

Critics paint portrait of duchess with unfavourable brush

“You are call’d plain Kate, and bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst”

Everybody’s a critic. Do you doubt it? Witness the storm.

The storm is over the official portrait of the Duchess of Cambridge, the former Kate Middleton. It is the painting about which everybody has a definite opinion.

Unveiled this month, Paul Emsley’s depiction of the usually glamorous Catherine was met with a tsunami of scorn. Unleashing their inner art critic, most people responded with revulsion. The litany of complaints: she looks older than she really is; she looks heavier than she really is; she has bags under her eyes. (And that was just the beginning.)

But where did all these instant art critics acquire their expertise?

“The classroom is now a place of detention, not attention. Attention is elsewhere,” said Marshall McLuhan in 1956. A canny Canadian intellectual, McLuhan liked to point out how new media advertising was what seized our attention the most. It had now become our real educator.

For McLuhan, movies and television had become the new “classroom without walls” that threatens the old schoolroom with obsolescence.

Living in the global theatre of this new classroom, we learn our lesson, day in and day out, about what looks good. That’s why everybody has an opinion. We are schooled incessantly by inescapable images.

Tens of thousands of dollars are poured into every second of screen time. Every picture is pored over and digitally doctored. The viewer demands nothing less. In this way, unreality becomes the standard by which every reality is measured.

Notice that the most cutting criticism we reserve for any product of art is that it is fake. But what do we really mean by that complaint? Aren’t we just indulging in whining when



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the illusion of unreality has been shattered? Isn’t our complaint in fact that an incongruous reality has suddenly torn into our seamless fantasy world?

Look how we congratulate ourselves on our critical skills. We freeze the frame of the movie’s digital scene. Look, there in the background of this epic film *Gladiator*, some schmuck is caught on camera at the edge of the frame wearing jeans! He wandered into the frame for a fraction of a second. “Fake!” we scream, and we laugh.

But where else did we learn these intoxicating critical skills other than from the movies and videos themselves? They taught us, by their ever-increasing skill at manufacturing unreality, to demand nothing less than their perfectly fake reality.

Yet perhaps there is nothing more real than the clumsy mistake, or the unwanted imperfection. Perhaps that is the real moment of grace, an opportunity to scorn the idolatrous ideal.

Did you notice how many people mocked Kate’s portrait by using the idiom of pop culture images? The painting of the duchess was likened to an assortment of ghoulish visages from *Harry Potter* to *Twilight*. Fiction provided the critical standard.

Do you see? The classroom without walls has taught us to instinctively judge reality solely by the standard of unreality.

The most surreal aspect of the media frenzy over Emsley’s painting is that he is in fact known for doing paintings that resemble photographs. Kate did two sittings for him, but without shame he also worked off of photographs when creating the portrait. And his painting of Catherine itself looks like a hazily lit and airbrushed photo.

Yet the howl of complaint was that even this, Emsley’s attenuated practice of painting, was still



Everybody has a definite opinion about the official portrait of Kate, the Duchess of Cambridge, and most opinions seem to be part of a tsunami of scorn, writes C.S. Morrissey.

too “fake” for popular taste. Many people who have never met her, other than through the media, were

quite certain that he failed to capture the real Kate.

But who is the real Kate? Doesn’t Emsley’s painting look more like an actual person, and less like a magazine cover? Perhaps we perceive the Kate portrait looks “bad” simply because it doesn’t measure up to the glamorous standard of unreality in which we have been schooled by the “classroom without walls”?

McLuhan wrote in 1969 to Father John Mole, OMI, commenting that the media of “the new electric environment” threatened to offer people the greatest unreality as a substitute for the greatest reality. Unreal media perceptions were “creating the world before which misguided Christians kneel. This strictly Luciferian product is ethereal and a highly plausible mock-up of the mystical body.”

When people share the same hate: that is an unreal unity. (Think of the shared loathing for Emsley’s image.) It is no substitute for the most real unity of the highest love.

A real education should therefore school us differently. Hence McLuhan wrote about what he learned from St. Thomas Aquinas of the Catholic Church on how to properly school one’s sensory perceptions: “I am a Thomist for whom the sensory order resonates with the divine Logos.”

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