FIVE FACES OF MODERNITY

Modernism Avant-Garde Decadence
Kitsch Postmodernism

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For Adriana and Irina
KITSCH

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rear-guard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: the thing to which the Germans gave the wonderful name of Kitsch... Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.

Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939)
KITSCH AND MODERNITY

In a note for his unfinished play *Kitsch*, written between February and May 1917 and published posthumously, the German dramatist and poet Frank Wedekind remarked that “Kitsch is the contemporary form of the Gothic, Rococo, Baroque.”¹ This was perhaps the first time that the essence of modernity was specifically identified as kitsch, and that kitsch, for all its strong derogatory connotations, was seen as a broad historical style, as a distinctive embodiment of the modern *Zeitgeist*. Whether Wedekind meant his statement to be taken ironically or literally is a moot question. He may have wanted it to be taken ambiguously. The other notes and the actual scenes from *Kitsch* that he managed to write before his death in March 1918 support both the ironical and the literal interpretation. What remains indisputable, however, is that Wedekind establishes an intellectually disturbing equation between modernity and kitsch.

The spectacular growth and diversification of pseudoart in the period between the wars and after World War II has confirmed Wedekind’s gloomy observation, and most contemporary critics would agree, however reluctantly, with Harold Rosenberg’s assessment of popular culture (and kitsch criticism) in an article published in the late 1950s and collected in *The Tradition of the New*:

Kitsch has captured all the arts. . . . When painter X or playwright Y begins to turn out X’s and Y’s for his readied audiences—kitsch. One of the best American poets has produced little else for years. . . . In each case no question of dishonesty, of “selling-out,” but of muscular slackness associated with finding an audience responsive to certain norms. . . . In the present organization of society only kitsch can have a social reason for being.²

Modernity and kitsch—the notions might seem mutually exclusive, at least insofar as modernity implies antitraditional present-
ness, experiment, newness of Pound’s “Make it new,” commitment to change, while kitsch—for all its diversity—suggests repetition, banality, triteness. But in fact it is not difficult to realize that kitsch, technologically as well as aesthetically, is one of the most typical products of modernity. The link between kitsch (whose dependence on fads and rapid obsolescence makes it the major form of expendable “art”) and economic development is indeed so close that one may take the presence of kitsch in countries of the “Second” or “Third” world as an unmistakable sign of “modernization.” Once kitsch is technically possible and economically profitable, the proliferation of cheap or not-so-cheap imitations of everything—from primitive or folk art to the latest avant-garde—is limited only by the market. Value is measured directly by the demand for spurious replicas or reproductions of objects whose original aesthetic meaning consisted, or should have consisted, in being unique and therefore inimitable. No one today is surprised that any masterpiece, say Michelangelo’s Moses, is available for “home use” in copies of different sizes and materials (from plaster, plastic, and china to real marble). Now one can buy the masterpiece and, after placing it near the fireplace, comfortably enjoy it every evening.

Alexis de Tocqueville in his famous book Democracy in America was perhaps the first intellectual historian and sociologist to analyze the effects of modern democracy on the arts and to explain why democracy necessarily leads to a lowering of standards in both creation and consumption. In a modern democracy “the number of consumers increases, but opulent and fastidious consumers become more scarce.” This general law explains why both the artisan and the artist are “induced to produce with great rapidity a [large] quantity of imperfect commodities” or art objects. Tocqueville described in the 1830s one of the fundamental drives of modernity—“the hypocrisy of luxury”:

In the confusion of all ranks everyone hopes to appear what he is not, and makes great exertions to succeed in this object. . . . To mimick virtue is of every age; but the hypocrisy of luxury belongs more particularly to the ages of democracy. . . . The productions of artists are more numerous, but the merit of each production is diminished. No longer able to soar to what is great, the artists cultivate what is pretty and elegant; and appearance is more attended than reality. 9

The highly interesting passage that follows refers to an experience that today we would probably describe in terms of kitsch:

When I arrived for the first time at New York, . . . I was surprised to perceive along the shore, at some distance from the city, a considerable number of little palaces of white marble, several of which were built after the models of ancient architecture. When I went the next day to inspect more closely the building which had particularly attracted my notice, I found that its walls were of whitewashed brick, and its columns of painted wood. All the edifices which I had admired the night before were of the same kind. 4

From Tocqueville on, many social and cultural critics, conservatives and revolutionaries alike, agreed that artistic standards were rapidly deteriorating and attributed the main cause of the widespread corruption of taste to status-seeking and display. First the plutocrats and the nouveaux riches, then the petty bourgeois and certain segments of the populace were seen as trying to imitate the old aristocracy and its patterns of consumption, including the consumption of beauty. The art they liked, created and bought mainly as a sign of social status, no longer had to perform its difficult aesthetic function, and genuine artists were forced to turn their backs on an audience that applied exclusively pecuniary criteria in the matter of aesthetics.

Some radical social critics were led to generalize the situation of the mid- and late nineteenth century to encompass the whole of cultural history. Thus, for Thorstein Veblen, all culture was nothing but a consequence of aggressive showing-off as manifested in what he called in his Theory of the Leisure Class (1899) “conspicuous leisure” and “conspicuous consumption.” Reacting against contemporary cultural hypocrisy, Veblen indulged in the somber illusion that all culture was reducible to the deceptive strategies of modern pseudoculture. Consumption for the sake of ostentation, he thought, had been the distinguishing feature of even the earliest
cultures, promoted by warrior castes in barbarian societies in which all values (including those we call aesthetic) were simply symbols and means of economic differentiation. In spite of its more complex relationships, Veblen thought, modern society has preserved the basic characteristics of "predatory culture."

Surely art and even modern commercialized pseudoart cannot be explained merely by status seeking. Although true aesthetic experience may be rare to the point of being statistically irrelevant, and although it may be aided or impeded by various social factors, the need for art and the desire for prestige are different psychological entities. This distinction can be verified indirectly by the fact that even the consumption of pseudoart does not coincide with consumption for purposes of ostentation only. Lovers of kitsch may look for prestige—or the enjoyable illusion of prestige—but their pleasure does not stop there. What constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague "hallucinatory" power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy "catharsis."* In numerous cases, like the true art that it counterfeits, kitsch has little if anything to do with Veblenian "conspicuous consumption."

Stressing the basic modernity of kitsch, T. W. Adorno has rightfully observed:

The historical necessity of such kitsch has been misjudged by Veblen. To him, the false castle is nothing but a reversion. He knows nothing of its intrinsic modernity and visualizes the illusionary images of uniqueness in the era of mass production as mere vestiges instead of "responses" to capitalistic mechanization which betray something of the latter's essence. The realm of objects which functions in Veblen's conspicuous consumption is actually a realm of artificial imagery. It is created by a desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile promesse du bonheur. 5

Whether we accept the "status-seeking" theory or whether we prefer to see kitsch as a pleasurable escape from the drabness of modern quotidian life, the whole concept of kitsch clearly centers around such questions as imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we may call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception.

Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying. As such, it obviously has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold. Kitsch, then, is a recent phenomenon. It appears at the moment in history when beauty in its various forms is socially distributed like any other commodity subject to the essential market law of supply and demand. Once it has lost its elitist claim to uniqueness and once its diffusion is regulated by pecuniary standards (or by political standards in totalitarian countries), "beauty" turns out to be rather easy to fabricate. This fact may account for the ubiquity of spurious beauty in today's world, in which even nature (as exploited and commercialized by the tourist industry) has ended up resembling cheap art. Less than a century ago, nature used to imitate art, as Oscar Wilde put it in his famous "Decay of Lying." Certain sunsets, Wilde went on to say, had come to look like paintings by Corot. Nowadays, nature has little choice but to imitate mass-produced color reproductions, to be as beautiful as a picture postcard.

KITSCH, CAMP, AND HIGH ART

Earlier in the century, when modernism's victory over pompier academicism (one of the most gorgeous and self-righteous forms of kitsch) and other similar corruptions of taste seemed irreversible, the art world indulged in the optimistic illusion that the benevolent and sinister monster of kitsch would never again haunt its precincts. After a period of half triumph in the domain of "high art," kitsch was believed to be safely confined to the fleamarket or to the obscure—if thriving—industry of cheap imitations, humble religious art ob-

*Adorno's perceptive definition of kitsch as a "parody of catharsis" is discussed on page 241.
jects, vulgar souvenirs, and kinky antiques. But the polymorphous monster of pseudoart had a secret and deep-rooted power that few modernists were aware of—the power to please, to satisfy not only the easiest and most widespread popular aesthetic nostalgias but also the middle class’s vague ideal of beauty, which still is, in spite of the angry reactions of various avant-gardes, the commanding factor in matters of aesthetic consumption and, therefore, production.

Other factors and influences have helped the recent reappearance of kitsch in the domain of high art. An extremely important “strategic” advantage has been the tendency of kitsch to lend itself to irony. From Rimbaud’s praise of “poetic crap” and “stupid paintings” through Dada and surrealism, the rebellious avant-garde has made use of a variety of techniques and elements directly borrowed from kitsch for their ironically disruptive purposes. Thus, when the avant-garde became fashionable, especially after World War II, kitsch came to enjoy a strange kind of negative prestige even in some of the most sophisticated intellectual circles. This seems to have been one of the main factors in the emergence of the curious camp sensibility, which, under the guise of ironic connoisseurship, can freely indulge in the pleasures offered by the most awful kitsch.

Camp cultivates bad taste—usually the bad taste of yesterday—as a form of superior refinement. It is as if bad taste, consciously acknowledged and pursued, actually could outdo itself and become its own clear-cut opposite. This is at least what Susan Sontag suggests in her “ultimate” statement on camp, namely, “It is beautiful because it is awful.” Externally, however, camp is often hard, indeed impossible, to distinguish from kitsch.

The new camp fashion, born not long ago in intellectual (originally homosexual) circles in New York City, rapidly swept over the entire United States and has contributed substantially to the kitsch Renaissance in the world of high art. Still, one has reason to be surprised when one learns that a unanimously esteemed museum—with one of the best collections of modern art in the world—can house a show consisting mainly of magnificent kitsch, as redeemed by the sensibility of camp. In his New York Times review of the big exhibition of contemporary American art organized at the Art Institute of Chicago in the summer of 1974, Hilton Kramer suggestively groups the numerous painters representative of the camp spirit (the “grand master” being Andy Warhol) under the label of “The Flea Market School.” He writes with acerbity “. . . I have passed many hours in real flea markets where the visual rewards were far greater.” Such examples of the proliferation and encroachment of kitsch in the domain of high art justify Kramer’s rather melancholy reflection that “there are now no pockets of bad taste or vulgar display buried in the past that are not ready for exhumation.”

If the avant-garde and camp fashions can resort to artistic forms and techniques clearly related to the most obvious varieties of kitsch, kitsch in its turn can mimic with profit the appearance of avant-gardism. This is another explanation of kitsch’s constantly renewed power of survival within the domain of what is commonly regarded as high art. Certainly, the kitsch artist mimics the avant-garde only to the extent to which the latter’s unconventionalities have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes. For kitsch, by its very nature, is incapable of taking the risk involved in any true avant-gardism.

Kitsch uses avant-garde procedures for purposes of what we may call “aesthetic advertising.” A good literary example of this is the Soviet poet, Evgheni Yevtushenko, who a decade or so ago achieved the rapid celebrity of a rock star in both his native country and the West. An Italian essayist, Luigi Baldacci, has convincingly pointed out the kitsch quality of one of Yevtushenko’s most characteristic poems, “The Hydroelectric Power Station of Bratsk.” Yevtushenko’s “poetic kitsch” is defined by the poet’s attempt to convey a plain and predictable political message by means of Mayakovsky’s futuristic poetic language. The message by itself, even though extremely banal, cannot properly be called kitsch. The political content of the poem becomes kitsch, however, when it assumes a false identity and masquerades as poetry. The aesthetic falsification consists of the use of avant-garde expressive means that have nothing to do with the
tenor of the poem and that have the unique function of sticking the label “prodotto d'arte” (“artistic product”) on “a package which does not contain anything except a purely ideological message.” The difference between Mayakovsky and Yevtushenko is quite clear: the first was a genuine revolutionary, both poetically and politically (whether we like his politics or not), while the second is just a skillful propagandist trying to “sell” accepted ideological commonplaces as avant-garde poetry.

The possibility of the avant-garde’s using kitsch elements and, conversely, of kitsch’s making use of avant-garde devices is just an indication of how complex a concept kitsch is. We are dealing here indeed with one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics. Like art itself, of which it is both an imitation and a negation, kitsch cannot be defined from a single vantage point.

And again like art—or for that matter antiart—kitsch refuses to lend itself even to a negative definition, because it simply has no single compelling, distinct counterconcept.

**ETYMOLOGY, CONTEXTS OF USAGE, AND THE “LAW OF AESTHETIC INADEQUACY”**

What, then, is kitsch? Can we be content with saying vaguely that it is bad art—artistic or literary rubbish, as its immediate etymology would suggest? Or should we favor the notion that kitsch is primarily false art and, therefore, to be judged in relation to such intriguing categories of falsehood as the counterfeit, forgery, or lie? And, if the relationship between kitsch and falsehood is admitted, how can this relationship account for the widespread view that kitsch is just a synonym for “bad taste”? And then what is bad taste? Is kitsch as bad taste to be discussed mostly in aesthetic terms or should it rather be conceived sociologically as a kind of ideological diversion? And, viewed as falsehood and diversion, does not kitsch also demand to be considered ethically? And, if the ethical approach is justified, can one not go further and conceive of kitsch theatrically, as a manifestation of sin to be blamed, ultimately, on the influence of the devil? These and other similar questions have been raised in connection with kitsch, and the trouble is that, up to a certain point, they are all relevant.

Before trying to answer such questions, let us note that out of the numerous terms designating artistic bad taste in various modern languages, kitsch has been the only one to achieve a truly international status. In German, where it comes from, kitsch has a number of synonyms or near-synonyms, such as schund or trivial, and lexical compounds like Schundliteratur or Trivialliteratur are employed interchangeably to denote literary kitsch. In French, camelote suggests the cheapness and poor quality of many kitsch objects, but it cannot be used as an aesthetic concept. Also in French, the notion of style pompier refers to a pompous, academicizing variety of bad taste in painting, but it lacks both the semantic complexity and flexibility of kitsch. In Yiddish and then in American English words like schlock (stuff of low quality or value) or schmaltz (sentimental and exaggeratedly florid art) come close to certain shades of meaning implied by kitsch, but they are far from covering the whole area referred to by the latter concept. The Spanish cursi, as far as I know, is the only single word that suggests both the deceptive and the self-deceptive aspects of bad taste that are implied in kitsch. The aesthetic paradoxes involved in the notion of cursi are very similar to those of kitsch, as a reading of Ramón Gómez de la Serna’s brilliant essay Lo cursi (1943) easily reveals. The circulation of the term cursi, however, remains limited to the Hispanic world.

As close to kitsch as cursi, perhaps, is the Russian term poshlust, at least in its Nabokovian interpretation and transcription, in which “the first ‘o’ is as big as the plop of an elephant falling into a muddy pond and as round as the bosom of a bathing beauty in a German picture postcard” (Nikolai Gogol [Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions,
The ten pages or so in Nabokov’s essay on Gogol in which poshlust is discussed are among the wittiest and most perceptive that have ever been written on the subject of kitsch and—although the German word is never mentioned—on the close affinities between what this notion signifies and certain outstanding traits of the German character. “Among the nations with which we came into contact,” Nabokov writes, “Germany had always seemed to us a country where poshlust, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit, habits, and general atmosphere...” (p. 64). Indeed, this may be one of the reasons why kitsch, and not poshlust, has been adopted internationally: the Germans truly earned this courtesy of recognition. And, furthermore, kitsch is so easy to pronounce, as easy as “itch.” And, if we were to follow for a moment Nabokov’s paronomastic logic, don’t we all have an itch for kitsch?

The term kitsch is, like the concept it designates, quite recent. It came into use in the 1860s and 1870s in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was employed to designate cheap artistic stuff. It was not before the first decades of the twentieth century that kitsch became an international term. As frequently happens with such rather loose and widely circulating labels, its etymology is uncertain. Some authors believe that the German word derives from the English “sketch,” mispronounced by artists in Munich and applied derogatorily to those cheap images bought as souvenirs by tourists, especially the Anglo-Americans (cf. Gero von Wilpert, Sachwörterbuch der Literatur, Stuttgart, 1969). According to others its possible origin should be looked for in the German verb verkitschen, meaning in the Mecklenburg dialect “to make cheap” (cf. Träumers Deutsches Wörterbuch, vol. 4, Berlin, 1943). Ludwig Giesz in his Phänomenologie des Kitsches also mentions the hypothesis that links kitsch to the German verb kitschen, in the sense of “collecting rubbish from the street” (den Strassenschlamm zusammenscharren); kitschen has indeed this specific meaning in the southwestern part of Germany; it can also mean “to make new furniture from old” (neue Möbel auf alt zurichten).12

These three main etymological hypotheses, even if erroneous, seem to me equally suggestive of certain basic characteristics of kitsch. First, there is something sketchy about kitsch. Second, in order to be affordable, kitsch must be relatively cheap. Last, aesthetically speaking, kitsch may be considered rubbish or junk.

Let me add that, apart from those who derive kitsch either from the English (the “sketch theory”) or from the German, there are writers who favor less plausible views. According to Gilbert Highet, kitsch comes from the Russian verb keetchetsya, meaning “to be haughty and puffed up.” Hence, his view that kitsch signifies “vulgar showoff” and “is applied to everything that took a lot of trouble to make and is quite hideous.” However improbable, such a derivation has the merit not only of stressing the basic uncertainties with regard to the word’s origin, but also of suggesting the actual flexibility of its present-day meaning. Moreover, Highet is right to the extent that he points out that kitsch is not always easy to make, and that to produce bad art or poetry can sometimes require a great deal of effort.

Whatever its origin, kitsch was and still is a strongly derogatory word, and as such lends itself to the widest range of subjective uses. To call something kitsch is in most cases a way of rejecting it outright as distasteful, repugnant, or even disgusting. Kitsch cannot be applied, however, to objects or situations that are completely unrelated to the broad domain of aesthetic production or aesthetic reception. Generically, kitsch dismisses the claims or pretensions of quality of anything that tries to be “artistic” without genuinely being so. It may, then, apply derogatorily to architecture, landscaping, interior decoration and furnishing, painting and sculpture, music, cinema and TV programs, literature, and virtually anything subject to judgments of taste. If we think of kitsch in terms of aesthetic deception and self-deception, there are obviously as many types of kitsch as there are possibilities of misusing or counterfeiting the signs of art. Limiting ourselves, for the moment, to literature, we can distinguish two very comprehensive categories, each one comprising an indefinite number of species and subspecies: (1) Kitsch...
produced for propaganda (including political kitsch, religious kitsch, etc.) and (2) kitsch produced mainly for entertainment (love stories, Rod McKuen-type giftshop poetry, potboilers, slicks, etc.). We should recognize, however, that the division between the two categories can become extremely vague: propaganda can masquerade as "cultural" entertainment and, conversely, entertainment can be directed toward subtle manipulative goals. From the psychological point of view we can use the distinction proposed by Hans Egon Holthusen between "sweet kitsch"—the sentimental "saccharine type"—and the sour variety, with innumerable nuances in between.\textsuperscript{14}

No matter how we classify its contexts of usage, kitsch always implies the notion of \textit{aesthetic inadequacy}. Such inadequacy is often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention. A Greek statue reduced to the dimensions of a \textit{biblelot} can serve as illustration. But the "law of aesthetic inadequacy" has a much wider scope, and we may well speak of kitsch effects in connection with combinations or arrangements of objects that, taken individually, have absolutely nothing kitschy about them. Thus, a real Rembrandt hung in a millionaire’s home elevator would undoubtedly make for kitsch. Obviously, this is a hypothetical example and a caricature but it has the merit of suggesting the \textit{use} of genuine great art as mere ostentatious decoration. An aesthetic object displayed as a symbol of affluence does not become kitsch itself, but the role it plays is typical of the world of kitsch. Certainly, the opposite happens more frequently, that is, a variety of easily affordable things, which have little if anything to do with art, may be given aesthetic significance and treated with the respect due to true art objects. We have only to think of the horrendous old "curiosities" that are on sale in the increasingly numerous nostalgia shops—rotten boots, broken cart wheels, porcelain night-pots, unwieldy rusty bathtubs of two or three generations ago, and innumerable other shabby and junky "antiques," which many people enjoy as poetic relics from the better world of our grandfathers. Between the two extremes of authentic art reduced to signifying mere wealth and patent nonart vested with aesthetic prestige, there are countless instances to which the concept of aesthetic inadequacy applies.

\section*{KITSCH AND ROMANTICISM}

Although kitsch can occur in a great many different contexts, the concept almost completely lacks what I would call "historical depth," that is, it can hardly be used in connection with anything before the late eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century. This is another way of saying that kitsch—not only as a term but also as a concept—is essentially modern. Even if we can discover some formal relationship between kitsch and mannerist or baroque art, kitsch seems to be, historically, a result of romanticism. On the one hand, the romantic revolution—insofar as it was a consequence of the eighteenth-century Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns—brought about an almost complete relativization of the standards of taste; on the other hand, many romantics (some of them truly great poets or artists and obviously having nothing to do with kitsch) promoted a sentimentally oriented conception of art, which in turn opened the road to various kinds of aesthetic escapism. The point has been made before that the desire to escape from adverse or simply dull reality is perhaps the main reason for the wide appeal of kitsch.

More generally, romanticism is the first important \textit{popular} literary and artistic movement, the main cultural product of the rise of modern democracy. A sociologist of institutions and intellectual life like Tocqueville could not fail to dwell upon the outstanding features by which literature in democratic ages (he did not use the
word "romanticism") is distinguished from the literature produced in periods of aristocracy (he obviously had the great French poets of the seventeenth century in mind). In democracies, men do not think that the pleasures of mind constitute the principal charm of their lives; but they are considered as transient and necessary recreations amidst the serious labours of life." And Tocqueville goes on to describe in more detail the needs of average readers in a democratic age:

As the time they can devote to letters is very short, they seek to make the best use of the whole of it. They prefer books which may be easily procured, quickly read, and which require no learned researches to be understood. They ask for beauties, self-proffered, and easily enjoyed; above all, they must have what is unexpected and new. Accustomed to the struggle, the crosses, and the monotony of practical life, they require rapid emotions, startling passages. . . . Authors will aim at rapidity of execution, more than at perfection of detail. Small productions will be more common than bulky books. . . . The object of authors will be to astonish rather than please, and to stir the passions rather than charm the taste. 15

Tocqueville is one of the first to remark that democracy encourages commercialism in literature and the arts. Leaving aside a few great authors, writers in a democracy work for the market:

Democracy not only infuses a taste for letters among the trading classes, but introduces a trading spirit into literature. . . . Among aristocratic nations no one can hope to succeed without immense exertions, and . . . these exertions may bestow a great deal of fame, but can never earn much money; whilst among democratic nations, a writer may flatter himself that he will obtain at a cheap rate a meager reputation and a large fortune. 16

What is remarkable about passages such as these is that many of the points they make might well apply to kitsch: art as recreation and entertainment, easiness of access, quick and predictable effects, "trading spirit" on the part of writers (who are more interested in immediate financial rewards than in achieving fame), the reading public's psychological need for escape from the dullness of quotidian life—these are some of the recurring elements in most sociologically oriented definitions of kitsch.

The relationship between romanticism and kitsch can also be discussed from an aesthetic vantage point. Hermann Broch, for instance, links the modern rise of kitsch to the change brought about by romanticism in the conception of the aesthetic ideal. Before romanticism the aesthetic ideal had been considered as transcendent in regard to any possible work of art: Beauty appeared as an absolute, practically never attainable, model and criterion of value. But during the romantic era the aesthetic ideal lost all trace of its former transcendence and came to be perceived exclusively in terms of its immanence in particular, finite works of art. Value systems before romanticism were, according to Broch, open (in the sense that the goal to be attained remained outside the system). In an essay written in 1950 he observed,

Romanticism is inclined in exactly the opposite direction. It wishes to make the Platonic idea of art—beauty—the immediate and tangible goal for any work of art. . . . Yet, insofar as art remains a system, the system becomes closed; the infinite system becomes a finite system. . . . And this process constitutes the basic precondition of every form of kitsch, but at the same time owes its existence to the specific structure of romanticism (i.e., to the process by which the mundane is raised to the level of the eternal). We can say that Romanticism, without therefore being kitsch itself, is the mother of kitsch and that there are moments when the child becomes so like its mother that one cannot differentiate between them. 17

In an earlier essay dating from 1933, Broch also spoke of kitsch and romanticism, basing his parallel on their common nostalgic quality. Often, he said, kitsch is nothing else than "an escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid. . . . Kitsch is the simplest and most direct way of soothing this nostalgia." 18 Replacing historical or contemporary reality by clichés, kitsch clearly thrives on some emotional needs that are generally associated with the
romantic world view. To a large extent we can see kitsch as a hackneyed form of romanticism.

BAD TASTE, IDEOLOGY, AND HEDONISM

Kitsch appears to be a recent phenomenon even if we identify it simply with bad taste. Although some critics speak of the "universality of kitsch" (theoretically a legitimate assumption), they will never go into specifics beyond, let us say, the baroque period. This is perhaps because it is extremely hazardous to speculate about what bad taste was like in older times. This is also because it may even be that bad taste did not exist in earlier periods or, if it existed, it did not have the means to systematize its conventions and to institutionalize its activities in order to reach a large number of would-be consumers of specifically fake art. This raises the question of the connection of bad taste and the history of modern technology, especially the advent of the machine in producing and reproducing books and other types of works of art.

As a working hypothesis we may consider that bad taste in modern times consists mainly of an ideologically manipulated illusion of taste. That is why mass culture can be described quite adequately in terms of ideology or false consciousness. If true art always contains a finally irreducible element, an element that is constitutive of what we may call "aesthetic autonomy," art that is produced for immediate consumption is clearly and entirely reducible to extrinsic causes and motives. To stress this important point it is useful to mention the distinction between genuine art and mass culture proposed by one of the representatives of the Frankfurt School of social and cultural criticism, Leo Lowenthal. A longtime student of the relationships between popular culture and society (as in his book Literature, Popular Culture, and Society, 1961), Lowenthal summarizes both his personal position and the cultural philosophy of the Frankfurt School as a whole when he says: "As far as there is any legitimacy to the concept of reductionism, it indeed applies to mass culture.... While I totally reject a sociological approach to literature which looks at the works of art as mere reflections of society, the reflection theory is exactly the legitimate concept to be applied to mass culture. In classical Marxian terms, mass culture is indeed ideology." And this is so because the significance of the phenomena of mass culture "in no way consists in what they have to say but rather in the extent to which what they say is a generalizable statement about the predispositions and attitudes of those consumers who in large aggregates are accepting the merchandise." If we replace the notion of mass culture by kitsch, this distinction becomes even more convincing. By kitsch in this context we mean simply false aesthetic consciousness or, to paraphrase Theodor W. Adorno's definition of kitsch as the "parody of catharsis," the parody of aesthetic consciousness.

During the late 1930s two of the leading members of the Frankfurt School, T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, introduced the notion of the "culture industry" (also referred to as "amusement industry," "entertainment industry," etc.), which they defined from a broader dialectical point of view and analyzed in more detail in their postwar collaborative work Dialectic of Enlightenment (first published in 1947). Basically, the culture industry is concerned with supplying the (pseudo) cultural market with products specifically designed to induce relaxation. As far back as 1941, Adorno had described the need of the masses for distraction or "fun" as both a result of the existing (capitalist) mode of production and, as it were, one of its most characteristic products. Reformulating in a cultural context Marx's famous theory that the mode of production manufactures not only certain commodities but also the need for precisely those commodities, Adorno wrote: "The customers of musical entertainment are themselves objects or, indeed, products of the same mechanism which produces popular music.... The power of the process extends itself over the time intervals which on
the surface appear to be 'free'.... The people clamor for what they are going to get anyhow."\(^{22}\) What is difficult to accept in Adorno's approach is the identification of the "masses" with the "working class" in a conventional Marxian sense. The fact is that, even at the time when the article was written, the concept of mass culture applied to the middle class as well. Today it is perhaps more obvious than three or four decades ago that popular culture—to the extent to which it is kitsch—responds primarily to middle-class psychological needs, which it tries, rather successfully, to generalize to the whole of society in an electronic world that resembles very much McLuhan's "Global Village." This point will be argued later. For the moment we should admit that Adorno's insight into the need for "distraction" is quite accurate if only we broaden the scope of its application and realize that the whole process of production and consumption of mass (pseudo) culture is facilitated by an all-too-human readiness for self-deception. Writes Adorno: "People want to have fun. A fully concentrated and conscious experience of art is possible only to those whose lives do not put such a strain on them that in their spare time they want relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects this dual desire. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested."\(^{23}\)

Certainly, one of the main reasons for the growth of kitsch since the beginning of the nineteenth century, to quote another sociologist of modern culture, Dwight Macdonald, is the fact that "business enterprise found a profitable market in the cultural demands of the newly awakened masses, and the advance technology made possible the cheap production of books, pictures, music, and furniture in sufficient quantities to satisfy the market."\(^{24}\) But even if the association between kitsch and low cost is often inescapable, we should not overlook the fact that the latter notion is very relative and can therefore become, when used as a unique criterion, dangerously misleading. What is regarded as cheap by a member of the upper-middle class can be prohibitively expensive for somebody less well off. Let us also repeat that sometimes bad taste can enjoy the possession of important financial means for the satisfaction of its ostentatious whims and fancies.

We have, then, to recognize the existence, along with the humbler varieties of kitsch, of a gorgeous kitsch that is the privilege of the rich. Moreover, even when it is inexpensive, kitsch is often supposed to suggest richness and superfluity: imitation gold or silver objects and colored-glass jewelry sold in drugstores undoubtedly have something to do with kitsch. As for actual rich, upperclass kitsch, the second half of the nineteenth century and then the time span that has been called la belle époque can furnish a great number of examples. Even the kings who happened to reign in that blessed period were sometimes converts to kitsch, like Ludwig II of Bavaria, who indulged frenetically in the most luxurious kind of bad taste. For some writers (for instance, Abraham A. Moles)\(^{25}\) the real kitsch has to be looked for precisely in that epoch, our own time being characterized by the formation of a "neo-kitsch" style, in keeping with the demands of an affluent consumer society. Even if we accept such a periodization of kitsch—and I do not see why we should not—the cheaper contemporary variety has, so to speak, its traditional roots in the pseudo-aristocratic aesthetic notions of the rich nineteenth-century bourgeoisie.

The kind of taste that is satisfied by the lower forms of kitsch ought not be confused with popular taste (although the epithet "popular" has undergone an important change of meaning during the last decades, and today's "popular culture" is often pure kitsch). Throughout the centuries, popular taste found its expression and natural satisfaction in folk art and poetry, which are in no way aesthetically inferior to the creations of high culture. Folk culture, the result of a long, organic, and manifold creative-participatory process is, in spite of its sometimes awkward or naïve appearances, highly elaborated and refined. What is important—to quote Macdonald again—is that "Folk Art grew from below," whereas "Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by business; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice of buying or not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in
short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule—in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains.”

Cheap or expensive, kitsch is sociologically and psychologically the expression of a life style, namely, the life style of the bourgeoisie or the middle class. This style can appeal to members of both the upper and lower classes and, in fact, become the ideal life style of the whole society—all the more so when the society grows affluent and more people have more spare time. Insofar as man chooses the ambience that suits his tastes, he can have several distinct types of relations with the objects that make up the decor of his home life. Abraham Moles distinguishes no less than seven modes of behavior in this respect: ascetic, hedonist, aggressive, acquisitive, surrealist, functionalist or cybernetic, and kitsch. And the kitsch mode is absolutely opposed to the ascetic one, combining all others in various proportions. The number of these modes can easily be increased or reduced. But the basic conflict between asceticism and hedonism remains in any ordering of these attitudes. Thus, keeping Moles’s classification in mind, it is not difficult to show that, asceticism excepted, all the other categories can be subsumed under hedonism. Aggressiveness, like possessiveness, cannot be dissociated from the pleasure principle. Surrealism is nothing else than an extreme case of enjoyment of quaint, unpredictable combinations, and functionalism (in this context) is just another word for the “comforts of civilization.”

To understand the nature of kitsch we should, then, analyze the particular hedonism characteristic of the middle-class mentality. Its primary feature is perhaps that it is a middle-of-the-road hedonism, perfectly illustrated by the “principle of mediocrity” that always obtains in kitsch (this all-pervading mediocrity is easier to notice in the more elaborate and exaggeratedly complicated forms of kitsch). The middle class being an active class, its hedonism is confined to the use of spare time. It is a hedonism of relaxation and, therefore, compensatory in nature. That is why kitsch lends itself to a definition in terms of a systematic attempt to fly from daily reality: in time (to a personal past, as indicated by the kitsch cult of the souvenir; to the “idyll of history”; to an adventurous future by means of the clichés of science fiction, etc.); and in space (to the most diverse imaginary and exotic lands). At a practical level, the pursuit of relaxation requires that household activities be performed with as little effort and as much fun as possible: this is how the gadget appears (gadgets being produced by a specialized sector of the industry of kitsch objects). Middle-class hedonism is in principle open, unprejudiced, eager for new experience; this openness, unhampered by any critical sense, accounts for the tolerant and sometimes heteroclite character of the world of kitsch. The superficiality of this hedonism can be matched only by its desire for universality and totality, and by its infinite capacity for acquiring beautiful junk.

The fundamental trait of modern middle-class hedonism is perhaps that it stimulates the desire to consume to the point that consumption becomes a sort of regulating social ideal. Obviously, consumption and production have always implied each other, but the ethical significance attached to these correlative concepts and activities has varied widely. Traditional civilizations—even those that do not hold labor as such in particularly high esteem—are for diverse reasons inclined to praise the virtues of saving, frugality, thrift, etc. (which are nothing but forms of postponing consumption), and will consequently guard against the dangers involved in immoderate consumption (a word that in common language still means primarily “destruction,” “waste,” “squandering,” and that is naturally associated with notions of “luxury,” “affluence,” and even “decadence”). Although modernity is largely a product of the famous Protestant work ethic (in which Max Weber saw the main cause of capitalism), the dynamics of present-day economics and the whole temporal framework in which social activities are performed encourage a drastic revision, indeed a reversal, of the traditional outlook: consumption is totally vindicated, whereas old temperance, restraint, and saving habits tend to appear as outdated and touchingly ridiculous relics of the past. More than a mere fulfillment of certain basic needs, consumption has somehow become almost a
duty—a way of helping the economic health of the nation—and, beyond mere economics, a way of apprehending and understanding the world.

To better comprehend what underlies today’s frenzy of consumption (the “have it now” urge of both cultural and countercultural hedonism) we also have to consider another major characteristic of modernity, namely, its all-pervasive sense of change. The psychological consequences of modernity’s increasing pace of change—and in the first place the ensuing axiological relativism—account for a decreasing trust in stability or continuity, without which no ethos of postponement or restraint is possible. In traditional societies, a homogeneous time that perpetually renews itself in a circular movement offers the guarantee that tomorrow will not be substantially different from yesterday or today. Individual anxieties and tragedies are of course possible, and within the framework of an essentially harmonious universe (the Greek Cosmos, for instance, as opposed to Chaos) the accidents and irregularities of chance may provoke untold personal and collective disasters. However, such mishaps do not contradict the belief in the basic unity of existence or the deep sense of continuity derived from respect for tradition. Within the Judeo-Christian eschatological view of history, the importance of tradition is in no way diminished by the implications of the doctrine of salvation. The system of values upon which the Christian ethic is based is among the most stable, and the variegated drama that takes place on the “stage” of this world cannot possibly throw the slightest shadow of doubt upon either the relevance of the past or the certainty of the hereafter.

The Christian ethic is an ethic of postponement par excellence. At the dawn of modernity the myth of progress emerged, based on a secularized concept of linear and irreversible time. During its “progressive” phase, modernity managed to preserve some of the older quality of time, and in the first place the sense of continuity between the past, the present, and the future. The idea of progress postulates that change has a certain pattern, that it presupposes a certain order that favors a constant and gradual development from the inferior to the superior. By itself, belief in progress can be an incentive to postponement of consumption. But the alliance between modernity and progress turned out to be only temporary, and in our age the myth of progress appears to have been largely exhausted. It has been replaced by the myth of modernity itself. The future has become almost as unreal and empty as the past. The widespread sense of instability and discontinuity makes instant enjoyment about the only “reasonable” thing to strive for. Hence, the drive toward consumption and the whole paradoxical concept of a “throw-away economy” and, more generally, civilization.

The great psychological discovery on which kitsch is founded lies in the fact that nearly everything directly or indirectly associated with artistic culture can be turned into something fit for immediate “consumption,” like any ordinary commodity. It is true that, unlike the ordinary consumer, the art consumer does not use up that which he enjoys. Mentally, however, the modern philistine can behave like a common consumer and, without materially damaging or even touching the original art work, destroy its aesthetic significance (the case of masterpieces, like Mona Lisa, worn out by kitsch will be discussed later). To respond to the “aesthetic” demands of today’s compulsive consumer, the culture industry is there to imitate, duplicate, reproduce, and standardize whatever he might enjoy. Uniqueness and even rarity have become anachronous qualities, which are not only out of step with the times but illustrate what an advocate of “cultural consumption” (and a proponent of respectable mid-brow and petit-bourgeois kitsch) calls “the Law of the Inefficiency of Art.”

Kitsch, therefore, is “efficient” art, the expendable cultural aspect of today’s society, and one of the most direct manifestations of the triumphant aesthetics and ethics of consumerism. Originally, as pointed out before, kitsch emerged as an expression of the taste of the middle class and of its peculiar spare-time hedonism. As a form of ideology (aesthetic false consciousness) kitsch appeared quite spontaneously, and the prevailing Marxist view that it was more or less deliberately introduced by the upper classes to divert the work-
ing class or the masses from their revolutionary vocation is fundamentally incorrect. This fallacy does not prevent certain Marxist or para-Marxist critics (Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance) from making a host of extremely perceptive observations with regard to the world of kitsch and its inner dialectic. This, incidentally, is not the first time that a basically erroneous approach has proved intellectually exciting and even fruitful.

If so many students of contemporary "mass culture" have overlooked the middle-class origin and nature of kitsch it may be that, as Jenny Sharp observed in an article published in 1967, this is at the same time the most obvious and the most bizarre characteristic of kitsch. Kitsch, she wrote, "means all those cheap, vulgar, sentimental, tasteless, trashy, pretty, cute objects the vast majority of people in this country like to live with.... This pop culture... has transcended the barriers of taste and refinement and become absorbed in the archives of the establishment culture. The only page left unturned is the most obvious, in some ways the most bizarre, and therefore overlooked. Kitsch is in fact the taste of the middle classes, which in the present day is the taste of the vast majority of our society."29

In the light of the foregoing arguments it becomes clear once again why kitsch as an aesthetic concept cannot be dissociated from modernity and, specifically, from the comparatively recent period that has seen the rapid rise of the middle classes. Kitsch is the direct artistic result of an important ethical mutation for which the peculiar time awareness of the middle classes has been responsible. By and large, kitsch may be viewed as a reaction against the "terror" of change and the meaninglessness of chronological time flowing from an unreal past into an equally unreal future. Under such conditions, spare time—whose quantity is socially increasing—is felt as a strange burden, the burden of emptiness. Kitsch appears as an easy way of "killing time," as a pleasurable escape from the banality of both work and leisure. The fun of kitsch is just the other side of terrible and incomprehensible boredom.

SOME STYLISTIC CONSIDERATIONS

To put some order into an issue so confusingly many-sided, it is helpful to approach the problem of kitsch from three different but complementary angles. To begin, we may consider kitsch as a product of a certain category of "artists," "makers," or "designers" who, addressing themselves to a well-defined audience of average consumers, apply definite sets of rules and communicate varieties of highly predictable messages in stereotyped "aesthetic" packages. From this point of view, kitsch is a style, in the sense in which Wedekind spoke of it as the contemporary form of the gothic or baroque or rococo. The second possibility is to take into account the specific kitsch elements that appear in the process of mass production and diffusion of art. Such elements are clearly nonintentional (that is, they are not planned in advance by the producers of kitsch but are rather the fatal consequences of modern technology's intervention in the art world). The third possibility consists of considering kitsch from the vantage point of the consumer who, willing to accept the "aesthetic lie" of kitsch and who, conditioned by the sheer quantity of pseudoart and instant beauty with which he is surrounded, can perceive even genuine works of art as kitsch.

What does the kitsch artist have in mind when he sets out to work? He obviously thinks in the first place of impressing and pleasing the average consumer who is going to buy his products. Aesthetically, then, we may say that the kitsch artist applies—consciously or not—a "principle of mediocrity," which offers him the best guarantee that his works will be favorably received. In the second place, the producer of kitsch must be aware of his public's diversity of interests and desires. This accounts for the basic eclecticism of kitsch as a style. What gives kitsch some kind of stylistic unity in the long run is probably the compatibility of its heterogeneous elements with a certain notion of "homeness." Kitsch is very often the kind of
"art" that the average consumer might desire to own and display in his home. Even when displayed elsewhere—waiting rooms, restaurants, etc.—kitsch is meant to suggest some sort of "artistic" intimacy, an atmosphere saturated with "beauty," that kind of beauty one would wish to see one's daily life surrounded with.

The characteristics of eclecticism and "hominess" that define kitsch are perceptively described in an article by the English art critic, Roger Fry, first published in 1912 and then collected in his volume Vision and Design (1920). Fry does not use the term "kitsch," but the variety of bad taste he is dealing with quite obviously belongs to the category of kitsch. The passage deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

I take pains to write the succeeding paragraphs in a railway refreshment-room, where I am actually looking at those terribly familiar but fortunately fleeting images which such places afford. And one must remember that public places of this kind merely reflect the average citizen's soul, as expressed in his home.

The space my eye travels over is a small one, but I am appalled at the amount of "art" that it harbours. The window towards which I look is filled in its lower part by stained glass; within a highly elaborate border, designed by someone who knew the conventions of thirteenth-century glass, is a pattern of yellow and purple vine leaves with bunches of grapes, and flitting about among these many small birds. In front is a lace curtain with patterns taken from at least four centuries and as many countries. On the walls, up to a height of four feet, is a covering of lincrusta walton stamped with a complicated pattern in two colours, with sham silver medallions. Above that a moulding half an inch wide, and yet creeping throughout its whole with a degenerate descendant of a Graeco-Roman carved guilloche pattern; this has evidently been cut out of the wood by machine or stamped out of some composition—its nature is so perfectly concealed that it is hard to say which. Above this is a paper-wall in which an effect of eighteenth-century satin brocade is imitated by shaded staining of the paper. Each of the little refreshment-tables has two cloths, one arranged symmetrically with the table, the other a highly ornate printed cotton arranged "artistically" in a diagonal position. In the centre of each table is a large pot in which every beautiful quality in the material and making of pots has been carefully obliterated by methods each of which implies profound scientific knowledge and great inventive talent. Within each pot is a plant with large dark-green leaves, apparently made of india-rubber. This painful catalogue makes up only a small part of the inventory of the "art" of the restaurant. If I were to go on to tell of the legs of the tables, of the electric-light fittings, of the chairs into the wooden seats of which some tremendous mechanical force has deeply impressed a large distorted anthemion—if I were to tell of all these things, my reader and I might both begin to realize with painful acuteness something of the horrible toil involved in all this display. Display is indeed the end and explanation of it all. Not one of these things has been made because the maker enjoyed the making; not one has been bought because its contemplation would give one any pleasure; they are there because their absence would be resented by the average man who regards a large amount of futile display as in some way inseparable from the conditions of that well-to-do life to which he belongs or aspires to belong. If everything were merely clean and serviceable he would proclaim the place bare and uncomfortable.

Fry's catalogue of restaurant art suggests quite aptly what we may term the "stylistic overdetermination" of kitsch. The early twentieth-century refreshment room he describes is literally crammed with objects that fake up stylistic conventions of the most widely different periods, countries, and cultures. The eclecticism of kitsch is often quite clearly a form of aesthetic overkill. Is this dizzying eclecticism simply a matter of "futile display" as Fry believes? And is it true that kitsch "can give no one pleasure"?

The point has been made before that even if kitsch is linked to status-seeking it also has the function—which is psychologically more important—of providing an illusionary escape from the banality and meaninglessness of contemporary day-to-day life. In whatever forms or combinations, kitsch is relaxing and pleasing. The wish-fulfilling element contained in this pleasure stresses its reactive origin, the fear of emptiness that kitsch attempts to assuage. Seen from this viewpoint kitsch is a response to the widespread modern sense of spiritual vacuum: it fills the empty time of leisure
with “fun” or “excitement” and it “hallucinates”—if we are allowed to use this verb transitively—empty spaces with an infinitely variegated assortment of “beautiful” appearances.

The stylistic eclecticism of kitsch has another remarkable feature, namely, that of suggesting commercial availability. A kitsch object is attractive not only because it is nice-looking but also because it—or any similar object—can be obtained by anyone willing to buy it. Even the most laborious and expensive varieties of kitsch contain a built-in self-advertisement, an invitation to possession and ready enjoyment. The aesthetic charm of kitsch is transparently commercial.

This feature accounts for the curious semiotic ambiguity of most kitsch objects. Such objects are intended to look both genuine and skillfully fake. The role of this paradoxical fakiness is not too difficult to elucidate. On the one hand, the visible signs of fakiness are devised to dispel the impression of uniqueness or rarity that a perfect fake should create. To be rare would contradict the sense of the commercial availability of kitsch. On the other hand, such a fakiness calls the viewer’s attention to certain agreeable qualities of proficiency, imitative skill, versatility and cuteness.

Kitsch’s semiotic ambiguity has received little consideration from the analysts of bad taste. Hence, certain widespread errors, such as Gillo Dorfles’s views on the kitsch nature of art reproductions. Dorfles contends: “We must regard all reproductions of unique works which were conceived as unrepeatable as equivalent of real forgeries.” But the aesthetic falsehood of kitsch should not be confused with that of a forgery. A forgery is meant to be taken for an original. While a forgery illegally exploits the elitist taste for rarity, a kitsch object insists on its antielitist availability. The deceptive character of kitsch does not lie in whatever it may have in common with actual forgery but in its claim to supply its consumers with essentially the same kinds and qualities of beauty as those embodied in unique or rare and inaccessible originals. Kitsch pretends that each one of its potentially innumerable fakes, and fakes of fakes, contains something of the objective aesthetic value of the styles, conventions, and works that it openly counterfeits. Kitsch offers instant beauty, maintaining that there is no substantive difference between itself and original, eternal beauty.

Stylistically, kitsch can also be defined in terms of predictability. Kitsch is, as Harold Rosenberg puts it: “a) art that has established rules; b) art that has a predictable audience, predictable effects, predictable rewards.” But literary and artistic conventions change rapidly, and yesterday’s successful banality can lose both its appeal and meaning in the eyes of the large audience for which it was devised. This makes for the paradox that older forms of kitsch (as expressions of bad taste) may still be enjoyed, but only by the sophisticated: what was originally meant to be “popular” becomes the amusement of the few. Old kitsch may stimulate the ironical consciousness of the refined or of those who pretend to be refined. This is possibly an explanation of the attempt to redeem some of the outrageously affected and artificial kitsch of la belle époque in what is called “camp” in today’s America.

Concerning literature, we can mention the interest in older forms of bad writing. Thus, for instance, in his already mentioned essay on “Kitsch,” Gilbert Highet professes a high admiration (evidently ironical) for the poetic gems of the nineteenth-century Scottish poet, William McGonagall, whom he considers, quoting from the Times Literary Supplement, “the only truly memorable bad poet in our language.” Along the same lines is the Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee anthology, The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse (1930), which limits itself, however, to what its compilers call “good Bad Verse.” A more recent example of the same kind of interest is Walther Killy’s essay on literary kitsch, supplemented with numerous examples anthologized according to thematic criteria. It is clear that such books are not meant for mass consumption but for the intellectual amusement of a literary elite.

If we think of kitsch as the “style” of bad taste, we arrive at another paradox, much deeper and more puzzling than the one just pointed out, namely, the earlier mentioned possibility of consciously using bad taste (i.e., kitsch) in order to subvert the conven-
tions of a “good taste” that eventually leads to the sclerosis of academicism. Baudelaire, who is rightfully regarded as a precursor of aesthetic avant-gardism, had such a possibility in mind when he wrote in *Fusées* about the intoxicating effect of bad taste, derived from “the aristocratic pleasure of displeasing.” Avant-garde movements have often indulged in such kinds of pleasure, satisfying their antiartistic urge by outrageously using kitsch mannerisms both in literature and the arts. Even if we accept Clement Greenberg’s view that avant-garde is radically opposed to kitsch, we have to realize that these two extremes are strongly attracted by one another, and what separates them is sometimes much less striking than what unites them. This is so for two reasons, which have been indicated before in other contexts: (1) the avant-garde is interested in kitsch for aesthetically subversive and ironical purposes, and (2) kitsch may use avant-garde procedures (which are easily transformed into stereotypes) for its aesthetically conformist purposes. The latter situation is another illustration of the old story of the “system” (read kitsch) co-opting its challengers (the avant-garde). The relationship between kitsch and the avant-garde may in a sense be taken as a caricature of the central principle of modernity: Octavio Paz’s “tradition against itself.” A good example in point is Marcel Duchamp’s treatment of Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, the masterpiece that has probably been the most overworked by kitsch. Everybody knows that some time in 1919, while in New York, Duchamp took a reproduction of the Mona Lisa and, after drawing on moustaches and goatee, entitled it enigmatically “L.H.O.O.Q.” (which spelled out loud in French gives the obscenity: “Elle a chaud au cul”). “L.H.O.O.Q.” is an example of what Duchamp used to call a “ready-made assisted,” as distinct from a straight “ready-made” like the famous urinal that he entered in a 1917 New York art exhibition under the poetic title *Fountain*. Many critics see the artist’s aggressive treatment of the Renaissance masterpiece as a humorous case of avant-garde iconoclasm. What Duchamp had in mind, however, was probably different. The Gioconda he abused was not the masterpiece but a reproduction, an instance of the modern falsification of tradition. Duchamp would have probably agreed with Adorno’s view (expressed in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* and elsewhere) that, in the modern world, tradition has become false, and that there is virtually no tradition that has not been falsified. So Duchamp insulted merely a kitsch object, meant to satisfy a typical form of cultural *Bovarysme*—one of those countless images of the Mona Lisa with which we have been flooded for decades. And I would add that it is not at all certain whether in proceeding as he did, the artist was attacking da Vinci’s original painting or whether, on the contrary, he did not try secretly, as I personally believe, to vindicate it. One thing is clear, however, namely that Duchamp resorted to kitsch not only to reject certain crass aesthetic misconceptions and jaded conventions but also to advocate the avant-garde drive toward the abandonment of an aesthetics based on *appearances*, which, in our time, are so easily falsified. But in spite of its efforts, the avant-garde was unable to go beyond appearances and, ironically, certain more advanced representatives of kitsch were not long in realizing that they could profitably use the successful unconventionalities of older avant-garde movements. Duchamp himself was largely kitschified by Andy Warhol.

**KITSCH AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIALIZATION**

A substantial factor in the “kitschification” of culture—almost all those who have written on the subject agree—is mass diffusion of art through the diverse media: radio, TV, large-scale reproduction, records, cheap magazines and paperbacks sold in supermarkets, etc. This can be so even when the initial elements used (masterpieces of
painting or of sculpture, novels turned into film-scripts) are de­
cidedly not kitsch.

It is evident that, psychologically, the mass media induce a state
of passiveness in the typical onlooker: one simply turns on the TV
and is flooded with an indefinite number of technically "predigested"
images (which do not require any effort to understand). And, as we
shall see, passiveness, combined with superficiality, are important
prerequisites of that state of mind that fosters kitsch.

Dorfles sums up the widespread argument that the mass media
are almost exclusively designed for a mindless, hedonistic use of
spare time: "All trace of a 'rite' in the handing out of cultural and
aesthetic nourishment by the mass media... has been lost, and this
lack of the ritual element has brought about an indifference in the
onlooker when he is faced with the different kinds of transmissions
and manifestations which are forced upon him."37

The media, Macdonald points out, contribute directly to the
advent of a perfectly "homogenized culture," as processed and even
as "homogenized milk." This homogenization is reflected in the
phenomenon that distinctions of age and of intellectual and social
status tend to become irrelevant. A largely unified audience has
emerged, whose tastes and emotional needs are skillfully manipu-
lated by the technicians of mass culture. This situation has been
aptly described by Macdonald as a "merging of the child and
grown-up audience," meaning: "(1) infantile regression of the latter,
who, unable to cope with the strains and complexities of modern
life, escape via kitsch (which, in turn, confirms and enhances their
infantilism); (2) 'over-stimulation' of the former, who grow up too
fast."38 Let me add that the type of artistic experience provided by
the media becomes eventually a norm for all artistic experience in
the eyes of the conditioned consumer of our time. Literature is also
supposed to fit into that pattern, so that gifted writers, in order not
to lose their readers, resort to pop techniques and try to become
best-selling authors.

From an antielitist point of view this is a happy thing. A critic
like Leslie Fiedler, who has recently become impatient "with all
distinctions of kind created on the analogy of class-structured soci-
ety," is candidly proud of his growing interest in "the kind of books
no one has ever congratulated himself on being able to read: books
which join together all possible audiences, children and adults,
women and men, the sophisticated and the naive.... I am con-
vinced that criticism at the moment can no longer condescend to
popular literature...."39

To consider the easygoing and overly sentimental world of pop
culture free from any association with the class-structured society
is naive, and neither changes the predominantly kitsch nature of pop
nor reduces the heavy dependence of pop on the contemporary
consumer civilization with its culture industry. This specialized in-
dustry not only adapts itself to fluctuating demands but is able to
predict and to some extent create new fads: from its point of view,
deviance, nonconformism, and radicalism can be readily trans-
formed into marketable items of consumption. The life style of the
counterculture has become big business, from records and jeans to
psychedelic posters.

The tendency toward massification affects all the arts, but more
directly the visual arts. All mechanical reproduction of paintings and
sculptures, in quantities limited only by market demand, definitely
makes for kitsch. I will not discuss here the degree to which
uniqueness accounts for the aesthetic value of a painting or sculp-
ture. Nor will I argue about the imperfect quality of reproductions;
one day, we may assume, perfection or near-perfection will be
achieved. But even then the problem of the legitimacy of large-scale
reproduction will still remain. Kitsch is not, however, the im-
mediate and automatic result of the process of reproduction.

To determine whether an object is kitsch always involves con-
siderations of purpose and context. In theory, there should be no-
ting kitschy about the use of a reproduction or slide even of the Mona
Lisa, in a study of art history. But the same image reproduced on a
plate, a table cloth, a towel, or an eyeglass case will be unmistakable
kitsch. A number of excellent reproductions of the same painting
put beside each other in a shop window will have a kitsch effect
because they suggest availability in commercial quantities. The mere consciousness of the industrial multiplication of an art object for purely commercial reasons can kitschify its image.

If we acknowledge that kitsch is the "normal" art of our time, we have to recognize that it is the obligatory starting point of any aesthetic experience. Consider the paradise of kitsch in which most modern children are immersed. In the Disneyland of childhood, aesthetic sensitivity is almost entirely subsumed under the comprehensive category of the cute. The infantile taste for cute things by itself has nothing to do with kitsch, because the general "law of aesthetic inadequacy" obviously does not apply to it. However, kitsch readily exploits this taste, and not only in children but also in numerous adults whose understanding of art has not gone too far beyond the level of childhood. If kitsch thrives on aesthetic infantilism, it is only fair to say that it also offers pedagogical possibilities, including the important realization that there is a difference between kitsch or pseudoart and art. If kitsch thrives on aesthetic infantilism, it is only fair to say that it also offers pedagogical possibilities, including the important realization that there is a difference between kitsch or pseudoart and art. Why then should we not accept the paradox proposed by Abraham Moles, namely, that the simplest and most natural way toward "good taste" passes through bad taste? Moles writes specifically:

The pedagogical function of kitsch has been generally neglected because of the innumerable bad connotations of the term and also because of the instinctive tendency of the writers on this subject to overrate their own aesthetic judgment. In a bourgeois society, and generally in a meritocratic one, the passage through kitsch is the normal passage in order to reach the genuine... Kitsch is pleasurable to the members of mass society, and through pleasure, it allows them to attain the level of higher exigencies and to pass from sentimentality to sensation. The relationship between art and kitsch is therefore particularly ambiguous... Kitsch is essentially an aesthetic system of mass communication.

Such a measured approach is somewhat reassuring, especially if we consider it in the context of the dark, Cassandra-like predictions of most students of kitsch.

As I have pointed out earlier, the phenomenon of kitsch cannot be adequately understood if the role of the consumer of fake art is disregarded. This requires us to discuss the intricate problem of what has been called the "kitsch-man." We note that authors with widely different backgrounds like Hermann Broch, Ludwig Giesz (a representative of phenomenology), Gillo Dorfles (an aesthetcian and art historian), Richard Egenter (a Roman Catholic theologian), and others, have devoted much attention to the concept of the "kitsch-man." A kitsch-man, to put it bluntly, is one who tends to experience as kitsch even nonkitsch works or situations, one who involuntarily makes a parody of aesthetic response. In the tourist's role, for instance, the kitsch man will "kitschify" not only cultural monuments but also landscapes, and especially great sights, such as the Grand Canyon, which are advertised as wonders or freaks of nature. What characterizes the kitsch-man is his inadequately hedonistic idea of what is artistic or beautiful. For reasons that can be analyzed in historical, sociological, and cultural terms, the kitsch-man wants to fill his spare time with maximum excitement (derived from, among other things, "high culture") in exchange for minimum effort. For him the ideal is effortless enjoyment.

The notion of a kitsch-man becomes clear if we think of him not only in aesthetic but also in ethical terms. This combined approach, whatever its theoretical difficulties, is almost unavoidable because the aesthetic attitudes of the kitsch-man—and of the kitsch-artist as well—imply a basic moral ineptitude. Hermann Broch makes a valid point: "The kitsch system requires its followers to 'work beautifully,' while the art system issues the moral order: 'Work well!' Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art." This element of evil can be identified in the fundamental characteristic of kitsch, that of lying (for the equation of kitsch = "aesthetic
lie” see Umberto Eco’s remarkable essay “La struttura del cattivo gusto”).

Seen as a lie, a kitsch work implies a close relationship and even a collaboration of sorts between the kitsch-artist and the kitsch-man. The latter wants to be “beautifully” lied to and the former is willing to play the game in exchange for financial gain. The responsibility is clearly shared by both. In this game of illusions and spurious impressions, the liar may end up believing that what he says is the truth. Quite often, the kitsch-artist may have no conscious intention of producing kitsch, although he should realize he is doing so, since he disregards the inner validity of his work (Broch’s ethical injunction: “Work well!”) and seeks only to reach a big consumer market.

The temptation to believe the aesthetic lies of kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or largely atrophied critical sense. Mental passivity and spiritual laziness characterize the amazingly undemanding lover of kitsch. Theologically, then, Richard Egenter may be right when he identifies kitsch as the sin of “sloth.” For the receiver of the artistic message, Egenter thinks, there is almost always an opening for sloth and mere pleasure seeking, which becomes dishonest when the pretext of an aesthetic response is maintained. . . . For from both artist and beholder, art. . . demands effort and seriousness; when this is not made, artistic activity becomes a flight from reality. It can become not only a bogus reflection of reality but an opening for the devil. Satan can present himself as an angel of light more strikingly, and much more easily, in an artistic symbol than in a scientific concept.

Let us observe, however, that earnest effort and seriousness by themselves are not guarantees against kitsch (the opposite is frequently true), and waggishness, irony, and self-irony can often have a salutary value. Historically speaking, the modernist reaction against romanticism has more than once taken the extreme form of levity and unseriousness, recasting in a new mold the conception of art as play. Some fine modernist poetry (e. e. cummings is a suggestive example) has resulted precisely from such a stance. At all events, seriousness and effort cannot offer a key to the problem. The fact is that, as always, genuine art does not lend itself to comfortable generalizations.

To speak of kitsch and the devil does not necessarily imply a specialized theological approach. The view that the devil is mainly a symbolic embodiment of mediocrity and even stupidity, widespread in Russian literature since Gogol (and reinforced by writers with such widely different world views as Dostoevsky, Andreev, or Sologub) is suggestively summarized in Nabokov’s theory of poshlust.

As I have pointed out earlier in this chapter, poshlust as conceived by Nabokov is a nearly perfect synonym for kitsch. With this terminological equivalence in mind, we can profitably meditate on the following passage in which Nabokov brings together Chichikov, the main character of Gogol’s Dead Souls, the Devil, and poshlust. Nabokov writes:

Chichikov himself is merely the ill-paid representative of the Devil, a traveling salesman from Hades, “our Mr. Chichikov” as the Satan and Co. firm may be imagined calling their easy-going, healthy-looking but inwardly shivering and rotting agent. The poshlust which Chichikov personifies is one of the main attributes of the Devil, in whose existence, let it be added, Gogol believed far more seriously than in that of God. The chink in Chichikov’s armor, that rusty chink emitting a faint but dreadful smell (a punctured can of conserved lobster tampered with and forgotten by some meddling fool in the pantry) is the organic aperture in the devil’s armor. It is the essential stupidity of poshlust. (pp. 73-74)

Nabokov’s olfactory parenthesis provides us with one of the closest approximations of what kitsch really smells like—really or ideally, these opposites dialectically coincide here. Rotten conserved lobster is indeed an apt suggestion of the bad odor of bad taste.

In conclusion, there is unfortunately no single definition of kitsch that is entirely satisfactory. However, we can come close to an understanding of the phenomenon by combining (1) the historico-sociological approach, in which kitsch, as we use it, is typically
modern and as such closely linked to cultural industrialization, commercialism, and increasing leisure in society, and (2) the aesthetic-moral approach, in which kitsch is false art, the production on a smaller or larger scale of various forms of "aesthetic lies." A crowd-pleasing art, often devised for mass consumption, kitsch is meant to offer instant satisfaction of the most superficial aesthetic needs or whims of a wide public. Basically, the world of kitsch is a world of aesthetic make-believe and self-deception. As earlier indicated, the dangers of kitsch should not be exaggerated. Offering "duplicates" of almost every known art form, kitsch suggests (sometimes with more accuracy than we would like to believe) the way toward the originals. After all, in today's world no one is safe from kitsch, which appears as a necessary step on the path toward an ever elusive goal of fully authentic aesthetic experience. After seeing many reproduced or fake Rembrandts, a viewer may ultimately be receptive to the experience of coming upon the real painting of a Dutch master. He may finally become aware that art, even when exploited, misunderstood, and misused, does not lose its value and aesthetic truth. In an unexpected manner, this failure of kitsch illustrates reassuringly the old comic motifs of the deceiver who is deceived and the fool who realizes his foolishness and becomes wise.
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4. Ibid., pp. 60–61.
10. Ibid., p. 48.
14. This distinction was worked out in Germany, in the late 1940s, and elaborated upon by, among others, H. E. Holthusen in “Uber den sauren Kitsch,” in his Ja und Nein (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1954), pp. 240–48.
16. Ibid., p. 72.
18. Ibid., p. 73.
22. Adorno, “On Popular Music,” Studies in Philosophy and Social Science 9 (1941): 38. Similar ideas are developed by Horkheimer in the essay “Art and Mass Culture,” originally published in the same issue of Studies. Horkheimer insists on the specifically false content of popular art: “The opposition of individual and society, and of private and social existence, which gave seriousness to the pastime of art, has become obsolete. The so-called entertainments, which have taken over the heritage of art, are
today nothing but popular tonics, like swimming or football. Popularity no longer has anything to do with the specific content or the truth of artistic productions. In the democratic countries, the final decision no longer rests with the educated but with the amusement industry. . . . For the totalitarian countries, the final decision rests with the managers of direct and indirect propaganda, which by its nature is indifferent to truth. Competition of artists in the free market, a competition in which success was determined by the educated, has become a race for the favor of the powers-that-be . . . ." Quoted from M. Horkheimer, Critical Theory, trans. M. J. O'Connell (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 289-90.


27. Moles, pp. 29-36.

28. Alvin Toffler, The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964), pp. 163 ff. The author, whose approach may be summarized in the observation that "what is good for General Motors may conceivably be good for art" (p. 108), establishes a direct relationship between cultural consumption, the quality of cultural products consumed, and affluence. Taken in quantitative terms alone, cultural consumption in the United States is an index not only of wealth but also, according to the author, of cultural progress (the author accepts the notion of a "cultural explosion"). From his rather crude economic perspective, Toffler rejects the elitist view that standards of taste have steadily deteriorated with the rise of mass culture, and argues that "High Culture" has never been more prosperous than in our time. Of course, he is unaware that High Culture can be exploited by kitsch exactly as popular culture is, and that both are nowadays regulated to a large extent by the laws of mass production and mass diffusion.


31. Dorfles, p. 31.

32. Rosenberg, p. 266.

33. The Stuffed Owl (London: Dent, 1930) is mainly concerned with such examples of bad poetry as can be found in eminent poets. The authors explain in the preface: "There is bad Bad Verse and good Bad Verse. . . . Good Bad Verse is grammatical, it is constructed according to the Rubrics, its rhythms, rhymes, and meters are impeccable. . . . Good Bad Verse has an eerie, supernatural beauty comparable in its accidents with the beauty of Good Verse. . . . Good Bad Verse . . . is devilish pleasing" (pp. VIII-X). Although the authors do not use the term kitsch, what they provide the reader with is distinguished poetic kitsch, defined in the first place by bathos and by "that windy splurgmg and bombinating which makes Victor Hugo's minor rhetoric so comic and terrible" (XIII). Other characteristics of "good Bad Verse" are "all those things connoted by poverty of imagination, sentimentality, banality, the prosaic, the style pompier and what Mr. Polly called 'rockcockyo'; anaemia, obstipation, or constipation of the poetic faculty; inability to hold the key of inspiration . . . ." (XIII). As an example of what the authors consider "good Bad Verse"—a beautiful instance of romantic kitsch—we may quote Wordsworth's sonnet, which lends its title to the whole anthology:

The Stuffed Owl

(This is taken from the account given by Miss Jewsbury of the pleasure she derived, when long confined to bed by sickness, from the inanimate object on which this sonnet turns.—W. W.)

While Anna's peers and early playmates tread,
In freedom, mountain-turf and river's marge;
Or float with music in the festal barge;
Rein the proud steed, or through the dance are led;
Her doom it is to press a weary bed—
Till oft her guardian Angel, to some charge
More urgent called, will stretch his wings at large,
And friends too rarely prop the languid head.
Yet, helped by Genius—untired Comforter,
The presence even of a stuffed Owl for her
Can cheat the time; sending her fancy out
To ivied castles and to moonlight skies;
Though he can neither stir a plume, nor shout;
Nor veil, with restless film, his staring eyes.


35. For a more detailed discussion of the deliberate use of kitsch by the avant-garde, see the "Conclusion" of Dorfles' Kitsch, pp. 291 ff.; see also


38. Macdonald, p. 66.


40. Moles, p. 74.

41. Dorfles, p. 63.


43. Richard Egenter, The Desecration of Christ, Engl. version of Kitsch und Christenleben (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1967), p. 75. The theme of the “diabolical character” of religious kitsch is not new. Speaking on behalf of Roman Catholic orthodoxy and attributing the main cause of the modern decadence of religious art to the movement of the Reformation, Alexandre Cingria wrote in his book La Decadence de l’art sacré (Lausanne: Les Cahiers Vaudois, 1917): “Venons-en à un autre moyen d’action du diable: je veux parler du mensonge. Il existe un certain art vraiment diabolique qui sangé la beauté. Cet art attire les suffrages de presque tout le public, par un certain joli, des apparences poétiques, un poli matériel qui cache aux yeux peu sensibles, peu exercés, peu attentifs, paresseux, une absence complète de vie, d’intelligence et de beauté” (p. 45). Although he does not use the term kitsch, Cingria is the author of probably the first book-length study on the subject. His notion of “decadence” is perfectly synonymous with kitsch, and the reasons for the decay of religious art as he sees them (moral reasons, such as boredom, laziness, lying, and historical reasons, such as the Reformation, the French Revolution and the rise of secularism, romanticism, and industrialism) lead to the inescapable conclusion that what he calls “decadence” is a specifically modern phenomenon. The relationship between modernity and kitsch is confirmed once again. Cingria’s book was reprinted in 1990 with a preface by Paul Claudel (Paris: L’Art Catholique).

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4. Jarrell’s review of Lord Weary’s Castle by Lowell, originally published in 1946, was reprinted in Randall Jarrell, Poetry and the Age (New York: Knopf, 1953). The quotation is from p. 216. In his Postmodern American Poetry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), Jerome Mazzaro stresses that Jarrell was the first user “of the term postmodern in regard to American poetry” and notes that two years later, in 1948, “John Berryman used the same term . . . citing Jarrell as its source” (p. viii).

5. Somervell’s abridgement of vols. 1–6 of Arnold Toynbee’s A Study of History was published in 1946 by Oxford University Press. I have used the Dell edition (New York: Dell, 1965). The “Post-Modern Age” appears to be the fourth major period of Western history, after Western I (‘Dark Ages’), Western II (‘Middle Ages’), and Western III (‘Modern’), 1475–1875 (p. 57).

6. Charles Olson, Additional Prose, ed. George F. Butterick (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1974), p. 40. The whole passage reads: “I am an archaeologist of morning. And the writing acts which I find bear upon the present job are (I) from Homer back, not forward; and (II) from Melville on, particularly himself, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, and Lawrence. These are the modern men who projected what we are and what we are in, who broke the spell. They put the men forward into the post-modern, the post-humanist, the post-historic, the going live present, the ‘Beautiful Thing.’”

7. For a more extensive list of the “post” vocabulary, drawn from one representative critic, Leslie Fiedler, see p. 137 in the text.

8. For a critical presentation of the “new gnosticism” and other characteristic currents of thought of the 1960s, see Ihab Hassan, Paraecriti­cisms: Seven Meditations of the Times (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).