Kitsch!

CULTURAL POLITICS AND TASTE

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Manchester University Press
Manchester and New York
distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan
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102 Triumph of the Will. Dir. Leni Riefenstahl. Reichsparteitag-Film. 1935.
112 Cited in Merck, p. 227.
113 Warhol, cited in Merck, p. 231.
117 Miguel Tamen, Friends of Interpretable Objects (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
119 See Andrew Arato’s discussion of Adorno’s distinction between immanent and transcendent critique in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader (London: Continuum, 1982), pp. 185–207.

2. Kitsch taste

Kitsch, technologically as well as aesthetically, is one of the most typical products of modernity.¹

Before examining specific uses of kitsch, a visit to kitsch past is necessary to establish the extent of its cultural defilement as well as its historically antagonistic relationship to art. This chapter explores the history of writing on kitsch – and its appreciator, ‘kitsch-man’. We aim to show that kitsch is thoroughly constituted as art’s ‘other’ and that kitsch-man, as lover of kitsch, represents the abject of the art connoisseur. In fact, as we demonstrate over the next few chapters, kitsch-man turns out more often than not to be kitsch woman; or child; the working class (although ‘popular’ taste is also frequently presented as feminised and/or ‘arrested’); and the colonial other – who joins these ‘less developed’ bedfellows of exclusion within Darwinian and Freudian narratives of development, civilisation and cultivation that allow only the cognisant few to appreciate the value of ‘real’ (some might argue, modern) art.² While in the twentieth century a direct attack on the tastes of others may have been seen as permissible (or even necessary), as time went on, and critiques of elite taste gathered pace, those who sought to preserve a privileged aesthetic have resorted to more circuitous modes of making judgements. Decoration and sentimentality have become key abjects of artistic discourse, and we seek here to offer something of a history of these categories as well as to present selected contemporary examples of their continued deployment. We begin by exploring early writings on kitsch and its relationship to art and to politics, subsequently exploring the figure of ‘kitsch-man’ to show the classed, racialised and gendered assumptions that attach to this figure in the discourse of modernist art and design. While we are in no sense claiming to be
philosophers, a brief outline of the philosophical ideas underpinning the appreciation of art is necessary before we progress to examine kitsch in particular.

Kitsch – a falling star

The word kitsch, originally German, purportedly began use in Munich in the mid-1800s. Its etymology includes verkitschen, meaning to make cheap and kitschen – to collect junk from the street. Since the 1900s, definitions of kitsch invariably cast it as mass-produced tat, as gaudy, tacky or brash – inferring both cheap manufacture and dubious aesthetic quality associated with the turn of the twentieth century and the new prosperity of the 1950s–1970s. As Binkley describes:

knock-off imitation luxury products, ‘fine art’ items crudely and glibly manufactured to resemble the posh, high art objects of the old aristocracy ... Fake-gilded furniture, glass-beaded jewellery, highly ornate candelabras, imitation oil paintings, miniature ceramic copies of ancient statues.3

Definitions of kitsch are therefore rooted both in a mode of production and a set of aesthetic values – and, additionally, in deception, what Matei Călinescu calls a ‘specifically aesthetic form of lying’. Whom these items are created to deceive is the subject of much of this book, but this is examined in more detail in the next chapter on ‘kitsch-man’. However, it is worth briefly rehearsing these two roots into definitions of kitsch and kitsch’s subsequent theorisations.

The most common conception of kitsch concerns the history and theory of mass production, which began in earnest in the early decades of the twentieth century preceded by the migration of rural populations into towns and cities and the imposition of ‘time discipline’ on the working day, breaking it into shifts. The factory system also effected a public–private split separating the spheres of home and work and confining middle-class women to the domestic. Standardisation and specialisation resulted in vast quantities of identical products which, while resulting in tedium and alienation for workers, simultaneously offered them the promise of fulfilment via democratised consumption. Marxists point out that the capitalist mode of production not only manufactures commodities, but also the need for those commodities. Capitalism doubly exploits the working class, first, in production through the extraction of surplus value and, second, in pricing products not according to ‘use value’ but to ‘exchange value’, creating a market price far in excess of the ‘real’ value of the product.

Despite selling for relatively high prices, then, mass produced goods are uniform and cheaply made. This system, kept in place by a cultural order whereby the ‘ruling classes’ generate ‘ruling ideas’ made to appear universally beneficial, can only occasionally be disrupted, by engaging with an ‘authentic culture’ that exists outside or beyond the capitalist system and its ideological reproduction. Rather
problematically, however, this 'authentic' culture frequently turns out to be coterminous with 'elite' tastes and sensibilities – whether those elites lean politically towards capitalism or Marxism. We explore this further later, but first we turn our attentions to that second ingredient so central to understandings of kitsch – aesthetics.

The best that has ever been thought ...

Beginning with the Enlightenment, the culture of capitalist modernity valued above all rationalism and progress. Progress in production meant constant innovation in technology and management principles. Progress in nature required its reimagining in line with Newton’s principles of an ordered universe and Darwinian evolutionary theory, calling an abrupt halt to the millennia of random and infinite variation of God-given wonders of the natural world. Plants, animals, humans and even capitalist organisations themselves were, it was claimed, ordered, competing in an endless battle for supremacy. Survival of the fittest required competition both between and within species – and

the human species was no exception, being reordered and revalued according to ‘race’, class and gender, among other classifications, producing white, heterosexual men as the ‘fittest’. All life before modernity was recast as a set of misguided journeys towards the present and the present was oriented only towards rational progression to a better future. No claim about the world could be made without observable evidence. However, culture is never monolithic, and it was not long before the green shoots of disaffection with rationalism and teleology began to show in the form of Romanticism.

It would be wrong to place rationalism and Romanticism in opposition, as both challenged the pre-Enlightenment hierarchy and authority of the Church and its insistence on divine order, either via secularism or Protestantism’s self-determination and individualised faith; both sought to liberate human minds from superstition. Whereas rationalism was associated with the northern countries of Europe, Romanticism derived from the romance languages and cultures of the south. Romanticism valued nature – especially the landscape – the curious, bizarre and spectacular elements of life, and in particular, human affective responses to these things. Experiences and spontaneity were central to moving beyond rational thinking into other areas of the human psyche, in particular the imagination. While rationalism was so embedded in the new sciences, Romanticism became embedded in the arts – painting, novels, but especially poetry. Enlightenment art favoured Neoclassicism which was seen to appeal to universal proportions and laws of beauty based on moral truths that preceded the now discredited Christian dogma. Simplicity was valued over the embellishments of Baroque, and especially the Rococo style associated with the excesses of the pre-revolutionary French aristocracy. Neoclassicism represented a return to nature (a nature, however, that had already been incorporated into the laws of science). Young men from Northern Europe were duly dispatched by their fathers to Italy, as part of the Grand Tour, to gaze upon the remnants of classical culture. However, on their journeys they encountered the wilderness and spectacle of the Alps – and thus the sublime.

The sublime was originally discussed by Longinus in the first century to describe that which was great, elevated and awe inspiring. However, its revival in the eighteenth century to describe an aesthetic quality found in nature took on an additional meaning – the sublime mixed feelings of pleasure and delight with those of horror and
despair. Joseph Addison, for instance, who embarked on the Grand Tour in 1699, commented that: ‘the Alps ... fill the Mind with an agreeable kind of Horror’. Whereas Plato talked about the aesthetic quality of beauty as producing a pleasurable experience, Edmund Burke’s theories of the sublime suggested that ugliness could produce extreme emotions—an experience that could also lead to pleasure. Vastness and irregularity, for instance, were not thought beautiful, but could provide a sense of individual limitation and mortality, which, when witnessed from a safe distance, could produce a vicarious fission of delight. In the Critique of Judgment (1790) Immanuel Kant weaves these positions on the sublime into a theory of aesthetics, which proposes a subjective quality of aesthetic experience that he calls taste or aesthetic judgement.

Plato had talked about beauty in this world bringing pleasure because it invokes true beauty in the realm of Forms—the realm from which we are born and to which we return after death. True beauty in the realm of Forms is connected with truth and goodness, but beauty in this world, being only a vague remembrance of true beauty, can be disconnected from these values and is therefore deceptive. The link between beauty, truth and goodness, even if only in the realm of Forms, has meant that ‘true’ beauty is inextricably connected to a discourse of moral value and that beauty is essentially a property of things or people. For Kant, on the other hand, the pleasure invoked by an encounter with beauty can be more problematic. Crucial for Kant is the distinction between two seemingly similar experiences—aesthetic judgements about the ‘beautiful’ and another type of judgement about the ‘agreeable’. For Kant these judgements mean very different things. The agreeable is ‘that which pleases the senses in sensation’ whereas the beautiful is ‘that which, without concepts, is represented as the object of universal satisfaction’. The agreeable brings pleasure only to the individual, while the beautiful, because each subject engages identical mental processes in every subject, should bring pleasure to everyone who encounters it. So, while such judgements are subjective, Kant argues that it is also possible for us to demand universal agreement in the judgement of what is beautiful since all subjects (capable of cognition) respond to beauty in the same way. Kant accounts for this through a description of the way in which the faculties of understanding and imagination interplay in response to the beautiful object.

In the eighteenth century Jean-Jacques Rousseau had introduced the idea of an individual self capable of making rational and moral judgements and that these judgements derived from shared conditions of existence. In addition, David Hume had talked of ‘taste’, as a refined ability to perceive quality in a work of art. He argued that although some artworks were undoubtedly better than others, it was the acquisition of certain abilities that allowed agreement to set a universal ‘standard of taste’. Kant expanded this to explore judgements of beauty. He claimed that beauty was both part of the artwork and part of rational judgement. Although the brain has a certain innate structure that is common to everyone, the world cannot be experienced as a material reality external to human existence but is only knowable as it appears to our senses, and is thus subjective—as he puts it, the nominal world is unknowable. Thus, he argues in opposition to Plato, that beauty is not simply the property of an object such as a mountain, or a painting, but is rather the pleasure derived from the ‘free play’ of the faculties of imagination and the understanding that it produces.

Another important distinction for Kant is between the beautiful and the sublime. Whereas the pleasure of beauty derives from the form of an object that has boundaries, the sublime is to be found in a boundless or formless object. The sublime promotes fear or awe but not necessarily of the object itself. A beautiful object is beautiful because it has purposiveness without purpose. It is organised in a coherent way but has no human use—in this way our judgements of beauty are disinterested. In 1912, Edward Bullough conceptualised this disinterestedness in terms of detachment or physical distance, and in 1936 Walter Benjamin picked up this metaphor to famously claim that ‘art begins four feet away from the body’. The sublime on the other hand is characterised by disorder and chaos and purposivenesslessness. The sublime is our encounter with something we cannot imagine (in the case of the mathematical sublime) and that threatens to overwhelm us (in the case of the dynamic sublime) and compels us to acknowledge our supersensible vocation and our ability to use reason and to stand firm in the face of danger. Hence, the sublime experience can also be linked with morality. Contemplating the sublime is not possible through imagination, Kant argues, because imagination cannot comprehend the infinite (formless, boundless), so the observer must turn instead to reason.

In the case of the mathematical sublime, the failure of the imagination to allow us to create an image of something infinitely large is
painful, but as we become aware that the failed attempt to use the imagination in this way was demanded by reason, the subject experiences pleasure and a sense of moral vocation, in turn developing moral character. Reason has to extend itself to comprehend the sensory information offered by the sublime, so the sublime experience involves a challenge to the (male) subject that is recovered through the deployment of reason, reminding him of his moral vocation (encounters with the sublime are not seen as desirable for women, since the sublime threatens danger, and women as bearers of children, should never stand up to the might of nature, putting themselves in danger). The sublime is therefore creative (of an expanded mind) and located not in the object in the world, but in the perception of the observer. For Kant, both aesthetic judgements and moral judgements are ‘free’ and offer the subject a degree of autonomy, but the application of individual reason, overcoming those irrational aspects of the self, leads to the development of universal (moral) laws. An art object may have a material value as part of its relationship to the conventions of society but it also has a ‘refined’ value which is the product of a judgement of taste. Art is the product of the artist’s antagonistic relationship with society and that while owning works of art indicates civilisation, only through the ideal of morality and the universalisation of refined value via the improvement of the mind can man ‘belong to culture’. Thus art is produced outside society, its appreciation expands the mind and promotes reason and refinement, and the practice of making taste judgements is universal and creative and brings the pleasure of deploying moral reason over the imagination. Interestingly, then, Kant retains Plato’s connection between the beautiful and the moral. It is easy to see how this informs the views too, of early cultural critics such as Matthew Arnold who characterised high culture as ‘sweetness and light’.¹¹

Je t’Adorno

Having identified two roots – one concerned with methods and outcomes of modes of production, the other with aesthetics – we now turn to the work of the Frankfurt School, which combined both Marxist and aesthetic theory to create a particular approach – to both art and kitsch. The primary concern of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt was human suffering and how to end it. While more conventional Marxist groups were predicting that the antagonisms at the heart of capitalism would soon tear it apart, the Frankfurt School stressed the potential of capitalism to sustain itself through the manipulation of culture. Instead of aligning themselves unproblematically with communism, the Frankfurt School, pointing to conditions in the USSR, noted the ways in which communism too was potentially oppressive. In addition, the Frankfurt School were critical of many of the philosophical approaches that developed out of Enlightenment thinking. Theodor Adorno, originally a musician and musicologist, began to associate with the Institute in 1927. Roughly half of his life’s work concerned theories of aesthetics.¹² Along with the Institute’s director, Max Horkheimer, he criticised all philosophical approaches that claimed to identify an ahistorical, universal characteristic of human nature or social reality. He argued against Enlightenment philosophers who saw reason as the path to emancipation and suggested rather that reason can be used to justify domination and the status quo. Drawing on Hegel, for instance, he criticised Kant’s claim that consciousness is self-constituted, claiming instead that consciousness emerges from engagement with a material reality – interaction with others, and the social and historical conditions in which the subject lives. Kant proposed that individual autonomy is linked to the deployment of reason in order to arrive at universal moral laws, but drawing on Nietzsche’s ideas of the will to power – that reason is not benign but interested and used to control others – Adorno saw these universal laws as just another form of domination, albeit self-domination. But while Nietzsche saw domination as an inevitable consequence of human nature, Adorno viewed it as the product of social conditions. In addition, he argued that while capitalism claims to encourage freedom and individuality, in reality individuality is categorised into consumer groups and individuals spend much of their lives in mass institutions like schools and factories where conformity is encouraged.

Adorno’s final work, *Aesthetic Theory*, was published in 1970, shortly after his death, and summarises many of the strands of his critique and the social philosophy he developed throughout his life.¹³ *Aesthetic Theory* primarily poses two questions. First, can modern art survive late capitalism? And second, can modern art contribute to changing the world? Drawing on Kant, Adorno retains the importance of an artwork’s formal autonomy (intrinsic to modern art) but he adds to this Hegel’s notion of art’s intellectual function and Marx’s
insistence that art is embedded in society. He summarises that art must be autonomous from society (have a critical function) but that this autonomy is simultaneously illusory. Because art is produced within particular historical and social locations, it also embodies the conflicts inherent in the society that produces it. These conflicts cannot be resolved by the viewer until they are resolved in society, which, in Adorno’s view, is unlikely to happen in the near future. Engaging with existing art theory, he raises a number of specific criticisms. According to Kant, beauty is located not in the artwork, but in the experience of the disinterested observer. However, if this is so then an artwork has no aesthetic quality of its own – form, content, the skill of the artist, ultimately do not matter. Similarly, in psychoanalytic accounts of art, writers focus not on the artwork, but on the artist’s motivations. Artworks are simply daydreams, and, as Adorno cannily notes, if artworks fail to conform to the reality principle, they are characterised merely as ‘escape’, and diagnosed as symptoms of pathology. But there are too many legitimate reasons to escape, he claims – one being the wish to bring about a better world. In fact the whole raison d’être of art for Adorno, far from conforming to contemporary society, is to provide a glimpse of something else, something outside society:

Artworks detach themselves from the empirical world and bring forth another world, one opposed to the empirical world as if this other too were an autonomous entity.14

The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill [sic] the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics. Art acquires its specificity by separating itself from what it developed out of; its law of movement is its law of form. It exists only in relation to its other; it is the process that transpires with its other.15

Like Kant, Adorno sees true art as produced at once within a society but also in tension with it, but unlike Kant, Adorno sees authentic art as producing a (Marxist) political consciousness rather than an improved moral state. Adorno’s definition of art is very specific. First, he is really talking only about modern (conceptual) art; second, much art (bourgeois art, pseudo art, or l’art pour l’art) can only offer the viewer a temporary escape. It forms nothing but a momentary release from capitalist production and leisure, thereby simply renewing the viewer sufficiently to return to the monotonous rhythms of capitalist life, reinforcing conformity rather than rousing to revolu-

The socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts; where in their expression, historically determined, the untruth of the social situation comes to light. It is actually this against which the rage at art reacts.17

The ‘truth’ of art seems to be a central concern of Aesthetic Theory. For Adorno every artwork has its own import produced by an internal contradiction (dialectic) between its form and content. This import invites the viewer to make judgements about a work of art’s truthfulness or falsity. In order to do this, however, the viewer must both recognise the artwork’s internal dialectic and the conflicts inherent in the socio-historical circumstances in which the artwork was produced. The artwork’s truth content is the way it simultaneously challenges the status quo and suggests how things could be better. Kitsch is a lie that simply reinforces the existing socio-historical conditions.

For Adorno’s colleague Walter Benjamin, things are perhaps not quite so bleak. Benjamin sees a work of art’s uniqueness, authenticity or ‘aura’, as he calls it, as inseparable from its being embedded in (pre-modern) authority and tradition – first magical and then religious rituals.18 It is from these rituals that art takes its original use value – or ‘cult value’. Beginning in the Renaissance, the secularisation of art and its ‘cult of beauty’, began to transform art’s value, although it nevertheless retained the traces of ritual, but this decline in art’s ritualistic basis reaches a crisis with the advent of mechanical reproduction – most obviously photography. Many photographs can be reproduced from a single negative, so it makes no sense to talk about an ‘authentic print’ or original copy. The aura’s decay detaches art from authority and tradition and ‘emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual’.19 Authenticity ceases to be a relevant criterion
by which to judge artistic production and art begins to be based instead on politics. This process leaves the reproduced artwork open to a number of different possible interpretations, and promotes its active and political consumption (instead of, in Adorno’s view, a passive psychological one). Benjamin argues that traditional works of art are subject only to enjoyment whereas new, politicised art, especially forms such as cinema, promote critical engagement:

The greater the decrease in social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public. The conventional is uncritically enjoyed, and the truly new is criticized with aversion. 20

According to Benjamin art was originally placed in places of ritual – churches, for example, and was viewable by only a small minority of people, a few at a time. The nineteenth century’s display of artworks for general consumption – in the great new public galleries and museums – anticipated mechanical reproduction by providing an expanded audience for art. Thus, from the nineteenth century artworks were produced with a mass audience in mind, changing the very orientation of art from tradition to politics. However, there was still no way in the nineteenth century for an audience to react to an artwork en masse. Mechanical reproduction represents the culmination of this crisis by making art much more widely available, challenging the very authenticity or aura of art and enabling its simultaneous mass reception. This mass (and active) reception, of course, offers the possibility of revolution that the previously individualised consumption of art could not. In fact, Benjamin goes further to suggest that popular forms, such as Chaplin movies, can embody revolutionary potential and provoke even more progressive reactions than art. Whereas the artwork abandons the viewer to quiet contemplation, the film is at once distracting and tactile. The constant shifts in time and space in film continuously shock viewers, leaving them in a heightened state of consciousness, able to fuse their visual and emotional enjoyment with the ‘orientation of the expert’.

The profoundly different approaches of Adorno and Benjamin to the possibilities of the politicisation of the proletariat are evident in Adorno’s reaction to Benjamin’s work in a letter he sent shortly after the publication of the latter’s famous 1936 essay, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:

the political effect [of your theory] is to credit the proletariat (as the cinema’s subject) directly with an achievement which, according to Lenin, it can realize only through a theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects, who themselves belong to the sphere of works of art which you have consigned to Hell […]

The laughter of the audience at a cinema … is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism. I very much doubt the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports; and despite its shock-like seduction, I do not find your theory of distraction convincing … the idea that a reactionary is turned into a member of the avant-garde by expert knowledge of Chaplin’s films strikes me as out-and-out romanticism. 21

This section, then, has outlined some of the key philosophical influences on art theory, as well as some of the tensions arising from different camps. The influence of philosophers like Plato and Kant has underpinned theories of beauty that locate it respectively in the properties of the artwork, or the mental faculties (especially, reason) of the observer. While all men are rational, only those who seek out experiences of beauty or the sublime can expand and develop their mental faculties. Who is therefore rational enough to appreciate beauty is therefore a central concern. For both Plato and Kant, women are discounted from making improving aesthetic judgements, and therefore from being fully moral (or political). For Adorno, mind expansion, in this case developing a critical (Marxist) consciousness, is available only to a few, and it is up to the few to intellectually lead the mass, who themselves are incapable of discernment. Being able to exercise rational judgement means being able to differentiate between authentic art that expands and challenges the subject, and kitsch, which simply reaffirms bourgeois values. For Benjamin, however, new production technologies can bring critical consciousness to a mass audience, and thus increase revolutionary potential. Revolution is unlikely if only a tiny elite can ever appreciate its politics or be moved by its aesthetics. In many ways this tension, between those who see audiences and consumers – ‘the masses’ – simply as passive victims of capitalist production, unable to implement appropriate judgement in their tastes for culture, and those that point to active consumer engagement and discernment, is one of the most entrenched dichotomies in studies of the popular and has not yet been resolved (although we revisit this later in this chapter by reference to the work of Rancière). We address this distinction in much greater detail later in
this book, but we now explore, briefly, how these positions have been taken up by commentators on kitsch specifically. To review everything that has been written on this subject is well beyond the scope of this book, thus we apologise to the many excellent authors whom we are forced to leave out. Rather we have selected some of the best-known protagonists of kitsch, reviewing the elements of their work which will strengthen our arguments in subsequent chapters.

Kitsch Lit

The Austrian writer Hermann Broch was probably the first to outline — and condemn — kitsch in detail. In 1933 he began to explore kitsch as part of his larger project on the European imagination at the turn of the century, criticising kitsch as sentimental and nostalgic and as confusing the ethical with the aesthetic. However, this early position was under-developed and he returned to the topic in his now well-known 1950 essay, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', reprinted and popularised in Gillo Dorfles' 1969 collection *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*. For Broch, kitsch is resolutely the product of Romanticism. Each age, he argues, produces a set of artworks which form its stylistic tone, judged most usually by its outstanding works of genius, but drawing its substance from average works too. The history of art is full of average but good works of art, until, that is, Romanticism. Romanticism was incapable of producing good average art because its lofty works of genius were immediately transformed by a disastrous fall into kitsch (imitation). The nineteenth century was the century of kitsch according to Broch because of a complex process of distinction that the new and rapidly growing middle class imposed between itself and the old courtly-feudal class.

As a class that was growing in power and in need of its own culture, the middle class on the one hand assimilated courtly values, and on the other reaffirmed 'its own original tradition, which was a revolutionary tempo'. The courtly tradition was primarily aesthetic rather than ethical, its ethics 'confined to setting mystical portrayals of a God-willed hierarchy', in return for 'unbridled debauchery of the senses and of the mind, all the pleasures possible, including those of art', especially 'exuberant decorative splendour'. The middle class, on the other hand, had an ethical tradition of restraint, influenced in Protestant countries by Calvinist asceticism and in Catholic ones by virtue - both requiring self-sacrifice for either God or Nation, and both opposed or indifferent to art and decoration. Seeing themselves as the class destined to come to power the middle class distinguished themselves from the aristocracy by insisting on their 'severe tradition' in opposition to the latter's moral degeneracy. However, as modernity progressed, the Enlightenment cast doubt on the possibilities for eternal rewards in the next life, replacing asceticism with 'the rationalism of libertinage'. The Reformation induced a great discovery, part theological, part mystical and part rational – 'the absolute, the infinite, of the divine conscience of the human mind', saddling the bourgeoisie with the responsibility for faith that the Church had previously borne. The positioning of the bourgeois subject at the centre of faith was a 'responsibility that exceeded its resources', inducing both exaltation and terror. The middle-class dilemma, then, was how to preserve its ascetic identity in the absence of God, while accepting the rationalism of pursuing earthly pleasures. It found resolution in the exaltation of monogamous love:
just as, in the sphere of erotic relationships, love itself has 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. 30

Beauty and love represent the same compromise, and this new religion of beauty, the ‘goddess of beauty in art’ is kitsch.

Drawing on Plato’s proposition that real beauty and truth are connected and knowable only in the realm of Forms, Broch argues that for earthbound man, beauty and truth are partial and restricted to particular phenomena or objects. Earthbound men are destined to discover these values only incrementally, each new step but a minor development of the previous one in pursuit of an ultimately unobtainable goal (the platonic ideal). This system, the one that art pursues, should be seen as ‘open’ and can only partially capture beauty and truth which are always unknowable in this world. For instance, the religious artwork attempts to capture the beauty of Christ, but that beauty is not an earthly, tangible thing that can be captured; it can only be partially represented. Romanticism adopts the opposite position – the immediate tangible goal of any work of art is beauty itself. It is a closed, finite, or self-contained system. The closed system is no longer ethical but only aesthetic, it is a system of imitation:

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. 31

Kitsch becomes dangerous when the child becomes so like the mother (not father, note) that it is hard to differentiate between them, just as it is tricky to distinguish the Anti-Christ from Christ.

Difficult to distinguish from real art, then, kitsch is the enemy within – it is Wagner and Dali according to Broch. But kitsch is not just a system of imitation, it is also without ethics:

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. 32

Kitsch is also neurotic in its attempts to unite Heaven and Earth. Because this is a false relationship and therefore based in self-deception (repression), a neurosis, based in evil, is becoming universal, evident in the ‘schizoid rift’ which embraces the modern world:

It is not mere chance that Hitler ... 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 ... 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 aesthetic musical accompaniment. 33

For Broch, then, kitsch is not just unethical, but evil and neurotic, evidenced by its admiration from Hitler and Nero. The middle-class compulsion to beautify derives from its lack of respect for the distinction between Heaven and Earth. Broch wants art to take us to another world, to God, but kitsch has infected art and brought these lofty aspirations down to earth. Its closed system prevents us from reaching a truly ethical state.

Clement Greenberg undoubtedly draws on Broch’s work in his essay ‘The Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, originally published in 1939 in the Partisan Review, but for Greenberg, the dangers of kitsch imitation are more tangibly rooted in mass production and the conservative fear that the masses no longer accept the cultural authority of their ‘masters’. 34 Greenberg proposes that modern Western culture is in decay and sees the avant-garde as the only way to ‘keep culture moving’.
(continue the development of artistic forms and elite consciousness) ‘in the midst of ideological confusion and violence’. Breaking with Broch, Greenberg sees the avant-garde as a new art form, because it refers not to something outside itself – God, or nature, for instance – but only to the processes and disciplines of art itself. However, the avant-garde has certain problems – first, it prioritises form over content, making its appreciation more intellectually challenging, and second, it critiques the very bourgeois culture that gave rise to it. Thus, there is a danger that the ‘elite among the ruling class … the rich and the cultivated’ to which the avant-garde belongs will no longer support it with its ‘umbilical cord of gold’. However, this internal threat to the ‘future of culture’ is far lesser than the external threat from kitsch:

popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies etc.

For Greenberg, kitsch is the product of two problematic characteristics of modernity (as opposed to Romanticism) – the creation of a new urbanised mass and universal literacy. Prior to this, the only people that could read or write were elites with refined tastes, but universal literacy makes reading and writing into ‘efficiencies’ or ‘minor skills like driving a car’, and so it no longer performs the function of distinguishing an individual’s cultural inclinations or indicating refined tastes. The ‘problem’ for Greenberg, is that art is accessible to those who lack the capability to appreciate it properly. Cultivation, he says, is based on comfort and leisure, and is therefore inaccessible to those without the necessary time to contemplate ‘difficult’ art. The masses prefer the easily intelligible content of the artworks to the difficult deciphering of its forms. Losing their connection with the traditions of the countryside has induced boredom in the masses who ‘set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption’ – the culture is mass produced, commoditised kitsch (notice that for Greenberg, unlike Adorno, kitsch is demanded by the people, rather than imposed upon them by the culture industries).

Kitsch is mechanical and formulaic, it is vicarious experience and faked pleasure and induces insensitivity in the masses who consume it. But even the appreciators of avant-garde art are not completely safe from kitsch. ‘Traps are laid’ within genuine culture which can fool people who should know better. And kitsch has gone on a ‘triumphal tour of the world’, becoming a ‘universal culture’.

In harmonious societies, Greenberg argues, all subjects appreciate the same art, because the masses accept the cultural leadership of their masters. However, if the plebeians become dissatisfied with culture it is most often a reactionary dissatisfaction expressed through revivialism, Puritanism and, most recently, fascism – failure to appreciate elite culture is thus fascist according to Greenberg! Most alarmingly, however, kitsch has become the cultural policy of states like Fascist Germany, Italy and Soviet Russia, not because their governments have conditioned them toward it, but because their political leaders pander to the kitsch tastes of the masses:

The encouragement of kitsch is merely another of the inexpensive ways in which totalitarian regimes seek to integrate themselves with their subjects. Since these regimes cannot raise the cultural level of the masses – even if they wanted to – by anything short of a surrender to international socialism, they will flatter the masses by bringing all culture down to their level ... Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the ‘soul’ of the people.

For Greenberg, the fact that Hitler enjoyed kitsch is largely irrelevant. If the people were to demand avant-garde culture it would not be long before Hitler, Mussolini, or indeed Stalin would provide it. Kitsch is not just fascist, it is totalitarian.

It is important to remember here, that many of the writers cited in this chapter were Jews facing active persecution in 1930s Germany from the strengthening Nazi Party. Broch, for example, wrote many of his early works from a concentration camp. Jewish intellectuals such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer, found that continuing their positions in the University of Frankfurt’s Institute of Social Research became impossible and all moved to other European countries or the USA, Benjamin tragically committing suicide after being apprehended during his failed escape to the USA. Clement Greenberg, a strong supporter of modern (particularly abstract) art, and early fan of Jackson Pollock, was born and worked in the USA, but was appalled at the Nazis’ repression and destruction of modern artworks. The division between art and kitsch was mobilised by the Nazis but compounded by so many subsequent critics seeking to rescue modern art from the Nazi charge of degeneracy. In a classic reverse discourse, however, these critics applied the same charge of degeneracy to kitsch.
The context in which many of these early studies were written has frequently been forgotten by subsequent enthusiasts and critics of their work. Calinescu, for instance, deploying the connection between kitsch and totalitarianism, generalised to many different historical and geographical contexts.

The influence of Broch and Greenberg on Calinescu’s 1977 essay on kitsch as one of The Five Faces of Modernity is clear. For Calinescu, kitsch is aesthetically and technologically modern for two reasons. First, it is an aesthetic style – the Gothic, Rococo or Baroque of the contemporary period – and second, unlike art, it is created only for its audience. Drawing on Tocqueville’s Democracy in America (1835–40), he argues that democratisation inevitably leads to a lowering of standards:

From Tocqueville on, many social and cultural critics, conservatives and revolutionaries alike, agreed that artistic standards were rapidly deteriorating and attributed the main cause of the widespread corruption of taste to status-seeking and display. First the plutocrats and the nouveau riches, then the petty bourgeois and certain segments of the populace were seen as trying to imitate the old aristocracy and its patterns of consumption, including the consumption of beauty.

However, drawing on Adorno, Calinescu differentiates between the desire to imitate and the need for art, proposing the need for kitsch as the ‘desperate compulsion to escape from the abstract sameness of things by a kind of self-made and futile promesse du bonheur’. While Calinescu rejects the position of some critics that real art only reflects the society that produced it, he sees this approach as wholly appropriate in the interpretation of mass culture, which ideologically manufactures false consciousness. Borrowing from Adorno’s definition of kitsch as the ‘parody of catharsis’, Calinescu defines kitsch as ‘the parody of aesthetic consciousness’. Kitsch promises aesthetic escape, but offers only temporary respite; it provides relaxation only because it is ‘predigested’. As a ‘specifically aesthetic form of lying’, it pretends to be art but is actually forgery or counterfeit – an ‘aesthetics of deception and self deception’. Kitsch is produced by technicians employed by capitalists and sold to passive consumers. Imbued with the power to (falsely) satisfy middle-class tastes, kitsch appears at a time when beauty is easy to fabricate, buy and sell. Like Broch, Calinescu argues that as deception, kitsch should be considered ethically: ‘And if the ethical approach is justified, can one not go further and conceive of kitsch theologically, as a manifestation of sin to be blamed, ultimately, on the influence of the devil?’ Kitsch conforms to the law of aesthetic inadequacy. It is the cheap and inartistic when treated with respect and given aesthetic significance, but remember it can also be the ‘real Rembrandt hung in a millionaire’s home elevator’. Here genuine art has been used only as ostentatious decoration.

Calinescu breaks with Adorno when he says:

What is difficult to accept in Adorno’s approach is the identification of the ‘masses’ with the ‘working class’ in a conventional Marxist sense … Today it is perhaps more obvious … [that kitsch] responds primarily to middle-class psychological needs, which it tries, rather successfully, to generalize to the whole of society.

To understand the nature of kitsch, then, we must understand ‘middle-of-the-road hedonism’ as a peculiarly middle-class mentality (we return to and elaborate this point in later chapters). Like Broch, Calinescu stresses the decline of religious belief, which has replaced asceticism and deferred gratification with the pursuit of fun. The move from (pre-modern) cyclical time to linear time was initially positive because belief in a better future is a reason to postpone consumption. But the link between modernity and progress has broken down, making the future as unreal and empty as the past – enjoyment in the present is seen as the only thing worth striving for. However, the middle class is an active class and, as such, hedonism is confined to its spare time and governed by a ‘principle of mediocrity’ – activities must produce as much fun for as little time and effort as possible: Kitsch offers ‘instant beauty’. The middle class is open and eager for new experiences – escape in time and space – and unhampered by a critical sense. ‘The superficiality of this hedonism can be matched only … by its infinite capacity for acquiring beautiful junk.’ And this consumption has become a duty or ethic – a way of helping the economic health of the nation. Kitsch is an easy pleasure, the other side of boredom, but also a reaction against the terror of change and the meaninglessness of time. It can also be propaganda masquerading as entertainment, and entertainment can be directed to manipulative aims, the most dangerous variety of kitsch in this respect is perhaps “sweet kitsch” – the sentimental “saccharine type”.

Calinescu argues that the ‘Lords of kitsch’, the ‘culture industries’ as we might better know them, have created a homogenised culture,
merging child and adult audiences (this is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). For Călinescu this has two consequences – the infantilisation of the adult audience and pressure on children to grow up too fast. Kitsch perfectly satisfies the tastes of children, because although children’s aesthetic sensitivities should rightly be termed cute, rather than kitsch, the general law of aesthetic inadequacy applies to both cute and kitsch. Kitsch, however, exploits cute taste, not just in children but also in ‘numerous adults whose understanding of art has not gone too far beyond the level of childhood’. 53 He also, however, points out the pedagogic possibilities of kitsch, claiming that kitsch negotiates the passage ‘from sentimentality to sensation’. While children may be excused for their kitsch tastes, which is after all part of their ‘normal’ development, the ‘the kitsch-man’ cannot excuse his childish tastes.

The kitsch-man – discussed by a number of writers and coined by Broch (Kitschmensch) – forms the zenith of Călinescu’s essay. Kitsch-man seeks to derive maximum pleasure for minimum effort (remember, ‘authentic’ art should be painful and challenging). He experiences even non-kitsch artworks as kitsch and ‘involuntarily makes a parody of aesthetic response’. 54 He is likened to the devil who is ‘mainly a symbolic embodiment of mediocrity and even stupidity’. 55 While kitsch is a lie, kitsch-man is co-conspirator, wanting only to be ‘beautifully lied to’:

The temptation to believe the aesthetic lies of kitsch is a sign of either undeveloped or largely atrophied critical sense. Mental passivity and spiritual laziness characterize the amazingly undemanding lover of kitsch. Kitsch is … the sin of sloth. 56

Gillo Dorfles repeats many of these themes; however, drawing on Hume, he extends the critique and taxonomy of kitsch-man perhaps to its logical conclusion. 57 Dorfles claims that there was no ‘really bad taste’ (i.e. kitsch) before the Baroque period, and that artworks should only be judged within their own time, with bad artworks representing ‘false interpretation of the aesthetic trends of their age’ (10). The only way to define the quality of an artwork is by means of a panel of experts who judge its ‘eurhythmics, balance and … pleasantness’. As we stated earlier, Hume claims that beauty is not a property of things in themselves, but exists purely in the minds that contemplate them, and where one person sees beauty, another may see ‘deformity’. 58

While Dorfles applies this position to art, kitsch on the other hand is a ‘stable element on which we can rely’. In this respect Dorfles aims to provide a ‘classified catalogue of bad taste’, which despite being such a ‘delicate and vague subject nevertheless scorches our hands leaving permanent “aesthetic scars”’ (11). In a statement that pre-empts the authoritative stance of the rest of his book, he challenges:

If anyone is not satisfied with our choice and finds some of the images artistic which we present as pseudo-artistic, un-artistic, too bad! To us at least it will mean that our reader is really a kitsch-man of the first water; and that the psychological test has worked properly. (11)

Mid-cult, middle-brow culture or kitsch is the most widespread culture and nourishes the masses in the USA and elsewhere, although Dorfles also claims it is particularly German. Kitsch-man is the man of bad taste, but more particularly he embodies a way of looking and enjoying art, either good or bad. Kitsch-man is not ‘the average man’ because even ‘simple people – technicians, craftsmen, electrical workers’ can come to understand and love works of art. Kitsch-man on the contrary can only appreciate art that produces ‘sugary feelings’ – art as background or as a condiment. Kitsch-man’s attitude is ‘definitely and hopelessly wrong’ (15). Kitsch-man appreciates art as status symbol, as fashion, as novelty, curiosity or attraction, for its pretty, romantic or decorative aspect, for its sentimental value, and judges ‘Raphael as if he were a painter of picture postcards’ – for all the wrong reasons (16). This is made possible by mechanical reproduction and mass culture which use, in one of Dorfles’ examples, the Mona Lisa in a cheese advert. Mass culture, unlike traditional art, does not have a religious or mythical function or hierarchy and is particularly problematic because in making art available to all simultaneously, then ‘all trace of a “rite” in the handing out of cultural and aesthetic nourishment … has been lost’ (30) – the role of the critic is simply circumvented. However, ‘hyper-kitsch’ or ‘kitsch squared’ is created when kitsch-man ‘re-mythifies’ an object – for instance, a Murano glass animal – by idolising it or looking upon it as the highest degree of sophistication.

Dorfles is not anti-technology per se, and welcomes the innovations it has made possible in music. Instead, it is enjoyment that is his principal target: ‘Nothing could be further away from a piece of “consumer music”, enjoyed and adored by the masses, than a piece of the new modern music, enjoyed and enjoyable to only a few individuals’
Kitsch

(27). Borrowing from Broch and Călinescu, Dorfles reserves particular contempt for kitsch-man's ability to debase proper art, in this case making Johann Sebastian into kitsch by mistaking his religious impulse for easy sentimentality. However, it is important to note that kitsch-man is not defined only in relation to the 'mass', but that he can also be economically upper class. Dorfles argues that 'economic-cum-financial-cum-social elite is not the same as the cultural elite', and that the tastes of the social elites are usually characterised by reaction and incompetence, seeing avant-garde art purely in financial or fashion terms, failing to recognise (contradictorily, since this is disparaged in relation to kitsch) its novelty value. Kitsch, then, is not 'the prerogative of the lower classes nor of the economically higher classes (even if it does often prefer the middle and upper middle classes)' and 'even the avant-garde artist himself sometimes prefers the kind of art which he appears officially to despise' (34–5). True appreciators of art, therefore, occupy an extremely narrow range, and art is primarily defined in terms of the very few people who 'enjoy' it (though enjoy is hardly the right word). It is difficult, reading Dorfles' book, not to imagine that the contempt he holds for kitsch-man derives from the reluctance of the 'mass' to accept avant-garde taste, thereby failing to confirm the superior taste and status of elite critics.

The groundwork for kitsch has thus been set and kitsch has been meticulously defined according to its key protagonists. Kitsch is not just bad taste, it is actually evil. Kitsch-man demands substandard imitative art and beautification, and has created a whole reproductive industry aimed only at satisfying his under-developed, pathological and unethical tastes. Kitsch has been exhaustively configured as art's other. Art, rather vaguely defined as invested with the capacity to move us – ethically, theologically, intellectually, politically – has expelled kitsch as the product of the immanent. The kitsch devil is abjected from art's heavenly form. These themes are echoed by subsequent writers such as Tomas Kulka, Umberto Eco and Milan Kundera. However, not all writers on kitsch aesthetics are unequivocally negative. We turn briefly back to Benjamin before moving on.

In his work on the Parisian arcades, and his 1927 article on surrealism, 'Dream Kitsch', Benjamin shows how art became more than ever a consumer commodity. For Benjamin, of course, the 'aura' of a work of art can only exist outside of both commodity production and technological reproduction. A work of art has a unique existence in a particular time and space – it stands two metres away from the body – which in turn provides its authenticity. According to Benjamin a work of art has two kinds of value, exhibition value and cult value. Works of art with cult value, religious artworks or cave paintings, for instance, were not designed for exhibition (with an audience in mind). Many religious artworks remained hidden or available only to the priest. Their value was in their religious or magical associations. The emancipation of art from ritual has resulted in the artwork's exhibition value - but available to a mass audience, for example in photography, the audience takes the place of the camera, and combined with the technological reproducibility of art, this results in the decay of the 'aura' because reproducible things are now accessible and tangible. While something is clearly lost in this process, Benjamin also points out that the demise of cult value also opens up a critical space for the audience, moving it away from a simple acceptance of religious and
traditional orthodoxies. This is a move from sacred distance to percep­
tual proximity.\textsuperscript{61}

For Romantics, dreams took on extreme significance and were
worthy of celebration, but Enlightenment thinkers saw dreams as
waste products of the mind, the detritus of rationality. Benjamin
shows how these two realms of dreams and wakeful reality are in fact
cross-contaminated and that this is the product of particular socio­
historical conditions. Dreams are no longer removed from reality
but have become tangible and immanent. The ‘dreamhouses of the
collective’ are now winter gardens, arcades and market halls – dreams
have become commercialised.\textsuperscript{62} Dreams fade into greyness when they
cease to be purely imaginary and enter the polluted sphere of every­
day life and just as dreams are the waste products of the mind, kitsch
objects are the detritus of (over) production. Modernity values move­
ment (progress towards a better future, linear as opposed to cyclical
time), but this movement is illusory, it is simply the repetition of
mechanical reproduction – progress through accumulation of things.
In consumer capitalism kitsch objects are assimilated into dreams,
obscuring the ‘blue distance’ of Romanticism with a layer of grey­
ness, just like the dust that accumulates on forgotten kitsch objects,
the detritus of modernity. The grey insufficiency of dreams (for a
better future) is made tangible by association with a world of extinct
things. The resultant tangibility (which Benjamin makes analogous
to exchange value) makes both dreams and things kitsch, the decay
of the interior essence of things (the aura) reduced to superficiality and
surface, marked by a grey covering of dust. However, dust is unset­
tling, because it marks lack of movement. The accumulation of dust
reveals the incapacity of things to fulfil dreams. Even dust, according
to Benjamin, has its critical function.

More recently, Odd Nerdrum, a Norwegian figurative painter who
describes his own work as kitsch, claims that ‘Art’ has now become
synonymous with modern art. All figurative art or representational
art, for its ease of access and communication, has been branded kitsch.
Drawing on the techniques of Caravaggio and Rembrandt in his own
work he criticises the limited use of colours and themes of modern art.
Modern art, he claims, produces only emotional distance and a search
for double meanings, ‘no tears or emotions. It should be discrete and
reserved.’\textsuperscript{63} The charge of emotionalism levelled at kitsch is perhaps
best expressed by Milan Kundera:

\textit{Kitsch!}  

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says:
How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says:
How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running
on the grass! It is the second tear that makes \textit{kitsch} kitsch.\textsuperscript{64}

Nerdrum’s work seeks emotional engagement, he claims that modern­
ists want viewers to involve themselves in artworks, so that they
become immersed, reflect on the artwork’s form and thus broaden
their cognitive horizons. Umberto Eco, like so many others, defines
kitsch as ‘passing itself off as artistic communication’:

But since [kitsch’s] fundamental project is not to involve the reader
in order to actively discover something new, but simply to overpower
him or promote a special effect where the reader is led to believe that
aesthetic pleasure lies in these feelings, kitsch is an artistic lie.\textsuperscript{65}

However, immersion cannot be achieved by artworks that create (emo­
tional) distance. In addition, art is public and used by society, kitsch
on the other hand is private and used by the individual. Kitsch was
originally public, but was repressed, confined to the private and devel­
oped into ‘the expression of unacceptable human longing’.\textsuperscript{66} This
partly explains why its social value is so low, as all things associated
with the private are negatively valued. Kitsch, Nerdrum argues, may
not be used politically, but it is used ‘passionately and sensually’.\textsuperscript{67}
It is art, then, not kitsch, that is subject to political manipulation
and exploitation. Observing this move reveals abstract art as no less
ideological than kitsch, and certainly anti-Semitism was also rife in the
modernist intellectual cultures of the 1930s and 1940s that condemned
kitsch. Thus, the distinction between modernist and kitsch forms
would appear to be one of populism versus intellectualism, rather than
of any particular political affiliation.

In our (brief) review we turn next to Celeste Olalquiaga’s exquisite
book, which documents the inspiration for kitsch in the early modern
culture – what she calls the ‘intoxication of modernity’. Arguing that
kitsch represents a set of middle-class anxieties and losses (specifically
the transition of nature from theocratic to scientific understandings)
during the nineteenth century, she beautifully and compassionately
demonstrates the technologies, historical coincidences and bourgeois
imaginings that produced a wondrous but largely domestic material
culture:
Kitsch is the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object. Since this recovery can only be partial and transitory, as the fleetingness of memories well testifies, kitsch objects may be considered failed commodities.68

Inspired by Benjamin, Olalquiaga connects dust with the decay of the aura: dust is a fragmented remainder of something now lost, and like kitsch 'a mundane proliferation that infiltrates homes at will' such that kitsch must endure the same 'accusations and cleansing operations' as dust.69 Supplementing Marxist critiques of kitsch for its loss of use value, extraction of surplus value, and commodification through exchange value, she insists on the decommodification of objects through 'sentimental value'. We discuss Olalquiaga's work in more detail in Chapter 3, but for now we show how she differentiates two forms of kitsch - melancholic and nostalgic kitsch, which she illustrates through the memento.

For Olalquiaga, melancholic kitsch is produced by remembrance, unconscious memory which she claims can be profoundly interruptive. Nostalgic kitsch, on the other hand, derives from reminiscence, conscious memory that has been ordered with all unpleasant remembrances expunged, to be recalled at will. Remembrance is obsessed with the fleetingness of lived moments and by what has ceased to be - loss and death. And it is this melancholic kitsch, Olalquiaga argues (like Benjamin) that haunts the consciousness of the nineteenth century as 'an existential state of pure present devoid of all past (history and mythical time) and future (hope and a potential for change)'. Souvenirs attempt to capture reminiscence but they often also promote remembrance but if the souvenir is the commodification of remembrance, then kitsch is the commodification of the souvenir. Like dust, then, the commodification of the souvenir can be wiped away, the object rehabilitated in the service of memory:

Souvenirs transcend the prefabricated wish image of commodities through the personal involvement of their consumers, a personalisation that, no matter how clichéd, momentarily 'resurrects' the dead possession.70

Olalquiaga therefore introduces a biography into the consideration of kitsch. Objects and things have a social life, an emotional life. This is important in our later consideration of kitsch and affect - the emotional responses to kitsch; but material objects also have another cultural meaning and social function in consumer societies - they indicate status. We conclude this chapter by briefly rehearsing the position of French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu, and his critic, Jacques Rancière. Bourdieu's famous book Distinction was originally published in France in 1979, and translated into English in 1984.71 Bourdieu's conception of taste constitutes a profound break with philosophers like Kant, and it is this break that Rancière tries to rehabilitate.

Taste the difference

The cultural politics of taste are a central concern of Distinction, which explores the taste battles between members of a class fraction growing in postwar France, which Bourdieu names the new petite bourgeoisie (or new middle class). This group of largely white-collar professionals have come to be seen as the key players in the game of distinction - the mapping out of differences through consumption of objects, judgements of taste and through the deployment of cultural capital. In a lengthy and detailed sociological analysis, Bourdieu maps the varied consumption habits of different occupations within the new petite bourgeoisie, highlighting the fine grain of distinction and the class war implicit in classification and judgement. Influenced by Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class (1799), Bourdieu explores the general 'system' of taste, which he identified within this group as a whole, as one of distancing from those seen as 'below' one's own taste culture, and emulation of those deemed to be 'above'. So, doctors attempt to demonstrate more refined taste than lawyers, who in turn attempt to be more like doctors and less like university lecturers, who then disparage and distance themselves from the tastes of teachers, and so on. By looking at the cars people drive, the music they like, the books and newspapers they read, where they go on holiday, what kind of house they prefer to live in, and, of course, their taste in art, Distinction reveals the detail of the system of classification and judgement, which is revealed to be intricate but codified.

Among a group whose levels of economic capital (in mid-twentieth century France, at least) are relatively equal, status and distinction is marked instead by the volume and uses of cultural capital. Cultural capital can be embodied, objectified (in the form of goods), or institutionalised (for example, educational qualifications are a recognised form of cultural capital) and is expressed through 'taste'. More
established middle-class subjects in recognised and secure professions have high levels of economic capital and are therefore less in need of cultural capital to make up their capital volume. Thus, they prefer established taste preferences: in the French context, ‘right bank’ (traditional art) galleries. Those with less secure middle-class status – the new middle-classes or those in less recognisably middle-class occupations, and those with lower economic capital – pursue cultural capital more aggressively to make up their capital volume, preferring ‘left-bank’ (modern art) galleries.

Breaking with Kant (although he only tackles Kant directly in a postscript), judgements of taste are not productive of an expanded mind, according to Bourdieu, but rather the product of complex and creative forms of emulation structured by a subject’s ‘habitus’. The habitus is a ‘structuring structure’ of the mind which produces a ‘system of dispositions’ – tastes or sensibilities – which are learnt in childhood, (the processes by which they are learnt long forgotten, such that they appear natural and are extremely difficult to change). Art, according to Bourdieu, has the function not of expanding political or ethical horizons, but instead is ‘predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences’. Not appreciating the finer things in life both marks and justifies inferior status. Middle-class taste is constructed through ‘distance’ (disinterestedness for Kant) – art that has to be ‘interpreted’ – because it responds to movements and traditions which one must be aware of in order to interpret it. Working-class taste, on the other hand, is constructed by ‘proximity’. ‘Naïve’ spectators cannot understand and appreciate art that relies on pre-existing cultural competence to decode it and thus prefer art that represents something directly, such as portraits or landscapes that provoke emotional engagement.

The ‘system’ of taste as mapped by Bourdieu is fluid and mobile. The meaning of things is constantly in motion, as tastes change. And tastes change at least in part because of the democratisation process: if too many people know which art is good, or hip, then distinction requires the discovery of new artists. There is both a generational dynamic at work here, but also an inter-class group dynamic. This makes the entire ‘game’ rather fraught, requiring constant scrutiny of oneself, of others, and of the guides. Cultural omnivorousness is one strategy that flows out of this anxiety – an openness to anything and everything (we address this further in Chapters 4–6). Away from the omnivores, the primary strategy is monitoring and code-cracking. What we can observe, then, if we animate Bourdieu’s maps of taste and run them forward on a time sequence, is individual consumer goods and artworks moving around, and generally ‘downwards’, as they achieve mass (or at least mass-ier) appeal. They are jettisoned by those higher up the taste hierarchy – becoming déclassé. In their place something new must be found to buy or wear or appreciate; a new place to holiday, new decor for the home. However, one of the quirks of Bourdieu’s mapping of commodities by class and capital volume is that occasionally something low down the map, considered poor quality at the time, is ‘rediscovered’ and returns to the top of the map. An example of this are the films of Brigitte Bardot, which were considered by Bourdieu as poor quality, appealing only to those with low cultural capital, but are now seen as ‘classics’. Thus, with the passage of time things can be rehabilitated and imbued with new meaning – perhaps the meaning in this case is kitsch.

One of the best known statements made in Distinction is:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed.

Revealing lack of cultural capital betrays one’s inferior class. Criticising another’s taste, then, enacts the ‘symbolic violence’ at work in judgements of taste. But, as the fluidity of the system also shows, such judgements may be harsh, but they are rarely unoverturnable. Taste is malleable, it seems, and nothing stays bad (or good) forever. Hence the anxiety of being déclassé – we know we will be judged because we know how we judge others. The new petite bourgeoisie, then, are revealed by Bourdieu as emblematic of what would later be called status anxiety: the horror of being misread as being of lower class than one’s own assumed class identity. The rapid expansion of the new middle classes partly accounts for this, in unmooring people from old-established hierarchies. In 1960s France, there is the additional issue of people being newly middle-classed – of being first generation entrants into the bourgeoisie, and therefore nervous of making a faux pas that might reveal their out-of-placeness. But as more recent revisits to Distinction have shown, the class war is still raging, and the anxieties are as acute
as ever. The even greater democratising of taste, not to mention the postmodernising and globalising of culture, has done little to change the game. If anything, it has intensified.\(^7\) We explore this further in later chapters.

We cannot leave Bourdieu, however, without tackling one of his fiercest critics – Jacques Rancière, a French cultural theorist who has been attracting much attention in recent years. Rancière’s work is difficult to pin down, not least because he works across disciplines – philosophy, history, politics, as well as on different subjects. Rancière breaks with conventional structuralism – especially its more determinist approaches, and it is this charge of determinism that he levels at Bourdieu. According to Rancière, Bourdieu’s work enacts a symbolic violence on philosophy, heralding the end of philosophy and the dawn of sociology. He claims Bourdieu’s model is too closed and all-embracing, leaving no room for political consciousness and activism from below, the possibility of which he demonstrates through concrete historical examples of worker-intellectuals in *The Nights of Labour* and through the work of Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.\(^7\) Rancière’s main criticism of Bourdieu, beginning in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, is the latter’s claim that ordinary people misrecognise the oppressive conditions in which they find themselves, yet ‘intellectuals’ (who have no experience of such conditions) can see the reality of power in society. This is self-serving according to Rancière, creating the need for intellectuals and justifying their lofty positions and high salaries in the academy. The problem of the ‘poor’ is not that they do not recognise and understand their oppression, but that they cannot be seen or heard by the mechanisms that make political messages available (what Rancière calls the ‘Distribution of the Sensible’, or ‘Partition of the Sensory’ in some translations). For Rancière, Bourdieu has missed something vital in Kant’s philosophy – his presumption of democracy (egalitarian universalism) in that all individuals capable of cognition exercise the free play of the imagination and the understanding in making aesthetic judgements. Thus, the universality of aesthetic experience cuts across social inequalities, and contemporary art produces the ‘anticipation of equality’ that previous regimes of art have not.\(^7\)

Whether or not Rancière is right about the egalitarian possibilities of aesthetic judgement, however, Bourdieu’s account of the *uses* of taste seem to hold water, even in the face of Rancière’s onslaught.

And if the judgement of taste is egalitarian, why do we disagree so much about what is beautiful (as opposed to pleasing)? Kant’s ‘egalitarianism’ serves all rational individuals with free will, but from which model of personhood women, ‘non-white races’, servants, hirelings and so on are excluded – not quite so democratic then. It seems that Rancière’s aim is still the democratic appreciation of ‘proper’ art, since he accuses Bourdieu of advocating a future in which mediocre cultural products are more equitably distributed. However, it is still tempting to think that art – or kitsch – contains disruptive political possibilities rather than always serving to solidify the existing social order and this
is a key consideration of this book which is taken up many times in subsequent chapters.

Kitsch is a problem, then. It involves both culture industries and consumers; it is an issue of production and reception. Approached from a position of aesthetics it lacks the ability to move its appreciators to a better – this might mean (depending on author) moral, ethical, political, intellectual or cultural – location. As imitative of art, kitsch is ‘deception’, but it can only deceive those who in Bourdieu’s terms lack the cultural capital to tell it apart from the real thing. In terms of class there are a number of contradictions in the writings on aesthetics. For writers like Marx, Adorno and Horkheimer kitsch is ‘mass’ (for them, working-class) taste. However, for Broch, Calinescu, Benjamin and Olalquiaga mass taste is middle-class, born of the new order created by industrialisation and the Enlightenment. Greenberg perhaps occupies a slightly different (elitist) position. Writing in 1930s America, he argues that there is no class, so in a convoluted move he makes the ‘Russian peasant’ the subject of kitsch. For Greenberg an audience demands kitsch and poor old capitalism has no option but to satisfy its consumers. Marxists, on the other hand, represent kitsch as foisted on the people. Kitsch is produced by evil corporations or consumed by evil consumers – or both, as in the case of Nazi Germany. Art’s nemesis is kitsch-man, invested with the power to turn even great works of art into kitsch through the power only of his gaze. Dorfles is particularly pernicious in his condemnation of kitsch-man.

For most writers we have discussed there is an ongoing problem, beginning with Kant, of how to distinguish good art from bad. Dorfles, however, turns to the everyday objects of the 1960s interior to cement his condemnation of kitsch and kitsch-man. Gnomes are not art, he argues. Pleasure, fun, enjoyment, amusement – these are simply unacceptable according to both Marxist and (other) elitist scholars, a sign only of kitsch-man’s deception by the culture industries. It would be hard not to read this alongside Bourdieu as class anxiety at the loss of distinction effected by a more democratic esprit (facilitated by mass consumption and mass education) – most evident again in Greenberg’s angst about universal literacy. For Dorfles, even simple men – technicians and craftsmen – can come to understand art with careful instruction. For Rancière such instruction is not necessary because all are equally capable of aesthetic judgement and can teach themselves.

Notes

4 Joseph Addison, *Remarks on Some Parts of Italy, &c. in the years 1701, 1702, 1703* (Dublin: T. Walker, 1773); Eighteenth Century Collections Online, Gale, University of Leeds (accessed on 27 July 2010), p. 261.
8 Ibid., p. 91.
9 Ibid., p. 96.
10 David Hume, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, in his *Four Dissertations* (South Bend: St Augustine’s Press, 2000 [1757]).
14 Ibid., p. 1.
15 Ibid., p. 3.
16 Ibid., p. 237.
17 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 218.
20 Ibid., p. 227.
23 Ibid., p. 53.
24 Ibid., p. 54.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., p. 55.
27 Ibid., p. 56.
28 Ibid.
29 See, for example, Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York; London: Routledge, 1995).
31 Ibid., p. 63.
32 Ibid., p. 63, our emphasis.
33 Ibid., p. 65.
35 Ibid., p. 5.
36 Ibid., p. 8.
37 Ibid., p. 9.
38 Ibid., p. 10.
39 Ibid., pp. 11 and 12.
40 Ibid., p. 19.
41 For the second edition of 1987, Calinescu re-titled his book Five Faces of Modernity.
46 Ibid., p. 229.
48 Ibid., p. 236.
49 Ibid., p. 242.
50 Ibid., p. 244.

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51 Ibid., p. 254.
52 Calinescu, quoting Broch, The Five Faces of Modernity, p. 236.
53 Calinescu, The Five Faces of Modernity, p. 258.
54 Ibid., p. 259.
55 Ibid., p. 261.
56 Ibid., p. 260.
63 Nerdrum, On Kitsch, p. 16.
64 Kundera, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, p. 244.
66 Nerdrum, On Kitsch, p. 32.
67 Ibid., p. 16.
68 Olalquiaga, The Artificial Kingdom, p. 291.
69 Ibid., p. 94.
70 Ibid., p. 78.
72 Ibid., p. 7.
73 Ibid., p. 6.
74 See Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow, Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Tony Bennett, Mike Savage, Elizabeth Bortolaia Silva, Alan Warde, Modesto Gayo-Cal and David Wright, Culture, Class, Distinction (London: Routledge, 2009); Mike Featherstone, Consumer Culture and Postmodernism (London: Sage, 1991); Mike Savage and John Barlow, Property, Bureaucracy and Culture: Middle-class Formation in Contemporary Britain (London: Routledge, 1995).