



KITSCH AND THE CRISIS OF THE WEST

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MR. RIEMEN: Thank you Jamie, and I hope that everybody is now asserted of the fact that this tutorial is not of terrorism or all these things, but this about kitsch and the crisis of the West. So if you want to leave, feel free to leave.

Ladies and gentlemen, a very warm welcome to you all. Probably, I owe you a small explanation why I've chosen to discuss this topic, Kitsch and the Crisis of the West. And the reason is basically quite simple: If you see the lineup of this conference with topics, like, American values, the future of democracy, tonight's discussion on your political culture, conservatism, liberalism, and the role of religion, and so on and so forth. All these topics, obviously, are very, very important and you will attend them and a lot of people will go to it. But the interesting question is why are these topic important and what connects these topic? What connects these topic and what makes them important is that they are all an expression of something very fundamental, different than anything, it is that Western culture is in a crisis.

If Western culture would not be in a crisis, you would not have the discussion on American values, in Europe, we will not have the discussion on European values. You would not have the discussion of what kind of education you are in need of and so on and so forth. So let nobody tell you that, 'Kitsch and Crisis of the West' is so gloomy and so pessimistic. It is the key topic and it's more basic than anything else, otherwise, you would not have these all in discussions.

Second: the crisis of our culture is not the first one. At this point, it is an old one. It is at least as old as the 20th century. And I think that we are all aware of the fact about this ongoing quest to our identity, the identity of what is the true America, the identity of what is the true Europe, what is the true Western civilization? And with this quest there are two questions pressing all the time. And those questions are: First of all, what is a good society? And the second question relates to: what is a good life?

Obviously, there are many answers to these questions, but you have to have a certain kind of matching to find out what are true answers, and what are real answers, and which answers are unacceptable. For example, Fascism, Marxism, and the world view of Mr. Bin Laden, they are all answers to what is a good society and what is a good life. And, thank God, most of those of us think that those answers are totally unacceptable. But still, when you have a culture in crisis we still are in need to find the measure to know: what is real and what is fake or what is a lie?

Having said this, you will understand that if I talk about kitsch, I'm not talking about bad taste or bad art because if kitsch would be bad taste and bad art, it would not be interesting. Kitsch is much more than this. Kitsch is a form of aesthetics but it relates to ethics, it relates to values as well. And the key thing is that it has the

pretension to be real. And so it makes us believe: yes, this is truly beautiful, or this is absolutely important, and this is very valuable, and so on and so forth. But it is kitsch, that is to say, it's fake, it's not real or if it was, it's a lie.

I want to speak about kitsch because my thesis is -- and I will present a series of arguments for it -- that if we want to understand what really is going on in our society, if we really want to understand what is happening, and why it is happening, and what are the consequences of what's happening, kitsch is the paradigm to understand it.

If we have the right analysis, if we understand what kitsch culture is all about, well, at least, you know, then we know that we have the right analysis. Without a right analysis, we will move into circles and nothing can happen. And my final preliminary remark, an inquiry into kitsch, at the same time, is a quest to what is real, what is really truthful. And I will make some points about that as well at the end of my talk.

The lineup I have in mind for this tutorial is the following. I would like to show you two fragments of a movie. And I will show you the opening of a movie and the very end of it. And in between, I will present my argument and after the final fragment I have a few concluding remarks. That should still give us at least half an hour for a real discussion about the topic.

Both fragments are from the same movie and I'm just wondering how many people of you have seen the movie *The Sacrifice* by Andrei Tarkovsky? You -- okay, that's my wife, that doesn't count.

(Laughter)

MR. RIEMEN: Well, nobody knows this movie not here, not in Europe, not any place where I've given my talk on kitsch. But the interesting thing is that this movie is absolutely one of the classical masterpieces of the 20th century and absolutely in the same league as the best work of a Picasso, or Faulkner, all those artists. .

Tarkovsky is a Russian filmmaker who went into exile. He left the Soviet Union and went to Paris. Everything that he made is worthwhile seeing. But this work is particularly interesting because he already had cancer when he made this movie. And not long after its completion, he died and so he knew he was dying. The film won a Golden Palm in Cannes.

The story is about a retired actor, Alexander, you see him at the very beginning, who is having his birthday. He's making a walk with his younger son, who's a kid from six-seven years old. And although it's his birthday, he's not in a very good mood. He's

full of anguish about what's going on in nowadays' society. Nowadays, we would say, he's close to be burned out and probably that's the reason why he had to retire.

That's the opening, what we'll see and which will take approximately 15 minutes. What I cannot show you because we don't have time is that after the opening, the news comes that a nuclear catastrophe is imminent. The Third World War is there, the Soviet Union -- and this is 1986 -- declared, "We will do a nuclear strike to America." And America's response: "If you intend to do that, we will do it as well."

In a state of panic and fear, Alexander, although an agnostic, starts praying to God. And he promises God that he will sacrifice everything, his house, and all these things, if God save his little boy, if God saves humanity.

After this scene, the next day, it looks like the world is saved. Birds are singing again, everybody's in a jolly good mood. But he knows what he has promised. So, indeed, he sets his house on fire and then you'll get to the end of the movie -- which I will not tell you about, you have to see it. You can now see the opening fragment of *The Sacrifice*.

(Movie being played. Text has to be added!!)

MR. RIEMEN: This was everything expect kitsch and definitely not made in Hollywood. And when you have seen the final part, you will understand why I wanted you to see the opening of this masterpiece.

Let's stay for a while with Alexander who's wondering about what's going on in nowadays' society. What are our main characteristics? What's the sociology of our society? To find an answer I can always recommend you not start reading books, definitely not books on sociology, but go to the airport and go to the Hudson News because there you have all these magazines. And those magazines are there because the vast, vast, vast majority of people have interest in it.

You will find one section on computers and all these stuff, which is an indication of, that Alexander is right, how much faith we have in technology. Faith in technology is a tremendous characteristic of our society. You cannot imagine nowadays' Western society without our faith in technology, technological achievement, technological progress, and so on and so forth.

Then there is a section which is on sports and motor races and all these things, which is an indication for our strong faith in speed. Speed too is of tremendous importance for all of us. Computers has to be faster, airplanes has to be faster, our traffics has to

be faster, and this all for the very simple reason that we simply don't have time. None of us has time, so everything has to be as quick as possible.

There is this huge section with the *Business Weekly*, and *Financial Times*, and all that kind of stuff, which is an indication for how important economic values are. There's no *Good Morning America* or any program on television which will tell you what the market and what the NASDAQ is doing. Money is very important, the market is important, competitiveness is important. So the whole set of economic values, you will find it as well in the Hudson News. One of the great stars at this festival is Alan Greenspan. Alan Greenspan could only be called the great guru in Western society, not only in America, he is also one of the great men in Europe because he is the incarnation of how important money is for us.

Talking about gurus, another section at the Hudson News is totally devoted to celebrities, to icons. And we want to know every single thing of them. And as you also know, the final competition of the television program "Idols" had the greatest turnout of voters that your Presidential elections. That says something about how important the 'idols' are for us.

If we talk about celebrities, we can move to another section of the Hudson News and that is everything that relates to beauty and lifestyle. Beauty, how you look, men's health, women's health -- it's all very very important. Again, you cannot imagine our society without it.

Why are these characteristics there? Why is it that we found them so enormously? And what has it to do with kitsch? Now, before I try to give an answer to this question, I'm afraid we must have a very short but important philosophical intermission because I would like you to tell something about some views of my all-time favorite philosopher, which is Socrates, the great teacher of Plato, Aristotle, and basically he was the founding father of Western thought.

Philosophical intermission

In one of the conversations, Socrates says to one of his friends: "Your worldview, it aims at the pleasant and ignores the best." It aims at the pleasant and it ignores the best. Now, this indeed could be the very first definition of what kitsch is all about. According to Socrates, 'the best' are obviously our highest values. But what are our highest values? Then Socrates comes in and he says: "Listen, you don't have to be an intellectual. You don't have to go to university. Any human being has the capacity to understand what highest values are. How? Well, because we are human beings, there is one thing that we can never escape from, and that is the confrontation with and the

experience of death.”

Yes, of course, you know, the ideal and the hope is you get old, you will live a happy, long, healthy life. You will get into your 80s, early 90s and then you will have a beautiful death. And that should be the case for your parents, and then for you, and then for your children, and then for your grandchildren.

But we are all old enough to know that this is, if it exists, is a very, very rare exception to the rule. The rule is that life is very fragile and that life can be very, very cruel. The fact is that babies die, that your children die, that parents die much too soon, that your loved one die much too soon, that your friend die much too soon, that you can die much too soon. Our mortality is always around us.

Next to our mortality is that fact that, literally, we can lose everything what is precious to us, divorce, a friendship, your job, your position, your money, anything. Anything, literally, everything can be lost. So life is, essentially this experience of loss. It's the experience of death and mortality and there is no escape for anybody.

Here Socrates comes in again. He says, “Listen, this is the reason why we human beings, as a kind of moral revolt, start our quest for: isn't there anything that can remain, that should remain?” And then he points at this profound experience that, indeed, yes, there are things which can remain, which should remain and which happen to be the highest qualities of our life, that what give the true quality to our life.

For example, there are friendships, which remain. They are rare, but there are lifelong friendships. And what about love? Love can remain, true love remains and even if the beloved died much too soon. People can have an experience that the loved one still speaks to them, to him or to her and that conversation goes on and that you, more or less in one way or another, are still ‘walking’ together. In a book of the *Bible*, the *Song of Songs*, there is this beautiful line, “Love is as strong as death,” which literally means that even death cannot destroy this love. So that's possible.

What about much more concrete beauty? This year it's the Mozart Year, it's the Rembrandt Year. Mozart created his works more than 200 years ago, Rembrandt, more than 350 years ago and still we can listen to Mozart and still we can have our joy watching a painting of Rembrandt. And the question is: why? Why, more than 200 years later, can we still listen to a Mozart piano concerto?

The very simple reason is apparently, this music still speaks to us. If it wouldn't speak to us, we wouldn't listen to it. And so there must be a life in it. This is the big difference between all that is dead and all that is alive: everything what is dead, there is

a dead silence; but everything that is alive, there is always a voice. There's always something what you can hear. There is always speech.

And here is Socrates again and he asks: "Why do you think that there is life in it? Why do you think that it still speaks to us?" And his answer: "Well, first and foremost, there must be a truth in it because life can never be based on a lie. Everything that is alive must be based on a certain truth: it's the true friendship that remains, not the fake friendship. It's true love that remains. It's the true beauty that remains. There must be a certain truth in it.

Next to this truth there will be goodness. There will be a kind of excellence. There will be a kind of virtue. Otherwise, it cannot exist. And when you have those two together, there will always be, by definition, a kind of inner beauty.

Again, in terms of music, it might take a while before we hear it. It took us half a century to understand the beauty of the symphonies of Mahler. It took us more than a half century to understand the beauty in the final quartets of Beethoven. But the beauty was there already from the very beginning.

This is the great discovery of Socrates. He realizes -- and this is not pure philosophical thought, nor is this just academic or intellectual stuff -- that the three main values must be united: truth, goodness, beauty, they belong together. And you should not disconnect them because at the very moment they are disconnected, they will lose their value. But as long as they are together, these three spiritual values is what gives life to life.

Because they are spiritual, transcendental, absolute values, they are of value for everybody at any time any place in history. And they tell us: if you want to live a life of dignity, to live in truth, you should develop the capacity to have truth, and beauty, and goodness incarnated.

If an artist wants to create great art, he must have the capacity to invest truth, goodness, and beauty in this piece of art. Also for a language: a language is meaningful at the very moment that these three values are invested in it. If there is meaning, the words tell us -- the words are making a demand on us. Example, if I say, "I love you," it's the word "love" that tells me how I have to behave because if I don't behave as the word "love" instructs me, I'm lying -- and the word is no longer meaningful.

Everything that is meaningful in language and in life must be related to the three big values, which are united: truth, goodness, and beauty. End of intermission.

It aims at the pleasant and it ignores the best.

Now, imagine a society in which we ignore the best, in which there is no longer a place for those spiritual absolute values, in which then there is no longer a place for a kind of spiritual identity. The very first characteristic is that, by definition, you get a total subjectivity because nothing is absolute.

Everything is immediately reduced to our individual self. The only thing you get is an individual self and the whole world and whole life will be focused and centered about me. All is about how I feel, who I am, what my feelings are. It's total ego-centered. That's the very first thing you get.

With it there is also a non-critical attitude like: 'you have to respect my taste, this is my opinion, these are my emotions, this is how I am' etc.

In this total subjectivity and with this lack of spiritual identity, the next consequence, again, by definition, is that an identity becomes completely depending on material things. And so here is where all those yelling advertisements comes in and are telling us, "You cannot be this or that, if you don't buy this car. And you cannot be this or that, if you don't buy this watch. And you cannot be this or that, if you don't go on holiday to that place," and so on and so forth. So, literally, an identity is something you can buy and you must buy because it's no longer who you are but what you have.

Third consequence is that we are no longer interested in Socrates' high-minded ideal that a life is only worth living when it is the examined life, which is focused on the life of the mind -- because that's already gone. So, again, the focus will be on the fact that we want to feel good. And at the very moment we don't longer feel good, somebody has to analyze it and has to fix it. *Analyze This*, it's all in the movie.

Part of the feel-good is also that we want to be in love, we want to have this rosy wonderful feeling of romance and being in love. It's no longer about the essence of love itself, which, as you know, is sometimes very difficult.

In terms of religion: the strong interest in religion is because it is so helpful in uplifting my religious feelings: I want to be in harmony, I want to be in peace with myself, I want to be in peace with nature, I want peace. It is not the encounter with God. And you can -- if you still have the *Bible*, you can go to the Old Testament, read a little bit about the prophets. They had an encounter with God and they can tell you, it's not a very pleasant one.

(Laughter)

MR. RIEMEN: Part of the total subjectivity is also that if I'm the measure of everything, then also, by definition, everything can mean anything. So language is no longer the transmission of truth and meaning, but it literally becomes chatter, it becomes talk. And here is where we get our talk shows. And the talk shows are there to entertain us and it's literally just talk, nothing more than that. Poetry in which every single word is important and meaningful will be replaced by the chatter and talk of newspapers and mass media. We can all reflect ourselves on how much time we're still spending on reading poetry and how much time we spend on watching television, browsing the Internet, or reading newspapers.

Part of total subjectivity is also that nothing can have an intrinsic value because there are no absolutes. Everything must become instrumental, useful, effective. How often do we hear: "It has to be useful" which means: it has to be instrumental?

What will happen to art? Art is still important to us, but not as a value in itself, but as a good investment, kind of commodity. Relationships the same. In a recent research in the United States it is stated that no real friendship is any longer possible because the intrinsic value of friendship no longer exist. It's all about mutual interest. As long as we have our mutual interest, we are great friends. If something happened to this mutual interest, friendship will be gone.

In short: what you get is the total utilitarian society. And all will be about economics, what is measurable, and material values. And in this context money is king because money is the instrumental value par excellence which became an end in itself. And money is of such a tremendous importance to us because with this instrument we can buy our identity and we can buy our success. In this respect, I would like to ground Mr. Trump and Mrs. Stewart as Mr. Kitsch and Mrs. Kitsch because --

(Laughter)

MR. RIEMEN: No, it's very simple. And it's not as an insult but as a fact. Their idea of being the best has nothing to do, whatsoever, with Socrates' ideal of the highest values on truth, beauty, and good. But it is replaced by essentially the total meaningless success, because money is without meaning. To become the apprentice of Mr. Trump, you have to become as kitschy as him. If have had any personality left, you have to get it out of your system and become like Mr. Kitsch.

Second series of characteristics of a kitsch culture:

In the kitsch culture, one word is missing, very tellingly. And it's the word infinitive

because there's nothing transcendental, there is nothing absolute. So nothing, by definition, can be infinitive. So the only word left is finite and transient. When that is the case, the only thing left in our life is the moment. Everything will be focused on the moment. Everything has to be done right now because there's no longer time. And because there's no longer time, we get focused on speed because everything has to be done quickly.

But what you also get, and Alexander was speaking about this, is the deep fear of death. And with this deep fear of death, we start creating the great escape. And the great escape is that we are totally focused on youth. You're 80, but you still would like to be and look like as if you are 18.

It's also here where the total glorification of youth and youth culture and being young and, you know, looking wonderful and all these things get in. Here it is also where we get the total infantilisation of our society because youth culture is such an impressive and important paradigm.

What we also get talking about escape is the escape, indeed, from reality, the escape from boredom because a quintessential characteristic of kitsch is that it is empty and meaningless. And so at a certain moment you start to realize, "Hey, there's nothing in it." Why is it that so many rock stars or fashion models get into drugs? Because it's the big escape from your own boredom. The noise we are having -- and the levels of noise are rising everyday -- the entertainment and idols, the need for instant satisfaction, and also the whole explosion of the games culture, which is now the bestselling product in the computer world, it has everything to do with the fact that we want to escape.

Then there is the impact of kitsch on politics. You'll have Mr. Rove on Saturday. Politics used to be the discussion on, what is the good society. This is the discussion of your founding fathers, the federalist papers. At the very moment that kitsch takes over, you get the politics of useful lies. It's all about useful lies. Read your newspapers and you can read a lot about useful lies. But also you get the politics of image. It's all about image and image creation. So you get Mission Accomplished, which is the prime example of supreme kitsch in politics. But it's not an innocent thing because at least one more year, a great many people believed that 'the Mission was Accomplished' -- which is still not true.

Economy and kitsch. You can't have a descent society without a blooming economy. But when economy becomes kitsch, it's commercial thinking which takes over. And when commercial thinking takes over it will be all about effect and image. And it's no longer about quality, but it is about quantity. It's all about numbers.

Eduaction and kitsch. Universities are no longer there to provide any form of wisdom. It's only focused on that type of knowledge which serves our 'business'. Last year, we had an important speaker at the Festival of Ideas, who dared to say, "English is important because it's the commercial language." English is no longer important because it transmit a certain meaning, it's the language of Shakespeare, and Whiteman, and Emerson, and Stevens. No: it's the commercial language.

In short, kitsch is the great reducer of everything: Truth will be reduced to facts, love will be reduced to satisfaction, beauty will be deprived of truth, knowledge will be reduced to information. You get this empty meaningless society, which is so much a cultivation of death.

I will show you now the second part of the movie, which is the very ending. And I would like you to keep in mind the fact that Alexander was talking about this monk who was watering the tree, that the son is mute because of his throat operation and that according to his promise in exchange of no nuclear disaster, he has set his house on fire.

This part will take five minutes.

(Movie being played: house is burning. Family in anger. Alexander in a car send away to a psychiatric instiution. Silence. The young boy carrying to heavy buckets of water, bringing them to the dead three. At the tree he pours the water. Music: aria 'Erbarne dich' from JS Bach's St. Matthew Passion. The boy lays under the tree. And suddenly he says: "In the beginning was the word. Why daddy?" The music from the aria continues. End of movie.)

MR. RIEMEN: I wanted you to see this because this young boy understands something about the essence of life, which is so much forgotten and ignored in our kitsch culture. And that is that the essence of life is everything that gives life: truth, goodness, beauty, but also mercy, forgiveness, love, friendship, wisdom, and true art. All these acts give life; have the capacity of life-giving.

When the boy, having in mind the story of his father, pours water at the tree, it's for the very first time you will hear music in this movie. Music, as you know, is rightly considered to be the highest level language because it is an expression of the inexpressible and the mute son suddenly can speak again. As I said earlier in my 'philosophical intermission': speech is a metaphor of the essence of life.

You can only understand this fragment, when at least you have seen the beginning of

the movie. And for me, in time of visual culture, this movie is the supreme visualization of the secret of life, of the secret of art, and in this respect, the total opposite of a kitsch culture.

My second final remark, the essence of a true culture is the cultivation of its highest values as the core of our ethics and as core of our education. This is what Socrates believed in, Spinoza believed in, Tarkovsky believed in. All the great, I would like to label them, European humanists believed in this and in an education in which the laws of wisdom and the knowledge of the muses are at the center.

It's the 4th of July, it's your Independence Day. It's the declaration of the self-evident truths. I am a European, but I know enough about America to know that America and its founding fathers started from the very beginning as an ideal of the better Europe, the true Europe, the true expression of the highest values of European culture. And at the core of their vision, the core of the vision of your founding fathers is faith in individual freedom and responsibility.

This brings me to my final remark. In confrontation with and the experience of death, as I talked about it, as Alexander has been talking about it, this confrontation and this experience of death bears in itself a moral responsibility. The moral responsibility is that you have to start this quest, when you are confronted with death and it's meaninglessness: what is truthful and what has still meaning?

But thinking, obviously, is never enough. As the great German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in one of his poems writes: "You must change your life!" This means that we should strive for a lifelong commitment to what is truthful, to what is meaningful, to what is life-giving. Because this is the only way to step out of a kitsch culture and turn into a society in which, we are refocused on what truly and really matters.

Thank you.

I guess we will have now around half an hour for your comments and your questions.

QUESTIONS:

SPEAKER: Watching just parts of this movie, I think, puts us all at a real disadvantage. We haven't had the same experience of the film that you have. All I could do while watching that film was to assume that it's allegory and it's all symbolic. It's hard for me to extrapolate some of the things in the film and connect them to what you said. It seemed to have begun with an exploration of life. And I couldn't -- I still don't know whether the man, the "Papa", was the father or the grandfather.

MR. RIEMEN: The father.

SPEAKER: The father, his explanation of how to help life was what sounded to me like a ritual. You come everyday at 3:00 o'clock or whatever it was and you watered the thing everyday. It began to sound to me like an apology for a religious ritual and - - you know, because it's only a portion of the movie. So I think we're all at a disadvantage.

The messenger comes and is riding in circles the whole time. Is that against the linear movement through life? He's circling around not knowing where he's going, not knowing the answers, questioning and questioning. He had more life to him than --

MR. RIEMEN: I'll take a few more questions.

SPEAKER: I'd like to thank you very much. I would like you -- it's not a question so much, but I'd like you to address something. I had tears in my eyes when the little boy carried the bucket because it seemed to me that there is a certain commitment or tenacity or consistency that, in our culture of change, has lost its honor. And I think this continuity or tenacity is a value that we would do well in our culture and I would like you to address that.

SPEAKER: I just wonder about your category of kitsch. Considering that when Socrates said the things that you said to us, obviously, he was writing a critique of contemporary Athens. Socrates did not feel that his society of his time had achieved any of these goals. And there's never been an ideal society. So what is special about kitsch and is there a pre-kitsch society? You seem to be implying that there is. But if so, when did kitsch emerge and is it a historical phenomenon or a permanent phenomenon?

SPEAKER: One of the things that we are taught and that we teach our children is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. If that's the case, how is it that truth and my perception or his perception or my kid's perception of beauty plus goodness, that is not something that is kitschy, that is the truth, that is real. And I have -- I'm having a difficult time wrapping my brain about that because you also spoke about absolutes, what is an absolute, what is not an absolute.

So if I have my realm -- and you also talked about the ego-centric point of view, but if I have my point of view based on my experiences and my parents' experiences and I try to pass on this truth, and beauty, and goodness to my children and to the children that I teach, how do I know I'm passing on the "right stuff"?

SPEAKER: I just wanted to ask when you talked about infinity, are you talking about God?

MR. RIEMEN: No, not necessarily. You can separate it.

SPEAKER: This is sort of related to my friend's comment here about the sort of persistence of kitsch and all imperfect cultures. And you began by saying you're not talking about taste or bad taste or good taste and setting up someone like Martha Stewart as an epitome of kitsch, which I don't -- I don't argue that.

But what we've seen here is this -- a certain kind of particular -- formerly particular austerity and kind of static quality of that film, as masterful as it, no doubt, is. And I wondered if you're kind of holding that up as -- well, you clearly are holding that up as a counterexample of non-kitsch culture. But I wondered if a certain kind of severity and austerity that that embodies is -- covers most of what you regard as exempt from kitsch.

SPEAKER: This was the least (inaudible) picture was nothing economic or -- there was nothing in this film except pure words and the old man's philosophy. And as it ended, there are many things to question what the young man was saying. But it didn't end well. The Papa was taken off to an insane asylum. All the things that his pure love of life -- this was the questioning of life without any of the kitsches here. What difference would that make?

SPEAKER: And, finally, on the tail of -- end of all of these comments, maybe, you can comment on Kundera's very succinct phrasing when he says that kitsch is the denial of shit.

SPEAKER: It seems to just be on an individual level overwhelmed by the horrendous issues that we face individually and culturally. That said, there seems to be a profound need for reevaluation of the simple daily interventions that individuals can engage in that indeed have the potential for huge improvement in the world. But it has to be well-informed. And I was personally concerned with how close that tree was planted to saltwater. Yes, that child poured water everyday, but in truth it will never blossom. It needed to be a more thoughtful planting so that the daily watering could gather a positive long term --

SPEAKER: Just two things. One is I wanted to cite that text of Socrates that you were quoting -- if you could give us that. And then secondly, perhaps, at some point, to reflect on the possibility of movements away from kitsch through different instruments of culture in -- today.

SPEAKER: I was just hoping you could comment a little bit on -- I guess it's sort of an irony that they switched rooms for this one with the session on the politics of on terror and terrorism. And I just came from a session on evangelicalism in America.

And it seems like, to me at least, and I'm curious to hear your thoughts, but that American elite culture is built -- maybe, the culture that Aspen Institute represents, for instance, it's built less on kitsch and more on ideas about pluralism and diversity and that there is a sort of -- there is a sense of both radical Islam and evangelicalism in different ways represent challenges both to kitsch and to the ideas of pluralism and diversity. And then is sort of -- in the West, there is this -- there is a fear, in a sense, of the challenges in cultures.

MR. RIEMEN: Well, let me take it from here. Then, hopefully, we'll have time for a second round, if necessary. Thank you for your comments and questions. I'll start right in the middle and then I hope to cover at least most of them.

To begin with this -- Kundera, "Kitsch is the denial of shit." Again, one of the characteristics of kitsch is that it is totally focused on something which in the end is not real, constantly being young, constantly being beautiful, constantly feeling good. I am okay, you are okay. It becomes the unacceptance of shit because your expression is, indeed, shit happens, right?

At the very moment you want to -- you create a kind of code in which even when shit happens, you don't look at it, or you would like to ignore it, or whatever. And in this respect, Kundera can say, you know, it's wonderful and it's the denial of shit.

Socrates. Socrates never learned about the word kitsch, obviously. It's a relatively new term. It's, according to all etymologies, late 19th century Munich, where it basically related to a new form of esthetics, which has to be beautiful. Now, again, this is one of the reasons why Gustav Mahler once changed the range in his music. His music was unacceptable to the public because they -- you know, they wanted something that could please them.

This is another definition of kitsch. Artwork can become kitsch and it can be popular culture and it can be high culture. I mean in my perception a lot of what is produced at the Metropolitan Opera in New York is kitsch. It's turned to kitsch because it is not about trying to transmit a certain truth, but it is about how to please a vast majority of our audience and according to their expectations.

The phenomenon -- this is -- probably you never heard of Hermann Broch. He was a Jewish philosopher who went into exile in the '30s. He was at Yale University for a very long time. And he is one of the most critical thinkers about impact of kitsch on Western society because he says, "This is not innocent. It is an evil."

What is the evil? Socrates realized very well that the highest values in our life, which also include love, friendship, and all these things, are never a given. It's not something you can download from your computer or you can buy it in the shop or when you have it will remain with you for the rest of your life.

The highest values, knowing a certain form of truth, knowing what goodness is all about, achieving beauty in life, achieving wisdom is a lifelong struggle. And what is quintessentially important and in all the debates of -- if you read the *Dialogues* of Plato, they are all about so what then is the meaning of the word, what is really justification or justice about, what is the meaning of good, what's the meaning of the Gods, and so on and so forth. So he was very well aware and one of the first one how easy it is that we are fooled by a wrong interpretation, by thinking that something is tremendously important or has a true value and it isn't.

Now, keep in mind Kundera and European history: why is there so much kitsch in totalitarianism? Totalitarianism could make millions and millions of people believe, as Mr. Bin Laden still can, that they know the right answer: "You're wondering about was it a good society? I'll tell you. Are you wondering about what to do with your life? I'll tell you. Just comply, that's the rule. And this is what we will do."

The point I wanted to make is that I think we should not be fooled about what's going on in our society. Because if you get a society which is so much one-sided driven by the economy and which is so much driven by lifestyle, it's only about your looks -- this will have an affect

(Tape Interruption)

MR. RIEMEN: -- and what the real values are. Now, there were some comments about the movie. Every piece of art, it could be Tarkovsky, it could be whatever, which wants to keep its moral, intellectual, artistic integrity.

I have nothing against Hollywood, and I have nothing against entertainment. Thank God, there is entertainment, right, so that we can escape for a moment. But I have a problem with entertainment at the very moment that there is only entertainment.

There is a difference between the world of the muses, the world of the arts, and the

world of a-musement, no muses. Tarkovsky has his own style, as every filmmaker has his own style. But what he wanted to show is the little boy who suddenly can speak and he says, "In the beginning is the Word." Why? Well, that's the opening line of the *Gospel of John*. And if you read it and you read a little bit further, you can read that everything came into being or what came into being through the word, was life.

The point he would like to make, as a metaphor, using the *Gospel of John* is that miracles can happen. And it doesn't matter whether the tree is close to the sea or on a mountain even higher than this. When the phenomenon is that you give life to something, life will be given as, you know, Sarah who was the wife of Abraham got -- she was barren and she was 80 and she still got a child.

It's all about that. It's all about the miracle, the miracle of the possibility to give life. Now, again, if in our -- if we create a society in which we are so damn busy all the time and we don't have time because we don't have time. What we get deprived of the serious quality of life. Then don't be surprised about what's going on in Western society, in terms of burnt out people who do need help, the loneliness in our society. It's all part of the fact that we are focused on things, which in the very end can offer us some money, and some name recognition, and we are in the newspaper, and we are an idol for 50 minutes. But that's it and it's not that much.

Officially, we should stop right now, but we can take one final question.

SPEAKER: And I think something really important here is this idea of measurement, which is something that startled me. And I believe that that film was all about calibration and the idea that calibration needs to be in tune. And when that child put the bucket down next to the tree and they were equally distant from the tree, when he moved down that road, the way that he moved the bucket, there is certain innocence and intuitive quality in the measured way that he was walking.

And that movie was beautiful and it was all about feeling and emotion and calibration. And even when the child tried to stop the bike with the lasso (phonetic), it was all measured. And that is what is being lost in my mind, it's this idea of measurement, what is it. And when you started with this intuitive notion, I think that is what is so important. And that's what the film said so eloquently. It's just beautiful.

MR. RIEMEN: Well, to this we could only say: hear! hear!

I think you have to go to your lunch right now. Thank you.

(Applause)

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