Six Essays by Hermann Broch

Geist and Zeitgeist
The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age

Edited and Introduced by John Hargraves, translator

Counterpoint New York
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Evil in the
Value-System
of Art (1933)

translated by John Hargraves

I. The Problem

If in the course of civilization it was always art and its respective styles that gave most visible expression to the lifestyles of different epochs, and if this applies as well to the present time, then art would make particularly manifest the extreme nature of the current period; our time places the highest ethical demands on humanity and its capacity for self-sacrifice; despite such clearly ethical striving, it is a time filled with horror, bloodlust, and injustice; and, moreover, it can dismiss all this so lightly—all this would have to be made manifest in art. Art would also show that this time is striving toward a new spiritual and Platonic union with an intensity unheard of for centuries, but that it is nonetheless mired in positivistic thinking, in an obsession with the factual, which abhors everything that is Platonic or deductive and which stands in odd

Geist and Zeitgeist contrast to its ethical striving. Can art really give expression to all this? Is it up to such a task?

And more than this, is art still capable of resolving such problems at all? Is it not precisely the tendency of ethics (to whose new rigor mankind is now subject) to oppose all art and all artistic practice, to the point that it would be an absurdity if this new lifestyle were expressed in any style of art? Is it not precisely characteristic of a radically de-Platonized world, a positivistic world, to relegate any esthetic considerations to the sphere of philosophical pseudo-problems, as radically as it rejects anything metaphysical? Even the previous era, that prewar period we call the “bourgeois” era, surely did not find its expression in the eclectic styles that it produced, and if it had any kind of representative art, it was that of grand opera only; and if art had a kind of intellectual and social status, art and the concern with art became primarily an interest of otherwise idle ladies of the bourgeois class. And although a purification process has begun since then, which in a certain sense reflects the world’s new ethical rigor and which has created at least in architecture a pronounced style for the age (Zeitstil), the interest in these artistic problems remains confined to the circle of those immediately concerned, has become, so to speak, an internal discussion among artists; a development that had begun in the nineteenth century now became clearly apparent: The obvious expression of the age is far more visible in machine technology or sports events than in urban architecture or works of art.

It would be all too easy simply to maintain that intellectual and esthetic problems have been ignored because they are essentially concerns that have been overwhelmed by the most pressing current question: “Do we have enough to eat?” No, this one-sided materialistic view is contradicted by the fact that it was the Middle Ages, a period of the most intense material deprivation, that produced the most sublime works of art, and even easier to assert the cliche that in any case the Muses are silent in times of war, for even this view is repeatedly dis-proven by history — all this would be too easy, would lead, if one may say so, to a lopsided pathology of the time. For although war may have been the great catalyst, bringing all the developing forces into literally explosive acceleration, and although war itself may be seen as the result of catastrophic economic or technical development, even perhaps of scientific and intellectual development, all these phenomena, however much they may mutually explain, cause, and even intensify one another, are nonetheless closely related sets of symptoms of a single colossal logical process. This process, occurring over hundreds of years, is one in which the European worldview, first formed by the Middle Ages, was dissolved bit by bit, and in which the individual value-systems became independent from one another, but in which man, increasingly confused and torn by both destructive and constructive forces, has lost the ability to halt the final disintegration of the old given values, to hold off the final bloody chaos, and finds himself to an increasing degree at the mercy of his own conscience, in the face of horror and death still confronted with the question, like a thunderclap: “What should we do?” And this question resounds wherever mankind attempts to be equal to the demands and needs of the time; everywhere its ethical urgency erupts with a vehemence that implies that the question “Do we have enough to eat?” can only be resolved in ethical, not material, terms.

For the collapse of the material-economic field of values can only be understood in the context of the collapse of a comprehensive general value-system. This state of affairs is now known to all: It is obvious, and intuitively so, that the hiatus between “no more” and “not yet,” this intermediary stage, in which the confusion of decline joins with the confusion of quest, forms the starting point of a new spiritual union; from this, only now, can we re-clarify rational definitions about value and nonvalue. Even with positivism’s abhorrence of speculative and theological definitions, with its preference for nonspeculative, emotionally grounded, and intuitively justifiable values, this goal is an unmistakably Platonic one, for it must culminate in a rational value-system, in which
the world’s plausibility, reason, and values will acquire new, systematic grounding. Despite philosophy’s low esteem in the eye of the practical man as well as the scientist, we should take due note that the current worldwide renaissance of interest in Nietzsche has a symptomatic significance, not so much on account of its new moral content (for Nietzsche, a product of his time, is grounded in a bourgeoisie more tuned to esthetics) but rather because of the demands he made of method and principle, where he made the concept of value the methodological heart of philosophy; it was an almost impassioned insight into the as-yet-unforeseeable implications of the concept of value that moved Nietzsche (and Kierkegaard as well), and, however hesitantly, however reluctantly the various schools of philosophy, whether Neokantian or otherwise, adopted the concept of value, they really had no choice; everything clearly indicates that it was just this value-concept that had so suddenly come to the fore which enabled them to build a bridge between a foundering and outmoded speculative philosophy and the possibility of a new metaphysics. The enormous tension between good and evil, the intense polarity of paired opposites that characterizes our age and gives it its specifically extremist nature, this compulsion for people to incorporate into their lives both the highest ethical needs and an often incomprehensibly frightful reality, so that life can be lived at all—all this gives direction to the intellectual strivings of the age, gives its struggles a legitimization that it had seemingly lost.

And this is also the point where art, its social esteem notwithstanding, makes its relevance felt anew as a representative phenomenon of the time, and where it again becomes a genuine problem of the age; the problem of art itself has become an ethical one. Not only have poetry and the fine arts too become more and more tendentious in their attempt, whether didactic or satirical, to express the ethical character of the age, but that very polarity of good and evil has become quite plainly evident in art itself. If we speak of art’s loss of relevance, we have in mind only the one pole, that of the good, that is, that conception of art as it was understood, rightly, through the centuries. For in times of securely held values, it is easy to separate out evil from individual value-fields (easier than in the present age, which has declined into a value-anarchy), easier even though the tension between the poles of good and evil was considerably smaller. One knew what was meant by art: good art. Today there also is good art, that is, that art which in its purest state is under the rule of the ethical, but this forms just one part of the value-field called “art,” and this isolated part, whether it succeeds in creating its own style of art or not, is still not an expression of the lifestyle of the world or the age. One sees this most clearly, perhaps, in music, which in many respects is now undergoing a process of renovation,² but whose influence and effect in general is becoming ever narrower, while at the same time a music industry of undreamt-of dimensions has taken hold throughout the world. Along with music as an art in the sense we have meant till now, kitsch-music has appeared, and when we speak of the artistic expression of the age, without doubt this negative pole is more significant than the positive one of genuine art. Or, more correctly: The artistic expression of the age is to be seen in the enormous tension between good and evil within art. For the evil in art is kitsch.

There is probably no place where the restructuring of value-standards, where the effective reach of evil in the world is so pronounced as in the existence of kitsch, which, significantly, is an offspring of the bourgeois age, and first appears precisely when the world entered into an age where its intellectual content converged with its actual appearance, that is, the Machine Age; at the same time its positivistic tendencies intensified into a most rigorous materialism. And precisely because a positivist, anti-Platonic world has been forced to choose the principle “Beauty is what pleases us,” not just as a convenient and to

² Broch is referring to serial music. Cf. his essay on Schönberg: “Zum Problem der Erkenntnis in der Musik.” Broch’s reference to “a music industry of undreamt-of dimensions” reflects his awareness of the growth of a mass market for popular music in film, radio, and the recording industry.
some extent theoretical formula, but rather as a rule to live by—for this reason it appears particularly to be the special function of kitsch (though it represents only a part of art’s total product) to embody art’s old task, to be the manifest expression of the age. But to understand how this partial value-area can become the symbol of a comprehensive value-setting system, how the ethical makeup of the time can be seen to appear in the esthetic phenomenon of kitsch, one must understand what constitutes the concept of values in general.

II. THE CONSTRUCT OF VALUES: OVERCOMING DEATH

The countenance of death is the great awakener! Nietzsche’s experience in the French infirmaries of 1870, those events of war that had a decisive or at least accelerating effect on his development, fifty years later took on an infinitely greater dimension; in that Europe of fifty years later, death had become the somber sovereign of all things, and the horror of death cried out to the heavens: Only then had the collapse of all values become apparent; fear of the loss of all life’s values descended upon mankind, and the fearful question as to the possibility of a new value-construct became inevitable.

To be sure, a world turned to positivism must deal with the reality of death with the same heroic realism with which it deals with all other manifestations of life. That era of rising positivism, the Renaissance, made the brashly hopeful attempt (perhaps condemned to fail for just this reason) to overcome death by its openly sensual, “pagan” affirmation of life. But at the same time a Protestantism arose filled with ascetic tendencies, to convert with its new rigor life’s chaotic anxieties into new values and attitudes. For even though the immediacy of death may force us to look it in the eye, even though its threatening proximity may narrow the focus of this anxiety to a fear that can be deflected like the danger that gave rise to it—all the same, death remains concealed in a world of night and uncertainty, and in this darkness fear resides, and against this uncertainty of darkness, this fear born of an isolation that accompanies a man’s soul from the moment he opens his eyes to consciousness until that moment when he closes them for eternity, against this fear there is no possible defense, no way to numb its impact: The human soul’s task is to secure itself, to protect itself against this fear.

Everything that we know as “value” and which deserves that name aims at the nullification and overcoming of death. Death is the opposite of value, it is un-value *a priori*, seen in opposition to the value of life, even when it can only be overcome by itself, when it is death that overcomes death, when death itself is transformed into a life-value, by linking the two infinities in a circle, in the ultimate sense of a redemption through death. And because the eternity of death is the gateway, the only gateway through which the absolute enters into real life in all its magical meaningfulness, bringing in its train the magic words “infinity,” “eternity,” and “universe,” words that otherwise could not withstand logical analysis, and because death in its unimaginable remoteness from life is nonetheless so near to life that it continuously fills the human soul with its physical presence and its metaphysical existence—because of death, the only absolute of reality and of nature, another absolute must be thrown up against it by the human will, which can create the absolute of the soul and the absolute of civilization; and this remarkable ability of the soul, perhaps the most amazing phenomenon of human existence, finds its form of expression in that ever-renewing act, which could simply be called the “act of being human,” and in this humanity, human existence is elevated to the act of value setting and value creating.

**Epistemological Comment**

Value is a concern of empirical life. Not the empirical life of the man in the street, but of a category that one could call the Platonic idea of empirical life.
In the category of pure consciousness, which philosophy normally deals with, there is no such thing as value, indeed, there is not even the concept of truth, or that of thought which creates truth, for pure consciousness is timeless like God, it does not need to “develop,” either from untruth to truth, or from evil to good, or least of all from value to “nonvalue.” It is one of the antinomies of all theologies that God needs the world to create himself.

But this absolute isolation, this autonomy of God and of pure consciousness has nonetheless become part of the “Platonic idea of empirical humanity,” it is a fact that the soul, filled with fear, experiences constantly; it is the desperate isolation of the human being dying alone. Whatever appears to the ego as value is based directly or indirectly upon this isolation, which is as near to and as far from death as death is near to and far from life, and so the absoluteness of life’s value, which is opposed to the absoluteness of death, is also a condition of this isolation, precisely as this isolation is constantly at work in all acts of value setting, is seen in them and lends all created things their peculiar character of autonomy, by which the Ego itself is characterized.

Isolation is the logical commonality of humankind and God. But if man distinguishes between himself and God — and he does — if empirical consciousness is to be distinguished from consciousness per se, then the idea of time and also the idea of relativity must be enlisted. The concept of truth remains void as long as the concept of untruth is not associated with it, indeed, it would remain void if there were not varying gradations of truth. And the ethical character of truth, its impatient and demanding teleological character, would be empty if there did not exist a category (unimaginable in the realm of pure consciousness) that has the power to rank itself higher than truth, to make this truth become what it in fact is in real life: a “value” among life’s other values.

In other words, in the sphere of pure consciousness, insofar as one can speak of truth at all, thought has primacy over life, the primacy of cogito over sum, the primacy of the category of truth over that of value.

In the realm of empirical life, this relationship is reversed; here the primacy rightly goes to life, with all its emotional variety and all its irrationality, here truth is a value among other values, the category of value is dominant. And if this empirical ego is able to uncover even merely relative truths, it remains in its autonomy and its aloneness permanently at the stage of a more or less subjective absoluteness: It cannot lie to itself, it finds itself at every instant of its existence in a state, if one can put it thus, of “maximal truth,” but it finds itself as well at every instant in a “state of maximal value”— and no matter how it acts, it creates in its isolation from moment to moment the most favorable value situation for itself, and only retroactively does it conceive of the prior, just-transpired situation as non-truth, as nonvalue, as error to be rejected.

The Dual Aspect of Value: Ethical and Esthetic

In the realm of the empirical, truth is subordinate to a more general category, that of value. Truth becomes a value among other values, which exist with the same claim for validity as itself. And it is clear that even the truth-producing acts, acts of thought, in short, thinking, lose their unique a priori privileged position, are degraded to a kind of action, differing from other value-creating acts only in that they bring the “truth,” instead of other values, into being; thinking becomes a special case of action in general, of value-setting activity, since in the autonomy of the ego there exist only acts aimed at value.

But all activity is formative, there is no empirical or ideal activity whose aim is not to form or re-form objective reality. Every activity of mankind is formative, and the world it creates, to become part of the world, and to undo death, arises from Anaximander’s apeiron (unknowable), from the primal cause (Ugrund) of the amorphic, from the irrational per se, in whose “quality-less-ness” life and death, nonbeing and being are united and still formless. The creation of values is a path that leads always from the unformed to the formed, or at least the better-
formed, and that which is unformed or less formed is always the irrational; in its darkness, the irrational, wherever and however it appears, cannot be distinguished from the darkness of death; it carries death within itself, and to shape the irrational, to cast light upon it, illuminates death, illuminates a piece of the future snatched from death, becomes known, finally becomes something rational and visible in the world—and in a world that has a formed and conceptual rationality, a rationality in which value can be constituted.

Nowhere is this so clearly apparent as in the phenomenon of time: not physical time, but that time which is man's most basic experience of life, that time which ebbs away in every hour of his breathing, conducts him into the future and ends in death. In time and its passing, the relativity of values is anchored, the eternal reminder that human value setting cannot escape relativity as it aspires to divine absoluteness. Thus, the goal of all formative activity is to create simultaneity out of the sequentiality of values, to create a value-system in which individual values no longer succeed one another individually and in sequence, but which support one another in common. It is this transformation of temporal sequence into a construct that must be termed "spatial" in an expanded sense, and that, to the last detail, reflects the value-system of music—the transformation of sequential to simultaneous, perceived spatially: This is the essence of music.

So if the concept of "form" is defined widely enough, then one could say all human action aims at forming an object, an object that exists in space. It is certainly not just a terminological convention, but rather the generally understood sense of the words, to say that formative acts are the concern of ethical valuation and that the results of these formative acts are the concern of esthetic valuation. And since all human actions and their results are values, it follows that within a given set of values, ethical valuation and esthetic valuation are closely coordinated; in the framework of any given or accepted value-set, every action that can be termed ethical, thus "good," brings about an esthetically positive result, and every result that this brings about, that can be valued as esthetically positive, thus "beautiful," points to a prior ethically positive act, and the same is true if we put the terms in the negative.

The old coordination of "good" and "beautiful" is only logically meaningful within a general concept of value that includes both, given a particular set of values; on the other hand, logically the concept of value is sufficiently constituted only in this double aspect, in this dynamic-static dichotomy—the ethical creating of value, and the esthetic value result.

This means that within the empirical world, and thus in history too (for the empirical world is in time and thus in history), the esthetic is the ethical become reality. Remembering the extraordinary role of the concept of value, not just in philosophical-historical considerations but in history itself (history being the world's verdict on itself), one may then deduce from the esthetic residuals of history the ethical deeds that are preserved for eternity solely in their esthetic legacy.

Autonomy and Absolute Nature of Value

That absolute quality required of all values and every value-system is a projection of the autonomous ego. Into every value and every value-system a value-setting subject is projected, latently or openly, a "god" who creates value. The system attains this godlike absoluteness only if all the phenomenal world is subject to the formative, value-setting will, only when all values share a common system, representing collectively an esthetic value in the widest sense, such that life's irrationality in all its breadth and depth is transformed into rational truth, rational form.

This pan-rationalism, the goal of the total system in its claim to absolute authority, becomes a kind of mathematical image of this absolute, for the infinite nature of the world as a whole, which is recalled by

3. "Die Welgeschichte ist das Weltgericht."
values, is subject to number; number’s infinity is “all,” and we are concerned here with “all” values that can be gathered into a complete system; a hierarchy must extend over “all” world values, if conversely it is to take on the authority of the absolute — that is, the absolute quality of the great world religions, which grow up in this way; as one saw in the medieval Western Christian/Platonic worldview, this organon of values, in its claim to totality was the “only way to salvation,” with the result that at the time of its full sway it represented the nearest approach to an absolute liberation from death.

But at this point of nearest approach to the absolute, every value-system, no matter how powerful, must begin the process of self-renewal. For the absolute will always be unattainable, and every step toward reaching it will always be followed by yet another, even closer approximation. Each and every Platonic system must finally concede that it cannot cover “all” values or contents in the world; every form of Platonism must be resolved to positive and positivistic empirical experience, and even at the cost of their own dialectic self-dissolution they must necessarily strive toward self-renewal.

For the West, this dialectic self-dissolution came about with the Protestant division of the Church, and this retroactive dissolution of an integral value-system into ever smaller systems, each one of which, in turn autonomous and laying claim to exclusive validity and absolute authority, ended in that fearful anarchy of values and mutual incomprehension in which the struggle of individual value-systems concludes in violence and death, an anarchy in which the Platonic Idea appears to be extinguished utterly, giving way to the unspiritual per se.

*Rational Formation and Irrational Goal*

The larger the system, the more difficult it is to define rationally. Its rationality is visible only in its esthetic result, in the visible church, in the totality of its dogmas, in what already has real form. But if we ask about the goal of the value-system (*Wertziel des Systems*), it remains indefinable. For the very smallest systems and for individual values an ultimate goal can be given: The value-goal of the shoemaker or the tailor is rationally perceptible, but the value-goal of large systems remains indefinable and irrational, since it is infinite, and remains infinitely removed, be it called “God,” “the people,” “beauty,” or “justice.”

And yet the God who is introduced into every value-system arrives with certain ethical demands on mankind, commanding, “Thou shalt act in such and such a way, and thou wilt be immortal,” adding, “Thou shalt have no other value-systems beside me.” What value-aim does he reveal to humanity, if he cannot define it?

Now it is true that every value-system represents a hierarchy of values, but also that the ultimate value standing at the apex of the hierarchy, by reason of internal logic, cannot itself be part of the system; it is only represented by the system: “Science” as such is an empty concept, only gaining meaning as the totality of all scientific actions and methods. The goal remains in the irrationality of the future, and only when the future is given form and illumination can this goal itself be made clear.

In accordance with this remarkable state of affairs, the medieval artist did indeed keep his eye fixed exclusively on the infinite value-aim of the system, that is, God — but he could only serve God by producing well-crafted handiwork. God was not his problem, even if the things he was painting were symbols of God; the problems he needed to solve were not in God, but in the colors and spatial layouts, the people and animals whom he painted to honor God. And the silversmiths and shoemakers, the linen weavers, all did just the same — each performing his earthly labor for its own sake, keeping only in his mind’s eye the remote goal that gave earthly endeavors their ethical direction. But even the Church itself was prone to skepticism toward anyone whose work was focused all too directly on God; indeed, it quickly sensed in such attitudes a whiff of heresy. Man was to live by
dogma, he was expected to subjugate himself to the "technique" of the Church, if we can say it that way; but beyond that he was expected to fulfill his ethical obligation as a Christian, i.e., to serve God exclusively by performing his earthly labor for the sake of the work alone. And it was only in the context of all these attitudes that he acted truly ethically; only through the accumulation of all ethical acts — of which each one, as we said, brought about an aesthetic result, if only a partial result — would he attain the final aesthetic result, which was located in the infinite; only thus would he reach the supra-aesthetic goal, the state of grace and eternal bliss. But this ultimate effect played no role in the creation of the painter's picture, the armorer's sword, or the cobbler's shoe.

Although art is no longer a part of the religious system, having become autonomous like all other value-systems since the breakup of that all-encompassing system of religion, reinforcing this autonomy with the principle of l'art pour l'art, nonetheless, art even today has set down its own private theology in a series of aesthetic theories, and continues to hold to its highest value-goal, and this, too, continues to hover in the realm of the infinite, be it called "beauty," "harmony," or whatever else. And the ethical demand made of the artist is as always ' to produce "good" works, and only the dilettante and the producer of kitsch (whom we meet here for the first time) focus their work on beauty.

For the esthetic in general as an expression of the supreme ultimate value of a system can influence the result of ethical action only secondarily, just as "wealth" is not the main goal but the side effect of individual commercial activity. And "wealth" itself is an irrational concept. It is an almost mystical process, the setting of ethical values: Arising from the irrational, transforming the irrational to the rational, yet nonetheless it is the irrational that radiates from within the resulting form.

III. THE IRRATIONAL IN THE CONSTRUCT OF VALUES

The Subjective Element in Value Creation

But what does this mean, to demand that art produce works that are "good," rather than "beautiful"? Although it may not be easy to articulate a general formula, it still seems certain that "good" work must be in accord with the idea of autonomy peculiar to every value-system. And since value and truth are very closely allied in this idea of autonomy, so much so that the autonomous development of the value-system bears the stamp of an inner truth, then one can surely maintain that truth in a work of art has a significance one always felt intuitively: "Good" work must be able to connect in a certain way to the epistemological nature of art, to the discovery of new insights and new forms of seeing and experiencing that confer the character of universal truth not just to fine arts or to literature but to the entire range of art. This always concerns, even in music, the portrayal of an inner or an outer world, a representation that must, first of all, be unmediated, and therefore unswervingly truthful. We are dealing here with a kind of "expanded naturalism," in which van Gogh and Kafka would deserve inclusion as much as Dürer and Zola. It is always a question of showing the (inner or outer) world "as it really is."

But if one can in fact see or sense in this expanded naturalism the mystical irrationality of the final value-goal, then this is not simply "showing the world as it really is." Here forces must be at work that go beyond this prescription. And in fact it is evident that along with the naturalistic tendency there exists another tendency, no less strong, to "show the world as one wishes or fears it to be." In other words, along with the objective condition of the first demand there is a subjective condition that probably constitutes a personal prerequisite for all artistic
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creativity, and all artistic enjoyment. No matter how naturalistic, literature will scarcely want to dispense with the victorious hero, or to do without the hero defeated only after attaining inner victory; it is basically unimportant whether the desire to create and enjoy art arises from simple identification with such heroes, or if the primitive artist was undergoing some rudimentary and magical process of fear-exorcism, or yielding to some metaphysical impulse, when he painted his hunting-scenes on the walls of his cave: What the naïve man (and not only he) finds “beautiful” in a work of art is the result of these subjective, affective pleasures, of a very personal liberation from fear, uniting him with the infinite and irrational final value-goal in a literal unio mystica.

The Vocabulary of Reality in the Syntax of the Value-Set

Now it is quite unlikely that this mystical connection is confined to relationships of this type, i.e., ones simply based on subject matter, for only a small portion of art is based on the reproduction and representation of subject matter, a process that excludes music and many other areas; moreover, one can also assume that similar conditions likewise apply to the other value-systems. All those who do work that sets values lay claim to a certain “artistry” separating them from the mere bureaucrat; and this is justly so: The great statesman, the great general, the great merchant, all pursue their activities in some ways “artistically.”

If we object that the merchant, the general, the statesman impact the world directly, while art manufactures mere images, one could answer that art, too, undertakes to create forms directly from materials such as paint, tones, words, stone, and concrete, so that here too we speak not of original creation, but likewise a transformation, a re-forming. Of course this is beside the point, for basically these materials are merely auxiliary. The actual material that art works with and turns into works of art one could describe as “vocabulary units of reality” (Realitätsve-kabel). Poetry, for example, does not arbitrarily string words together (except in Dadaism), but rather sets up specific situations: “A man crosses the street” would be a kind of vocabulary unit of reality. Even the most fantastic and unreal poetry consists of such units. Nor are matters different in the other arts; even in music such vocabulary units of reality can be found.

But what are individual actions in a battle? What are individual political actions? What are individual commercial transactions? From this viewpoint, they are surely nothing but vocabulary units of reality, and if the handling of these vocabulary units can be considered artistry, then the “selection” made to create from them a new scheme of values is a function of the “creative license” that the artist, and all who call themselves artists, lays claim to.

Of course this creative license is not without limits: It has a close connection with the autonomy of the value-system in which it operates: The Christian’s freedom is the freedom of God, and is dependent on him. And just as one cannot string words together without heeding the value-system of language, just as it is impossible to use those words outside of the prescribed linguistic syntax, it is just as impossible to break the bonds of the specific syntax inherent in any value-system. The value-systems of politics, of military strategy, of commerce, all have their specific syntactic regulations, from which the agreed-upon values of the value-system get their particular significance: It is the actual “systemic idea” by which every value-system is governed, and just as the position of a word in the sentence not only colors the specific meaning of the word but changes the sense of the sentence, so also the position of the vocabulary units of reality in the value-system depends on this productive reciprocity.

The affinity of art to dreams has often been pointed out, and even dreams make use of the vocabulary units of reality that they take from the external world and that constitute, so to speak, the dream’s objective existence. Dreams also have syntactic laws, according to which the vocabulary units are generally used. But in applying these laws, the dreamer is allowed much subjective, “creative” freedom: the same
creative freedom with which artistic people handle syntax in every value-system.

The energy formed in words and lines, this quiet lending of meaning which is realized through selective use of these vocabulary units of reality, and which constitutes the essence of poetry, is at the same time the system's driving idea, and the power of this syntax can be so great, as in lyric poetry, that a single one of these units of reality can light up the whole world. For by virtue of poetic syntax, this unit of reality connects with all others in the world, all the others are intuitively felt in this one, and poetry's ultimate value, cosmic limitlessness, is fulfilled in the single reality-unit of a lyric poem.

The Example of Music

Music, the art most deeply linked to the emotions, yet nonetheless the most rational, expresses its syntax most purely and clearly through the laws of counterpoint. And nowhere else is it so clear as precisely here, in music's rational and visible syntax; all its discipline notwithstanding, music remains the production of a creative subject, a personal creativity that is as irrational as the person who performs it; truly, if all art is a representation of the world, here an inner world, if music, with ever more complex counterpoint, could ultimately represent the inner world of a Beethoven, and the mystical archetype that all music has as its ultimate, infinite goal, then it represents also an absolute redemption from death—the aim of all creativity, and which the value-system as a whole promotes.

The Irrational and Conservative in the Work of Art

Here the function of the value-system of art in contrast to the function of the other value-systems is revealed—the former has the enormous and near magical advantage that in every act it makes, it does not just hint at but actually reflects that totality.

But this reflection of the final, irrational value-goal, this reflection of totality gives the work of art another special significance: For every "unclosed" value-system—for example, the system of science—the esthetic concretization of its ethical efforts is already outdated and overtaken at the very moment of occurrence. Any given state of science is usually made obsolete at the very moment it is reached, becoming at that moment the object of re-forming again; one could even say that what has already been formed takes on once again the character of the unformed. In the work of art, what "was," the esthetic result of ethical impulse, is the unmediated image of the future toward which it is striving; this claim to totality is reflected in every individual artwork, and this closed quality, the quality of being "at rest in itself" which is the hallmark of the true work of art, this being lifted out of time, this value scheme made concrete in itself, can surely be understood as the second major reason for the dominant position of art throughout history.

And probably this is also why the artwork, and the esthetic in general, has been assigned such a significant role in every conservative value-system. For the future harbors darkness and death, and the only safety that life offers is in the visible and the created, thus ultimately in the past, and it is consistent with the absolutist tendency of value creation that there is also one value-system—the conservative system—that would likewise make into absolutes these values of a preformed past. But the artwork already represents this quality of the absolute. Indeed, it bears the mirror image of this absoluteness within itself, and one could almost say that art, in contradistinction to science, which in its structure is revolutionary and absolutely committed to progress, needs always to be conservative (although, in a peculiar, but probably necessary dialectic reversal, the individual artist is generally revolutionary, while the scientist is usually conservative). And if as it develops, art is continually mindful of what has been, if (art theories being in constant flux) the Renaissance and Classicism recalled ancient Greece and Rome, while Romanticism turned to the Gothic, then such phases in the development of a style of life are not only a general and necessary phenomenon,
but in such constant and inextinguishable continuity of events one finds perhaps the strongest possible case for the unity of civilization, for a totality of what is human, a totality that encompasses all times and regions of the earth, expressing simultaneously the closed nature of the artwork and the claim to totality of the creative human being.

For everything conservative goes back as well to the irrationality of man, and if we call the conservative maintenance of old values and attitudes “Romanticism,” then it is an essential component of this Romanticism to locate its sense of the world not in rational thought but in human feeling, in the intuitions and premonitions of the blood. And that remarkable merging of past and future that is characteristic of the search for values acquires a coloration that directly connects the human, irrational experience of values with the cosmos, with the final value-goals of humanity: the mysteries of blood and sexuality but also those mysteries of art—insofar as they mean the Dionysian-creative—that closeness to death that is a part of the fearful existence of every creature becomes simultaneously the way the supreme value releases us from death. It is an arch spanning the irrationality of the past to the irrationality of the future, rising out of fear, and reaching toward fear, yet taking with it the dark knowledge of life into the darkness of death, projecting back into its origin a final defeat of death, which is its aim; a gleam of light between two darknesses, the artwork is the symbol of being and of eternity, and a constant deliverance from fear.

IV. Nonvalue

Nonvalue as Defining Element for Every Value-System

The establishment of value-systems occurs as a result of ethical demand; this demand specifies how the person belonging to the system must conduct himself, in order to share in the final value-goal.

But the very impossibility of defining the value-goal in its infinite nature has shown that an ethical demand is merely a kind of direction giving, that it would be wrong to expect specific individual regulations. Every demand is based on an action, and just as every action is fixed between two stationary poles, and moves back and forth from one to the other, and can only be defined when these two things are known, the same applies to every demand made of such actions: It can only be defined when the two stationary poles, the point of origin and the destination point of the action, are known. Where this is not the case, where, as in every value-system, only the point of origin lies within the real and the visible, and moreover, all that is known is that actions that are a part of the system move away from this point of origin, for the entire system is occupied in a continuous evolution, striving toward the infinite—then the ethical demand can no longer consist of the “finite” formulation “Thou shalt strive toward this or that finite Goal,” but can only be put negatively: “Thou shalt quit this momentary and visible condition.”

And it is in fact true that all ethical imperatives in the world of the empirical, which is where they acquire moral character, appear in negative form. Seven of the Ten Commandments have the form “Thou shalt not,” and the other three can easily be shown to be derivatives of absolutes. A book of laws is always a collection of prohibitions. And no matter how many “Thou shalt nots” are set down, the goal that fits all these prohibitions is not defined but is only approximated in endless circles.

So if the value-system actually consists of ethical demands that the values of the system must satisfy, this not only points to the permanently open quality of its constitution and definition but also lends it the general structure of “Thou shalt not,” which always originates in the visible, definable, in what already has form, and so can be ultimately repudiated. No value could exist at all, if the “Thou shalt not” did not proceed from a nonvalue, from an evil, which is definable and at the same time repudiated. Value is constituted by nonvalue, the value-system is constituted by the evil that it overcomes, from which it develops continually, the evil that in the end always means death.
Nonvalue: Function of the Autonomy of Value

But here too there exists the same interaction, because the evaluation of what must be deemed value or nonvalue, as bad or good, is controlled by the system; the “bad” from which the value-system is supposedly constituted is not absolute, but, due to the relativity of values, is a function of the system. To create saleable mass-produced goods is an ethical value for the mercantile system, but for the artistic system, a nonvalue.

So if the constitution of nonvalue is to be separated from the relativity of a plurality of differing given value-systems, then it must be based on the structure of the systems themselves. And once again we must deal with autonomy, for the defining characteristic of every value-system is its aspiring to the absolute: Every value-system, indeed every individual value itself claims to be uniquely valid a priori and in a way would claim all one’s available consciousness (the psychology of children and primitive peoples would provide plenty of examples), and only through the necessities of practical life are groups and hierarchies of values built that finally mature into unified systems. But whatever remains outside the system, both in theory and in fact, can never take on the character of value, it remains nonvalue, perhaps neutral to the system, but only so long as no direct contact with the system itself takes place. For that menacing, dark, and incomprehensible quality, which is always obscurely the reality of death, this quality is attached to every alien system (even while still neutral), but as soon as it abandons its neutrality and enters into logical connection with one’s own system, it is immediately actualized, it becomes evil, and leads to a war of opposing values.

Evil in Dogmatism

Although the struggle of individual value-systems is real and plainly raging all about us, our concept of it is nonetheless entirely anthropomorphic; it is a kind of war of the gods, a war between imaginary sub-
jects of commercial, military, national, or other systems. And the logical connection between two value-systems that is required to transform the neutral alien value into “evil” is seen to some extent as the intrusion of one god on the ethical authority of another. This intervention, which the autonomous freedom of one system is supposed to suffer at the hands of another, is an impairment of that “freedom” which is so closely connected with the system’s autonomy. It does not matter if this impairment consists of commands that are be patriotic, that military operations be conducted in accordance with the views of the aristocracy, or that a capitalist economy allow socialist viewpoints to prevail, it is always this breach of its autonomy that is felt by a value-system to be “evil.” The formulation of evil as a breach in a system’s autonomy is independent of the content or nature of the particular value-system; it is a condition of its structure only, and if the breach of a value-system’s autonomic authority can be called the essence of dogmatism, then dogmatism is “evil” per se.

Nonetheless, the necessary logical connection has not yet been established. The dogmatic attack on a system by some alien system can of course actually occur under certain circumstances, but there is always a degree of arbitrariness about it, and as such says nothing about the logical possibility or the structure of such an attack. For even if the origin of the dogmatic, the origin of evil, must be displaced onto an alien system, if it must always need to come from an “outside,” a realm of darkness and death, where one’s “own” values do not apply, there must still exist certain logical preconditions that enable the alien system to carry out this attack, and we must at a minimum assume that in the alien system certain phenomena that are considered “good” in one’s own system are considered “evil,” for without this presupposition no attack on one’s own ethical postulates could take place. So it is always a certain dialectic relationship, a dialectic process of divergence, which must be present in part or in full between the two warring value-systems: What is considered good in the one must be evil in the other. This type of
systemic pair is well known: One could actually speak of “oppositional systems,” theism-atheism, capitalism-socialism, militarism-pacifism, to name a few examples.

Thus, independent of whether the “evil” in fact attacks from an empirically opposed outside system, or whether it has developed dialectically from within one’s own system (for there exists no value-system from whose values and attitudes the “criminal” opposition could not be logically derived), the “valuation” that the valuating subject performs in his own system is always such that the subject isolates evil as an oppositional value, locating it in an external and criminal oppositional system, which is then held responsible for the dogmatic attack.

The historical process in which human life is played out collectively or individually is an aggregate of innumerable value-systems, and regardless of whether the systems coexist in mutual indifference or whether they overlap, support, or oppose one another, an individual by his actions can belong to the most diverse value-systems but remains compelled to unite these different impulses into a single system of his own, to make them to some extent a part of his personal biology. The more polarized the world and its value-systems become, the greater and more painful the tension is between them, the more difficult it becomes for the individual psyche to cope with the values of good and evil imposed upon it. Man always sins with only one part of his being. But when this balance of values is disturbed, when he transgresses against the complex value-system comprising “society,” its value-system then goes into action and “expels” him; he is then relegated into an opposing system, the “criminal” system dialectically opposed to the system of society, for it is presumed that he has acted according to the laws of this opposing system.

Savonarola burned paintings and thus acted against the value-system of art, the motivation for his actions was located in a value-system of religion and asceticism; when an enemy army invades a country, it acts according to its own native system; when the Convention felt compelled to sentence Louis XVI to death, it did indeed offend the monarchic value-system but acted within the value-system of freedom; for each value-system that is “offended,” an externally located oppositional system can be given, to which responsibility for such actions can be ascribed, and as long as this can be done, the evil remains within the relativity of the value-system; call it “error,” call it “simple evil,” or even “criminality,” but the boundary separating it from “absolute evil” has not yet been crossed. But when such an “outside” force, aimed at the destruction of the system and the abolition of its values, is no longer to be found, when destruction becomes self-destruction, arising from and using the means of the system itself, a self-destruction that cannot be excused as “seduction” from without, then it is appropriate to speak of the effect of “radical evil.” Radical evil is innate within the system and cannot be eradicated.

The more comprehensive a value-system is, and the greater its value-goal, the more likely an attack on this goal becomes a crimen laesae maestatis (an offense against the crown), the crime of lese-majesté. But since such an offense has no immediate victim—for the dignity of God or the crown cannot be impaired by any such offense—such quantitative thinking does not sufficiently explain the peculiar gravity of an offense against the crown, which approaches that of radical evil. The seriousness of such an offense is only made clear by the fact that the more extensive value-system has increasing difficulty identifying an oppositional system in reality that could compete in scope and power with itself, the injured system; to identify, in other words, a system with the ability to take action against the original system and to injure it. Here the oppositional system must be accorded literally satanic power, a power that automatically raises it to the level of being the vent of evil itself.
A total value-system like religion, which in essence strives to encompass the totality of the world along with all its values and value-systems, feels itself called completely into question by the existence of Evil; the absolute quality, the absolute, world-inclusive nature of religion permits no neighboring or opposing systems into which evil could be displaced. Even for Manichaeism, which saw the world as resulting from the conflict between principles of good and evil, the theological antinomy “How is sin possible in God’s world?” is inescapable. And since under no circumstances can sin and evil belong to one’s “own” system but only to an alien system, the question broadens to “How is the presence of an oppositional system within one’s ‘own’ system possible?”

The resolution of this paradox is found in the nature of the ethical demand itself. When Luther says, “Good and pious works do not make a good and pious man, but rather a good and pious man does good and pious works,” he expresses the essence of the matter. Luther denounces the perverting of an infinite ethical demand into a finite moral code, which is indeed a part of the value-system but must not be confused with it. In other words, within every value-system there exists another completely identical system, which trait for trait completely matches with the original and yet is its opposite, for it lacks its view toward an infinite value-goal. It is the mask of the Antichrist, who bears Christ’s features but is Evil nonetheless.

One could speak of a specific imitation system, of an imitation in which even the imitatio Dei is again imitated but where all essential elements are converted to their opposites: the infinite to the finite, the irrational to the rational, and vice-versa. And no matter how significant it is that the infinite is lessened and degraded into the finite, and the finite pathetically inflated to the infinite (for this is the essence of pathos), more important than this reversal is the reversal of the ethical and the esthetic, which is the distinguishing characteristic of an imitation system, indeed, where the logic that drives it is to be found. For here something is happening that changes the total ethical character of the system: Its ethical demand is replaced by something for which really there is only one description, albeit a contradictio in adjecto, namely, the “esthetic demand.”

Using the word “esthetic” in its broadest sense, whereby it applies to anything already formed, the “esthetic demand,” in brief, is not oriented toward the ethical and infinite value-goal of the system but is based on already existing formations within the system. If every value-system finds its concrete esthetic realization in preformed or prealtered versions of the world — art in the multitude of existing artworks, science in the system of established scientific findings, politics or military strategy in the global political conditions currently in effect — and if every system is striving beyond the current situation toward its infinitely distant value-goal, in a continuous process of refinement, then, we have said, preexisting esthetic formations are eliminated from the system at the moment of their being formed and can only become the objects yet again of new formation. And even art, in so far as it is rational theory, develops by constantly turning away from what has been; theories of painting, for instance, such as perspective or atmospherics, are constantly improving “scientifically.” The conservative tendency at work in every value-system, aiming at the preservation of previously formed esthetic values, plays a role, forming a countermovement within all this ongoing development, but this countermovement leads immediately ad absurdum when the real goal of the system is lost, i.e., when humanity in its quest toward value turns and directs its gaze backward. Yes, even conservatism as a value-system in itself becomes senseless, paralyzed, “reactionary,” as soon as it forgets its own living goal, the preservation of the past in continuous and living development, and clings solely to preformed, rigid ideas. This is what Plotinus meant by “forgetting the divine origin of things;” here we have the reversion of the preexisting and the preformed into the chaotic state of apeiron (the unknowable), even though they might be preserved for a time in petrified form; the man who thus perverts his value-goal has lost his goodwill; his volitio
has become reversed to *nolitio*, even that *nolitio perfecta* which Aquinas saw as constituting evil itself; he becomes a collector of lifeless objects, and for him the past and its forms are not just symbols of the infinite goals but come suddenly to be the goal itself. And so for the believer in dogma and in Scripture — to come back to our example — the visible Church is no longer the all-encompassing symbol of God that it professes to be, but is made to be God itself: In reducing the infinite quality of God to the finite quality of the visible, faith becomes mere moralizing as it is dragged down from the sphere of the ethical and into the esthetic, and the infinite imperative of faith is degraded into an esthetic one.

But this “esthetic demand” is thus also transformed into a demand for “effect,” in fact can be defined as such. So while the “effect” of faith is to be found in the grace of redemption from death, which is only granted to mankind as a logical possibility and preparedness for the soul’s infinite journey, the effect of grace for the literal believer rather than the man of faith is in a sense a direct reward, having an immediate and formal connection to his earthly deeds. And it is no different in all the other value-systems: the infinite goal, in fact esthetic and irrational, which results merely as an “effect,” the correct automatic side effect of ethically good action: “Wealth” for the merchant, “beauty” for artists, this entirely irrational thing, is now elevated to a rational goal, and this is what defines the true essence of an imitation system, that it is seemingly no longer distinct at all from the original value-system, but in fact stands in strict opposition to it. The imitation system is everywhere, whether it is the financial mercenaries that are built into the system of commerce, or the snobbism that characterizes a feudal society, or the imitation system of kitsch within the value-system of art: All these are, although in miniature, images of the system of the Antichrist.

And it is the system of “reaction” in the value-system of conservatism. For the “esthetic demand” is based on the past *per se*, which transposes it into a value-goal, a “false” value-goal, and elevates it into a false value subject, to an Anti-God, the bearer of evil, whose anti-ethical demands dogmatically intervene in the living evolution of the original system and its autonomy. And precisely because this is how “esthetic demand” functions, it becomes the mission of kitsch as an esthetic phenomenon to be the representative of the ethically evil.

V. Kitsch

*Kitsch and Tendentious Art*

First, one objection: If the dogmatic is in fact supposed to be evil for every value-system, if art in fact should refuse to be subject to any external influences, then every kind of tendentious art would *a priori* be representing evil; indeed, it would be dubious whether the medieval subordination of art to religion had not contradicted the essential nature of art. And nonetheless medieval art survived, artworks survive today whose outspokenly tendentious nature is undeniable; Lessing’s didactic writings, Gerhart Hauptmann’s *The Weavers*, and Russian films all survive.

So one cannot simply insist that all tendentious art is kitsch, no matter how much the imitation system (as represented by kitsch) is suited to be subordinated to extra-artistic ends, no matter how much one feels the danger of kitsch for all tendentious art. Take Zola, whom no one would accuse of creating kitsch: Looking at his *Quatre Evangiles*, where he wanted to set down his socialist, anticlerical convictions, one sees a completely utopian situation in the frame of a naturalistic novel, a condition that would certainly never have come about even after the arrival of a classless society, a condition in which good and evil are judged not by future moral concepts but are attached to good socialists and bad anti-socialists in accordance with moral concepts valid in 1890. And even though Zola himself is far from kitsch, in this process one sees all the dangers that are provoked by the penetration of an alien system inside the autonomous realm of an art form. It is almost a textbook
example of the effectiveness of the dogmatic within a value-system. For if it is part of the essence of our age that every value-system maintain its autonomy under all circumstances, if this entirely ethical behavior — and therein lies the tragedy of our age — finds expression in an all-out war among values, then the rape of one value-system by another is, to put it anthropomorphically, like the conduct of an enemy army in occupied territory, i.e., it allows itself things that its ethics would forbid it at home. And if art — which in itself has no theme “of its own,” for it is a representation, always requiring alien value-realms, drawing even its major theme, love, from the value-realms of the erotic — if art, more than any other system, is able to tolerate intrusion from without, so that today art and especially literature have become more than ever a playground for every imaginable alien value-system, if we have not only patriotic and socialist tendentious art but also novels about sport and other special interests, then all of this has a least common denominator perhaps most obvious where love poetry turns pornographic, i.e., just where the erotic value-system becomes dogmatic and literature is transformed into erotic tendentious art; the infinite goal of love reverts to the finite, its irrationality is pulled back toward the finite, the goal becomes a series of rational sex acts. And it is no different, if less crass, for Zola the utopian to shift the vital value-system of socialism (and back then it was still young and vital) into the time and circumstances of 1890; in drawing the infinite goal of socialism into the finite, he “finitizes” the system itself, but in so doing perverts its ethos into rationalistic moralizing. Not only does this offend the principle of a genuine utopia, which logically must be infinitely distant from reality, but, most significantly, it also transforms the artist’s “good” work into the despised “beautiful”; of course, it cannot be forbidden for the artist to describe socialists, patriots, and sports and religious figures, it cannot be disallowed to describe conditions that cry out for military or pacifist solutions — in just this sense Hauptmann’s Weavers is legitimate tendentious literature — indeed, the poet must depict them, for the world in all its aspects must remain

the subject of an “expanded naturalism,” but it is just this expanded naturalism and its truthfulness, which is the only criterion of an autonomous art, that may not observe these value-systems in any way other than as objects of faithful description: It must show them in their incompleteness, in their evolution, “as they really are,” and not “as it would like them to be,” or as they would themselves like to be, completed in the realm of the finite and made concrete in a way in which they never can be.

The Reactionary Technique of “Effect”

The essence of kitsch is the confusion of ethical and esthetic categories; kitsch wants to produce not the “good” but the “beautiful.” And if this means that the kitsch novel, even while often using quite naturalistic language, i.e., the vocabulary of reality, describes the world not as it really is but as it is hoped and feared to be, and if quite analogous tendencies turn up in the fine arts as well, if kitsch in music depends exclusively on effect — one need only think of the so-called bourgeois salon music, remembering that in many respects the music industry of today is its overbred offspring — still one must concede that no art can work without some effect, without a smattering of kitsch. In the dramatic arts, kitsch becomes a structural and artistic component, and there is even an entire genre, a specifically bourgeois one, namely, opera, in which effect is the principal structuring element; and one should not forget that opera by its very nature is distinctly “historical,” and that that relationship between artwork and public where the “effect” is actually revealed is a matter of the empirical, the earthbound. The means employed for effect are always “proven,” and they can hardly be increased any more than the number of possible dramatic situations could be increased; that which is past and proven appears over and over again in kitsch; in other words (a stroll through any art exhibit will confirm this), kitsch is always subject to the dogmatic influence of the past — it will never take
its vocabulary of reality from the world directly but will apply pre-used vocabularies, which in its hands rigidify into cliché, and here is the nol­tiō, the rejecting of goodwill, the turning away from the divine cosmic creation of values.

**Kitsch-Romanticism**

This reversion to the historical, which is the hallmark of kitsch, is by no means restricted to technical or formal considerations. For even though its value-system is likewise based on the fear of death, and, in line with its innate conservatism, tries to provide humanity with an existential certainty plucked from the imminent darkness, kitsch is still just reactionary, because it is an imitation system, and just as it foreshortens its view of the future, for example, and is satisfied with counterfeiting the finite reality of earthly life, so its view of the past is likewise truncated. The historical novel can be seen as the product of a quite legitimate Romanticism that clings to the values of the past and sees the continuous unfolding of history as a reflection of the eternal. But this completely legitimate and in principle unchangeable attitude of the conservative spirit is discredited the moment it is employed out of personal motivations: for example, in times of irrational and revolutionary turmoil, if it is used as an escape from the irrational, as a flight into an idyllic historic past, where fixed conventions still applied. This personal longing for a better and safer world makes more understandable the current rejuvenation of interest in the historical and in the historical novel; but, since this longed-for historical past is also “beautiful,” this is a move into an area that belongs to the sphere of influence of kitsch. And in fact nowhere is this longing satisfied so simply as in kitsch; just as once the blood-and-thunder novels of knights and knaves were a response to this romantic tendency, and where even then the vocabulary of reality from the immediate historical past was replaced by prefabricated cliché, so, today, we flee from reality clearly in search of a world of fixed conventions, a kind of world of our fathers, where everything was good and right, seeking, in short, an immediate connection to the past; similarly, kitsch always technically copies its immediate predecessor, and the means it employs to do this are always astonishingly simple— one could really call this the symbolic power of kitsch— indeed, it suffices to bring some historical figure from the recent past like Emperor Franz Josef onto the operetta stage: His mere presence creates that atmosphere of reassurance that people need. And it is no different in the rose-colored world of kitsch novels.

**Confusing the Finite with the Infinite**

One must distinguish between annulling death and fleeing death, between shedding light on the irrational and fleeing from the irrational. Kitsch is found in flight, it is constantly fleeing into the rational. The techniques of kitsch, which are based on imitation, are rational and operate according to formulas; they remain rational even when their result has a highly irrational, even crazy, quality. For though kitsch, as an imitation system, is obliged to coincide in all its aspects with art, the artwork’s methodology as such cannot be imitated—all that can be imitated are its simplest forms. It is quite significant—and nowhere is this so obvious as in poetry, but also somewhat in music—that kitsch must always revert to the most primitive methods, precisely because it completely lacks any imagination of its own: Pornography, whose reality vocabulary consists, obviously, of sex acts, is mostly a mere series of such acts; the kitsch detective novel consists of a series of identical victories over the criminal, the sentimental kitsch novel is an array of indistinguishable good deeds rewarded and bad deeds punished; incidentally, here the monotonous vocabulary units of reality are fitted into a method of primitive syntax, a constant, rhythmic drumbeat.

If such novelistic situations were translated into reality, they would be not fantastic but simply crazy, for what they lack is that meaning from a
syntactic system which is the mark of an authentic work of art. The subjective and creative freedom of selecting and forming the reality vocabulary is here no longer at work within a system, and the connection between the reality base and its ultimate form is at the same time as loose and as illogical as that between a building and the stuck-on ornamentation of kitsch architecture. And probably it is this inability to copy any systematically creative work of art that leads any imitative system (and not just that of art) to justify betraying the highest value-aim of the imitated system through an appeal to dark and Dionysian forces, to the pulse of the blood, to the emotions. It is almost immaterial whether this appeal to the emotions is undertaken by a pseudoscience, a pseudophilosophy, or a pseudopolitics, or simply by a sentimental novel, for any appeal to the emotions or to the irrational will always, in kitsch, return to imitation, to rational formulaic means; for example when the kitsch novel aims at reproducing Hamsun’s closeness to nature by an overdone emphasis on autochthonic themes and peasant virtues, or when it similarly incorporates Dostoievsky’s infinite search for God into every second work of popular fiction, then the efforts that kitsch makes to distance itself from its own peculiar primitive methods do not conceal but actually expose quite clearly the discrepancy here, that the finite is being patheticized, that is, elevated to the level of the infinite, as is always the case when a finite and minor value appears with the claim of universal validity.

The Representation of Evil

And just this gratification of physical urges through finite and rational means, precisely this patheticizing of the finite to the infinite, this conscious working at “the Beautiful” gives kitsch that touch of mendacity behind which one senses the ethically evil. For the flight from death, which is not the annulment of death, this shaping of the world, which nonetheless leaves the world no further formed, is still just an apparent annulment of time: The goal of every value-system, the transformation of time into a simultaneous system, is likewise the goal of every imitation system, including kitsch. But since no new formative action occurs, since the irrational is not in any way clarified, merely substituting one rational definition with another, kitsch never attains the annulment of time, and its flight from death is just “killing time.”

The maker of kitsch does not create inferior art, he is not an incompetent or a bungler, he cannot be evaluated by esthetic standards; rather, he is ethically depraved, a criminal willing radical evil. And since it is radical evil that is manifest here, evil per se, forming the absolute negative pole of every value-system, kitsch will always be evil, not just kitsch in art, but kitsch in every value-system that is not an imitation system; for whoever works for the effect of beauty, whoever seeks only that affective gratification that makes one gasp, “beautiful!”, that is, the radical esthete, will use any and all means without hesitation to achieve this effect of beauty: The gigantic work of kitsch that Nero himself arranged with the fireworks display of burning Christians in his gardens, while playing the lute—not for nothing were Nero’s greatest ambitions theatrical.

Every era of disintegration of values was also an era of kitsch. The disintegrating classical culture of Imperial Rome created kitsch, and the present era, standing at the end of that process which the medieval worldview began, must once again find its representation in the esthetically evil. For times of final loss of values are grounded on evil and the fear of evil, and the art that is to be their most obvious expression must also be an expression of the evil at work within them.

A New Synthesis of Value-Systems

Of course if the thesis is correct that the world’s historical legacy to succeeding generations and to eternity is solely the ethically worthy act, including its equivalent esthetic result, then kitsch has never been the
Geist and Zeitgeist

expression of the lifestyle of an age. For then the kitsch created through all these millennia just disappeared, and nothing survived except genuine art. Or did a lot of kitsch just change its signature? Do we not take much art to be full, legitimate, expressive of its time, which in fact once was manufactured art, and conventional kitsch? One must be extremely cautious dealing with assessments of historical phenomena, being mindful of constantly changing patterns of appreciation; it would be difficult to determine a hierarchy of Egyptian art today, and in the last analysis it is probably not possible to say what is just epigonal provincial art of Fayum or Pompeii, preserved only by accident, and what should be accounted as the true expression of the age and its style. Certainly the parallels between the final days of the ancient world and the present time are significant—but can they be extended unproblematically to the field of art?

And yet this objection—if it can be justified at all—is weak. For it does not much matter if what is clearly seen as kitsch today, if what is despised and taken as the representation of evil today, if this oddly undervalued and yet so profitable phenomenon will still be existing in a number of years or whether it will then be judged differently. History is not quite absolute immortality, and even if kitsch is ephemeral, if its manifestations already are slipping into oblivion, even there providing us with a proof of our thesis, and even though the ethical act and its esthetically valid result will easily outlive today’s kitsch, nonetheless for them, too, the era of darkness and of complete oblivion will also break: History is a function of viewpoint and distance, and its only absolutes are method and idea. And if it is an expression of our age that the fearful tension between its good and its evil shows in its art as well, this may fade with the passing of time, its contours may blur, but it will remain timeless like every correct view (provided its method is correct) and will remain valid for all ages and allows one to conclude that in every era that had to live and suffer under similar conditions, even in the late Roman empire, things were just the same, regardless of whether their forms of kitsch have survived until now, regardless of whether they are viewed now as kitsch or as art. But one inheritance we have from the late ancient world, from the horrors of religious strife that it struggled through, an inheritance that has become both historical and spiritual actuality, is the merging of value-systems, which then were as strife-torn as today, into an organon of a new religion and a new religiosity, which will be the fruit of a present whose deepest need is the search for faith.

And that is what matters. Not until a higher value-system has absorbed and conciliated the warring of autonomous individual value-systems, not until these individual systems have again become subservient to an overriding Platonic Idea, have been fitted into its hierarchy, only then will the tension and convulsive struggles between different groups disappear, not just from the world, but from the soul of man, whose discord is identical with the world’s discord of values. The counter-reaction to the presence of evil in every individual gives rise to the world’s question: “What should we do?”; the esthetic reverts back to the ethical, so that unity may be restored to the world; for even though one day it may again sink into disintegration, for as long as it exists, this unity will exclude non-art and will be visibly embodied as such in the existence of beauty.