Kitsch!

CULTURAL POLITICS
AND TASTE

Ruth Holliday and
Tracey Potts

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On 24 May 2006 Oprah Winfrey broadcast her talk show from Auschwitz, prompting wry commentary from the LA Times: ‘Oprah in Auschwitz. Not since *Springtime for Hitler* have we been treated to a Holocaust production so surreal.’ In the blogosphere, the response, similarly, was one of disbelief. As much as the show itself drew attention, discussion was directed, simultaneously, toward the billboard advertising the special episode. One blogger writes:

A friend, knowing I value the perverse and idiotic, sent me an email with an image so ridiculous I burst out laughing: a billboard in Los
What is interesting, beyond the expression of incredulity, is the marked inarticulacy of the responses. The scandal of the billboard, not to mention the show itself, is imagined as speaking for itself: the reproduction of its image across the World Wide Web is mostly unaccompanied by commentary (other than that of the OMG! emoticon variety). The comments and debates that do emerge take the bad taste of the talkshow/billboard situation in the main as read and turn instead upon the consideration of whether it – that is, taste – in fact, matters. In the words of one commentator: ‘I cannot forget what I heard and saw as a child in Nazi Germany, but the generation of my children and grandchildren will forget our reports. Anything which brings back past reality is ok with me, even Oprah’s Ultra-Kitsch.’

What is seen to be a kitsch treatment of the Holocaust is, then, on the one hand, an affront of unimaginable proportions, rendering the offence of Oprah’s project. Kitsch says it all. The entanglement of notions of kitsch and kitschification in broader academic discussions around testimony and public memory are comparable in their faith in the plenitude of either term as a marker of an offence. Art Spiegelman, author of the Pulitzer Prize winning Maus, for instance, delineates what he calls ‘holokitsch’ as the constitutive limit of his own graphic poetics without going as far as to explain the precise shape or nature of that limit. As Tim Cole notes, a number of writers have expressed dismay over what they see as ‘the transformation of Europe’s most searing genocide … into an American version of kitsch’. Yet neither Cole nor the writers concerned provide any sense of what such a transformation might mean. A number of critics, likewise, see the events of 11 September 2001 as having been ‘kitschified’ to the point of cultural catastrophe. Writer Philip Roth ponders the possibilities for a literary response to 9/11: ‘September 11 is not something that I can draw on on [sic] an imaginative level. The only story that I can take from it is the kitsch in all its horror – not the horror of what happened, but the great distortion of what happened. It’s almost embarrassing, the kitschification of 3,000 people’s deaths.’

The real subject of the disaster is, for Roth, its disavowal via its re-presentation in kitsch: the horror of the event is sacrificed to the horror of what we term here disaster kitsch. In stark contrast to the resignation evidenced in the blogosphere (kitsch is a fact that cannot be resisted), Roth figures kitsch as a species of crime: as some kind of self-evident affront to memory itself.

In this respect, disaster kitsch can be seen to offer an intensification of ideas of kitsch circulating in relation to ordinary death. Gillo Dorfles elaborates the case of funerary kitsch:

Today death is a candied affair, swamped in sentiment and pathos. We have death disguised as life; death concealed, adulterated and masked … Death … is now a cosy counterfeit travesty … The great majority of modern tombs … are no more than the bearers of a final homage of bad taste to the memory of the dead.

In keeping with Milan Kundera’s conception of kitsch as a ‘folding screen set up to curtain off death’, kitsch memorials become figured as a form of deception and even desecration. In the case of the disaster, though, the presence of kitsch amounts to little short of revisionism. Daniel Harris’s distillation of the offence of 9/11 kitsch expresses the point vividly:

Does an event as catastrophic as this one require the rhetoric of kitsch to make it less horrendous? Do we need the overkill of ribbons and commemorative quilts, haloed seraphim perched on top of the burning towers and teddy bears in firefighter helmets waving flags, in order to forget the final minutes of blind traders, restaurant workers and secretaries screaming in elevators filling with smoke, standing in the frames of broken windows on the 90th floor waiting for help and staggering down the stairwells covered in third degree burns? … Through kitsch we avert our eyes from tragedy.

Kitschification, in operating to partition the disaster from the real, is seen to constitute a fatal form of aestheticisation. In the context of Holocaust memory, especially, aestheticisation is the very worst form of lie. Saul Friedlander’s figuration of kitsch as Nazi technology of concealment establishes aestheticisation decisively as the absolute crime, the negation of the real: ‘The important thing is the constant
identification of Nazism and death; not real death in its everyday horror and tragic banality but a ritualised, stylised and aestheticised death.\textsuperscript{11} The aestheticisation of the disaster colludes with the actions of the perpetrators of the crime, enacting a forgetting and, ultimately, a denial of the event. James Young elaborates: ‘compensating this catastrophe with beauty of any sort, would be not just a betrayal of the Jews’ experiences during the war but an extension of the crime itself, of the redemptive cast of mind that led to mass murder’.\textsuperscript{12} Holocaust kitsch is figured, thus, as a kind of collaborator: a revisionist technology, which propagates the falsification of history and memory.

Instead of joining the debate at the point of adjudication – deciding whether or not the presence of what is perceived to be kitsch matters in the project of public memory and memorialisation, that is, siding either with bloggers or academics – it would be more useful to begin by better anatomising the scandal itself. What exactly is the offence caused by kitsch in such contexts? What is at stake in the question of taste at the site of the memorial? As it will become clear, the entanglement of kitsch in discussions of the Holocaust and September 11th, together with the belief that we are witnessing the kitschification of memory and mourning more generally, requires a good deal more discernment. The conviction, especially, that the notion of kitsch is expressive as far as the offence itself is concerned needs to be challenged. As it stands, the debate is congealed and, more, stymied at the point that kitsch is positively identified at the scene of the disaster: \textit{Oh my God! Kitsch!} Any suggestion that further investigation is needed is rendered unthinkable beyond the secondary task of identifying the lover of disaster kitsch: whose profile effectively is that of neo-kitsch man. The emergence of a disaster kitsch souvenir economy in relation to the events of 9/11, in particular, is taken to match the emergence of an identikit consumer public. Mass culture prejudice inaugurates, further, a set of divisions aligning the commodity with politically naive and gullible consumers bewitched by the spectacle, on the one hand, and knowing, politically astute critics on the other.

By surveying scenes of Holocaust kitsch, Twin Towers kitsch, and in the process moving beyond apprehensions and diagnoses (\textit{Stop! Look! Kitsch! Kitschification!}), the perceived incommensurability of kitsch, and its appearance at what is deemed an inappropriate scene, is taken out of the sphere of universal self-evidence, that is of brazen presence, and instead aligned with a particular community. Following Rancière, who detaches the incommensurable from transcendence and suggests that there might be ‘several kinds of incommensurability. Perhaps each of them ... bringing into play ... a certain form of community’, we begin by asking, \textit{to whom} is the form that is given the label kitsch a problem?\textsuperscript{13} Further, what is the precise constitution of the problem of disaster kitsch? Grounding discussion in specific operations, what is identified as kitsch becomes visible as a cipher for a range of conjoined problems: principally, those of the image, the word, and the commodity, not to mention that of affect and public sentiment.\textsuperscript{14} An affective economy – a distribution of sense and sensibility and perceived emotionality or lack of it – is delineated, therefore, in what follows.

Given that the image, as Rancière notes, is itself embroiled in ‘the apocalyptic discourses of today’s cultural climate’, there is a good deal at stake in anatomising the scandal of disaster kitsch.\textsuperscript{15} The ‘problem’ of the image combined with the ‘problem’ of words in the case of Holocaust testimony, for instance, can be seen to inaugurate a
particular aesthetic consensus which functions to admit only select witnesses into the public memory project. The impertinence of kitsch as memory material is, consequently, illuminated in relation to the evolution of an anti-aesthetic (which coincides in its properties to certain modernist forms) as the proper, stately vehicle for public memory work. Moreover, the inequitable distribution of the codes of the anti-aesthetic serves to divide those who are equipped to respond to sanctioned memory forms from those who seem to prefer kitsch. The democracy of consecrated Holocaust forms, therefore, seems to be compromised at source. With this a certain community of sense begins to be discernable. Rancière delineates the notion of a ‘community of sense’ not ‘to mean a collectivity shaped by some common feeling’ but rather as a:

frame of visibility and intelligibility that puts things or practices together under the same meaning, which shapes thereby a certain sense of community. A community of sense is a certain cutting out of space and time that binds together practices, forms of visibility, and patterns of intelligibility. I call this cutting out and this linkage a partition of the sensible.16

The aesthetic judgements and – more – expressions of outrage that constitute the framework of visibility that brings disaster kitsch as an aesthetic scandal into existence are traced in relation to their projections of community.17 Crucially, the portraits of kitsch at the scene of the disaster are shown to be constitutive, productive both of community and its excess, and in no way empirical. The consumers of what are seen to be kitsch 9/11 souvenirs or the audiences of Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List seldom feature as sociological respondents and are instead invoked through close readings of what is perceived to be the kitsch object.18 Formatted texts generate formatted responses. Producer culture – a plastic atrocity exhibition – is deemed to be fully determining of consumer practice: the kitsch disaster souvenir thus becomes an index of degenerate consumption and reactionary politics. The community of the affronted thus manifests in co-constitution to a phantom community endowed with the power to deliver the affront; the subsequent partition of the sensible delineates a frightful vision of mass hysteria and neo-kitschmania crystallising into the worst forms of community (one that is nationalistic, narcissistic and, ultimately, fascistic in outline).

By undoing the linkages that engineer such communities and the constituent consensus that circulates therein, the aim is to better enable investigations into the relationship between aesthetics and politics in the project of public memorialisation and public sentiment. At the very least, a certain set of equations hinging on equivalences between kitsch, mass and pop culture, the commodity, the spectacle and politically prone sensibilities should be rendered less usable. As Rancière notes, the furnishing of political community rests on the recognition of the ‘aesthetics of politics, meaning the way politics frames a common stage’ (48). In other words, political consensus, a resolutely aesthetic enterprise, implies ‘a reconfiguration of the visibility of the common’ (ibid.), so much so that: ‘the givens of any collective situation are objectified in such a way that they can no longer lend themselves to a dispute, to the polemical framing of a controversial world within the given world’ (ibid.). By placing the hinges of groups of terms such as ‘consumerism, memory, mourning, and kitsch’ back into dispute, a circuit of false equivalences is dismantled and interrelated questions of the image, the word, the commodity and affect, hopefully, are opened up.

Beginning with an exploration of Holocaust aesthetics – or to be more precise the evolution of an anti-aesthetic as the privileged vehicle of Holocaust memory – questions of representation, testimony, memory, pedagogy, aesthetics and politics are staged in relation to issues around popular forms and sanctioned commemoration. The decision between ultra-kitsch and the anti-aesthetic (typically delimited as a choice between Schindler’s List and Claude Lanzmann’s epic documentary Shoah) is explored in relation to the social conditions that inform aesthetic experience.19 The demarcation of a representational limit via kitsch is then shown to secure sensible divisions that depend on the possession of symbolic capital. Sanctioned forms – Shoah over Schindler – are shown to require predisposed audiences, and not, as it is suggested by key critics, plain sensitivity or receptivity to their testimonial content.20 Attention is directed, following this, toward the presumed problem of mass culture in the context of the events of 9/11, in particular, to consider how notions of the spectacle and the commodity have come to dominate perceptions of public memory and mourning at Ground Zero. The imagined kitschification of memory is here seen to found a series of related and escalating projections moving from the ‘spectacle of grief’ to commodity patriotism and nationalism to defensive, even fascistic community.21
As Geoffrey Hartman, among others, observes, Holocaust memory has 'entered a period of transition'. The cultural transmission of the Shoah and its attendant pedagogical questions – the transmission of the memory, following Adorno, is necessarily burdened with an educational agenda – becomes further complicated as the event itself recedes. With this, Hartman notes not only the end of the era of ‘direct’ witness testimony and its replacement with ‘education’ but simultaneously the ‘growing use of the tape recorder and video camera’ (40). What John Urry calls the ‘electronification of memory’, that is, mediatised, technologised memory, is a cause for consternation for Hartman, however. The value of projects such as Yale’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies is potentially compromised that is, mediatised, technologised memory, is a cause for consternation for Hartman, however. The value of projects such as Yale’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies is potentially compromised by the technological means of memory production: ‘Memory and technology have become correlative themes. If, by a new fatality, everything returns as film, then not only is the present endangered as a site of experience, but also the past.’ (91) Media and information technologies present a world where ‘exploitation is inevitable’ (22) and ‘anti-memory’ (49), a form of ‘postmodern amnesia’ brought on by information overload and image-saturation, an ever-present threat. As much as videotestimony democratises and distributes Holocaust memory, the format itself is seen, simultaneously, to dispense amnesia and, consequently, to short-circuit the memory project. Hartman expresses his concern thus:

Popularization disseminates but also trivializes. Is there a way to prevent the cheapening of Holocaust memory? Should Elie Wiesel have appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show? Will our Holocaust museums become a series of macabre theme parks? How can survivor testimony differentiate itself from testimonial video that promotes a cult of the victim? What if we can soon tap into thousands of such witness accounts through access to technology that allows video on demand? Is it possible to maintain the quality of knowledge in a media age, where public memory is under assault, pressured by information and disinformation, by sensational narratives, by the unceasing juxtaposition of trivia and extreme experiences. No wonder [Claude] Lanzmann envisages a ‘ring of fire’ encircling the Holocaust to limit its exploitation, especially in fiction. (12)

The perceived encroachment of media culture into the spaces of Holocaust memory is framed as a series of offences, culminating in kitsch. For Hartman, the issue is one both of format and form: the proliferation of images, on the one hand, contributes to anti-memory (‘what meaning can be extracted from an increasing mass of materials?’) (38), while the form of such images, potentially, negates their testimonial function. The sentimental, the melodramatic – exemplified by the 1970s TV mini-series *Holocaust* and by key scenes in Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* – effectively blocks the testimony by offering redemptive, familiar narratives that, in substituting for the event, bring about premature closure. Docudrama and Hollywood ‘poster effects’ (ibid.) thus bear false witness; Inga Clendinnen underscores Hartman’s concerns:

Most commercial films about the Holocaust have vulgarised events even more grossly than popular novels. Consider the American series *Holocaust*, where terrible actuality is subordinated to, and suborned by, a standard girl–boy romantic narrative, or the German series *Heimat*, where exculpatory sentimentality takes unchallenged precedence. Hear Elie Wiesel on what the populace gets from the ‘cheap and simplistic melodramas’ that pretend to represent the Holocaust: ‘a little history, a heavy dose of sentimentality and suspense, a dash of theological ruminations about the silence of God, and there it is: let kitsch rule in the land of kitsch.’

For a number of critics, the Holocaust is singularly unsuited to either big or small screen. Reviewing Roman Polanski’s *The Pianist* amid what he identifies as ‘a torrent of Holocaust related movies’, Jonathan Freedland asks: ‘How can humankind’s darkest hour be conveyed by a medium fundamentally committed to entertainment?’ The entertainment industry is seen to imprint itself indelibly upon the film’s text and hence upon the testimony itself. Gabriel Schoenfeld sees the structuring experience of the Simon Wiesenthal Center’s Museum of Tolerance as one bearing precisely this imprint. The museum, he argues: ‘promotes itself like a theme park. “Travel Leaders and Tour Operators!” barks the publicity material. “Make the Museum of Tolerance part of an exciting and informative itinerary for your group. Check us out for group discounts, special bonuses.”’ The Wiesenthal Center, thus, comes to stand as an exemplar of ‘death camp kitsch’ and, further, as evidence of what Norman Finkelstein terms a Holocaust industry; indeed, Finkelstein singles out the Center for its ‘“Dachau-meets-Disneyland” museum exhibits’ (92).

To anatomise these charges, what is seen as the Disneyfication of
the Holocaust represents the breach of Lanzmann’s imagined ‘ring of fire’ in at least two key places: first, education is replaced with edutainment (to recall, Umberto Eco’s worst thing), and with it the element of pleasure is admitted to the pedagogical scene. Given that around the representation of the Holocaust - Adorno’s plea ‘After the Holocaust, no poetry’ is at its core less an argument against art per se than an appeal to extinguish any possibility of aesthetic pleasure from the project of witnessing – its readmission is an ethical violation of the highest order. Second, Disney Dachau and Hollywood Holocausts are contaminated by the fact of profit, leading to the identification of a commercially packaged version of Auschwitz for the purposes of financial gain, exemplified by Der Speigel’s denunciation of Holocaust, the mini-series: ‘a commercial horrorshow ... an imported cheap commodity ... Genocide shrunken to the level of Bonanza with music appropriate to Love Story.’

Disneyfication and kitschification, thus, operate as a codewords for the twin crimes of making the annihilation beautiful (aestheticisation) and making the annihilation profitable (commoditisation), resulting in two forms of forgetting: a commodity forgetting (turning disaster into exchange goods and so denying the singularity of the event) and an aesthetic forgetting (essentially a glossing over of tragedy, a sprinkling of glitter on ash). Of these two concerns, the latter – the aesthetic and the question of images – dominates discussion as to the damaging impact of what is taken to be Holocaust kitsch. Indeed, Christopher Hitchens suspects that Finkelstein’s controversial stance is itself held at bay by kitsch:

In England, in Germany and elsewhere Finkelstein’s arguments and evidence have received serious attention and been subjected to real and fierce debate. But in the United States, where the press and the academy are wedded to a near-uniform combination of Holocaust kitsch and Holocaust dogma, no real argument has been permitted to arise.

While the issue of commercial exploitation and Holokitsch profiteering is a key ingredient of the offence – crystallised in the mordant coinage ‘Shoah business’ – it is the aesthetic aspects of commercial forms that are at stake mostly in charges of Holocaust kitschification. The commercial formatting of Holocaust memory, primarily, is an aesthetic matter, one that is seen to produce a profound distortion of
fades with repetition and with it the pedagogic and testimonial function of disaster photography. If shock and novelty work in concert to keep the referent in focus – 'photographs shock insofar as they show something novel' – then this is a game with distinct limits: 'unfortunately, the ante keeps getting raised – partly through the very proliferation of such images of horror' (19). For Hartman, the desensitisation wrought by repetition threatens a lapse into relativism and, worse, revisionism. The repeated image shades into ‘an icon, a barely expressive metonymy’ (85), which leaches fictionality: ‘It is feared that mechanical reproduction, glossily efficient, will corrode over time the distinction between history and fiction’ (157). Repetition, then, invariably results in iconomania, anaesthesia, dissociation and amnesia. The photographic image fights with itself in offering both to register and to negate the event.

In her recent reworking of the *On Photography* project, Sontag proposes an aesthetic means of averting this impasse:

> Beautifying is one classic operation of the camera and tends to bleach out a moral response to what is shown. Uglifying, showing something at its worst, is a more modern function, it is didactic and invites an active response. For photographs to accuse, and possibly to alter conduct, they must shock.36

Shock value alone, having a ‘shelf-life’ (ibid.), is insufficient, however, in delivering the moral imperative of the photographer to teach and transform the viewer through the image. The feeling project of disaster photography (we must be, and continue to be, moved by what we are shown) is negated by the presence of beauty, here figured as an over-exposure that renders the referent illegible, even absent. Only ugly images register, and therefore by extension, only the uglified can trigger action, can make us feel the disaster, properly connect us to its memory. While Sontag places the concentration camp image ultimately outside the circuit that drains atrocity of its shock value (for her, photographs of Belsen retain their ‘negative ephiphanie’ and Auschwitz has not produced any iconic ‘poster-images’), the aesthetic task of uglifying (i.e. de-aestheticising, achieved by the stripping away of gloss) remains central to her conception of documentary photographic work.37

The problem of the image after Auschwitz is matched by the problem of words. Survivor testimony has negotiated problems comparable to that of the photographic record, in that reality is, at once, what is at stake in the act of witnessing and is in excess of the words with which to say it: language, representation, historiography, theory are all found wanting in the shadow of the concentration camps. As Aharon Appelfeld notes, ‘Everything that happened was so gigantic, so inconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself.’38 The disaster, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, ‘de-scribes’: ‘We read books on Auschwitz. The wish of all, in the camps, the last wish: know what has happened, do not forget and at the same time never will you know.’39 The Holocaust has thus been figured as ‘an event without a witness’, as Dori Laub explains: ‘Not only, in effect did the Nazis try to exterminate the physical witnesses of their crime; but the inherently incomprehensible and deceptive psychological structure of the event precluded its own witnessing, even by its very victims.’40 The testimonial task, consequently, has been circumscribed by notions of aporia, crisis and the unrepresentable, which is best represented by Jean-Francois Lyotard’s figuration of the crime of Auschwitz as an earthquake that ‘destroys not only lives, buildings and objects but also the instruments used to measure earthquakes directly and indirectly’.41 The disaster – what Lawrence Langer designates *l’univers concentrationnaire*, delineating the concentration camp as a realm apart from everything that went before and after – awaits an apparatus adequate to the project of representing the unrepresentable.

The radical failure of the historical document is, however, the event that opens up the Holocaust to the literary imagination. If, at first, in accordance with Adorno’s plea for no poetry, fiction was cast outside of the project of representing *l’univers concentrationnaire* as a potential affront to memory, it soon establishes itself within the realm of testimony.42 Lawrence Langer elaborates:

> An essential characteristic of [holocaust literature] is not the transfiguration of empirical reality ... but its disfiguration, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader’s sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it is intrinsically eliminated. (p. 3)

Literary responses become framed as indispensable to witnessing; the case for fiction consists in the ability of literary forms to undo habituated ways of seeing, to prise the reader loose from the conventions
and codes of the pre-concentrationary world in order to prepare for the journey into l'univers concentrationnaire. Hartman makes this clear: the shattering of traditional frames of reference also puts in question the resemblance of words, which can become false friends when their task is characterization of the death camp experience. ‘Martyrdom,’ ‘victim,’ ‘suffering,’ ‘choice,’ ‘resistance,’ are inadequate phrases even though we may have to use them to communicate and restore a semblance of normality. There is, here, the basis of an argument for fiction, or rather for the defamiliarization of words and events in great poetry, like that of [Paul] Celan or [Dan] Pagis. (3)

As in the case of photography the emphasis is placed on literary forms that disfigure, that estrange, that defamiliarise; in short, that are perceived to de-aestheticise. The burden placed upon representation in all media (photography, literature, film, art, architecture) elicits an anti-aesthetic, or what Hartman terms ‘disaster notation’, predicated on the shattering of established aesthetic forms. De-aestheticised poems, sculpture, buildings, paintings, films, novels, defamiliarise and disorient, they refuse resolution, comfort, and refuge. Disaster notation aims to represent while admitting reflexively to the limits of representation. Its forms stutter and jar and are exemplified in the chilling decorum of the title of Tadeusz Borowski’s collection of short stories This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen; in the opening lines of Levi’s If this is a Man (‘It was my good fortune to be deported to Auschwitz only in 1944 …’); in the deranged language of Paul Celan’s poetry; in the charred surfaces of Anselm Kiefer’s Margarete; in the disjunctive poetics of Dan Pagis – ‘Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car’; in the spare and fractured prose of Charlotte Delbo. The contradictory form of Rachel Whiteread’s Vienna memorial emblemsatises disaster notion in three dimensions: a negative yet monumental library, Whiteread’s sculpture materialises the absent testimony of the ‘drowned’, of those who, in Levi’s words, fathomed ‘the bottom’. The complex textuality of the sculpture – its negative presence – combines with an austere edifice to produce an imposing, disorienting and yet, ultimately, frustrated public monument.

Clendinnen, in providing a distillation of the successful Holocaust text, delineates an implicit division between direct and indirect representation:

The most effective imagined evocations of the Holocaust seem to proceed either by invocation, the glancing reference to an existing bank of

ideas, images and sentiments (‘Auschwitz’), or perhaps more effectively by indirect. Martin Amis in Time’s Arrow conjures Auschwitz skimmingly through the swift manipulation of familiar clusters of icons. The pathos of Anne Frank’s diary derives not from the words before us, which are in fact rather chirpy … but from our knowledge of what is to come. The horrors in Aharon Appelfeld’s laconic novels are always extratextual, or at least offstage. (165)

The atrocity of the camps must be implied, suggested, staged offstage and above all, not shown directly. The hermeneutic structure of Holocaust testimony thus requires the presence of a reader, whose ‘existing capital’ (168) completes the picture. Hartman’s consternations around what he terms ‘supermimesis’ or extreme realism echo Clendinnen’s recommendations for an indirect record: ‘a massive realism … not only desensitizes but produces the opposite of what is intended: an unreality effect that fatally undermines realism’s claim to represent reality’ (157). In place of no poetry, then, no mimesis, no realism; the false friendship offered by words that aim to resemble the experience of the camps must be refused. The logic of no mimesis follows the quasi-theological strictures of the Bilderverbot: ‘the prohibition of graven images’. Realistic renditions of concentration camp experience – in Hartman’s case, the particular forms of ‘docudrama and historical fiction’ (51) – are seen to be pretentious, blasphemous even, in attempting to approximate what ought to lie beyond representation.

Jonathan Romney’s review of Roberto Benigni’s Life is Beautiful offers an exemplary vision of the perceived inadequacies of supermimesis. The film – a concentration camp ‘comedy’ – tells a tale of survival through ingenuity and humour: the principal plot centres around the character of Guido Orefice, played by Benigni, who conceals his child’s presence in the camp in which he and his wife are interred via a series of jokes and games. The offence for Romney, however, is less the ‘controversial’ element of comedy and more that of realism, especially in the scene where Guido encounters a pile of corpses during an evening walk through the camp:

Benigni makes it an aesthetic vision, like a religious image in ivory, beautiful in its starkness. If there’s one place beauty doesn’t belong, it’s here. This is the most unthinkingly kitsch image I’ve ever seen in cinema, and just one of many foolish touches from a director who doesn’t know not to cross the barrier of bad rhetoric, who thinks nothing of having a stray kitten clamber over the clothes of the dead.
Benigni, mistakenly, attempts to show, and worse, reconstruct, the dead. While Romney remains inarticulate as to the anatomy of the mistake (here kitsch is self-expressive), for Clendinnen, the error is, in the main, attributable to a fault that lies within film itself as a medium: ‘in the exuberance of its communication of information … everything must appear’ (175). Film, consequently, ‘must at once say too much, in its expert mimicry of the richness and denseness of actuality and too little, in its concealed selectivity, its beguiling, invisible anglings and strokings’ (our emphases, 175). Forced to show what is, or should be, unshowable, and further, forced to conceal its manipulative machinery, film introduces an inevitable distortion into the record. Further, this is ultimately productive of an unreality. With cinematic realism, this is all the more a risk, as the weight of the means of cinematic production competes with the images on the screen: ‘Modern realistic media, then even in the hands of as brilliant a movie maker as Spielberg, remains shadowed by an unreality effect more subversive than aestheticism. We are spellbound, yet something in us keeps saying showing despite his profound reservations about film, is however less pessimistic than Clendinnen over its potential for the memory project; what effect. Video-testimony – ‘no theatricality or stage managed illusions’ – places survivor accounts outside the narrative strategies and temporal structures of classic cinema (comprising, in Miriam Hansen’s words, a ‘dramaturgy of deadlines, suspense, and rescues in the nick of time’ alongside ‘moments of melodramatic intensity and relief’). In addition to the Yale archive, Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah represents the epitome of the counter-cinematic for Hartman: ‘Shoah blanches all other Holocaust depictions’ (129), so much so that it is possible to speak of Shoah as ‘divid[ing] the history of Holocaust representation into before and after – after Lanzmann’ (144). Shoah thus assists in illuminating the shortcomings of Hollywood cinema, in particular Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List.

Not surprisingly, and beyond Hartman’s figuration, Shoah and Schindler’s List have been pitched in opposition to one another, as Hansen notes: ‘as two mutually exclusive paradigms of cinematically representing and not-representing the Holocaust’.

Critical objections to Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List tend to coalesce around its ‘violat[ion] of the taboo on representation (Bilderverbot) [in] that it tries to give an “image of the unimaginable”’ (300). In Lanzmann’s own words: ‘Spielberg shows everything that I left out in Shoah.’ Shoah’s List shows too much and not enough: Spielberg attempts to take the viewer to the epicentre of the disaster: contentiously, to the gas chambers and, obscenely, to the experience of the gas chambers, in the scene where the camera follows a group of women into the showers.

For Hartman, this is one of a number of scenes that shade into kitsch; suspense, followed by a last-minute reprieve, brings melodrama to the very last place that it should appear. For Clendinnen, Spielberg ‘sweetens the horror’ by offering the audience ‘the consolatory figure of the little girl in red’ (175). Lanzmann is far less accommodating, dismissing the entire film as little more than ‘a kitschy melodrama’ (ibid.). Spielberg shows what he ought not and neglects to show what he should, by allowing sentiment and heroic gestures to block the view. Lanzmann, by contrast, privileges survivor and bystander witness accounts, which, nevertheless, refuse the consolations of personal Schindleresque heroisms:

None of the survivors in Shoah says ‘I’. Nobody tells a personal tale: the barber does not tell how after three months in the camp he escaped from Treblinka, that didn’t interest me and it didn’t interest him. He says ‘we’, he speaks for the dead, he is their spokesman. As far as I am concerned: I wanted to construct a form that acknowledged the generality of the people. (ibid.)

Lanzmann continues to distinguish his project from Spielberg’s:

The holocaust is unique in that, with a circle of fire, it builds a border around itself, which one cannot transgress, because a certain absolute kind of horror cannot be conveyed … If one wants to testify, does one then invent a new form or does one reconstruct? I think I have created a new form, Spielberg has chosen to reconstruct. If I had found an existing film – a secret film because filming was highly forbidden – shot by an SS-man, that shows how 3000 Jews, men, women, children die together, choking, in a gas chamber or crematorium, then not only would I not have shown it, I would have destroyed it. (ibid.)

In Clendinnen’s view, in Shoah the testimony is itself being formed rather than staged: we watch – and are made to watch – the moment
when ‘memory transforms into language’ and silence is made eloquent, often ‘more eloquent than speech’ (177). Shoah, thus, bears witness while upholding the bilderverbot. Lanzmann’s documentary comes to exemplify disaster notation while Spielberg’s movie constitutes an object lesson in how not to represent the Holocaust. The title of a review of Lajos Koltai’s Fateless (2005), adapted from Imre Kertész’s semi-autobiographical novel, expresses things more succinctly: ‘Schindler’s List? Kitsch’. 49

The bar on supermimesis carries into the Holocaust museum. Praise for James Freed’s United States Holocaust Memorial Museum consists in oppositions between kitsch reconstruction and an oblique, suggestive modernism. Adrian Dannatt’s tour of the architectural blueprint of the Museum is instructive in its delineation of an approved Holocaust aesthetic. 50 The entrance hall is said to be ‘skewed’ and ‘disorienting’ (5), no guidance is offered, the signposting that traditionally greets the visitor to the museum is lacking. The expected codes that usually structure museum space are intentionally missing. The entrance offers a space without the usual transitional elements that greet the visitor (stewards, guidebooks, signs, directions) and the sense of disorientation continues throughout the building. The Hall of Witnesses is said to be ‘disturbing and fractured, with elements sloping one way or another in contradictory directions forming a pattern of interrupted logic’ (5). Through the continued experience of disorientation, the visitor is seen to be placed in a state of receptivity to the events, therefore, barriers between the viewer and the viewed must be minimized. 51 In addition to engendering disorientation in the museum visitor, architectural details are said to be drenched with historical significance:

Freed’s use of brick is logical yet poetic … The red brick is warm, tactile yet eventually disturbing. The brick walls of camp ovens are present in ghost form, haunting us by association … high on the walls there are batteries of lights pointing down behind slanted slats which deliberately recall camp lamps, especially as the space is full of daylight and hardly needs such illumination. These slats ajar imply a process of surveillance, eyes upon us, the fake ventilation systems built in the death houses, even the cattle trucks. (6)

The architect attends to the referentiality of the Holocaust through the building’s structure and use of space and materials. Holocaust testimony is encoded in the very fabric of the building.

Freed thus avoids creating what one critic sees as the potentially ‘kitsch’ experience threatened by the museumification of the Holocaust:

Freed could have designed the museum’s transitional spaces to simply resemble the Nazi death camps and Jewish ghettos. While this approach would have allowed visitors to be immersed in a concrete reenactment of the Holocaust experience, such blatant imagery and literal symbolism would run the risk of reducing the Holocaust’s somber meaning to one that is more thematic in nature. The resulting space would be less like an emotionally trying encounter and more like a sightseeing trip to Epcot Center – visitors would be impressed by the realistic Holocaust portrayal, but would be so mentally removed from the exhibit that the lasting effect would be kitsch at best. 52

Oblique, indirect, suggestive – as opposed to blatant, literal, supermimetic and kitsch – Freed’s museum structure refuses to show; it communicates ‘information about the Holocaust without words or photographs’ (Dannatt, 6). Such a feat of communication – wordless and imageless – echoes that of Shoah’s perceived poetics of silence. Clendinnen describes the testimonial process enacted by Lanzmann’s documentary:

We stare at silent fields, at rusting railway tracks with soft grass tufting between them, and are forced to locate and reconstruct buildings, sidings, walkways, chimneys. Then, the structures having been inexorably established in the imagination, we are made to people them out of information slowly being fed to us, in interaction with banks of memories we did not know we held. (176, emphasis added)

The supermimetic is, here, counteracted by what could be termed the superoblique: an indirection so pure that it appears immediate. Memories are activated unwittingly, unbidden, from beyond the circuit of communication; messages relayed without the burden of language, visual or written. Vulgar literalism, theme park noise and the obfuscation of memory, receives its antidote in the sublime sensibility attuned to the nuances of the suggestive; as James Young phrases it: ‘the traces of the story the survivor is not telling; these traces are in his eyes, his movements, his expressions – all of which become part of the overall text of video testimony, suggesting much more than we are
hearing and seeing'. This excess, 'a universe of non-verbal memory' (ibid.) surplus to what can be both heard and seen, summons a community of witnesses sensitive to such an endeavour. While Young admits that non-verbal memory is constituted from signs that require interpretation and decoding, the precise contours of such memory (being both invisible and inaudible), its material traces, are hard to discern. Likewise, the process of reception of such a memory is ill-defined: what are we, the discerning, sensitive witnesses, taking delivery of as recipients of the testimony? What is the eloquence of silence?

The presence of the superoblique, thus, betrays an iconophobia at the heart of sanctioned Holocaust representation and an attempt to align the image with a particular, most notably vulgar, audience. **Showing**, via visual or written images, is aligned with aestheticisation, and more, with dissociation (too little emotion resulting in themeparkisation) or sentimentalisation (too much emotion resulting in melodrama), all of which amalgamate in kitsch. Consequently, not showing becomes the sign of the appropriate relation to l'univers concentrationnaire. If disaster kitsch materialises the event in inappropriate form, disaster notation attempts to render the sign altogether redundant, and with this, to found the memory project upon the possession of a certain, above all responsive subjectivity. Hartman makes this clear in his assessment of Paul Celan’s poetic achievement: ‘Trauma is given a form and disappears into the stammer we call poetry, into a fissure between speech on the page, and an invisible writing that may not be retrievable. This is, in truth, a disaster notation’ (164). The poet ‘who aspires to the most reticent self-presence’ (ibid.), testifies to ruined memory, to the stubborn refusal of illumination, and to the impossible task faced by the witness. Renouncing the authority of narrative ‘or any luminosity that would fill the emptiness’ (ibid.), Celan requires a witness to the event’s de-scription.

For Rancière, such attempts to hitch the image simply and plainly to idolatry, and its audience likewise to kitsch, are readable as a distribution of the sensible. Refusing the opposition that posits speech hierarchically against image, Rancière challenges both the ‘trial-like atmosphere’ in which images of the Holocaust are themselves immersed together with what he labels ‘the dogmatists of the unrepresentable’. By alighting upon a scene in Lanzmann’s Shoah, Rancière dismantles the linkages that contribute to the derogation of the visible in consecrated Holocaust representation. The moment where...
The division between an obscene display and an eloquent silence with their attendant vulgar and civilised audiences is, to reiterate, a matter of sensible distribution. Disaster notation is, then, productive of a particular community of sense. Hansen highlights the reductiveness of its distributions:

Rather than continue to partition modes of representation and then to attribute sensibility to the distribution (a sensitive, ethically disposed audience watching a nine-hour subtitled documentary, as opposed to what Sylvia Plath would figure as a 'peanut-crunching crowd' baying for kitsch) or to act as if certain visual, literary or spatial forms deliver predictable effects, it would be better to acknowledge the separation of any format from the experience of its reception. In addition, we need to begin to appreciate 'what images are, what they do and the effects they generate' (Rancière, 95) instead of subsuming the visual to the spectacle and, then, aligning the spectacle to new forms of cultural savagery. Indirection is a code, and the poetics of brick and survivors' tears or the ghost forms of ovens and camp searchlights require the appropriate key to be made meaningful as transmitters of memory. Similarly, mimesis, as Rancière is careful to note, is 'not resemblance but a certain regime of resemblance'; that is, there is nothing automatic about the mimetic or about showing. Mimesis is not an actual burden placed on representation that acts outside cultural frames, nor is it something that is simply exhausted by the gravity of certain subjects. As a regime of resemblance, mimesis requires consideration rather than defamation, and with this, the very idea of the unrepresentable needs rethinking. In place of what Dominick LaCapra sees as a 'fixation on the aporetic or the sublime', then, and a corresponding denigration of popular forms and preferences (in this case mimesis) within the project of Holocaust representation and memorialisation, critical attention should be directed toward the ways in which the popular is received and consumed. LaCapra elaborates:

with respect to more recent commodified popular and mass culture, we should avoid blanket categorizations or condemnations that always skirt essentialization, elitism, and self-defeating cultural pessimism. Instead we should attempt to work out sustained and careful analyses of the ways artifacts always to some extent affect social and cultural stereotypes and ideological processes, even when they insistently attempt to reproduce and reinforce banality. (7)

It is all too easy to survey the listings of UK cable TV's History Channel (Running Hitler's Henchmen?) and to despair (with Hartman) of the future of Holocaust memory, neglecting in the process the ways in which, as LaCapra's would see it, the 'critical dimensions' of mass-media texts are released 'either through creative modes of consumption or through more thoroughgoing and even collective procedures in which commodified artifacts are reproduced or refunctioned' (8). In other words, the response-inviting structures of texts are by no means self-determining, nor are texts hermetic in their relations to one another; as Hansen notes in her thoughtful analysis of the relations between Schindler and Shoah: 'the mercurial factor of popular reception ... cannot be totally reduced to intended response' (294). More, the temporality of reception is itself difficult to track, in that those moments when an audience diverges or goes away from the film, when reception takes on a momentum of its own, that is becomes public in the emphatic sense of the word' demand a methodological agility that 'is capable of mediating empirical and theoretical levels of argument' (295). Schindler's List will commingle with other related and unrelated films, books, plays, news items, public monuments, joining the 'hum and buzz' of worldly textual encounters. While Hartman worries about the 'new amnesia' provoked potentially by a proliferation of Holocaust images, what can be said, at the very least, is that reader/audience reception needs to be accounted for ethnographically and neither assumed nor projected in the interests of securing the boundaries of certain communities of sense.

The question of accessibility, equally, is crucial to that of reception. A consolidated, codified disaster notation (which coincides in its shape, in many ways, to a high modernist notation) can inadvertently introduce inequities into the process of witnessing and responding 'properly', with the appropriate decorum, to the disaster. As LaCapra points out, 'difficult' texts 'may be elitist, for example, in their function as symbolic capital and social reinforcement for a restricted in-group or cenacle' (7). So, choosing between 'effective' suggestiveness and 'vulgar' literalism, or the superblique or supermimesis, is by no
means an open decision. As Clendinnen’s definition of the successful text admits, sanctioned indirection relies on the reader’s pre-existing stock of images, to recall, what she refers to as ‘existing capital’, for its completion. The impressionistic, response-inviting outline provided by the abstract minimalist monument, by Martin Amis’s novel, by Anne Frank’s diary, beckons an informed response so as to be decoded precisely (and precise decoding is what is at stake here, given the potential revisionisms of ‘distorted’ readings and representations). The reader necessarily brings with them the shadow that casts its darkness over the text. However, despite her observation that ‘existing capital’ (168) is necessary to the correct reading of Holocaust testimony, photography and literary fiction Clendinnen gives no indication of where and how such capital might be acquired.

Presumably, one place where it might be found is in the Holocaust museum. In the case of the Washington museum, though, evidence points in favour of an altogether more amorphous incultation into Holocaust history; crude didacticism is disdained and an emphasis placed on ‘experiencing’ rather than ‘knowing’. The Holocaust Council, who oversaw Freed’s design, aim, Dannatt insists, ‘to generate reflection, emotional rather than intellectual, from a reduced vocabulary of austerity’ (6). The implication here is either that, like Clendinnen’s reader of Holocaust fiction, the museum visitor arrives complete with their own personally acquired archive of images to fill in the gaps in the exhibition structure or that the event somehow communicates itself through the abstracted confrontation with the building’s fabric. Indeed, both are suggested through Dannatt’s emplotment of the implied visitor’s experience, and the account of the museum’s ‘architecture of sensibility’ given on its website: history and narrative comprises those who are able to appreciate, indeed to prefer) vulgar realism, kitsch pretension. The inequitable distribution of sanctioned sensibilities and modes of appreciation makes a ‘pure’ conversation about Holocaust aesthetics impossible, not to say symbolically violent. If the ability to participate in consecrated acts of remembrance is conditional upon the cultivation of consecrated dispositions and sensibilities, the question of aesthetic judgement needs, consequently, to be suspended in order to permit space for the interrogation of questions of cultural acquisition and contemporary ‘configurations of the common’. The setting of a disaster notation (whether cinematic, monumental, literary, or museal) over and above a shining sea of disaster kitsch, consequently, delineates a community of sense and not, as it is supposed, a portrait of the embattled, sensitive witness, defending the shores of memory against the tides of mass culture.
The figuration of kitsch as an aesthetic means of forgetting and as a tide of awfulness engulfing public memory seeps into discussions around the events of 11 September 2001. Marita Sturken, in keeping with Philip Roth’s framing of kitsch as its own disaster, sees the ‘teddy-bearification’ of responses to 9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing as serving to blot out the political realities of either event. The evolution of a kitsch ‘comfort culture’ together with the development of a disaster souvenir economy, she argues, operates to ‘smooth over tragedy … constituting a kind of erasure of the effects of violence’ (217). Echoing Kundera’s conception of kitsch as a partition obscuring death, its presence at the scene of the disaster is its own disaster. Kitschification indicates a profound collective amnesia and the very opposite of remembrance. Worse still, this substitute reality short-circuits any possibility of a meaningful response by offering premature, insulating comfort: we are made to feel better effectively before we feel anything. If, as for Lanzmann to extract comfort or redemption from the disaster is to violate the terms of the telling, then for Sturken this is no less the case: to kitschify is both to bear false witness and to frustrate the project of mourning.

The miniature world of the World Trade Center snowglobe is emblematic, in Sturken’s view, of ‘the ways that American culture processes and engages with loss’ (2). The plastic scene captured within its ‘insulated, bubble-like world’ encourages ‘god-like’ looking relations and reductive responses (ibid.). The Twin Towers are seen to be caught ‘in a mystical temporal moment: the towers remain standing and unscathed though the emergency vehicles that signal the towers’ demise are already present’ (2–3). The effect is productive of a grandiose fantasy where the police and fire services save the day: ‘The power of the scene imagined in the globe is the affirmation and comfort offered by the emergency vehicles signifying a protective response, one that in the fantastic world of the snowglobe has kept the towers standing.’ (217) Feel-good feelings substitute for acknowledgement of catastrophe, and history is sacrificed to ‘narratives of redemption’ (217). More, ‘a spectacle of grief usurps collective mourning, culminating in what Sturken terms the ‘tourism of history’ (ibid.).

As cultural relations to trauma and memory are diverted through souvenirs, history itself is rendered a visitor attraction with disastrous consequences. The tourist gaze, while allowing for individualised relationships to the trauma site – ‘one can cry and take pictures, leave a personalised object and purchase a souvenir’ – precludes broader political engagement (11). The ‘kitschification of cultural memory’, interchangeable with what Roth sees as an ‘orgy of national narcissism’ or what Hal Foster terms ‘Bush kitsch’, contributes to a subjectivity governed by false innocence. Consumer culture distracts from political reality, mobilising a banal nationalism (‘the banality of kitsch is integral to banal nationalism’) in the process: ‘Thus, an American public can acquiesce to its government’s aggressive political and military policies, such as the war in Iraq, when that public is constantly reassured by the comfort offered by the consumption of patriotic objects, comfort commodities and security consumerism’ (6). The disaster souvenir, thus, erects a partition to the real, enclosing the consumer within a fantasy realm furnished with the fake reassurances of commodity patriotism.

Not surprisingly, the ‘kitschification of the American flag’ stands
as the exemplary form of patriotic souvenir; on the day of the disaster, Wal-Mart is reported to have sold 116,000 flags. What is more, the mass culture supports for patriotism seem to know no bounds. As Jennifer Scanlon identifies, the US flag materialises, among other things, as T-shirts, car stickers, air fresheners, registration plates, seat covers, playing cards, paperweights, key rings, hair scrunchies, braces, frisbees and golf balls.\textsuperscript{68} Sturken comments:

the flag itself has taken on new dimensions of kitsch in its proliferation in consumer products in times of crisis; it has been used to sell pizza, is worn as a t-shirt, and in one of its most kitsch manifestations, was worn by Bono inside his jacket as he sang at the January 2002 Superbowl halftime show while the names of the 9/11 dead scrolled behind him on the massive stage. (57)

Displays of national pride, together with the injunction — issued both by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and the Bush administration — to return to normal by ‘returning to retail’, alloy patriotism and consumption into an expressively American product. Kitsch is thus seen to constitute:

the primary aesthetic style of patriotic American culture, indeed that American political culture can be defined by and thrives on a kind of kitsch aesthetic ... In the United States, kitsch is the dominant political style of a nation that is wedded to an abstract notion of populism which is distinct from the people, a sense of kitsch that is so kitschy that it can be easily inhabited by a president who is a member of the elite. (25)

Kitsch seamlessly enacts a transition between consumer culture and politics. National identity is mobilised via a combination of populist flag waving and consumer fervour, crucially, to Republican advantage. Sturken is not alone in figuring the clamorous presence of patriotic kitsch consumer culture as fuelling political acquiescence and garnering hostility toward the ‘enemy’. Karen Engle, confirming Sturken’s identification of banal nationalism, details the mixed response of a Ground Zero worker to the merchandising of T-shirts as a blend of disgust toward profiteering and racial hatred: ‘I’ll buy [a T-shirt]. I’ll buy one and burn it. Want to burn it with me? ... They should start selling Iraqi flags. That way, people can take those out and burn them.’\textsuperscript{69} Even as its crass commercialism is being resisted, the souvenir economy structures a flag-waving response and the assertion of insular, fortified community:

\begin{itemize}
\item Public mourning of the attacks emerges as a work of communitarian desire – the formulation of a unified declaration of nationalism and consequent global purpose. Grief is subsumed under, and harnessed to, the larger project of ‘Infinite Justice’ – the original name given to ‘Operation Enduring Freedom’ in Afghanistan. (79)
\item At once infantile and aggressive, the Twin Towers snowglobe, the FDNY teddy, the American Eagle Beeny Baby, the Osama Bin Laden Voodoo Doll, foreclose on grief’s ethical project: for Sturken and Engle, both following Judith Butler, the opportunity presented by the disaster is one of ‘being returned to a sense of human vulnerability, to our collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another’.\textsuperscript{70} Melancholia thus replaces mourning in the realm of disaster kitsch. In obstructing the proper, \textit{politically productive} work of mourning, the 9/11 souvenir comprises a plastic technology of political subjectivation.
\item In Sturken’s view, the threat of ‘political acquiescence’ invokes the spectre of past acquiescences: ‘The Nazis were particularly adept at deploying kitsch to create a sense of shared national sentiment and kitsch is a key element in superficial symbols of national unity’ (22). Engle characterises the formation of political community in terms sympathetic to Sturken’s worst fears. The wearers of souvenir 9/11 T-shirts – especially those bearing the slogan: \textit{America Under Attack: I Can’t Believe I Got Out} – are seen to participate in a totalitarian expression of ‘sentimental uniformity’ (77). Eliding distinctions between survivors and tourists, the T-shirt renders ‘the experience of trauma ... [as] a fashion statement. Something anyone can put on’ (76). Souvenir hunters ingest the disaster, via its fake, commodified rendition, narcissistically (\textit{I was there!}), swallowing its beautiful lies and enacting their patriotic duty as consumers. Such ‘melancholic incorporation’ forges community of the most frightening kind:
\end{itemize}
Souvenirs thus enable a ‘rhetoric of belonging’, which assists in producing the group misrecognitions necessary to mobilising against ‘an evil “other”’ (78).

The selling of 9/11, as Dana Heller’s edited collection of essays frames the emergence of a Ground Zero commodity culture, is irrefutable. A brief survey easily confirms the emergence of a patriotic disaster souvenir economy around the event. Of the twelve available 9/11 memorial T-shirts on the NYC Webstore, for instance, ten are emblazoned with flags, five of which reference the armed forces. The America Wins! site (www.MakemPay.Com) offers a range of Osama novelties, including Osama toilet paper (‘wipe number 2 with [public enemy] number 1!’), donating 20 per cent of its profits to victims’ families. In addition to the well-stocked shelves of Wal-Mart, the souvenir stores and stalls of Manhattan street vendors, eBay offers a veritable universe of commemorative 9/11 memorabilia: from Twin Towers earrings to reproduction dollar bills to ‘in honor of our American heroes’ poker chips. What needs to be placed back into the realm of doubt, however, is the sequence of linkages that articulate an argument leading straightforwardly from these objects through deterministic notions of the commodity to patriotism to melancholia before arriving, finally, at defensive constructions of community. In short, the alignment of aesthetics and politics that structures Sturken’s and Engle’s logic is based on faulty premises and requires a good deal of further attention.

The sharp escalation of grief to anger to military aggression in George W. Bush’s rhetoric notwithstanding, the leap from semiotic structure of the souvenir to the psychic make-up of the American subject to the shape of US foreign policy consists in the main of a series of conflations, and more, is itself melancholic. A depressing and familiar tale ensues, featuring, to borrow Rancière’s words: ‘the image, totally hackneyed and yet endlessly serviceable, of the poor cretin of an individual consumer, drowned by the flood of commodities and images and seduced by their false promises’. The imagined vegetative state of the disaster tourist/consumer converges with that of kitsch-man (whose infantilised self-deluding psyche, similarly, is primed for nationalistic fervour), to produce a post-millennial breed of fascist. With this, complementary roles are cast: iconoclasts, destroyers of false idols, critics charged with the self-appointed task of leading the spellbound out of the society of the spectacle, stand apart from the crowds purportedly ‘gazing at ground zero’, captivated by kitsch.74

Such a division of the sensible – between the knowing, acting, politically astute critic and the mindless-consumer-patriot – turns upon a series of interrelated presuppositions, chiefly, between the commodity and the spectacle. First, the structure of the commodity is wholly determining: the moment when ‘a national tragedy became a commodity’ thus speaks for itself, and more, is the end of the story.75 Just as for Roth, where kitschification is its own catastrophe, commoditisation is the disaster, a judgement that neglects utterly the idea of commodity state as dynamic, subject to fluctuation and the beginning of the social life of things.76 The contours of consumer culture, as the field of material cultural studies shows, are in no way reducible to shape of the commodity itself.77

Those who perfect the trick of remaining unimpressed and uncaptivated are, nevertheless, doomed to play out the melancholic script of exposing the truth behind the spectacle. The spectacle, as Rancière envisages its role in left-critical discourse, is seen to rest on a sequence of engulfments: the image itself consumes life – hence the simulacrum – and the spectacle is taken to account for the image. Even critical images, then, form part of the same optical apparatus that produces the spectacle, resulting in an iconophobic suspicion – what Rancière terms ‘the intolerability of the image’ – that all images engender activity, or are, in some ways, reductive or inadequate. The job of the critic, consequently, becomes one of exposing the inadequacy of images and the lure of the spectacle. Spectating, gazing, behaving like a tourist becomes scripted, correspondingly, as the very opposite both of knowing and of acting. The spectator is ignorant, ‘in thrall to shades’, and above all passively drawn into appearances, which represent the inverse of life: the image/spectacle is dead, a pale imitation of life. To break the spell, the image must be up-ended:

This is the seemingly paradoxical, yet perfectly logical, conclusion of the denunciation of the spectacle: if every image shows life inverted, rendered passive, it suffices to turn it upside down in order to unleash the active power it has appropriated. (87)

Active iconoclasts save the day or, rather, sink into depression, as the only possible game is one of exposing the falsehoods projected by image/spectacle machines. Critical action is reduced either to ‘the
endless task of unmasking fetishes or the endless demonstration of the omnipotence of the beast' and therewith, as the first task confirms the second, to a form of ‘melancholic pessimism’.78

The sensible alignment of the kitsch spectacle to passivity, sentiment, consumerism, patriotism and melancholia (and its inversion to action, memory, history, politics and mourning) simultaneously plots an illusory route between understanding and change: ‘There is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at the spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action.’79 The assignation of inactivity to kitsch aesthetics and thus to reactionary politics relies on a secure linkage between aesthetic form and aesthetic experience. Reduced to what Bourdieu would see as the \textit{bearer of a structure} (where the commodity structure mirrors psychic structure), neo-kitsch-man has no choice but to perform the stupid and prone, even fascistic, prostheses of souvenir memory while critics look on horrorstruck.80 Abjected from the scene of politics, the subjectivity of the tourist of history is held captive in a snowglobe, which, in turn, is held aloft in the hand of the critic. (It is revealing that both Sturken and Engle purchase 9/11 souvenirs and yet profess to remain uncaptivated and able to see through their spectacular allure.)

Far from constituting evidence of neo-fascistic tendencies, Ground Zero souvenirs remain opaque from the point of view of their ‘secondary production’; any account of the social lives or singularities of flags and snowglobes and bears remains to be written. Sturken records a ‘frenzied consumer response’ (5), but neglects to attend to the composition of the frenzy, despite a stated commitment to examining ‘practices of consumerism’ (17). More, she dismisses outright, in advance of her exploration and without naming him specifically, the kind of approach that de Certeau recommends:

\begin{quote}
I don’t feel that the model of cultural analysis that sees such cultural practices as people ‘making do’ with the symbols at hand tell us very much about what happens politically at such places. It may be that the purchasing and display of an Oklahoma City National Memorial teddy bear allows one to feel a connection to and sadness about those who lost their lives in the bombing and to process one’s own grief ... But such a teddy bear also disables certain kinds of responses. It is not a versatile object that can be employed for a range of responses; it is a circumscribed object precisely because of the messages of sentimentality and reassurance it offers. (13)
\end{quote}

To shift from the proposed meanings of objects to the sensibilities of consumers, to the ideologies of communities of consumers of those objects, is to perpetrate what Bourdieu terms an objectivist error, that is, a frictionless movement from academic viewpoints to social practices which mistakenly sees ‘the theory of action as mere execution of the model’ (op. cit, 29). The subjectivity trapped in the ‘dreamy documentary bubble that would contain an “other”’, to borrow Kathleen Stewart’s image, is, hence, an illusion, a hallucination brought on by objectivist logic.81 The tidying actions of such an apparatus ‘forgets and interrupts cultural particularity and texture through a rigid distincotion of “subjects” and “objects” and a hierarchy of reason, idea and truth claim over the anecdotal, the accidental, the contingent and the fragmentary’ (11). Sturken’s privileging of the snowglobe as the vessel of contemporary American subjectivity is, therefore, mistaken in its neglect of the processes of concrete, empirically evidenced, consumption. The studied neglect of practice – Sturken elects to ignore ‘contemporary practices of tourism’ in favour of ‘the traditional notion of the tourist as metaphor’ – compromises her findings by replacing evidence with presupposition (11). The idea that the snowglobe is prepostorous in its unworthiness of what it represents – the disaster – is suspended when it comes to the complexities of the American psyche: here a plastic object is held to properly represent and encapsulate an entire world.

Those who glimpse, from the secure ground of a common-sense universe beyond the spectacular, the formation of fascist community would do well to interrogate, to recall Engle’s words, their own ‘rhetoric of belonging’ and its attendant projection of an ‘evil “other”’. The configuration of sense that assists in the building of community – ‘being together’ and simultaneously ‘being apart’ – is politically productive: ‘politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of “being together”’ (56). The being together of iconoclasts clashes violently with the projected being together of the mass of spectators. Spectacle-man, neo-kitsch-man is, familiarly, depressingly, a harbinger of worse to come: in Engle’s words: ‘When mourning becomes kitschified, totalitarianism is not far behind.’82 Voracious consumer of his own aestheticised destruction, neo-kitsch-man represents the victory of ‘unchecked narcissism’, and receives star billing in the perceived ‘aestheticisation of politics’ (ibid.).

Circular logic, similarly, besets Sturken’s search for the subjectivity of the tourist at Ground Zero: the snowglobe already contains the object...
of investigation, which is already determined by prescribed models of action (or rather passivity). Presuppositions around kitsch, consumer culture and the spectacle, obfuscate the ethnographic project subsuming the particularities of visitor practice to a spectator/tourist gaze. The initial observation (what appear to be ‘kitsch’ souvenirs are being sold at Ground Zero) and the initial question (what does this mean?) become short-circuited by a notion of kitsch grounded in modernist aesthetics coupled with a melancholic view of consumption. Kitsch is, in essence, ‘prepackaged sentiment’ (26) and thus a ‘circumscribed object’ (13) and so ‘dictates particular kinds of sentimental responses and emotional registers’ (21). In place of the promised exploration of the ‘complex intersection of cultural memory, tourism, consumerism, paranoia, security and kitsch that has defined American culture over the past two decades’, a familiar horror story is spun which is over, effectively, before it begins. That which is said in advance to define US culture is revealed to define US culture and consumer practice is gloomily overcast by self-fulfilling prophecy.

The point at which the FDNY bear and the WTC snowglobe finds itself constituted as building material for shrines offers a moment of disruption for Sturken, however: ‘street level mourning’ is said to counter the ‘spectacle’. The personal and idiosyncratic nature of vernacular memorials are said to ‘individualise the dead’ and in doing so, ‘resist the mass subjectivity of disaster’ (173). This idea of material transformation chimes with the positive evaluations of many anthropologists’ studies of shrines and their builders. Jeannie Banks Thomas, for instance, argues that the mass culture origins of the primary materials for shrine building – to her mind the kind of ‘schlock and kitsch’ that Frederic Jameson identifies as the key feature of the late capitalist landscape – is in no way determining of the significance of shrines and tributes. Plastic objects and Hallmark greetings cards become utterly singularised in the very action of constructing vernacular memorials, introducing intractable complications into issues of aesthetic judgement. The notion of action is, likewise, central to Sturken’s revaluation of kitsch objects in the context of shrines. As opposed to consuming kitsch souvenirs (i.e. taking a commodity away from the trauma site), shrine builders ‘leave objects in a ritualistic fashion’ (217). The result of an active as opposed to passive relation to the site (making rather than consuming) is key in the transmutation of kitsch, so much so that even those who left objects ‘apparently without irony’ outside Las Vegas’s New York New York are deemed to be connecting to the disaster in a manner that ‘seem[s] appropriate and meaningful’ (174).

In addition to leaving the presuppositional structure of passive spectators/consumers intact (it is the action of building that disrupts the tourist’s gaze/consumer’s indolence), Sturken’s analysis, nevertheless, remains bound to the spectacle. The media is seen to pull the shrine-event back into the dominant narrative by its very presence. Public mourning and vernacular expression are filmed and therein ‘immediately mediatized and packaged’ (174) into forms that, subsequently, are said to act to shape public mourning and vernacular expression. The formatting of reportage prompts the formatting of emotional response: people see such memorial practices on television and act them out in public.

Conclusion

The problem of disaster kitsch, once given attention, turns out to consist of a series of interrelated problems: concerning the image, and with this the word (i.e. representation); the commodity, and with
this mass culture and the spectacle (which also pertains to the image); and the realm of affect (which relates to all of the above in that it is both the image’s and the commodity’s capacity to produce particular affective states that is at stake here). The strategic aim of investigating the entanglement of kitsch at the scene of the disaster was to initiate a critical process by removing an obstacle: the idea of kitsch as somehow expressive, self-contained and the sign of its own disaster. Kitsch in this respect is revealed to be an operation and not an essence or object.

By addressing the constituent problems of disaster kitsch, the problem of representation (of word and image) and the problem of the commodity (of mass culture and the spectacle) begin to unravel, particularly when it comes to the question of audiences and consumers. The question of reception and consumption, thus, remains at the level of projection; empirical audiences and consumers are lacking – conspicuously so – in diagnoses of disaster kitsch. The idea of who is receiving disaster kitsch images or purchasing disaster kitsch objects is allowed to dominate much of the discussion, leading to a portrait of the viewer/reader/consumer that is revealing of little more than the imaginary of those affronted by aesthetic difference. Such projections, then, function constitutively to bind a community of sense via key distributions of the sensible: principally, around the image and the division between, on the one hand, the anti-aesthetic, disaster notation and the sublime, and on the other, kitsch, mimesis and artifice. The security of the ‘we, having a world in common’, appreciators of the aporetic versus the ‘they’, devourers of kitsch, turns on a series of faulty linkages: between aesthetic forms and referents (i.e. the idea of appropriate/inappropriate forms), together with the predicted effects of such forms on particular audiences/reading communities.84

To decide that there are formal limits to representation (and more, that no words or images can communicate the disaster) and to determine in advance that certain forms deliver predictable audience effects is not only to scupper debate around the possibilities for particular media in the transmission of public memory, it is also to create what Rancière sees as a ‘common measure’: that is, the terms of a community that succeeds by concealing its constitutive terms.85

For Bourdieu, such secrecy is the mark of a symbolic currency: symbolic capital operates through a sleight of hand that denies its status as capital (i.e. available for open exchange in explicit mar-
Notes


2 Amateur images of the billboard advertisement can be viewed at: http://adweek.blogs.com/adfreak/2006/05/was_the_tom_crui.html and www.slightlywarped.com/crapfactory/actualads/morbid.htm.


17 As Hinderliter et al. point out, communities of sense can be a reactionary formation. See Hinderliter et al. Communities of Sense, p. 3.


32 See Jenny Edkins, Trauma and the Memory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) for a discussion on Shoah business and the Holocaust industry.


37 Sontag describes her own negative epiphany in On Photography (pp. 19–20).
39 Maurice Blanchot, The Writing of the Disaster (University of Nebraska Press, 1986), pp. 7 and 82.
42 Sue Vice captures the problem of fiction succinctly: 'To judge by what many critics have to say, to write Holocaust fictions is tantamount to making a fiction of the Holocaust,' in Ho­locaust Fiction (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 1.
53 James Young, Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) cited in Clendinnen p. 177, emphasis added.
75 Dana Heller’s The Selling of 9/11 includes a number of essays that contradict the implications of the collections’ title and begin to map the complex universe of reception and consumption of media images and material goods. Most notable are: James Trimarco and Molly Hurley Depret, ‘Wounded Nation, Broken Time’ (pp. 27–53); Lynn Spigel, ‘Entertainment Wars Television Culture after 9/11’ (pp. 119–54) and Mick Broderick and Mark Gibson, ‘Mourning, Monomyth and Memorabilia: Consumer Logics of Collecting 9/11’ (pp. 200–20).
78 Rancière, The Emancipated Spectator, p. 49.
79 Ibid., p. 75.
82 Engle ‘Putting Mourning to Work’, p. 72.

7. Conclusion

In this book we have interrogated the distinctions between beauty as a property of objects and artworks and beauty as a way of seeing, between art and beauty and art and kitsch. We have identified the central figure of ‘kitsch-man’ – the appreciator of kitsch – whose judgement of taste, and therefore very subjectivity is found lacking. We have shown that kitsch-man is more often than not woman, child, working-class, black, queer … according to those who vilify kitsch as satanic distraction from higher moral, spiritual or political purpose. While we have not attempted to offer any renewed definition of kitsch, we have described two different orientations towards kitsch, perhaps two ‘structures of feeling’. Each orientation also has its own history – one warm, one cold. These orientations we have called camp and cool. Camp is ‘tender feeling’ for kitsch, it is appreciation, it is warmth. Cool on the other hand is a cold hard surface of love, belying a deep hatred.

This book has explored camp kitsch and cool kitsch in relation to many different artefacts – some labelled kitsch and some not, some produced with kitsch intentionality, some not. We have investigated the full meaning of these orientations and traced their histories and uses. We must be clear that we do not attribute either camp kitsch or cool kitsch to specific or separate categories of subjects or objects, although each has its roots in the politics of belonging to specific groups. Rather, a single person may deploy either of these orientations or both at the same time.

While considering the possibilities for productive relations between anthropologists and design historians in the project of approaching the