Kitsch
The world of bad taste
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Certain writers claim that the word derives from the English 'sketch', while others attribute it to the German verb *etwas verkitschen* ('knock off cheaply'). Giesz attributes it to *kitschen*, meaning *den Strassen­schlamm zusammenscharren*, literally 'to collect rubbish from the street' which in effect is the interpretation closest to the concept of 'artistic rubbish' and might be linked to the term 'junk art'. This latter term has been used by English and American writers for a certain type of art which makes use of refuse taken bodily from the rubbish dump. The word *Kitschmensch*, meaning 'kitsch-man', is used by Giesz in his book and should I think be taken into the English language.
The mere fact of being able to talk of a kitsch-myth (as well as of a kitsch element in religion, in patriotism, in the family and in death, as we shall see in later chapters) proves once more that kitsch exploits irrational, fantastic and even sub- or pre-conscious elements.

The revaluation of the mythical element in the study of symbolism (as carried out by Ernst Cassirer along the lines which lead from Vico to Schelling and to the new mythologists of our own days: Kerény, Durand, la Langer etc.) has proved the fundamental significance which should still be attributed to the irrational aspect of our thoughts and our faculties for learning. It is therefore easy to understand that it is this irrational aspect, rather than the rational one, which should exploit kitsch to trap the unwary.

If a mytho-symbolic component is always present in every kind of art, it does not necessarily follow that each work of art should be regarded as mystified or mystifying, as some people tend to believe; it is more realistic to admit that in the kind of pseudo-art which we call kitsch, the mythifying aspect appears more obviously and more frequently.

With your permission I shall begin with a warning: do not expect any rigid and neat definitions. Philosophizing is always a game of pretense played with the clouds, and aesthetic philosophy follows this rule just as much. So if I say now and again that that cloud up there looks like a camel, please be as polite as Polonius was and bear with me. Otherwise I am afraid that at the end of this lecture you will find that too many questions have been left open, to which I could only reply in a study of kitsch in three volumes (which I would rather not write anyway).

In addition, I shall not talk strictly about art, but about a fixed form of behaviour with regard to life. Kitsch could not, in fact, either emerge or prosper without the existence of kitsch-man, the lover of kitsch; as a producer of art he produces kitsch and as a consumer of art is prepared to acquire it and pay quite handsomely for it.

In a broad sense art always reflects the image of contemporary man, and if kitsch represents falsehood (it is often so defined, and rightly so), this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it, on the person who uses this highly considerate mirror so as to be able to recognize himself in the counterfeit image it throws back of him and to confess his own lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere). This is the phenomenon with which we shall concern ourselves.

When dealing with phenomena which have to do with the history of the mind it is always necessary to reconstruct the environment in which they arose and on which they have an influence; first of all architecture, which represents a fairly characteristic expression of each historical period; when we think of the Asian civilizations, of Egypt, of the Gothic period, the Renaissance and the Baroque,
architectonic images of these civilizations and historical periods are the first things which spring to mind. But what architectonic image comes to mind when we think of the Romanticism of the nineteenth century?

None. Of course much of European Romanticism was contained within a framework of facades in the neo-classical-Biedermeier style (and American Romanticism in the colonial style); but only because the buildings of the previous generation were still standing. Romanticism itself did not in fact produce a single architect capable of raising his style to the level of any of the styles of neo-classicism: the Berlin Schinkel style for example. Its first architectonic expression was horrible: whitewashed or bare-brick Gothic with battlemented trimmings, which held the field from the 1820s to the 1840s and was used for stations and public buildings as well as for private villas and working-class districts; after this this type of kitsch (for it really was kitsch) had to give way to the even more violent neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque styles. Not to mention the fact that the extremely rapid industrialization and development of large cities did not give architecture enough time to adjust itself to its new tasks, and it was therefore forced to embark on a desperate and groping search. No, Schinkel had, for example, provided solutions for shops and public buildings which were perfectly adequate for their functional requirements, and which were indeed quite modern. Why then, instead of welcoming these proposals, were stations and lower-class dwellings built in Gothick kitsch? The answer is simple. Because kitsch, not Schinkel, corresponded to the spirit of the times and because the functionalism of Schinkel did not seem beautiful enough when taste was orientated towards kitsch. What interested people was beauty, the fine effect, decoration.

Great Romantic art was totally inadequate in this setting, thanks to this kitsch which was not yet the ambiance of Beethoven, Schubert, Byron, Shelley, Keats and Novalis, but already that of Stendhal, Delacroix, Turner, Berlioz, Chopin, Eichendorff, Tieck and Brentano. How can one combine this authenticity and high degree of genuine and brilliant expressive force (and so much inner expression in the case of German lyricism) with so much decorative emphasis? And why has this decorative cult become so insipid, and therefore kitsch, while the milder décorativeness of the Baroque (every age has its passion for decoration) offered an adequate framework even for someone like Bach, not to mention Handel and Mozart, who tended to like effect? Architectural kitsch certainly constitutes a completely adequate framework for a considerable part of the artistic production of the time. Walter Scott, for example, revealed an undeniable and quite fatal affinity with the neo-Gothic style of the time, and one cannot imagine an environment better suited to Paul de Kock, Balzac's esteemed contemporary. The environment, therefore, appears inadequate only for the greatest works of genius and there was an abundance of such work at this time); it is quite adequate for everything which did not attain an absolute level of value, such as the musical dramas of Weber (although they do nonetheless deserve respect). A clear line of demarcation seems to run straight across the artistic production of the age, dividing it into two basic and radically different groups, without any intermediary gradations: on the one
hand we have work which reveals cosmic aspirations, and, on the other, kitsch. Which group is representative of the age? Was it hallmarked by kitsch (which would tend to make us consider the great Romantic work of art as something surpassing it), or should one say conversely that Romanticism was responsible for kitsch?

Many things, chiefly the lack of average values, testify in favour of a prevalence of kitsch. The stylistic tone of an age is generally determined solely by the work of genius, but it draws its substance from the average work. The history of art is full of such minor works. Paintings by the Gothic and Renaissance schools belong to this category; the same could be said, without exception, of the compositions of all the many organists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, who, even if they were not all Bachs, accomplished extremely valuable work. Also in the architectonic field, the last of the master-builders, before the advent of Romanticism was absolute master of his trade. Romanticism, on the other hand, was incapable of producing average values. Every slip from the lofty level of genius was immediately transformed into a disastrous fall from the cosmic heights to kitsch. Take Berlioz, for example, whose decorative and consciously effective style (a very French feature) is only just bearable: not only does Berlioz use associations which are sensational and foreign to music, but he even quite shamelessly sets his Faust to the rhythm of a spiritedly orchestrated Racocy march. Even introverted German Romanticism always moves along a razor's edge, continually running the risk of falling into kitsch; this can happen even in a fine piece of poetry, not through deliberate irony (as in Heine) but more simply because of the poet's inability to maintain the cosmic tension. To many of you it may seem blasphemous for me to use Germany's best-loved Romantic poet to illustrate my argument, but I have done so in order to show how swift and headlong the fall can be. Let us look at Eichendorff's Abendlandschaft (Evening Landscape). The first six lines:

Der Hirt bläst seine Weise,  
Von fern ein Schuss noch fällt,  
Die Wälder rauschen leise  
Und Ströme tief im Feld.  
Nur hinter jenem Hügel  
Noch spielt der Abendschein.¹

¹The shepherd plays his tune, a last shot disc far off, the woods rustle softly and streams flow deep in the fields. The last glow of evening still plays behind that lone hill.

are certainly among the most beautiful German lyric poetry ever written in their calm descriptive precision. These perfect lines are then followed by a couplet which is no more than an insipid and sentimental imitation of popular poetry:

Oh hätt ich, hätt ich Flügel,  
Zu fliegen da hinein.²

Only in a very few of his poems, Reisesehenucht for example, or the Greisenlied, does Eichendorff succeed in sustaining the cosmic tension from beginning to end; the others seem to be fated to be shipwrecked on the reef of sentimentality contained in the last lines and to drift ashore towards the beaches of kitsch. This justifies what I have said about the lack of average values in Romanticism, and the reader himself, once he has managed to leave behind his youthful impressions, will find further proof of this in Chamisso's Frauenliebe or Mateo Falcone. Conversely, kitsch definitely does contain average values. Kitsch can be good, bad or even original, and while I am going to blaspheme once again by saying that Wagner is one of the highest peaks never touched by kitsch, I would not hesitate to add that even Tchaikovsky failed to escape it.

It seems, then, that there is every justification for considering the nineteenth century as the century of kitsch instead of the century of Romanticism? But if this verdict is fair, why is it so? The Marxist would say that the bourgeoisie degraded art with imitation goods, which is why the full flowering of industrial capitalism could not help but provoke the flowering of kitsch as well (the fact that the Marxist living in Russia today is confronted by a powerful and post-humous second crop tends to be overlooked by him because of his love of theory). But it is better to set aside what is happening in Russia and to concentrate on the facts in the West; if we anticipate the outcome of this study, we can say that however deep the mark left by kitsch on the nineteenth century, it in fact derives pre-dominantly from the spiritual attitude we define as Romanticism.

The middle class emerged in the nineteenth century as a class destined to win power in the fairly near future. Driven by its urge for power, it had, on the one hand, to assimilate the traditional patrimony of the courtly-feudal class, changing it as it went along, and, on the other, to reaffirm its own original tradition, which was a revolutionary tempo.
The courtly tradition was predominantly an aesthetic one: its ethical conception was confined to set mystical portrayals of a God-willed hierarchy, to which, quite independently of any enlightened rational scepticism, men had to adjust with an attitude which was at once amused and stoical; in return, they were entitled to make their lives a work of art and to procure for themselves, by means of unbridled debauchery of the senses and of the mind, all the pleasures possible, including those of art. In other words—and this is the privilege of any ruling class—they had the right to embellish their lives with exuberant decorative splendour, which would be all the more exuberant because it was subject to the formal influence of Baroque. The bourgeois tradition, on the other hand, had a fundamentally ethical stamp. In Protestant countries this was influenced exclusively by the ascetic Puritan-Calvinist ideal, while in Catholic countries the parallel revolutionary movement (which was also a protest against the libertinage of the ancien régime) had made virtue into a universal guiding principle. In both Catholic and Protestant countries man was thus spurred on to put his great spirit of sacrifice to the test—sometimes for love of the State, sometimes for love of God. In both cases alike, this ethical imperative was founded exclusively on reason, and in both cases this was opposed to art and decoration, or at least indifferent to them. The middle classes had to remain absolutely faithful to their severe tradition, so as to be able to make the distinction between themselves and the feudal aristocracy, seeing themselves as the class destined to come to power in its stead. Why then, did they ever have to submit to the law of assimilation and appropriate the aristocratic tradition, which was still moving in a direction diametrically opposed to their own? Were they driven to do so by their passion for art? Or merely by a spirit of imitation? Or, more simply still, had their ascetic spirit run out in the meantime? All these factors must have played their part, as they then found themselves in the midst of the Enlightenment, and, as we know, the Enlightenment did not favour the ascetic spirit (it is not mere chance that it produced libertinage). On the other hand the spirit of enlightenment was not to be quenched in the age of industrialization, nor was it possible to restore the old faith which had provided the incentive for asceticism. To preserve this ascetic spirit, despite this, but without abandoning the rationalism of libertinage was, therefore, the insoluble question that the bourgeoisie had to solve. The problem would probably have remained unsolved if the bourgeoisie had not still carried within them, ever since their most distant origins (as far back as the Renaissance), those tendencies which were in turn destined to produce Romanticism: the tendencies of reform. The Reformation came about due to a great discovery, which was partly mystical and partly theological and rational: this was the discovery of the awareness of the absolute, the infinite, of the divine conscience of the human mind. This brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility which the Church had previously borne. The mind settled the account and became presumptuous and boastful.

38. An 1896 illustration: dry-point for the magazine Pan titled The Pair of Centaurs by Max Pietschmann.
It became presumptuous because it had been assigned this cosmic and divine task, and it became boastful because it was well aware that it had been given too much credit, that it had been loaded with a responsibility which exceeded its resources. This is the origin of Romanticism; here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of spiritual (and artistic) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved. That uncertainty which is peculiar to the Romantic mind and which is timorous and hesitant, longing to turn back and hide in the bosom of the Church, to take refuge once again in its absolute certainty, derives in fact from this mixture of exaltation and terror. To forestall this relapse, the Calvinist-Puritan movement pointed out the exclusive guarantee of the Holy Scriptures and forced men to accept that cold asceticism, totally foreign to any form of effusion, which was destined to become the middle-class way of life. But when asceticism began to lose its strict dominance, the bourgeois felt that the veto on exaltation had also been swept away, so he exalted, paradoxically, to save the ascetic tradition. Any asceticism, any repression of pleasure has its sexual centre of gravity. Puritanism certainly did not impose a monastic type of chastity, but strict monogamy. It was precisely this monogamy that was to be reaffirmed and reinforced; all the more so because in this way it could strike at the heart of libertinage. Monogamous love was saved by being intensified to a level of exaltation which at one time had been severely condemned by asceticism. Puritan frigidity was transposed into passion. Every casual act of love in everyday life was raised to the astral plane; the level of the absolute (or rather of the pseudo-absolute) was transformed into an incorruptible and eternal Tristan-and-Isolde-style love. In so doing it simply introduced the most terrestrial aspects of life into the eternal and immortal kingdom - the worldly aspect *par excellence* - which explains that atmosphere of quite indecent necrophilia which so largely dominates Romantic literature. Listen to what Novalis says about this type of fidelity beyond death in his *Lied der Toten* (Song of the Dead):

Leiser Wünsche süßes Plaudern
Hören wir allein und schauen
Immerdar in sel'ge Augen,
Schmecken nichts als Mund und Kuss.
Alles, was wir nur berühren,
Wird zu heissen Balsamfrüchten,
Wird zu weichen zarten Brüsten,
Opfer käührer Lust.
Immer wächst und blüht Verlangen,
Am Geliebten festzuhalten,
Ich im Innern zu empfangen,
Eins mit ihm zu sein.
Seinem Durste nicht zu wehren,
Sich im Wechsel zu verzeihen,
Von einander sich zu nähern,
Von einander nur allein.
So in Lieb' und hoher Vollust
Sind wir immerdar versunken,
Seit der wilde trübe Funken
Jener Welt erlosch.  

39 *Libertinage* carried to the pseudo-absolute sphere of the sublimation of love in this picture from *Salon*.

*All we hear is soft desires, sweet murmuring, and look eternally into beloved eyes, taste only mouth and kisses, everything at our mere touch becomes the hot fruit of balsam, soft and tender breasts, sacrificed to fierce longing, Desire grows and blossoms ceaselessly, desire to cling to the beloved, take the beloved within us, be at one with him, to nourish and be nourished by ourselves alone, Thus we plunged forever in love and sublime desire, until the wild and troubled spark of this world is out.*
Here fidelity is literally raised to a position of power. The new age—i.e., the age of the middle classes—wants monogamy, but at the same time wants to enjoy all the pleasures of libertinage, in an even more concentrated form if possible. They are thus not content to raise the monogamous sexual act to the stars; the stars, and everything else that is eternal, are obliged to come down to earth to concern themselves with men’s sexual lives and enable them to reach the highest pitch of pleasure. The means of obtaining this lies with the imagination over-kindled by exaltation. Werther is the first work in which this type of exaltation appears; and in fact the spirit of an age is always made manifest for the first time by a genius (no wonder then that Napoleon felt Werther to be so close to his own spirit that he carried it everywhere with him, although his life was not in the least like Werther’s). It was Novalis, however, who took the consequences of Wertherian exaltation to extremes: which resulted in high Romanticism. And it seems almost natural that unbridled Romantic exaltation also brought with it a revival of Catholic tendencies.

But having falsely overcome the ascetic tradition, or rather having opted for this new false celebration of asceticism, the middle classes then tended to find in it not only solutions to their own erotic and sexual problems, but also a compromise between their own Puritan and ascetic conception of art and their own love of decoration. Even if courtly-feudal decorative art secretly appealed to them, they had to disdain it so as to remain faithful to their own ascetic tradition; and if they were now able to grant freedom to their own taste for decoration, the result was to be a form of art that was more serious, more elevated and more cosmic than that of their predecessors. One is immediately struck by the parallel with the erotic and sentimental situation (man does not have a very rich range of variations in his attitudes and actions): the aesthetic pleasures of the libertine are looked down on, but the bourgeois would also like to indulge in them, even if on a higher plane. And in fact just as, in the sphere of erotic relationships, love itself has to come down from its celestial heights to consecrate and take part in every human act of love, so in the aesthetic field beauty has to be incarnated in every work of art and consecrate it. Eichendorff has expressed this attitude in a not very poetic sonnet, Der Dichter (the Poet):

Das Leben hat zum Ritter ihn geschlagen
Er soll der Schönheit neid'sche Kerker lichten;
Dass nicht sich alle götterlos vernichten,
Soll er die Gött' zu beschwören wagen. 4

Almost all the ingredients proposed for the artist by the poet’s age and generation are contained in this recipe (which Eichendorff fortunately did not follow in his own poetry). He should not only represent the aristocracy of mankind, he should not only be the ‘knight’, the ‘prince of poetry’, but also the sublime priest whose duty it is to ensure the survival of the gods by practising his creed, i.e. by his artistic production; as a priest he must be in contact with the gods to induce them to restore beauty to the world and to make her descend from her celestial heights to the level of mortal things in every work of art. Schiller, who expressed himself rather more lucidly on this point, seems to have been forgotten. This conception is none other than a forewarning of a sort of religion of beauty which is not very different from the religion of reason which the French Revolution tried to establish when, having dethroned God, it saw the need of basing its virtue on something absolute, and accordingly had to invent its ‘Goddess of Reason’. But as things proceed rationally in the kingdom of reason, this ‘Goddess of Reason’ was soon forgotten. In the kingdom of art, on the other hand, absurdities are much less disturbing, so that the horrible spectre of divine beauty that enters or is introduced into the work of art continues to lurk in literature throughout the nineteenth century, and indeed passes on into the twentieth century as well without any break in continuity. This divine beauty is the fundamental symbol of all the symbolist schools and is at the root of their aspiration to set up a new religion of beauty (which one can detect both in the Pre-Raphaelites and in Mallarmé or George). Without damaging the greatness of Mallarmé or the important artistic work of George, or even the admittedly considerably lesser value of the Pre-Raphaelites, we can safely say that the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess kitsch.

One can raise the objection that art always generates beauty. This is true, just as it is true that every cognitive act generates truth. But has there ever been a human eye capable of contemplating ‘the’ beauty or ‘the’ truth? The answer is certainly no, because both—and I do not need to quote Schiller here—are mere Platonic objectives.

*LIFE has marked him as a knight; his job to light the envious prisons holding beauty captive; to stop everything becoming profane he must dare to invoke the gods.
adjectives that have become nouns. For earth-bound man beauty and
truth are only accessible in the form of single beautiful or true
phenomena. A scientist who puts no more than his own love of truth
into his research does not get very far; he needs, rather, an absolute
dedication to the object of his research, he needs logic and intuition;
and if luck (which plays a rather more important part than the idea
of truth in such cases) is in his favour, truth will appear all by itself
when his work or his experiments come to an end. The same is true of
the artist. He, too, has to subject himself unconditionally to the
object; his capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object (indepen-
dently of the fact that it presents itself as an exterior or interior
object), to seek out the laws that it obeys—think of Dürer’s experi-
ments with perspective, or Rembrandt’s experiments with light—does
not depend on the artist’s love of beauty. His truth, like the scientists’,
is, on the contrary, a ripe fruit that he will pluck from the successful
work. And yet why are the scientist and the artist driven onwards
incessantly by the whip of obsession for the object? What causes this
love of exploration? Is it perhaps the terra incognita of what exists
that fascinates him? No: the truly unknown cannot seduce him; he is
seduced only by what is just beginning to be sensed: the man who can
foresee a new shred of reality must manage to formulate it, so as to be
able to make it exist. In science and art alike the important thing is
the creation of new expressions of reality, and if this process is
interrupted not only would there be no more art or science, but man
himself would also disappear, since he differs from animals precisely
because of his capacity to discover and create something new. The
artist who limits himself merely to a search for new areas of beauty
creates sensations, not art. Art is made up of intuitions about reality,
and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions. If this were
not so one could certainly content oneself with previously discovered
spheres of beauty, e.g. with Egyptian sculpture, which is without
doubt unsurpassable.

We have reached the point where we can illustrate why kitsch
resulted from Romanticism, and why it must be considered a specific
product of Romanticism. And in fact if knowledge, and in particular
scientific knowledge, can be defined as an infinitely developing
logical system, the same can be said of art in its totality: in the first
case, the telos of the system (a goal suspended in infinity and at an
infinite distance) is truth; in the second it is beauty. In both cases the
final objective is the Platonic idea. It seems regrettable that love is
also a Platonic idea, an idea that cannot be attained by means of
the many unions to which man is constrained (this, incidentally,
the goal remains outside the system, then the system may and should to some inner logic from one discovery to the next, which means that the goal remains outside the system, then the system may and should be called open. 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. In this way it at least partly removes the systematic aspect of art. Yet, insofar as art remains a system, the system becomes closed; the infinite system becomes a finite system. Academic art, which involves a continual search for rules of beauty, with which all works of art must comply, makes things finite in a similar manner. We cannot, of course, identify Romanticism with academic art, nor are kitsch and academic art identical (although the latter is one of the most fruitful areas for the influence of kitsch); but nor should we overlook the common denominator underlying all these phenomena, which consists of their tendency to render the system finite. And as 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.

I know I have become rather too abstract; and I also know that to make an abstraction concrete one has to follow it up with a second abstraction and then a third. Kitsch is certainly not 'bad art'; it forms its own closed system, which is lodged like a foreign body in the overall system of art, or which, if you prefer, appears alongside it. Its relationship to art can be compared - and this is more than a mere metaphor - to the relationship between the system of the Anti-Christ and the system of Christ. Every system of values, if attacked from the outside in its autonomy, can become distorted and corrupt: a form of Christianity that forces priests to bless cannons and tanks is as close to kitsch as any literature that exalts the well-loved ruling house or the well-loved leader, or the well-loved field-marshal or the well-loved president. The enemy within, however, is more dangerous than these attacks from outside: every system is dialectically capable of developing its own anti-system and is indeed compelled to do so. The danger is all the greater when at first glance the system and the anti-system appear to be identical and it is hard to see that the former is open and the latter closed. The Anti-Christ looks like Christ, acts and speaks like Christ, but is all the same Lucifer. What then is the sign that enables one to see this difference? An open system, the Christian one, is an ethical system: it provides man with the necessary directions for him to act as a man. The hints given by a closed system, on the other hand, (even if they are covered with a veneer of ethics) are no more than simple rules of play; i.e. it transforms that part of human life which is in its control into a game that can no longer be valued as ethical, but only as aesthetic. This conceptual cycle is anything but simple - as I warned you earlier - but it can become clearer if you remember that a player is ethically well-behaved if he is thoroughly versed in the rules of the game and acts in accordance with them. He is not concerned with anything else going on round him with the result that, when he has to play his part, he will calmly let a man drown at his side. This man is the prisoner of a purely conventional system of symbols, and even if these symbols are copied from some sort of reality, the system is still a system of imitation. We have already mentioned the grotesque religions of beauty and reason. At this stage we can also add political religions. Here again it is a question of imitation, of religions of imitation, which therefore carry within them the seeds of evil. Kitsch is also a system of imitation. It can resemble the system of art in every detail, above all when it is handled by masters such as Wagner, the French dramatists (Sardou, for example) or - to take an example from painting - someone like Dali, but the element of imitation is still bound to show through. The kitsch system requires its followers to 'work beautifully', while the art system issues the ethical order: 'Work well'. Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art.

Of course, an ethical system cannot do without conventions and since this is so, the man who sticks to it is inevitably constrained, at least to a certain degree, to aestheticize his tasks and to transform them into works of art which correspond to convention. In accordance with the exclusively aesthetic character of the convention which he follows, the libertine will make his life a sybaritic work of art, while the monk who lives according to an ethical convention, will allow himself to be conceived as a transcendental work of art. Both are unequivocal, and conform to reality, the sybarite's life being suited to worldly reality; the monk's to celestial reality.

Can the same be said of a life inspired by kitsch? The original convention which underlies it is exaltation, or rather hypocritical exaltation, since it tries to unite heaven and earth in an absolutely false relationship. Into what type of work of art, or rather artifice,
does kitsch try to transform human life? The answer is simple: into a neurotic work of art, i.e. one which imposes a completely unreal convention on reality, thus imprisoning it in a false schema. High-Romanticism scattered so many tragedies of love and individual or dual suicides throughout the world precisely because the neurotic, wandering among unreal conventions which have assumed for him the value of symbols, does not notice that he is continually confusing aesthetic and ethical categories, and is obeying false commandments. The only category that emerges from this confusion is that of kitsch and its evil quality, which is what caused all those suicides. It is the wickedness of an existence based on universal hypocrisy, astray in an immense tangle of sentiments and conventions. It is superfluous to stress that the middle classes deceived themselves by saying that they had won a complete victory; throughout the nineteenth century they pretended that they had inaugurated great art and defeated libertinage for ever.

From a contemporary historical viewpoint, I find the idea of the relationship between neurosis and kitsch rather significant, not least because it is based on the evil inherent in kitsch. It is not mere chance that Hitler (like his predecessor Wilhelm II) was an enthusiastic disciple of kitsch. He liked the full-bodied type of kitsch and the saccharine type. He found both 'beautiful'. Nero, too, was an ardent supporter of beauty, and possibly even more artistically gifted than Hitler. The firework spectacle of Rome in flames and the human torches of Christians impaled in the imperial gardens was certainly prized artistic currency for the aesthetic emperor, who showed how he could remain deaf to the screams of pain coming from his victims or even appreciate them as an aesthetic musical accompaniment. And in this respect we must not forget that modern kitsch is still far from reaching the end of its triumphal progress and that it too - especially in films - is impregnated both with blood and saccharine and that radio is a volcano vomiting a continuous spout of imitation music. And if you ask yourselves to what extent you are affected by this avalanche of kitsch, you will find – at least I find it as far as I personally am concerned – that a liking for kitsch is not all that rare.

The conclusion that we are heading towards an ever-increasing universal neurosis does not seem to be unfounded; it is not in the least absurd to think that the world is tending towards a schizoid rift, even if this has not yet become schizophrenic, which embraces all of us, and behind which we can still see the theological antimony of the early Reformation. For the basic structure of the human problem seems to remain constant in all its various disguises, and in the last analysis will show that it is still conditioned by theology and myth.

As I said to begin with, I am well aware that I have only hinted at the problems without really attacking them. I should have said more about opera and operatic kitsch as the representative art of the nineteenth century, and I should have shown how the modern novel has made a heroic attempt to stem the tide of kitsch, and how, in spite of this, it has eventually been overwhelmed by kitsch, both by kitsch aestheticism and kitsch entertainment. And I should have referred to modern architecture, which forms the framework for all this and
It is certainly no fluke that Hitler was an ardent follower of kitsch. Yet precisely because of this more optimistic prospect, I should at least have tried to lay down a symptomatology of authentic art. But I am afraid that in that case we should have had to stay here discussing all night. So I am going to tell you a Jewish legend instead:

In a Jewish community in Poland a miracle-working rabbi appeared one day with the gift of restoring sight to the blind. Ailing men and women came from far and wide to Chelowka - that is the name of the community -, and among them one Leib Schekel, plodding along the dusty country road protecting his eyes with a green eye-shield and holding his blindman's stick. An acquaintance of his came along: 'Hey there, Leib Schekel, you are off to Chelowka!' 'Yes, I'm going to see Him at Chelowka.' 'And what's happened to your eyes?' 'Me eyes? What's the matter with me eyes?' 'If your eyes are still all right at your age, why on earth are you going to Chelowka with your stick?' Leib Schekel shakes his head: 'Because a man who is still fit at a hundred can be short-sighted. Don't you see what I mean? When I am before Him, the Great and the True, I shall be blind and he will give me back my sight.'

It is the same with the true work of art. It dazzles you until it blinds you and then gives you back your sight.

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Let us begin with an objection: if dogmatism is really to be considered as the 'evil' element in any system of values, if art should really refuse to be dominated by any outside influence, why should we not deduce from this that any form of 'art-with-a-message' represents evil? Why not ask ourselves directly whether the medieval subordination of art to the religious element was not a contradiction of the essence of art? And yet medieval art did exist and works of art do exist which undeniably contain a message, there is Lessing's didactic poetry, Gerhart Hauptmann's drama Die Weber (The Weavers), and Russian films.

So we certainly cannot say that all art which contains a message is kitsch, although the system of imitation - as represented by kitsch - is well-suited to being subordinated to extra-artistic purposes, and however much we may feel that all art of this type runs the risk of becoming kitsch. We only have to consider Zola, whom no one could accuse of having produced kitsch, and consider his Quatre Evangiles, where he expounds his socialist and anti-clerical convictions: in the frame work of a naturalistic novel he depicts an absolutely Utopian situation, which could never be realized, even after the attainment of a classless society, and in which good and evil are not distributed according to the moral concepts of the future, but according to those which were valid in about 1890 and which serve to divide people into good socialists and wicked anti-socialists. However far removed from kitsch Zola may have been personally, this process inevitably displays those dangers which are caused by the penetration of an alien system into the autonomous sphere of art; it constitutes a classic example of the action of dogmatism within a system of values. For if the bitter defence by every system of values of its own autonomy is a typical feature of our times, if this attitude, in itself absolutely ethical, is expressed in the overall conflict of values - and in this lies the tragedy of our age - the violence that one system shows to another is comparable (in anthropomorphic terms) to the behaviour of an enemy in occupied territory allowing himself to do things which in his own country would be strictly forbidden by his own ethos. Art has no 'personal' theme and because it is a copy, must always depend on alien spheres of values and must even draw its own principal theme - love - from the sphere of erotic values. It is thus more inclined than any other system to suffer from the penetration of foreign elements.

43 Engagé art imposed on demagogic motifs almost always exploits the reactionary technique of 'effect', as in this high relief sculpture in a Russian museum.
Today, then – and this is especially true for poetry – art is transformed more than ever before into an arena where all possible systems of values meet and collide. Nor do we find that the type of art which offers a message is purely patriotic and socialist; there are also specialist novels concerned with sporting or other topics. All these factors lead us back to a common denominator, which is perhaps clearest at the point where love poetry overflows into pornography, i.e. where the system of erotic values becomes dogmatic and poetry is transformed into erotic propaganda-type art: the infinite goal of love then retreats into the sphere of the finite and the irrationality of events becomes finite and is reduced to a series of rational sexual acts.

Zola's Utopian compression of the living value-system of socialism – which was still young and vital at that point – into the straitjacket of the situation which prevailed in 1890 is no different, although less brutal. He moves the infinite goal of socialism over into the finite sphere, thus rendering the actual system 'finite' but distorting its ethos into a rational form of moralizing. In so doing he not only betrays the principle of the authentic Utopia which, logically, is always played out at an infinite distance, but also – and this is essential – degrades the artist's attempt to produce 'good' work to the despised goal of 'beauty'. Artists cannot, of course, be forbidden to portray socialists, patriots, sportsmen or monks, nor to depict situations which lead forcibly to socialist, aggressive or pacifist solutions (in this sense Hauptmann's Die Weber is legitimate didactic poetry); indeed the poet must depict these people and situations, because it is the world as a whole, in all its different aspects, which must constitute the theme of his 'extended naturalism'. At all events, to be truthful (and truthfulness is the only criterion for autonomous art) this 'extended naturalism' must not discuss systems of values otherwise than as the subject-matter of its faithful representation: it should show them in their openness, in their living growth, it should portray them 'as they really are' and not as 'it wants them to be' or as they want to be, i.e. isolated in the finite and made concrete in a way that they can never make themselves concrete.

**THE REACTIONARY TECHNIQUE OF 'EFFECT'**

The essence of kitsch is the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category; a 'beautiful' work, not a 'good' one, is the aim; the important thing is an effect of beauty. Despite its often naturalistic character, despite its frequent use of realistic terminology, the kitsch novel depicts the world not 'as it really is' but 'as people want it to be' or 'as people fear it is'. The same 'didactic' tendency can be seen in the pictorial arts; in music kitsch lies exclusively in effects (think of what is known as bourgeois parlour-music, and do not forget that the music industry of today is, in many ways, its hypertrophic offspring). How can we escape the conclusion that no art can do without a soupçon of deliberate effect, a dash of kitsch? Deliberate effect is an essential component of the spectacle, an aesthetic component, while there is a whole artistic genre (a specifically bourgeois genre), i.e. opera, in which deliberate effect is a basic and constructive element.

44 Even if the scenery has a mark of distinction, the 'effect' in opera (Aida in this case) is a basic element.
but we must also remember that opera tends, by its very nature, to historicize, while that special bond between the work of art and the public, in which the effect makes itself felt, involves the empirical and earthly sphere. The means used to obtain effect are therefore always tried and tested; they cannot be increased, just as the number of possible dramatic situations cannot be increased. That is why what has already been, what has already been tried and tested, will always reappear in kitsch work. Incidentally, a walk around an art exhibition is enough to convince one that kitsch is always subject to the dogmatic influence of 'what has already been', that kitsch does not take its realistic terminology directly from the everyday world, but uses prefabricated expressions, which harden into clichés. Here too we are faced with the nolitio, the detachment from good will, the rupture with the act of divine creation of the world which is really of value.

**KITSCH AND ROMANTICISM**

This return to past history, which is typical of kitsch, is by no means restricted to the technical and formal aspects of art. Although the existence of a kitsch system of values does also depend on the fear of death, and although, as befits its conservative vocation, it tries to communicate to man the safety of his existence so as to save him from the threat of darkness, kitsch as a system of imitation is nonetheless purely reactionary. As a Utopian form of didactic art, kitsch foreshortens, for example, our glimpse of the future, and is content to falsify the finite reality of the world; and similarly it does not look too far back into the past. We can consider the historical novel as an expression of that indestructible conservative spirit, of that absolutely legitimate Romanticism which wants to keep past values alive for ever, and sees the continuity of the course of history as a mirror of eternity. This orientation of the conservative spirit, in itself more than legitimate and fundamentally unchanged, is nonetheless immediately degraded when guided by personal motives (the personal emotional satisfaction is the most abundant source of kitsch), or when, as often happens in periods of revolution, it is used as a escape from the irrational, an escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid. This personal nostalgia for a better and safer world enables us to understand why historical studies and the historical novel are thriving again today, but it also shows that this is just another way of entering a sphere that already belongs to kitsch's sphere of influence (any historical world nostalgically re-lived is 'beautiful'). In reality, kitsch is the simplest and most direct way of soothing this nostalgia; the Romantic need was at one time satisfied by chivalrous novels or novels of adventure (in which the immediate terms of historical reality were replaced by prefabricated clichés); and even today, when there is an escape from reality, it always and only represents a search for a world with set conventions, the world of our fathers in which everything was good and fair; in short, an attempt to establish an immediate liaison with the past. Similarly, kitsch technically copies what directly precedes it and the means it uses to this end are amazingly simple (one could well credit kitsch with having the power of creating symbols). It is enough in fact for some recent historical figure - the emperor Franz Josef for example - to appear in an operetta, because his presence alone creates that atmosphere of release from fear which man needs. And the same happens in the rose-coloured kitsch novel.

**THE CONFUSION OF THE FINITE WITH THE INFINITE**

A distinction must be made between overcoming death and escape from death, between illuminating the irrational and fleeing from the irrational. The technique of kitsch, which is based on imitation and uses set recipes, is rational even when the result seems to be extremely irrational, or even positively absurd. As a system of imitation kitsch is in fact obliged to copy art in all its specific features. It is impossible,
The postcard, particularly in the first decades of the twentieth century, was an inexhaustible source of kitsch. *The Fruits of Love, The Pharaoh and The Lovers* are three blatant examples.

However, to imitate methodically the creative act from which the work of art is born: only the most simple shapes can be imitated. It is quite significant and characteristic that, given its lack of imagination, kitsch must constantly have recourse to the most primitive of methods (this emerges extremely clearly in poetry, but also, to some extent, in music): pornography, whose terms of reality notoriously consist of sexual acts, is, at the most, a mere series of such acts; the detective novel offers nothing but an unchanging sequence of victories over criminals; the sentimental novel offers an unchanging series of good acts being rewarded and wicked acts being punished (the method governing this monotonous arrangement of the terms of reality is that of primitive syntax, of the constant beat of the drum).

If these romantic situations were to be transformed into reality, they would be in no way fantastic, but simply absurd, because what is missing is precisely that power of meaning that the syntactic system gives to the true work of art. In this system there is no longer any subjective and creative freedom of composition, nor is there any possibility of choosing the terms of reality, while the bond between the foundations of reality and the form of composition is just as illogical as the bond between a house and the architectonic kitsch inside it. It is probably the impossibility of copying a creative work that leads the system of imitation (and not only in art) to justify its own betrayal of the more elevated goal of the system imitated by having recourse to the obscure and Dionysian aspects of existence, and by appealing to sentiment. That these 'appeals' to sentiment are made by a pseudo-awareness, by a pseudo-conception of the world, by pseudo-politics or by the romantic novel, is more or less a matter of indifference; for through kitsch, any recourse to sentiment and irrationality is bound to be transformed into a rational recipe-book of imitations. For example, if the kitsch novel tries to imitate the strong bond between someone like Hamsun and nature with noisy declarations of love for the land and the peasants who work it; or if in the same way light literature tries to assimilate Dostoievsky’s unending search for God, these efforts on the part of kitsch to get away from its own specific and original methods in no way cover the distance that separates it from art, and even show quite plainly how it sentimentalizes the finite *ad infinitum* (which always happens when a finite and lesser value claims to have a universal validity).
This satisfaction of impulses by finite and rational means, this never-ending sentimentalization of the finite, this gazing at 'the beautiful', imbues kitsch with a false element behind which one can sense ethical 'evil'. For escape from death, which is not the same as overcoming death, this act of shaping the world which nonetheless leaves the world shapeless, is similarly no more than an apparent overcoming of time: the transformation of time into a simultaneous system, towards which every system of values is inclined, is an objective which even the system of imitation, and therefore kitsch, keeps in view. Moreover, there is no new formative act in the system of imitation; the irrational is not clarified, the cognitive aspect is still confined to the sphere of the finite, and there is only a substitution of one rational definition for another rational definition. Kitsch cannot, therefore, overcome time, and its escape from death remains a mere 'hobby'. The producer of kitsch does not produce 'bad' art, he is not an artist endowed with inferior creative faculties or no creative faculties at all. It is quite impossible to assess him according to aesthetic criteria; rather he should be judged as an ethically base being, a malefactor who profoundly desires evil. And as it is this radical evil that is portrayed in kitsch (that evil which is linked to every system of values as the absolute negative pole), kitsch should be considered 'evil' not only by art but by every system of values that is not a system of imitation. The person who works for love of effect, who looks for nothing else except the emotional satisfaction that makes the moment he sighs with relief seem 'beautiful' in other words the radical aesthete, considers himself entitled to use, and in fact uses, any means whatsoever to achieve the production of this type of beauty, with absolutely no restrictions. This is the gigantic kitsch, the 'sublime' spectacle staged by Nero in his imperial gardens, which enabled him to accompany the scene on his lute. Nero's ambition to be an actor did not go in vain.

All periods in which values decline are kitsch periods. The last days of the Roman empire produced kitsch and the present period, which is as it were the last stage of the process of the disintegration of the medieval concept of the world, cannot but be represented by aesthetic 'evil'. Ages which are hallmarked by a definite loss of values are in fact based on 'evil' and the fear of evil, and any art which is intended to express such an age adequately must also be an expression of the 'evil' at work in it.

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