

Kitsch and the Absurd in Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*

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For the purpose of this paper, I shall understand kitsch to be not merely the attempt to pass off “unworthy goods” as art, but also, in Milan Kundera’s words, “the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.”¹ For Kundera, kitsch appears in politics and philosophy, as well as art. In terms of politics, he sees kitsch as the notion that political transformations can bring a sort of secular paradise to the world.² Whether the paradise is of communism (the classless society) or capitalism (mindless consumerism), Kundera argues that the resultant “happiness” is superficial, propagandized, idealized, and false. The precise and specific experiences of individual human beings in their daily struggles with the beauty and filth of life—and everything in between—are thereby ignored or negated. In effect, political kitsch is the ideology of a sort of fantasy land. Philosophical kitsch, on the other hand, tries to establish monism in place of actual plurality; it posits essentialist stereotypes about the supposed nature of our concretized and individualized being in such a way that we become diffused and lost in idealized ontological categories. Even funerary events are not exempt. Kundera notes in passing the theatrical games we play with tombstone inscriptions and stories of the dearly departed: “Before we are forgotten, we will be turned into kitsch. Kitsch is the stopover between being and oblivion.”³

Enter Ionesco. *Rhinoceros* has often been cited as one of the great paradigms of the theater of the absurd. Many interpretations have been offered, ranging from the sociological to the psychoanalytic to the surreal. However, in keeping with Kundera’s theme, I shall argue that the essence of absurdity in the play is that Berenger, the quintessential clochard or anti-hero, is caught between two idealized and false worlds, namely, the world of the provincial petit bourgeoisie and that of the mindless dynamism of the rhinoceroses. In this sense, he dangles, as it were, between being and non-being; he is an unhappy resident of the double fantasy world of kitsch. The residency begins with the cultural and political aspects of kitsch, and concludes with philosophical kitsch.

I. Socio-Political Kitsch

It is clear that Berenger is a disheveled and malcontented member of his small town. The characters with whom he interacts are invariably paragons—at least in the early stages of the play—

of the petit bourgeoisie and its values. Typical in this regard is his friend Jean, who is proper, fastidious, well-dressed, taken with the importance of social duties, and given to the cultivation of the cultural aspects of life, albeit in a rather superficial manner:

Jean: Look, instead of drinking and feeling sick, isn't it better to be fresh and eager, even at work? And you can spend your free time constructively.

Berenger: How do you mean?

Jean: By visiting museums, reading literary periodicals, going to lectures. That'll solve your troubles, it will develop your mind. In four weeks you'll be a cultured man.

Berenger: You're right!⁴

Other characters scuttle about in early scenes, absorbed in their shopkeeping, proprietary, or clerical routines. This is a worldview or way of life that Berenger participates in only to a limited extent. It is true that he holds a position at a local publications office, but more often than not he seems lost in an alcoholic or displaced haze. He tells Jean that life is a dream and that he sometimes wonders if he (Berenger) exists. Furthermore:

Berenger: I don't like the taste of alcohol much. And yet if I don't drink, I'm done for; it's as if I'm frightened, and so I drink not to be frightened any longer.

Jean: Frightened of what?

Berenger: I don't know exactly. It's a sort of anguish difficult to describe. I feel out of place in life, among people, and so I take to drink. That calms me down and relaxes me so I can forget.

Jean: You try to escape from yourself!

Berenger: I'm so tired, I've been tired for years. It's exhausting to drag the weight of my own body about...

Jean: That's alcoholic neurasthenia, drinker's gloom...

Berenger: I'm conscious of my body all the time, as if it were made of lead, or as if I were carrying another man around on my back. I can't seem to get used to myself. I don't even know if I *am* me. Then as soon as I take a drink, the lead slips away and I recognize myself, I become me again.⁵

Berenger clearly does not identify with the socio-cultural kitsch of his town. The standard idealizations and values of life mean nothing to him. He cannot find "happiness" as it is articulated

and culturally propagandized. He is lost in a Disneyesque world that denies the anxieties and tribulations of individual, flesh and blood life.

And then the rhinoceroses appear. It is interesting to note that the initial shock of their arrival devolves soon enough into the red herring of whether they have one horn or two. If the animals represent political collectivism, then Ionesco seems to be suggesting that a common response to such an upheaval is that many citizens take cover in the defense mechanism of denial, debating irrelevancies rather than the brute facticity of the new and startling political order.⁶ The rhinoceroses bring with them another kind of socio-political kitsch. They are not a political party, or perhaps only vaguely so: their numbers increase exponentially; they stampede and trumpet; they destroy public property and eat everything in sight; and they bring increasing chaos to the world of unassimilated, individual human citizens. Once the metamorphoses occur, no one “speaks for” the beasts. They do not have a leader or spokesperson per se. They are beyond the pale of language and logic, as is especially evident in the increasing inability of Jean and Berenger to speak the same language in the scene where Jean literally changes into a rhinoceros. One thinks of historical examples of such utter dynamism, monism, and chaos: Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and Ceaușescu, among others. But the rhinoceroses do not have an exact ideology; Ionesco leaves them as a sort of shadowy threat, monstrous to be sure, raw, inhuman, inarticulate, charging at everything, and growing in numbers. Perhaps this is the family eidon of all such collectivist phenomena:

As usual, I went back to my personal observations. I remembered that in the course of my life I have been very much struck by what one might call the current of opinion, by its rapid evolution, its power of contagion, which is that of a real epidemic. People allow themselves suddenly to be invaded by a new religion, a doctrine, a fanaticism.... At such moments we witness a veritable mental mutation. I don't know if you have noticed it, but when people no longer share your opinions, when you can no longer make yourself understood by them, one has the impression of being confronted with monsters—rhinos, for example. They have that mixture of candour and ferocity. They would kill you with the best of consciences. And history has shown us during the last quarter of a century that people thus transformed not only resemble rhinos, but really become rhinoceroses.⁷

Additionally, the characters of Jean (in his actual transformation into a rhinoceros) and Dudard and Daisy (in the moments before their own capitulations) function as prequels, as a sort of last human gasp before the leap into animalistic oblivion. Their respective justifications of the leap are similar expressions of political kitsch. They anticipate an extraordinary, extra-human type of happiness, which is idealized as raw energy, freedom, and a new way of being-in-the-world. Indeed,

at the end of the play, the trumpeting of the rhinoceroses takes on a beautiful and sonorous quality. The movement has its seductive attractions:

Daisy: They're singing.

Berenger: They're roaring, I tell you.

Daisy: You're mad, they're singing.

Berenger: You can't have a very musical ear, then.

Daisy: You don't know the first thing about music, poor dear—and look, they're playing as well, and dancing.

Berenger: You call that dancing?

Daisy: It's their way of dancing. They're beautiful.

Berenger: They're disgusting!

Daisy: You're not to say unpleasant things about them. It upsets me.

Berenger: I'm sorry. We're not going to quarrel on their account.

Daisy: They're like gods.⁸

We are not far here from the Reichsführer and the statist cult of personality that Ionesco savagely satirized in his play *The Leader*. As Berenger recognizes, this cult—and the metamorphoses it requires of citizens—is an absurd lie because it falsifies the complexity and individuality of humans in favor of an impossible promise of utopia on earth. Political kitsch in this sense is the absurd made manifest.

The tragic dénouement in the closing moments of *Rhinoceros* is an instance of what might be called personal kitsch. Realizing they are the last two surviving humans, Berenger and Daisy shut out the external world and speak naively of how they will make each other happy. Their dialogue is superficial and idealistic, and it comes to an end when Daisy bluntly asserts that she does not want to have children and that there's no point in saving the world anyway. Shortly thereafter, she leaves to become a rhinoceros, while Berenger is left with his image in the mirror and his closing soliloquy.

II. Philosophical Kitsch

In *Rhinoceros*, the larger philosophical narrative is that human nature is inferior and that it can be metamorphosed by way of a monistic worldview that is beyond morality, humanism, and individual personality and rights. It is clear that Ionesco finds such a metamorphosis to be absurd, and he uses the character of Berenger (Everyman?) as a bumbling, but persistent, foil to this philosophy. Berenger is no intellectual, nor is he a talented debater, but he senses the inherent

absurdity of the monism. It is important to note that Ionesco does not use the character of the Logician to resist the new world order. Rather, the Logician is a purveyor of unsound syllogisms (that commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent) and a mere arranger of logical possibilities; once he lays out all the permutations of horns and places of origin of the rhinoceroses, his job is finished, and he soon becomes one himself. In the *mise-en-scène* thereafter he is referred to as the “Ex-Logician.” It seems Ionesco had little faith in formal logic as a solution to philosophical kitsch. Perhaps he also associated it with those members of the intelligentsia who have historically exhibited an early and complete capitulation to such assimilating regimes.

In Act Two, Scene Two of the play, Jean presents a defense of philosophical kitsch:

Jean: I tell you it’s not as bad as all that. After all, rhinoceroses are living creatures the same as us; they’ve got as much right to life as we have!

Berenger: As long as they don’t destroy ours in the process. You must admit the difference in mentality.

Jean: Are you under the impression that our way of life is superior?

Berenger: Well, at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incompatible with the standards of these animals.

Jean: Moral standards! I’m sick of moral standards! We need to go beyond moral standards!

Berenger: What would you put in their place?

Jean: Nature!

Berenger: Nature?

Jean: Nature has its own laws. Morality’s against Nature.

Berenger: Are you suggesting we replace our moral laws by the law of the jungle?

Jean: It would suit me, suit me fine...⁹

And subsequently:

Berenger: Just think a moment. You must admit that we have a philosophy that animals don’t share, and an irreplaceable set of values, which it’s taken centuries of human civilization to build up...

Jean: When we’ve demolished all that, we’ll be better off!

Berenger: I know you don’t mean that seriously. You’re joking! It’s just a poetic fancy...that’s not what you believe fundamentally—I know you too well. You know as well as I do that mankind...

Jean: Don't talk to me about mankind!

Berenger: I mean the human individual, humanism...

Jean: Humanism is all washed up! You're a ridiculous old sentimentalist.¹⁰

In suggesting that morality is something akin to a trick played by the super-ego on the id, Jean's views are a throwback to Thrasymachus' position in Plato's *Republic*: justice is whatever is in the interest of the stronger party. It is also a version of Nietzsche's view of the world as a Dionysian monster of energy (albeit without the nuancing Nietzsche provides in terms of the theory of the Übermensch).¹¹ The only things that are "really real" are unbridled energy and power, and these are beyond good and evil in the sense of traditional bourgeois, democratic-liberal morality. To acquiesce to the rhinoceroses, Jean asserts, is to be lifted into a new dimension, a new way of being-in-the-world.

These themes are taken up again in Act Three of the play when Dudard and Berenger debate the issue of evil and the normal/abnormal distinction:

Berenger: We must attack the evil at the roots.

Dudard: The evil! That's just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It's just a question of personal preferences. You're worried about your own skin—that's the truth of the matter. But you'll never become a rhinoceros, really you won't...you haven't got the vocation!¹²

And later:

Berenger: And you consider all this natural?

Dudard: What could be more natural than a rhinoceros?

Berenger: Yes, but for a man to turn into a rhinoceros is abnormal beyond question.

Dudard: Well, of course, that's a matter of opinion...

Berenger: It is beyond question, absolutely beyond question!

Dudard: You seem very sure of yourself. Who can say where the normal stops and the abnormal begins? Can you personally define these conceptions of normality and abnormality? Nobody has solved this problem yet, either medically or philosophically. You ought to know that.

Berenger: The problem may not be resolved philosophically—but in practice it's simple. They may prove there's no such thing as movement...and then you start

walking...and you go on walking, and you say to yourself, like Galileo, “E pur si muove”...[“And also one moves.”]

Dudard: You’re getting things all mixed up! Don’t confuse the issue. In Galileo’s case it was the opposite: theoretic and scientific thought proving itself superior to mass opinion and dogmatism.

Berenger: What does all that mean? Mass opinion, dogmatism—they’re just words! I may be mixing everything up in my head but you’re losing yours. You don’t know what’s normal and what isn’t any more. I couldn’t care less about Galileo...I don’t give a damn about Galileo.

Dudard: You brought him up in the first place and raised the whole question, saying that practice always had the last word. Maybe it does, but only when it proceeds from theory! The history of thought and science proves that.

Berenger: It doesn’t prove anything of the sort! It’s all gibberish, utter lunacy!

Dudard: There again we need to define exactly what we mean by lunacy...¹³

Dudard’s intellectual maneuvering is an anticipation of some of the more facile types of postmodernism: all axiology and ontology are mere matters of perspective or personal preferences; there are no absolutes in deciding what is evil or abnormal; practice (i.e., practical, everyday, empirical observation) has no standing independently of theoretic “framing” (or in more abstract terms: there are no theory-neutral observation statements); and in the absence of any absolute values, the most appealing ontology is that of raw energy and power. Berenger senses the dubious aspects of Dudard’s claims but is unable to offer anything by way of counter-example, save that his intuition tells him that in actual practice he most certainly knows the idiocy of a misguided philosophy when he sees it. Indeed, the effect this produces might have been weaker had Berenger been presented as a professional philosopher, since the reader can identify with him as the “common man” who, although perhaps philosophically unsophisticated, can certainly sense kitsch when he smells it.

The moral relativism and power-based monism of the rhinoceros movement are philosophical kitsch precisely because the idealized, “happy,” and carefree world they postulate is, in Ionesco’s eyes, a lie. The complexities and contradictions of individualized and concretized human existence cannot be caught by such illusions. Berenger knows this and he clings in an inconsistent and haphazard manner to his own individuality. At the end of the play, he is tempted by rhinocerism: “They’re the good-looking ones. I was wrong! Oh, how I wish I was like them...Their song is charming—a bit raucous perhaps, but it does have charm! I wish I could do it!”¹⁴ But finally, he snaps out of it: “Oh well, too bad! I’ll take on the whole of them! I’ll put up a fight against the lot

of them, the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating!"¹⁵ In the light of the reign-of-terror machinations in his home country of Romania under Ceaușescu, Ionesco seems to rest his case with Berenger's final declaration. Philosophical kitsch undergirds political kitsch, and they are equally absurd idealizations concerning the fundamental realities of personal life. Ionesco seems to be suggesting that individualized human life is not totally absurd; it is complicated and hard, dark, paradoxical, and sometimes "nasty, brutish, and short," as Hobbes said. But it is utterly concrete and multi-dimensional. The true absurdity resides in trying to replace actual life with fabrications that turn us into beings that we most assuredly are not. Oversimplified, clichéd views of human life were a constant target of attack in Ionesco's work.

As a dramatist and philosopher, and notwithstanding the utterly bizarre nature of most of his works, Ionesco was not a nihilist nor was he casual and indifferent as to his writing techniques. In reference to the latter, Alain Bosquet has isolated in *The Bald Soprano* alone

...no fewer than thirty-six "recipes of the comic," ranging from the negation of action (i.e., scenes in which nothing happens), loss of identity of characters, the misleading title, mechanical surprise, repetition, pseudo-exoticism, pseudo-logic, abolition of chronological sequence, the proliferation of doubles, loss of memory, melodramatic surprise, coexistence of opposing explanations for the same thing, discontinuity of dialogue...to purely stylistic devices like cliché, truism, onomatopoeia, Surrealist proverbs, nonsense use of foreign languages, and complete loss of sense, the degeneration of language into pure assonance and sound patterns.¹⁶

One can find many of these techniques employed in *Rhinoceros* as well. What they suggest is that Ionesco was a careful craftsman who used ingenious methods to achieve his finest comedic and tragic effects.

As to the charge of nihilism, it is often assumed that Ionesco was an irrationalist who saw no point whatsoever in existence. But this assumption is belied by the very activity of writing itself. It is also put into question by the following:

When I wake up, on a morning of grace, from my nocturnal sleep as well as from the mental sleep of routine, and I suddenly become aware of my existence and of the universal presence, so that everything appears strange, and at the same time familiar to me, when the astonishment of being invades me—these sentiments, this institution belong to all men, of

all times. We can find this state of mind expressed in almost the same words by all poets, mystics, philosophers, who feel it in exactly the same way I do....¹⁷

Ionesco rejected the irrationalism and absurdity of collectivism and “rhinocertis,” and he seems to have been searching for a deeper alternative; namely, the primal mystery of each individual’s “thrownness” and often paradoxical struggle against despair and death. Ionesco’s ally in this search was hardly the full-blown Cartesian cogito, but rather something closer to the lucidity advocated by Camus, that is, a persistently intellectual and passionate struggle to enable his readers to feel the unique existential dilemmas of being alive as he felt them. What he finally uncovered in his search was the ridiculousness and duplicity of all forms of kitsch, and the possibility of a shared human nature that revealed the commonalities of our most authentic moments of freedom and creativity. Ionesco believed that the theater was the most ancient and effective medium for bringing forth these insights.

A final, cautionary note. Martin Esslin has argued that *Rhinoceros* is not as straightforward and simple as it seems. He makes much of the switch from the word *instinctive* to the word *intuitive* in Berenger’s defending his desire to remain human (*instinctive* being more rhinocerotical), and of the fact that at the end of the play Berenger bitterly regrets that he seems unable to change into a rhinoceros.¹⁸ Furthermore:

His final defiant profession of faith in humanity is merely the expression of the fox’s contempt for the grapes he could not have. Far from being a heroic last stand, Berenger’s defiance is farcical and tragicomic, and the final meaning of the play is by no means as simple as some critics made it appear. What the play conveys is the absurdity of defiance as much as the absurdity of conformism, the tragedy of the individualist who cannot join the happy throng of less sensitive people, the artist’s feelings as an outcast, which forms the theme of writers like Kafka and Thomas Mann.¹⁹

Esslin concludes that the play mocks both conformism as well as the individualist “who merely makes a virtue of necessity in insisting on his superiority as a sensitive, artistic being...Only a performance that brings out this ambivalence in Berenger’s final stand can do justice to the play’s full flavour.”²⁰ However, Berenger has no pretensions of being a “sensitive, artistic being” throughout the play, and he only comes into full consciousness of himself as an “individualist” in the last lines. Otherwise, he is mostly an insecure, bumbling, and alcoholic sort of rag-tag who has just enough mulishness in him to cling to his own way of life in the face of overwhelming odds to the contrary. If he did adhere to some sort of Bohemian restlessness and artistic rebellion, this

would have been a type of aesthetic kitsch that undoubtedly Ionesco would have struck down as brusquely as any other type.

In the final analysis, Ionesco was a latter-day Quixote inveighing against kitsch in every form, at every level. He sought to convey a primal glimpse of the enigma, the darkness, and the mysterious qualities (sometimes beautiful, sometimes inane and ridiculous, sometimes horrific) of individualized human life. But this could only be accomplished by the unrelenting exposure of how we are all ensnared by the clichés and lies of language, cultural conventions, political conformism, and philosophical idealizations. The way to authenticity was surgically to remove all types of kitsch in the most direct and hyperbolic manner possible, and the result was an oeuvre that took tragedy and comedy to the extreme limits of the human condition.

Notes

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1999), 248. My thanks to Professor David McNaron of Nova Southeastern University for commenting on earlier drafts of this paper.

² For an expansion of the traditional concept of kitsch, see Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 248-78. For a discussion of the concept of a secular paradise on earth, see Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1965).

³ Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 278.

⁴ Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, trans. Derek Prouse (New York: Grove P, 1960), 22-23.

⁵ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 17-18.

⁶ Other theories of the rhinoceros movement are entertained in the play, such as it's a joke, a collective psychosis, a disease called rhinoceritis, a way of sublimating oneself, et al. But all these centrally relate to the theme of totalitarianism—see Ionesco's quote, below.

⁷ Eugène Ionesco, interview with Claude Sarraute, *Le Monde*, January 17, 1960.

⁸ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 104.

⁹ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 66-67.

¹⁰ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 67-68.

¹¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), 550.

¹² Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 80.

¹³ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 84.

¹⁴ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 106-107.

¹⁵ Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 107.

¹⁶ Alain Bosquet, quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 195-196.

¹⁷ Eugène Ionesco, quoted in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 196-197.

¹⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 183.

¹⁹ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 183.

²⁰ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 183.

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