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 kitsch kitsch.¹

As the notion of “truth” requires “falsity,” the very notion of “taste” in art necessitates the existence of “bad taste” and, consequently, bad art. But bad art, like falsehood, comes in many varieties and is subject to different kinds of objections. There is sheer technical incompetence, just to begin with (although artistic inability as such is much less fatal than it used to be); there is ignorance of the medium, the tradition and its history, the current fashions and the tastes of the times. For those outside the bustling art centers, what seems to be bad art may be just bad timing. There is unimaginative imitation and straightforward plagiarism. There is such a thing as having “no eye,” the failure to understand color or composition. But there is also an “ethical” dimension to bad art, as in the depiction of the forbidden, the blasphemous, the vulgar expression of the inexpressible, the provocation of the improper and cruelty. (For example, a bar stool whose legs are actual, stuffed buffalo legs.) Once upon a time, bad art was, above all, such use of unacceptable subject matter, evoking the wrong emotions and provoking the wrong reactions (e.g., visceral disgust and nausea)—but this too seems to have recently dropped out of the picture. These days, it is far wiser for an aspiring young artist to offend or disgust the viewer rather than evoke such gentle sentiments as sympathy and delight.

So this is just what is particularly interesting, from a philosophical point of view, about that peculiar variety of “bad art” called “kitsch,” and, in particular, that variety of kitsch sometimes called “sweet kitsch.” Sweet kitsch is art (or, to hedge our bets, intended art) that appeals unsubtly and unapologetically to the softer, “sweeter” sentiments. Familiar examples are the road side ceramics of wide eyed puppies and Keen-type paintings of similarly wide-eyed children. Saccharine religious art (so long as it is serious and not sarcastic) would be sweet kitsch, and so, too, perhaps, much of Muzak and Rod McLuen-type poetry. Examples of sweet kitsch are often mentioned as paradigm instances of bad art, but the nature of its “badness” is just what makes kitsch philosophically interesting. The problem is not that sweet kitsch is always badly done. Indeed some kitsch may be highly professional and keenly aware of the artistic and cultural traditions in which it gains its appeal. Indeed, some kitsch seems to be flawed by its very perfection, its technical virtuosity and its precise execution, its explicit knowledge of the tradition, its timeliness and the fact that it stimulates the very best emotions—the “soft” sentiments of kindness and sympathy and the calm passions of delight. But the best emotions seem to be the worst emotions where art is concerned, and “better shocking or sour than sweet,” has become something of a rule of thumb for artists and a criterion of good taste for connoisseurs. But why is this? What is wrong with sweet kitsch? Its deficiencies appear to be just what we would otherwise think of as virtues, technical proficiency and a well-aimed appeal to the very best of the viewer’s emotions.

What is wrong with sweet kitsch, first and foremost, seems to be its sentimentality, its easy evocation of certain “sweet” emotions. But what is wrong with sentimentality, and sentimentality in art in particular? I think that the heart of the problem lies in our poor opinion of the emotions in general and in particular the “softer” sentiments, and in this essay I would like to defend (sweet) kitsch and sentimentality as well as the softer sentiments in general against the more serious, non-aesthetic charges against them. (When
I speak simply of “kitsch,” it is to be understood that it is this “sweet” variety alone that I have in mind, though some of my arguments may well also hold where “sour” and “bitter” kitsch is in question. [Is there a “salty” kitsch?]

The sentiments have had a bad time in philosophy as well as in aesthetics, and “sentimentality” has become, in ethics as well as in art, a term of harsh abuse. About the turn of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schiller praised himself and his poetry as “sentimental” (as in contrast to Goethe’s “naive” style, which Schiller much admired as the hallmark of true genius). What he had in mind was cultivated fineness and intelligence of feeling (preferably building on “natural” and “naive” emotions), but the term “sentimentalist” has gone a long way down since then. Only a few years later Robert Southey dismissed Jean-Jacques Rousseau as a writer who “addressed himself to the sentimental classes, persons of ardent and morbid sensibility, who believe themselves to be composed of finer elements than the gross multitude” but if Rousseau’s audience was objectionable because it believed itself to have ‘finer’ feelings, the object of Oscar Wilde’s scorn (the young Lord Alfred Douglas) was a “sentimentalist” because of his fraudulent and contemptible passions. By the end of the century, “sentimentalist” was clearly a term of ridicule and abuse, connoting superficiality, saccharine sweetness and the manipulation of mawkish emotion. Kitsch was its artistic equivalent, and artists in Paris who had been praised only a century before as the “geniuses” of Official Art became figures of loathing and ridicule in retrospect, mere curators of kitsch who produced paradigms of “bad art” which we keep in our museums only for the sake of the historians, and as contrasts to the great art of the “Refused” in the room next door. Kitsch thus serves us well in museums, where it is not only part of the historical record but also fly paper for the Philistines, who in their ignorance flock to the sweet perfection of classical kitsch and leave at least some space in front of the great impressionists and their successors.

**THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST KITSCH**

In this essay, I want to present a qualified defense of both kitsch and sentimentality against a number of familiar but unsubstantiated objections. Kitsch and sentimentality have been accused not only on the grounds of “bad taste” (which I will not dispute here) but also on ethical grounds, as betraying (or promoting) serious flaws in character. What underlies these objections, I believe, is a deep but undeserved suspicion of emotions, especially those tender emotions that would seem to be most humane. Before I do that, however, I think it worthwhile pointing out a historical parallel too infrequently noted in these conversations and that is the general fate of the sentiments throughout exactly that period of history during which kitsch and sentimentality became such objects of loathing. In middle and early eighteenth century, moral philosophy was all but dominated by the “moral sentiment” theorists—notably David Hume and Adam Smith. In popular literature, the advent of the “woman’s novel” inspired a literary flood of widely-read pot-boilers and romances which equated virtue and goodness with gushing sentiment, and in French art, the revolutionary moral sentiments evoked by David and exotic fantasies inspired by Delacroix were succeeded by the sentimental mastery of such academic artists as Greuze, Messonier and Bouguereau. But by the end of that century, moral sentiment theory was all but dead: the “women’s novels” were dismissed by the male literary establishment as “sentimental trash,” the French academicians were dismissed as “kitsch” and the status of “sentimentality” went into a steep decline as sentiment lost its status in moral philosophy.

The key figure in this philosophical transformation was Immanuel Kant, whose unprecedented attack on sentiment and sentimentalism was a reaction not only against the philosophical moral sentiment theorists (whom he at least admired) but against the flood of popular pot-boilers and romances. It has always seemed to me to be ironic, at least, that Kant saw himself as ethical heir to Rousseau, one of the most important moral sentiment theorists, for it was Kant who did away with “melting compassion” as an ingredient in ethics once and for all in a single sarcastic comment in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.* It should not be surprising, therefore, that ever since then sentimentality has had an even worse time of it and is not only excluded from most discussions of ethics but, when discussed at all, it is condemned as an ethical defect. To call someone a “sentimen-
talist” in ethics is to dismiss both the person and his or her views from serious consideration, adding, perhaps a disdainful chortle and an implicit accusation of terminal silliness. Sentimentality is roundly condemned in the arts as well, and to call a piece “sentimental” or “kitsch” is to say that it is very bad art—if, indeed, it deserves recognition as art at all—and to cast suspicion on both its creator and its appreciative audience. (As an ad hominem aside, we might note that Kant’s own taste in art had a notoriously kitsch-like flavor.) There is good reason to suppose, then, that the derogatory meanings of “sentimentality” and kitsch” have something to do with the general degradation of the sentiments and their significance. It is the sentiments as such—and in particular those sentiments that pretend to ethical significance—that are in ill-repute.

But the argument against sentimentality is not just that it is in “bad taste,” and the argument against kitsch is not just that it is bad art. In his essay entitled, “What is Wrong with Sentimentality?” Mark Jefferson begins his discussion, “it is generally agreed that there is something unwholesome about sentimentality.” He concludes that it is a moral defect, an emotional malaise, a form of self-indulgence properly associated with brutality. Here he follows Mary Midgley, who several years before suggested a similar association between sentimentality and brutality.7 Hermann Broch went so far as to call kitsch (in general) the “incarnation of evil.”8 and Michael Tanner reiterated Oscar Wilde’s oft-repeated link between sentimentality and cynicism: “the sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed, sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.”9 The objection to sentimentality in both art and ethics, in other words, is not just its lack of sophistication and bad taste. Kitsch is dangerous. Broch even writes, “The producer of kitsch does not produce ‘bad’ art ... it is quite impossible to assess him according to aesthetic criteria; rather he should be judged as an ethically base being, a malefactor who profoundly desires evil.”10 Now this might seem a bit odd to anyone who has spent an hour in an Interstate Stuckeys contemplating the figurines and “No Place Like Home” placards, but this indeed is the charge. Kitsch and sentimentality lead to brutality. Sentimentality and kitsch reveal not only woefully inadequate aesthetic sense but a deep moral flaw of character.

**SWEET KITSCH: SENTIMENTALITY IN ART AND ETHICS**

There is a range of quality to sweet kitsch. On the one hand, there are those “cheap” mass-produced K-Mart style artifacts, disdain for which surely has much to do with economic class distinctions and manufacturing values rather than aesthetic evaluation as such. Much of the literature attacking kitsch is political rather than aesthetic, though ironically much of it comes from Marxists and their kin who despise the mass-marketing origins of kitsch at the same time that they would defend the people who are most likely to purchase such objects. But whether kitsch is attacked because it is cheap and “low-class” or because it is the product of a debased economy, what is wrong with kitsch surely cannot be, philosophically speaking, either the rationalization of snobbery or contempt for its manufacturing and marketing. (We should be suspicious about the depth of class prejudices underlying even the most abstract aesthetic argument and the extent to which the charge of “sentimentality” is in fact an attack on unsophisticated taste.) But though much of what is called “kitsch” is disdained because it is “cheap” (a word that often performs multiple functions in discussions of kitsch), because it is mass-produced and “plastic,” because it is the sort of item that would and should embarrass someone with a proper aesthetic education, there is, on the other hand, some quite expensive and well-produced “high” kitsch, e.g., the academic painting of the mid-nineteenth century that I will shortly use as an example. It is this kind of kitsch that focusses our attention on sentimentality as such and which has attracted such critical abuse and has been accused of moral as well as artistic degeneracy. Not all kitsch can be dismissed as merely “cheap,” in any of these obvious senses.

High kitsch, whatever else may be said of it, cannot be openly dismissed as “cheap.” It is typically very professional, well-made and expensive. Of course, this opens up a new argument along class lines, as an attack on the “nouveau riche” who have money but not taste. Being moved by one’s emotions, in contrast to paying attention to the more formal and refined aspects of a work of art, is at best a distraction, if not a “dead give-away” that one is having a
“cheap” emotional experience instead of a cultivated aesthetic response. High-class kitsch may well be “perfect” in its form and composition: the academic painters were often masters of their craft. Thus the accusation that a work is kitsch is based on lack of form or aesthetic merit but on the presence of a particularly provocative emotional content. (The best art, by contrast, eschews emotional content altogether.)

The term “kitsch” comes from the nineteenth century. One of several suggested etymologies is that the word is German for “smear” or “playing with mud,” and, toying with this, we might speculate that the “mud” in question is emotion and mucking around with emotions inevitably makes a person “dirty.” The standard opinion seems to be that kitsch and immorality go together and that sentimentalism is what is wrong with both of them. For example, Harries: “Kitsch has always been considered immoral.” Of course, one culture’s or one generation’s kitsch may be another’s avant garde, and what is obligatory as “compassion” or “sympathy” in one age may be dismissed as mere sentimentality in another. Accordingly, the sentiments that are provoked by and disdained in “sweet” kitsch may vary as well. But whatever the cause or the context, it is sentimentality of kitsch that makes kitsch kitsch and sentimentality that makes kitsch morally suspect if not immoral. Granted, kitsch may be bad art. Granted, it may show poor taste. But my question here is why it is the sentimentality of kitsch that should be condemned, why it is thought to be an ethical defect and a danger to society.

Let’s look at the sentimentality of “sweet kitsch.” I recently attended an exhibit at the Denver Art Museum which featured, among other nineteenth century French works, a painting by Adolph Bouguereau (1825–1905) and one by Degas, more or less across from one another in the gallery. The Bouguereau is a classically arranged portrait of two very pretty little girls, in rosy pink and soft pastels, set against an expansive sky. The Degas, by contrast, catches one of his dancers in an awkward back-scratching gesture, her body turned away from us, her face unseen. She is framed in a cramped canvas in pale green, ochre and burnt orange. The Bouguereau is one of those well-painted pieces of sweet kitsch that gives French academic painting a bad name. At the same time, it is an almost “perfect” painting. John Canaday writes, in his classic textbook on modern art, “The wonder of a painting by Bouguereau is that it is so completely, so absolutely, all of a piece. Not a single element is out of harmony with the whole; there is not a flaw in the totality of the union between conception and execution. The trouble with Bouguereau’s perfection is that the conception and the execution are perfectly false. Yet this is perfection of a kind, even if it is a perverse kind.” The Degas, on the other hand, is anything but “perfect” in this sense. It is one of those tiny discomforting treasures that haunts the viewer for hours afterward. But it is the Bouguereau that turns out to be one of the most popular pieces in the museum. The curators of the exhibit comment, “Most of our visitors readily admit they don’t know a whole lot about art. So it’s only natural for them to look for works that are pretty and easy to understand.” And then they add, “novice viewers rarely speak of the Bouguereau’s features and aesthetic qualities. Instead, they use it as a springboard to dreams of the future or nostalgic memories of the past. More advanced viewers are soon bored” (from the catalog of the exhibit).

What makes Bouguereau kitsch? What makes it bad art? From an aesthetic point of view it is the “pervasive perfection” that is so offensive and cloying, the absence of any interpretive ambiguity or dissonance on the part of the viewer, but most important (for our purposes) it is the manipulation of emotion, the evocation of “cheap,” “false” emotions that makes this otherwise “perfect” painting perverse. Clement Greenberg, for instance, complained (in 1939) that kitsch “is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations.... It is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time.” Calling a work of (bad) art “kitsch” is not just to condemn the glibness of its technique; it is also to question the motives of the artist and the emotional maturity of the audience. In such cases, sentimentality is the culprit, manipulated by the artist, indulged in by the viewer. It is, we hear from critic after critic, false (“faked”) emotion. And so, the sentimentality of kitsch becomes not ultimately aesthetic but ethical, a species of dishonesty. Karsten Harries says: “to
Solomon  On Kitsch and Sentimentality

isolate aesthetics from ethics [is] to misunder-
stand what art is all about.”16

What makes Bouguereau kitsch is the one-
dimensional purity of the emotion. These girls
don’t do any of the nasty things that little chil-
dren do. They don’t whine. They don’t tease the
cat. They don’t hit each other. They don’t have
any bruises. They aren’t going to die. The art
gives us a false portrait, a carefully edited por-
trait that limits our vision and restricts our sense
of reality. It “manipulates” our feelings. There
is no ambiguity. Above all, there is no discom-
fort, no ugliness or awkwardness, no sense (as
in the Degas) of intruding on privacy. Bougu-
ereau himself writes, “I see only the beautiful in
art … art is the beautiful. Why reproduce what
is ugly in nature?” (Cf. Degas: “I show my
models deprived of their airs and graces, re-
duced to the level of animals cleaning them-
_selves.”) It is here (though not only here) that
ethics meets aesthetics, in the images we are
given of human reality, visual theories of human
nature, if you like—one a portrait of pure inno-
cence, the other a reminder that we are awkward
animals. Sentimentality is “false” because it
gives us a picture of ourselves that is too pure,
too ethically one-sided. But isn’t the Degas por-
trayal just as “one-sided,” as far as its philoso-
phy (its theory of human nature) is concerned? It
may be an infinitely better painting (as a paint-
ing) but is it better as a moral theory? Even if we
were to accept the rejection of kitsch as art, why
is the sentimentality of kitsch to be condemned,
in other words, not just as art but as ethics?

WHAT’S WRONG WITH KITSCH?

The strong, shared contempt for kitsch and sen-
timentality is something of a standard for good
taste, but there is all too little agreement about
“what is wrong” with kitsch and sentimentality
to back it up. We can accept, as simply irrelevant
to our concern here, the claim that kitsch repre-
sents “bad taste,” but this is hardly a concession
given the rarely rational vicissitudes of taste in
an art market that now celebrates street graffiti,
a pile of bricks and an artist’s dragging himself
across broken glass as art. But culling through
the literature in both ethics and aesthetics, I
think we can narrow down the leading candi-
dates for an argument to six: (1) the claim that
kitsch and sentimentality provoke _excessive_ or
_immature_ expressions of emotion; (2) the claim
that kitsch and sentimentality _manipulate_ our
emotions; (3) the claim that kitsch and sentiment-
ality express or evoke “false” or “faked” emo-
tions; (4) the claim that kitsch and sentimentality
express or evoke “cheap” or “easy” or “super-
ficial” emotions; (5) the claim that kitsch and
sentimentality are _self-indulgent_ and interfere
with “appropriate” behavior and, perhaps the
most dominant charge; (6) the claim that kitsch
and sentimentality _distort_ our perceptions and
interfere with rational thought and an adequate
understanding of the world. The charge is that
kitsch gives us a false and fraudulent, overly
“sweet” and benign vision of the world (or cer-
tain beings in the world, notably children and
puppies) and thus somehow “blocks” our larger,
nastier knowledge of the world (children and
puppies too). Underlying all of these charges,
indeed, is the suspicion that kitsch and sen-
timentality are modes of distraction and self-
deception, shifting our attention away from the
world as it is and soothing us instead with objects
that are uncompromisingly comfortable and ut-
terly unthreatening.

(1) Kitsch and sentimentality provoke _exces-
sive_ or _immature_ expressions of emotion. It is
true that kitsch is calculated to evoke our emo-
tions, especially those emotions that are best
expressed by that limp vocabulary that seems
embarrassingly restricted to such adjectives as
“cute” and “pretty” or that even more humili-
ating, drawn-out downward intoned “Aaaaah”
that seems inappropriate even in Stuckeys. It is
also true that the emotions provoked by kitsch
tend to be unsophisticated and even child-like
(as opposed to childish). But is the charge that
kitsch provokes _too much_ of these affectionate
emotions, or that it provokes them _at all_? And
when the critics of sentimentality call an emo-
tion “immature” or “naive” are they really con-
trasting it with more mature and knowledgeable
emotions or are they, again, dismissing emo-
tions as such? Now I would be the first to insist
that emotions develop with experience and are
cultivated through education, and there certainly
is a world of difference between the emotions of
a seven year-old and the emotions of a seventy
year-old. But are the emotions of the latter nec-
essarily better or even wiser than the emotions
of the child? Indeed, don’t we often take emotions
to be sophisticated precisely when they are
cynical, even bitter, not only controlled but suppressed? There is something charming, even virtuous, about an adult who is capable of child-like feelings and something suspiciously wrong if he or she can never be so, even in the intimacy of a private apartment, a theater or an art gallery. To be sure, the ability to be so moved is no sign of aesthetic or artistic maturity, but neither is it evidence to the contrary nor an emotional flaw in character. To be sure, we outgrow some of our emotions, but one of the purposes of art is to remind us of just those tender, outgrown sentiments, perhaps even to disturb us regarding their loss. Better yet, art can help us feel them again, and move us to action on their behalf.

I think that it is worth noting that our limited vocabulary and expressions indicate a cultivated inability to recognize or publicly express the more gentle emotions. (How rich our vocabulary of abuse and disgust, by way of contrast.) How much of an emotion is “too much?” How is this to be measured? Of course, one can condemn the public expression of emotion as “inappropriate” or as “immature,” depending on the context and its customs, and we might well agree without argument that the childish expression of even the most sophisticated emotion is inappropriate in the public space of an art museum, but it is not excessive or childish expression that is being criticized here. It is the emotion as such, whether expressed or not, and the idea is that a sophisticated viewer will be mortified at his or her emotional response to a piece of high kitsch. The usual cultivated response, accordingly, is a sneer. So what is “too much” emotion? What is an “immature” emotion? If we are embarrassed by the gentle emotions I suspect that it is because those emotions themselves make us uncomfortable, in any “amount” and remind us of our own residual naïveté. Of course, it may be that good taste requires subtlety (though one might well object that this is a very cold-blooded and whiggish conception of good taste) and it may be that certain emotions are indeed inappropriate and out of place, e.g., getting sexually “turned on” by Bouguereau’s two little girls—which may in a few troubled souls be difficult to distinguish from more appropriate feelings of affection. (This sort of pathology is hardly “immaturity.”) But the bottom line seems to be that feeling “cuddly” just isn’t “cool.” Feeling our “hearts going out” to a painting of two little girls in the grass makes us uncomfortable and indicates incipient poor taste if it is not also a mark of some sort of degeneracy (sexual overtones quite aside). But why should we feel so guilty about feeling good or feeling for the moment a childlike affection? In real children, of course, such gentle feelings may well co-exist with meanness (I am not trying to sentimentalize children here) and they may play poorly in the rough and tumble world of business outside of the museum. But in such a safe, relatively private context, what would it mean to feel an excess of kindness, even “cuteness”? And why should the unsubtle evocation of tenderness be ethically blameworthy, distasteful or dangerous? Bad art, perhaps, but why any more than this?

(2) One obvious suggestion is that kitsch and sentimentality manipulate our emotions. Of course, it must be said immediately that one puts oneself in the position of being so manipulated, by going to the museum, by standing or walking in front of the painting, and so the “blame” is properly placed on the viewer as well as the artist and the object. Indeed, kitsch is manipulative. It utilizes what Kathleen Higgins calls “icons” to guarantee an instant and wholly predictable emotional response.17 Why else depict little girls, puppies and other subjects guaranteed to tug at our “heartstrings”? The argument, presumably, is that manipulation of emotions, even with the initial acquiescence of the “victim,” is a violation of a person’s autonomy. Of course, it is just as manipulative to depict the same subjects being beaten to within an inch of their lives, and while we might object to the latter (on moral grounds to be sure) the objection is not of the same sort as our objection to kitsch. But, again, my suspicion is that the objection, while cast in the language of violation, is a covert reaction against the emotions themselves. We do not talk about a violation of autonomy when a person is “reasoned with,” so why do we do so when the appeal is not to reason but emotions? The presumption is that our emotions, unlike our reason, are not truly our own, and they are humiliating rather than ennobling. Of course, this may be true of some emotions but it does not follow for all of them. One would think that feelings of tenderness would be ennobling and not humiliating, but then why should we feel “manipulated” by their provocation?
What does it mean, to “manipulate” someone’s emotions? I suppose it means to intentionally bring them about. We do this all the time, of course, in our every social gesture, but one does not ordinarily complain when his or her emotion of gratitude, for example, is intentionally brought about by a gift. The accusation of “manipulation” only emerges when the emotion in question is an unwanted one, e.g., if the gift is given by an offender whom one does not (for whatever reason) want to forgive—or at least not yet. But, why should we find even saccharine sentiments so unwanted that we resent their provocation, particularly in the sanctuary of a museum where such feelings would seem to be appropriate. Again, one might insist that great art, e.g., the Degas bather, stimulates much more than such simple sugary feelings. But the question is not whether kitsch is great or good art but whether the feelings it provokes are odious or morally insidious. Spending one’s time in front of the Bouguereau instead of the Degas may result in one’s leaving the museum edified but aesthetically ignorant. One may indeed feel for a moment or two (at least until hitting downtown traffic) that life itself is sweet and precious, but I do not see that even the most schmaltzy feelings, apart from the potential for intrusive expression, are in any sense despicable or dangerous. It is true that such feelings, when intentionally provoked in place of nasty and more urgent political impulses (Kundera’s objection to communist party kitsch) or when juxtaposed against a target for extreme hostility, as in racist propaganda (sweet English girls and Belgian babies about to be murdered by Hitler’s hateful Huns, pure and pretty Ms. Quested harassed by the dark hands of an Indian native in E.M. Forster’s Passage to India). But in such cases it is not the intentional provocation of the tender sentiments that is objectionable; it is the political situation and the hateful attempt to use honorable emotions as a shield against an honest view of oppression and hatred.

(3) The emotions evoked by kitsch and involved in sentimentality are often said to be “false” or “faked,” for instance by Clement Greenberg in his casual but familiar charge that kitsch involves merely “vicarious” emotions which are not “real” but rather “faked.” But what is a “faked” emotion? And is it true that “vicarious” emotions aren’t “real”? One can pretend to have an emotion, of course, and in that sense it can be “faked.” One can even deceive oneself about one’s pretenses, and so fake an emotion in seeming sincerity. But none of this seems to be what goes on when a piece of kitsch evokes its gentle sentiments. The unsophisticated viewer displays unself-conscious affection, not affectation, and the sophisticated viewer, with his or her mixture of embarrassed emotion and corrective disgust, is certainly not “faking” that despised emotion. Of course, there is that extreme cynicism that would insinuate that all gentle emotions—as opposed to such professionally familiar emotions as envy and resentment—are “false,” that is, impossible to feel sincerely and seriously, but I think that (for most of us) such a view need only be openly stated to be repudiated.

Emotions can go wrong, of course, and it thus makes sense to say that they can be “false,” particularly when the putatively factual premise on which they are based is false. One might also call an emotion “false” if one of its component evaluations is inappropriate or exaggerated, as when a trivial incident is “blown up out of all proportion.” A work of art can be straightforwardly false if it depicts a situation which is emotionally impossible or contrived or if it presents a scene which (in any of a thousand ways) is inaccurate. But the emotions evoked by kitsch are anything but false in any of these senses. The Bouguereau errs in the direction of perfect depiction, capturing two perfectly rendered little girls in a pose that is utterly typical (even cliché). One might object that the girls and their little game are “idealized,” but idealization is not the same as falsehood (more of this under item #6) and the fact that the artist does, indeed, pick two rather exceptionally “cute” little girls in their best dress and at their best behavior does not make the depiction or the emotions it evokes “false.” Could it be that showing such scenes, admittedly rare in the experience of most parents and elementary school teachers, is itself a “falsification” of reality? Or are such scenes (no matter how rare) and the emotions they evoke essential to our affection for children? (Why else would most people intentionally have them?) Again, cynicism shows its face behind the attack on sentimentality. (Are the posed and perfect portraits of children that sit on every other executive’s and secretary’s desk kitsch? Are they and

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the emotions they evoke in the middle of a busy day “false”?

What about vicarious emotions? Are they “real” emotions? That depends on the emotion, and on its context. To be sure, the fear (or more properly horror) that one feels while watching a grade-B movie thriller isn’t actually fear (although what it is, is not easy to say; it certainly is an emotion, and it obviously shares some essential features with fear.) The disgust we feel looking at a picture (whether real or staged) of a mutilated human face, however, is the same emotion that we feel when we come across a real mutilated face (making allowances, of course, for surprise, proximity and the stimulation of other senses and other emotions). The moral outrage we feel when looking at a politically-loaded painting (Goya’s Horrors of War, Picasso’s Guernica) or film (Costa Gravas’s Z, Attenborough’s Cry Freedom) is the same as the outrage we might feel when actually in (as we all are) the midst of violence and injustice. The fact that an emotion is “vicarious” (in some sense “second-hand”) does not mean that it is not a “real” emotion or that it is not an emotion of the morally appropriate type. Some are, some are not. Indeed, it is not at all clear that the sweetish feeling that we get when viewing the Bouguereau is “vicarious” in the usual sense at all. (The term seems to apply better to our voyeuristic viewing of the Degas dancer in her naked privacy.) But in any case, the charge against kitsch cannot be the vicariousness of the emotions provoked, and vicarious emotions are not thereby “unreal.” The sentiments one feels looking at the little girls in the Bouguereau are just the same sentiments as those one feels watching two very real little girls at play, and it would be only the extraordinary (and probably pathological) case in which one would feel sweet sentiment only with the painting and not with two (similarly well-behaved) girls.

Karsten Harries writes that “the need for kitsch arises when genuine emotion has become rare, when desire lies dormant and needs artificial stimulation.” He then adds—a very different argument—that kitsch seeks emotions where there is “no object that would warrant that emotion. Thus religious kitsch seeks to elicit religious devotion without an encounter with God, and erotic kitsch seeks to give the sensations of love without the presence of someone with whom one is in love.” But the initial diagnosis presupposes a kind of either/or addiction model of emotion, such that one “needs” an artificial stimulant when the “real thing” isn’t available, while the second argument insinuates a kind of fraud, a kick without a cost, or as Wilde would say “an emotion without paying for it.” The diagnosis seems to me to be false on the face of it, whether or not one agrees that one “needs” religion or love one way or the other. The role of kitsch in most kitsch lovers is as an emotional bonus, not compensation, and while it is a comfortable pretension to suppose that people with bad taste suffer from an emotional deficit as well, I see very little empirical evidence that this is true. (Of course, there are always the odd, even pathological cases, and then there is also the “tu quoque” argument, that it is those who condemn kitsch and sentimentality who are demonstrably lacking in their emotional life—a more plausible hypothesis, I believe.) Harries’s second argument seems to me much more interesting, and I want to deal with it in a bit greater depth later, for it is an argument that concerns the status of the object of emotion. Harries’s charge is that kitsch evokes emotion from inappropriate objects. Again, I would dispute the observation on which this charge is founded—it seems to me that those attracted to religious kitsch are so just because they are persons who are already devoted to God and at least some of those who find erotic kitsch most rewarding (as opposed to simply exciting) are persons who are already in love and utilize kitsch to remind them and stir in them semblances (or the same?) already genuine emotions.

(4) So, too, kitsch and sentimentality are said to express or evoke “cheap” or “easy” or “superficial” emotions. We should note with considerable suspicion the ambiguity of the word “cheap,” which on the one hand means “low quality” but on the other has unmistakable relevance to the socio-economic status of the sentimentalist. “Cheap” means “low-class,” and the suggestion is that we should be “above” such sentiments. We are not particularly surprised when class-conscious Oscar Wilde suggests that the feelings which constitute sentimentality are unearned, had on the cheap and come by too easily. (“To be sentimental is to be shallow.”) Irony and skepticism are the marks of the educated; sentimentality is the mark of the unedu-
cated. One cannot understand the attack on kitsch, I propose, without a sociological-historical hypothesis about the fact that the “high” class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings, and male society has long used such a view to demean the “emotionality” of women. I am tempted to suggest that the attack on sentimentality also has an ethnic bias, Northern against Southern Europe and West against East, with only a few geographical modifications for ethical and aesthetic prejudice in North America. But such obviously class-based criticism is not restricted to those who would confuse aesthetic taste with political legitimacy. Indeed, much of the contempt for kitsch, I would suggest, is not the product of personal or cultivated taste at all but rather the “superficial” criterion that teaches us that kitsch—immediately recognizable by its play on the tender sentiments—is unacceptable. Those sentiments are “cheap” not just because kitsch is cheap but because the person who feels them is, emotionally speaking, cheap as well. In a society that strives for political equality, can we afford to tolerate such snobbery? (“Some of my best leftist friends …”)

I have, quite frankly, never understood the charge of “easy” emotion, unless this is (again) code for a naive response to obvious emotional content in place of hard-earned aesthetic appreciation that comes only with education and sophistication. It is true, there is no subtlety in the Bouguereau; it dictates our emotional reaction. The Degas is ambiguous; it is impersonal and even cold. No emotion comes readily or easily. But why is a gentle and “easy” emotion, that is, one that is directly provoked without ambiguity, in any way blameworthy. Granted, it may have little to do with aesthetic appreciation but the objection against kitsch and sentimentality is not just artistically naive. It is the emotion itself that is supposed to be odious, but the “ease” with which it is provoked does not seem to have anything to do with the quality or desirability of the emotion in question.

In what sense are the tender sentiments “superficial.” Again, I believe that this oft-abused metaphor needs only to be brought to our attention to be disowned. “Superficial,” one supposes, is opposed to “deep.” What is a “deep” emotion? The grand emotions of tragedy are deep. The cosmic emotions (religious awe, devout faith) are deep. Life-long love is deep. By way of contrast, petty irritations are not deep, envying one’s roommate’s new shoes is not deep. Infatuation is not deep. But what seems to characterize the deep emotions is not “depth” so much as thorough-going involvement. The deep emotions are those in which we are (to use a not very deep financial metaphor) heavily emotionally invested. Those emotions which signal a dramatic change in one’s life, utter ruin or devastating loss, the joy of having a child or making a long-sought discovery, are deep because of our total engagement. Infatuation is superficial because it is usually short-term, often casual and at best tenuously attached to a particular person while life-long love is deep not (necessarily) because of the intensity of the experience but because of the all-embracing nature of it. To be obsessed, on this account, is to be deep. To have a fleeting feeling on encountering Bouguereau’s little girls is by this same account superficial, but now we should ask: Do we want to limit ourselves to deep emotions, presumably restricted to those whom we know intimately? Or is it not one of the essential features of social existence that we can be moved by children and puppies and a happiness not our own, that we can have affections that are superficial, that is, in which we have nothing at stake, nothing invested. That is what kitsch provides for us, and it is only if we demand all-embracing engagements in all of our emotions—the province of a few self-destructive romantics—that such casual emotions become unwanted or intolerable. Casual emotions and not the grand passions are the currency of everyday life, but some of us reject the casual emotions of kitsch not because we are holding out for the grand passions but because we are all too timid about or embarrassed by even the gentlest sentiments. Thus the attack on kitsch, I suggest, is a defensive attack on “easy” emotion as such. Better a grand passion than a passing fancy, perhaps, but sometimes better a “superficial” sentiment than none at all.

(5) Kundera argues at some length that kitsch and sentimentality are self-indulgent. Let us repeat his most famous charge:

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 kitsch kitsch.

The idea that kitsch is “false” because it is the emotion and not the object of emotion that is the primary concern is part of the charge that kitsch and sentimentality are not only fraudulent but self-indulgent as well. Harries writes “kitsch creates illusion for the sake of self-enjoyment” and suggests that love is kitsch, for example, “if love has its center not in the beloved but within itself.”19 We all know the phenomenon of being “in love with love,” but what is wrong with this, in our social lives, is that we know from experience that the supposed beloved usually gets the short end of it. Where the putative object is a figure in a painting or porcelain, there is no such danger of abandonment or fraud, and the locus of the enjoyment—in the object or in the emotion itself—would not seem to be a matter of concern. Indeed, is the reflectivity of emotion in such cases self-indulgence, or is it what we would call in philosophical circles “reflection”—the enjoyment of the seeing and not just the seen? What is wrong or self-indulgent about enjoying our emotions, even “for their own sakes”? Has any philosopher not suspected that enjoying the games and skills of reason—quite apart from the putative subject of discussion—might be similarly “self-indulgent”? Again, I suspect a deep distrust of and disdain for the emotions as such, and the ethical innocence of kitsch and its enjoyment thus becomes a suspected vice.

More recently, Kundera has written: “Kitsch is the translation of the stupidity of received ideas into the language of beauty and feeling. It moves us to tears for ourselves, for the banality of what we think and feel.”20 Notice that here the charge is not self-indulgence at all, but rather our banal and unoriginal ideas. Of course, Kundera’s concern is political propaganda and the use of kitsch as a cover for totalitarianism; but then it seems that what is so wrong with kitsch is that here it is used to evoke sentimentality on the basis of manufactured objects with the purpose of distracting us from the hideousness of totalitarian rule. But, then, it is not kitsch that is at fault, and there is nothing necessarily kitsch-like about either our being moved by children in the grass or by our further being moved by our being moved.

“Self-indulgence,” of course, is already permeated with moral disapproval; it means not only “allowing oneself to yield to temptation” but wallowing in it. But what is the “temptation” here? A warm satisfying feeling? The enjoyment of some item or event that can best be described in the prohibited language of “cute” and “nice.” In art, at any rate, it is not at all clear that “self-indulgence” is any more a mark of kitsch than it is of great art. (Is Degas less self-indulgent than Bouguereau?) But note that the self-indulgence argument shifts the indictment away from the object of sentimentality and back to the subject, to the viewer and not the art or artist. This would seem implausible to begin with, whatever one is to make of the difficult distinction at stake here; the banality is “in” the Bourguereau whether or not it is also a characteristic of the viewer. But, once again, is it at all clear that the museum-goer rhapsodically studying the Degas is any less self-indulgent (which is not the same as being more knowledgeable, more sophisticated and having more taste) than the “novice” who is enraptured by the Bouguereau? Is “self-indulgence” here becoming a code-word for unearned or untutored enjoyment? Indeed, one might well argue that the sophisticated connoisseur is considerably more self-conscious and self-congratulatory than the “novice,” who is genuinely caught up in the painting (by way of his or her feelings) rather than caught up in his or her feelings. As for the charge of banality and lack of originality, this may be a legitimate accusation against an artist (in our culture) but it is hardly fair as a charge against the viewer, much less as a more sweeping charge against sentimentality in general. Kundera rightly points out that our being moved by children running on the grass (or Bouguereau’s depiction of their sitting on it) is perfectly acceptable (though his descriptions elsewhere throw some doubt on this). It is our feeling good about our feeling good that is so obnoxious and constitutes kitsch. But would the same argument hold against the sophisticated viewer of Degas, who quite self-consciously enjoyed his enjoyment of the painting? Does the Degas dancer suddenly become kitsch? Or is Kundera, whose real concern is political propaganda, not sentimental French paintings of little girls, and so many other critics of kitsch giving
way here to a confusion between aesthetic bad taste and sentimentality and a condemnation of sentimentality as a kind of immorality? Those folks who find the Bouguereau “beautiful” will find that it is not only their artistic taste that is being attacked but their sentimentality and ultimately their character as such that is under attack, their indulging themselves in false or phony emotions. It is not the kitsch that is blameworthy; it is _them_ (for indulging themselves with kitsch as the object of their emotions).

This is the place to take up again Harries’s charge that kitsch deals with inappropriate objects, objects that “do not warrant” the emotion in question. But what a genuine emotion is “about” need not be the object that stimulates it, and this argument confuses the _cause_ of an emotion with its _object_. It is the critic of kitsch, not the kitsch lover, who assumes that the saccharine velvet painting of Jesus is the object of devotion or the Bouguereau children are themselves the object of tender affection. Quite the contrary, the objects of such emotions—what they are really “about”—are God and children (perhaps one’s own children) respectively, and the artistic quality of the cause has little to do with the appropriateness of the actual object or the genuineness of the emotion. Again, the matter of aesthetic bad taste is being wrongly used to condemn or belittle genuine feeling.

Michael Tanner raises a more serious objection against sentimentality in general. Tanner’s objection to sentimentality is that it “doesn’t lead anywhere.” 21 For example, “anger about a political extradition in a distant land.” 22 It is this gap between sentimentality and action that Tanner rejects. In “emotional generosity,” which Tanner contrasts directly with sentimentality, one “acts on [one’s] feelings without anxiety about the point and value of doing so … feeling and action become fairly closely linked. 23 Sentimental people, by contrast, “avoid following up their responses with _appropriate_ actions, or if they do follow them up appropriately, it is adventitious.” 24 (We might note that Tanner takes sentimentality in music as his paradigm, a starting point that makes his analysis incoherent to start with, caught between the non-representational nature of music and the intentionality of emotions, the purely aesthetic enjoyment of music and the need for action appropriate to emotion.) But it seems to me that the manipulative sentimentality of Jacques-Louis David’s paintings _The Oath of the Horatii_ and _The Death of Socrates_, for example, shows quite conclusively that sentimentality is not nearly so ill-directed nor so ineffective as Tanner suggests, and, to the contrary, being deeply moved by some specific (even if fictional) circumstance (e.g., David’s Napoleon on horseback, crossing the Alps) would seem to be a much more reliable prod or at least conduit to action (e.g., provoking possibly violent sentiments on the behalf of the revolution or the empire) than a well-rationalized set of categorical imperatives. Popular emotional support is not the least effective ingredient in the success of powerful political movements.

Do fictitious objects make “appropriate” action impossible? There are people, of course, who become so caught up in their own emotional reactions that they block their access or attention to action, and there are people who are sentimental all of the time, inappropriately responding to situations as “moving” or “sweet” when they would be better viewed as disgusting or dangerous. But such pathological sentimentalists are hardly fair examples of sentimentality as such. The gap between emotion and action is not itself the objection against sentimentality. (And does the self-scratching Degas dancer move us to appropriate action?) Indeed, part of the supposed problem of kitsch and sentimentality with reference to action lies precisely in the fact that, by the nature of the case, they are simply _viewed_, and those who enjoy them are observers or spectators but not participants as such. (Thus the charge of “self-indulgence” as well, which might mean nothing other than the fact that one is enjoying one’s status as a viewer). One of the great debates in and about eighteenth century moral sentiment theory also had to do with the prominence of the spectator and that spectator-emotion of _sympathy_. Robert Montgomery, reviewing this literature in _TLS_ (May–June, 1989) asks “Where is genuine emotion?” but if “genuine emotion” means “not the emotions of a mere spectator” then many of the moral sentiments and sympathy (and compassion) in particular are simply ruled out of court. Thus James Beattie wrote, in defense of such emotions, that “their obvious effect is to bind men more closely together in society and prompt them to promote the good and relieve the distresses of one another.” 25
Action is not always the test of true emotion, and our “best” emotions may sometimes be those upon which any “direct action” is simply impossible.

(6) The most common charge against emotions in general and against kitsch and sentimentality in particular is that they distort our perceptions and interfere with rational thought and understanding. I want to argue—briefly—that this epistemological critique of emotions in general as “distorting” or “irrational”—a standard bit in the rationalist’s repertoire—seriously confuses both the nature of emotion and the nature of perception. The first argument is that sentimentality is objectionable because it is distorting. Mary Midgley, for instance, argues that, “the central offence lies in self-deception, in distorting reality to get a pretext for indulging in any feeling.” Sentimentality centers around the “flight from, and contempt for, real people.” So too, Mark Jefferson argues that “sentimentality involves attachment to a distorted series of beliefs,” in particular “the fiction of innocence.” But the reply to this objection is, first of all, that all emotions are “distorting” in the sense intended and such “distortion” isn’t really distorting at all. In anger one looks only at the offense and fails to take account of the good humor of the antagonist. In jealousy we are aware only of the threat and not of the wit and charms of our rival. In love one celebrates the virtues and not the vices of the beloved, in envy we seek only the coveted object and remain indifferent to questions of general utility and the fairness of the desired redistribution. It is the very nature of an emotion to be engaged, even if only vicariously, to “take sides,” sometimes judiciously and sometimes not. Through our emotions we edit a scene or a situation in such a way that it matters to us, and in sentimentality we focus on the sweet and innocent aspects of a scene such that we are moved. Kitsch is art (whether or not it is good art) that is deliberately designed to so move us, by presenting a well-selected and perhaps much-edited version of some particularly and predictably moving aspect of our shared experience, including, plausibly enough, innocent scenes of small children and our favorite pets playing and religious and other sacred icons. But what must a critic be thinking of the world when she or he condemns these representations as “the fiction of innocence,” or worse (according to Broch), as “universal hypocrisy”? All emotions have an inevitable bias (not by any means always self-centered). But why call this “distortion” rather than “focus” or “concern”? And why in particular condemn the focus on innocence and cuteness as a “fiction” when every form of enthusiasm or emotion betrays some particular focus and concern? What is the alternative—omniscience?; always attending to everything that one knows or remembers about a subject? Must one review the entire subject of child psychology before one allows oneself to be moved by Bouguereau? Should we insist that all paintings of young, adorable children be trip-tuchs, an adorable centerpiece, perhaps, but two obligatory side panels displaying the child destroying a piece of furniture in one and throwing a temper tantrum in the other? Should we make it a point never to have a nice thought without a nasty one as well? That would seem to be the advice implicit in a great many attacks on kitsch and sentimentality, that for the sake of objectivity we should eschew any emotion that does not display the world, at least in part, for the ugly being that it is. (In a recent article entitled, “Is Disney Guilty of Innocence?” Ron Powers writes, “I keep a weather eye peeled for an opposite excess: false innocence. There are pietistic passages in Lady and the Tramp of such over-arching kitsch, such convenient benevolence and good-burgeher [or good-mutt] morality that I fear my kid may be psychically over-softened for his next ride of the school bus. There may be such a thing as too little sex and violence on TV.”) How much paranoia, under the guise of sophistication and moral superiority, underlies the attack on kitsch and sentimentality?

“THANK HEAVEN FOR LITTLE GIRLS” OR, IN DEFENSE OF KITSCH

What is wrong with being moved by a “too perfect” painting of two too perfect little girls, or a ceramic depiction of a wide-eyed puppy, or an idyllic painting of mother and infant, perhaps a particularly maudlin Madonna and Christchild? It seems to me that there are at least two questions here, which discussions of kitsch and sentimentality typically throw together; one is what is wrong with the so-called work of art as art,
while the other has to do with the quality of the emotion that is provoked by it and the character of the person who has that emotion. (Maureen Mullarkey writes in The Nation, “This should signal art’s irrelevance as a political act. An artistic conscience and a social conscience are not the same, and there’s too much at stake to confuse them” [March 6, 1989].) Little girls are particularly popular kitsch characters, not just by virtue of the fantasies of dirty old male artists and motherly nostalgia but because of the very real respect that almost all of us have for the innocent happiness of childhood, no matter how often both innocence and happiness have been compromised in our own experience. The art may be terrible, and we may indeed object to the obviousness with which such emotions are evoked in us, but Mark Jefferson rather objects to the “emphasis upon such things as the sweetness, dearness, littleness, blamelessness and vulnerability” as such and the fact that such “simplistic appraisal[s]” are a “direct impairment to the moral vision of its objects.”28 But need it be said or are we too cynical to say that some things in life are indeed sweet, some things are dear to us, some things are little and blameless and vulnerable, even if such virtues rarely if ever come unalloyed? And if such qualities provide us with an easy sigh or tear, that only shows how central they are to the very foundations of ethics and character. The work that evokes these emotions may not be great or even good art, but the emotions seem to me to be perfectly sound and feeling them is a virtue and not a vice.

Mary Midgely objects to such fictional young female characters who “could not exist and [are] the product of wish-fulfillment—a subservient, devoted, totally understanding mixture of child and lover, with no wishes of her own.” She suggests that “this figure was well-designed to provoke a delicious sense of pity and mastery, and to set up further fantasies where this feeling could continue,” and then she warns, “one trouble about this apparently harmless pursuit is that it distorts various expectations; it can make people unable to deal with the real world, and particularly with real girls.”29 But the dubious idea that sentimentality makes it impossible “to deal with the real world,” should be juxtaposed against the charge that people who are incapable of tender sentiments deal with the world in notoriously awful ways. If someone responds tenderly to a little girl in a painting, is that not a good indication that they will tend to do so in the case of a real little girl? And if they respond with cold contempt to the painting, isn’t that a warning, that this is a person deficient in essential human feelings? However sophisticated we may be, we respond to representational art as if the subject in question were real and actual and the way we respond to art says a great deal about how we respond to life. It is not self-indulgence that motivates us to absorb ourselves in a painting and welcome the emotions it evokes. It is part of our emotional engagement in the human drama.

Once we remove from consideration those concerns that are appropriate to art and aesthetics rather than ethics, it seems to me that the real objection to kitsch and sentimentality is the rejection (or fear) of emotions and, especially, certain kind of sentiments, variously designated as “tender” or “sweet” or “nostalgic.” (Harries: “cloying sweetness,” “sugary stickiness.”) But the rejection extends as well to the gloomier emotions, and Karsten Harries warns us: “how easy it is to wax lyrical over despair, to wallow in it, to enjoy it. This too is kitsch, sour kitsch.”30 Mary Midgley points out that “thrillers” have much in common with kitsch and sentimentality, for they too distort reality and manipulate emotion (though different emotions and to a very different end).31 So what emotions are legitimate, “true” and undistorted? Can art evoke any ordinary human emotions without being condemned as kitsch? Is there any room left in our jaded and sophisticated lives for the enjoyment of simple innocence and “sweet” affection? The trumped-up charges against kitsch and sentimentality should disturb us and make us suspicious. These attacks on the most common human sentiments—our reactions to the laughter of a child, or to the death of an infant—go far beyond the rejection of the bad art that evokes them. It is true that such matters provide a facile vehicle for second or third rate painters, but if such incidents are guaranteed to evoke emotion it is because they are indeed a virtually universal concern. The fact that we are thus “vulnerable” may make for some very bad art but this should not provoke our embarrassment at experiencing these quite “natural” sentiments ourselves, nor should it excuse the enormous amount of sophistry that is devoted to making
fun of and undermining the legitimacy of such emotions.  

ROBERT C. SOLOMON  
Department of Philosophy  
Waggener Hall 316  
The University of Texas at Austin  
Austin, TX 78712  

6. Ibid., pp. 519, 527.  
12. Ibid., p. 77.  
19. Ibid.  
22. Ibid., p. 131.  
23. Ibid., p. 139.  
24. Ibid., p. 140.  
29. Ibid.  
31. Ibid.  
32. My thanks to Kathleen Higgins for her many good discussions, her expertise on this topic and, not least, her inspiration to enjoy much of what I once could not. My much belated thanks to Paul Ziff, with whom a Pier I Imports conversation over various knick-knacks and chatchkes many years ago stimulated my thinking about the difference between art and (sweet) kitsch.