcends the meaninglessness of consumer economy. Romantic love is this ideal. Love is outside of the economy (it cannot be bought), yet because it so, it gives meaning in the midst of the meaninglessness of the commodification of social relations. The inverted ascetic ideal subordinates our lives to the search of love in the similar way lives were subordinated to God, the traditional ascetic ideal. Yet it is an inversion of the ascetic ideal because kitsch, contrary to the Christian ideal, promises happiness here and now: "a painless existence surrounded by commodities" and, of course, by happy and conflict free love which transcend the value form. Thus, the

ideal of happy love within contemporary cinematographic Hollywood kitsch functions through the denial of (...) any element of tragedy. The structure of the portrayal of innocent romantic love within Hollywood kitsch is almost always the same. The short intrigue caused by obstacles or unfavourable circumstances are always overcome at the end—the passionate love between two lovers overcoming all obstacles always triumphs. The narrative structure of these films finishes at the point where the major challenge looms, namely, to portray how this beautiful love, being able to overcome all 'dramas' and obstacles, survives and is lived through in daily mundane life. It is precisely this lack of reflectivity, the lack of 'realistic' reflection about the dynamics of love and life in general, that makes this type of cinematographic production kitsch.

(Bielskis 2005, p. 69 & 73)

What I want to argue now is that today the ideal of romantic love and the idea of the American dream, as the paradigmatic narrative structure against which happy ending Hollywood films are recognized as authoritative and persuasive, have been transformed due to the bankruptcy of neoliberalism. The American dream is dead in Hollywood today, that is, post-2008 economic crisis. This is not say, of course, that there are no banal American dream movies produced after 2008 or that

they will not be produced in the future. There are and they will be. Yet there is a shift in mood and this shift is best exemplified, in my mind, in *La La Land*, a 2016 musical romantic comedy-drama, the film which, far from being an example of Hollywood kitsch, is nonetheless significant for the genealogy of kitsch. However, before I discuss it, it is important to say something briefly about the American dream.

Noam Chomsky in his recent book *The Requiem for the American Dream* argues that the American dream has always had large elements of myth. Yet to a certain extent, it was true during the Golden Age of 1890s, in 1920s and then in 1960s. It was an optimistic belief that no matter how poor people were, provided their determination to work hard, they would achieve a level of prosperity, freedom, and equality: they could buy a house, a car, and their children could go to schools and universities (Chomsky 2017). According to Chomsky, given the unprecedented levels of inequality, wealth concentration, lack of social mobility, and the rocketing high college and university fees, this dream, despite its continued appropriations by the propaganda of the ruling elite, is over today. In a similarly way, although less pessimistically, Cullen (2004) argues that the American dream has had a number of historical transformations and that ambiguity was at its very core. According to Cullen, from the early ideals of English religious dissenters dreaming to worship God as they pleased and Abraham Lincoln's idea of economic advancement and upward social mobility to the failed ideal of social equality of 1960s, and the personal fulfilment, fortune and fame in its portrayals by Hollywood, the American dream signified the ideal of opportunity, happiness and freedom for everyone.

As far as Hollywood is concerned, the American dream, roughly put, is the idea that no matter who one is or what kind of social background she or he comes from, provided the protagonist is a decent individual who fights for justice and has determination to pursue one's dreams, such a person will always win and will achieve happiness. The idea is that anyone who is good can achieve happiness. The crown jewels of this happiness is romantic love. The rewards the hero receives are victory, the triumph of good over the evil, recognition, financial reward, but the most important of them is love: the courageous hero or heroine is embraced by a beautiful woman or a handsome man. The American dream then consists of all the good things together: the victory over evil, public recognition, fame and the love of one's perfect match. The dream is the togetherness of professional recognition, success and perfect love. There is no place for tragedy in Hollywood kitsch.

*La La Land* (written and directed by Damien Chazelle) breaks with this tradition by introducing a tragic element into, otherwise, mainstream Hollywood narrative. "Not bad is great" is the punchline of the story, expressed by Sebastian towards the end of the movie. Two young beautiful individuals—Mia Dolan (Emma Stone), an aspiring actress, and Sebastian Wilder (Ryan Gosling), a jazz pianist—are struggling to succeed in their professional careers. Sebastian dreams of playing authentic, non-popularized jazz. Unable to make ends meet Sebastian is forced to do gigs he hates, while Mia struggles through unsuccessful auditions. Their aspiration and hope to achieve the American dream puts them together, but the failure to realize them also sets the couple apart. Valuing his love for her, he takes up a job with a mediocre jazz band which castrates him as a musician, while she is fed up with rejection and decides to quit. They split, yet Sebastian still encourages Mia to go to an audition which changes her fortune. Five years later Mia is a movie star married to another man, while Sebastian has his jazz club and now plays the music he loves, yet they are no longer together. Mia stumbles into Sebastian's club, he plays their love song, they imagine what their lives would have been had their careers and love been celebrated and fulfilled. Now the American dream is just in their imaginations. So she stands up and leaves with her husband.

It is an enjoyable film, yet there is a point of criticism to be made. The film is genealogically important, because good films capture a new mood and tend to influence other, less sophisticated, productions. The novelty of the film, especially given that it is a musical, lies in the tragic element, in its "not bad is great" motto. Hollywood is the mirror of American society and its dreams, it is never stupid; it has to adjust by capturing the failing aspirations and unfulfilled hopes. Neoliberalism is failing on its own terms. Not only has it produced grotesque levels of inequality, it has failed to

generate sustainable economic growth and investment.<sup>1</sup> The financialization of the economy allowed wage compression to go unnoticed and, due to the fraud and gross criminality of banks, produced the biggest economic crisis since the 1930s (Harvey 2005, 2010; Piketty 2014; Mason 2015). The American dream is dead indeed. Hence the victory of Donald Trump: by openly proclaiming that the dream is dead, he promised to make America great again and won the simple souls and minds of America.

A lie in the film is this: in a similar manner to cinematographic kitsch (e.g., Richard Curtis film *Notting Hill*, 1999) *La La Land* portrays Hollywood stars as if they were ordinary people, people who are constrained by their social circumstances, class, and modest means. A Hollywood celebrity is not an ordinary soul constrained either by the petit-bourgeois mores of marital fidelity (*à la* once married always married) or by their modest financial means. Hollywood celebrities marry, divorce and marry again as often as they please. So the fact that Mia is happily married (?) and has a child does not necessarily justify her decision to stick with her reality of “not bad is great” and forget the dream of her true love unfulfilled. For if, as the narrative suggests, Sebastian is the love of her life (Mia to Sebastian: “I’m always gonna love you” and he replies: “I’m always gonna love you too”), and the only person who always believed in her talent as well as helped her to become a star, why wouldn’t she pursue her dream of true love now that she (and he) achieved her professional dream? Leaving this question unanswered, the film lacks truthful reflectivity, thus its tragic element is excessively seductive and therefore suspect.

As far as genealogy is concerned, the problem with kitsch is that it leaves things as they are. It encourages escapism and never challenges existing power structures. It certainly does not question class power. The myth of the American dream and its numerous portrayals by Hollywood kitsch creates and legitimizes the illusion that any decent individual without structural resistance and collective struggles can achieve their constitutional rights: freedom and happiness. Now that this dream is dead, it remains to be seen what kind of new forms of kitsch will take its place.

#### 4. The Critique of Ideology and the Genealogy of Kitsch

For the remainder of this paper I want to address the relationship between the genealogy of kitsch thus understood and the Marxist critique of ideology. A Marxist critic of ideology may object: the genealogy of kitsch is all fine, but how is it different from the critique of popular culture as a form of ideology advanced by the Frankfurt school? Furthermore, why the genealogy of kitsch rather than the critique of ideology? Since it is impossible to answer these questions in detail in the rest of the paper, my task will be to raise questions and make several suggestions rather than provide fully articulated philosophical arguments.

Although the content and analysis of the concrete examples of kitsch and popular culture may be indeed similar, the difference between the genealogy of kitsch and the critique of ideology lie in their different philosophical premises. Simplifying considerably, it boils down to the philosophical differences between Marx and Nietzsche. That is, Foucault took his philosophical inspiration predominantly from Nietzsche, while the critics of ideology follow Marx. Ever since Marx’s (and Engels’) formulations of ideology and his materialist conception of history spelled out in *The German Ideology* (1846/Marx and Engels 1998) and in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859/Marx 1999) the notion of ideology has had several essential characteristics.

First, ideology, as Marx conceived it, is the dominant ideas of the ruling class. The control of material forces of society allows the ruling class to be its intellectual force. Therefore, ideology organically stems from and mirrors the existing material forces and power relations of a given society. Second, the main function of ideology is to justify and legitimize existing power relations in such

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey (2005, pp. 154–57) argues that neoliberalism, despite its aspiration to create wealth, has failed to produce economic growth: from the 1970s to the present the average global growth has been a bit more than 1% as compared to 3.5% during the 1960s, while the enormous growth of financial sector has produced a great amount of fictitious wealth in the hands of the very few.



a way that the dominant ideas are accepted as “natural”. Ideology, so Antonio Gramsci argued, is successful when its ideas and values become the common sense of the whole society rather than just of the ruling elite. Third, since ideology is a distorted view of the world, its critique presupposes the distinction between science and truth, on the one hand, and ideology as false consciousness, on the other hand. Fourth, ideology conceals alienation and exploitation making individuals passive and docile. It fosters banal popular culture and consumerism which, as Herbert Marcuse argued, create one-dimensional human existence. Finally, ideology relies on the notion of the subject either in the positive or in its negative sense. Positively, the subject is implied in the early Marx’s conception of species being, but also in the humanism of the British school of ethical Marxism. Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology is the most obvious example of the negative conception of the subject: ideology constitutes individuals into subjects of the repressive state apparatus and enables the reproduction of labor power and, therefore, capitalism.

Not all critics of ideology would agree on all of these points. For example, Althusser, who from the company of the critics of ideology is philosophically closest to Foucault, got rid of alienation and humanism from his critique of ideology. Now, Foucault, following Nietzsche, went further and rejected the notion of ideology altogether. He argued that

The notion of ideology appears to me to be difficult to make use of, for three reasons. The first is that, like it or not, it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth. Now, I believe that the problem does not consist in drawing the line between that which, in a discourse, falls under the category of scientificity or truth, and that which comes under some other category; rather, it consists in seeing historically how *effects of truth are produced within discourses that, in themselves, are neither true nor false*. The second drawback is that the concept of ideology refers, I think necessarily, to something of the order of a subject. Thirdly, ideology stands in a secondary position relative to something which functions as its infrastructure, as its material, economic determinant . . . (Foucault 2002, p. 119, emphasis added)

The critique of ideology does indeed presuppose either the Hegelian-Marxian notion of history or, at least, the notion of human liberation beyond the exploitation of the capitalist relations of production. So even in Althusser’s structuralist Marxism, the theory of ideology implies and points to a possibility of emancipation from the repression and exploitation in capitalism. However, leaving Althusser aside (after all, he was not the keenest critic of ideology at work), the aim of the critique of ideology is to uncover alienation and exploitation in the hope of collective liberation. A part of such critique is the critique of popular culture which, following the Frankfurt school’s analyses, takes the shape of a popular ideology. Through the different forms of kitsch and entertainment generated by the culture industry, ideology deprives the working men and women from their revolutionary potential.

The culture industry and its different forms of kitsch dull our critical capacities and, therefore, leave the status quo of alienation intact. Therefore, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argued that films “no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 95). Adorno defined kitsch as the beautiful without the ugly which becomes “taboo in the name of that very beauty that it once was and that contradicts in the absence of its own opposite” and argued that kitsch, in its embodiments of trash art and popular culture, was the parody of catharsis (Adorno 2002, pp. 47–48, 239). Marcuse followed their suit and, also, argued (yet less convincingly than Adorno) that popular culture functions as an ideology. According to him, it fosters fake needs produced and satisfied by capitalism, manipulates and oppresses people by making them superficially happy, yet dulled and passive.

Although Foucault acknowledged his admiration for the Frankfurt school in the late 1970s (Foucault 2002, pp. 273–74), he, as we saw, rejected the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history, the concept of ideology, and the sharp contrast between truth and power. On the subject of history, Foucault’s position was uncompromising: “humanity does not gradually progress from combat to

combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (Foucault 2000b, p. 378). Nonetheless, he incorporated Marx's thought into his theorizing, arguing that it is impossible to write critical history without "using a whole range of concepts directly or indirectly linked to Marx's thought and situating oneself within a horizon of thought which has been defined and described by Marx" (Foucault 1980, p. 53).

By rejecting Marxism (especially dialectical materialism and the so-called repressive hypothesis) without however rejecting Marx, Foucault was bound to conceptualize political struggles in terms of localized attempts to resist power structures (rather than "the power structure", as Marcuse used to call it). His philosophical materialism, which he learned from Marx and his teacher Althusser, meant his realism in politics. Rather than hoping for the utopia of global revolution (as many pseudo-idealist Marxists did), he conceptualized genealogy in terms of micro resistance. If discourse is fused with power, then discourse and truth do become the key political question. If there is no outside of power and power is formative rather than just repressive, then, indeed, genealogical critiques are our attempts to disrupt the existing discursive regimes which, hopefully, allow us to offer our own, alternative, discursive regimes and power relations. Genealogy then, as opposed to the Marxist critique of ideology, has no linear direction: power relations provoke other power relations. Thus, if indeed we follow Foucault, we should understand the genealogy of kitsch in these terms as well: it is an attempt to disrupt the *dispositif* of kitsch we find ridiculous yet effective in making others stupid.

## 5. Conclusions: Ideology or Kitsch? Marx and Foucault

So what shall we make of all this? Which is better: the Foucauldian genealogy of kitsch or the Neo-Marxist critique of ideology?

Foucault, of course, was right that we should resist both the vulgar and romanticized teleology of history. The grand narrative of history is gone for good, so is the nineteenth century proletariat as the homogeneous and self-conscious political subject. Foucault is also right that even in an emancipated society there will be power relations, thus genealogical analysis has something important to teach us. It teaches us to engage in the analysis of localized power relations and, once cracks in them are identified, advance strategic resistance. Yet, Foucault, seduced by Nietzsche and the *Weltanschauung* of the day, pushed his philosophical conclusions too far: even if there is no outside of power, there are structural differences as far as different power relations are concerned. Marx's historical materialism, especially his analysis of the relations of production, is essential today for theorists to advance their critiques of the structural power of those who control capital and command production.

It is not necessary to draw a sharp dividing line between power and truth, on the one hand, and subscribe to the philosophy of history together with its belief in the utopian future, on the other hand, in order to retain the utopian aspect rooted *not* in the utopian future but in normative rationality. We should reject the Nietzschean idea of power against power, of our will to power against their will to power. Foucault's politics of truth should also be avoided, if it does, indeed, presuppose the outside of truth (after all, how else should we understand his "effects of truth produced within discourses which, in themselves, are neither true nor false"?). For us to engage in localized struggles of resistance successfully, we need to provide good reasons not only for those who are engaged in the struggles, but also for others. As such, these reasons and arguments supporting them maybe good or bad, better or worse, but their goodness is never to be judged *only* on the basis of the effects they produce.

Nietzschean-Foucauldian genealogy is right: kitsch is not repressive. Kitsch does not oppress, as Marcuse wrongly argued in his critique of popular culture. It forms and makes people pursue illusions and banal dreams. Hollywood certainly has no sinister intention to control and repress. It reflects the dreams, hopes and aspirations of people but also shapes them. Furthermore, it encourages us to believe in "human, all too human" banality. Yet the critics of ideology are also right to argue that kitsch makes people docile and passive, the fact so convenient for the rich and powerful.

Finally, without collapsing the irreconcilable, we need Foucault's and Marxist analyses together. Contrary to Foucault's hardcore Nietzscheanism, it does not make sense today to reject ideology as an outmoded concept. Ideology does serve the interest of the powerful and thus the critique of ideology has an important role to play in social sciences. In particular, critical analyses ought to show what kind of discursive regimes and ideological utterances have produced the effects they have enabling us to tolerate the grotesque levels of inequalities existing today. As Alasdair MacIntyre convincingly put it, "money generated a new kind of hierarchy, a hierarchy of patent absurdities—for you have to be a fool to believe that you should be paid that amount of money—yet absurdities that are treated with great solemnity. We are not supposed to laugh at the foolishness of the rich" (MacIntyre 2015, p. 14). To understand and expose this ideology is indeed an urgent task for both Foucauldian and Marxist critics.

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