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Kitsch

The origins of the word kitsch are obscure. Most sources declare that kitsch's origins lie in German and Germany and that it means, variously, to throw something together hastily, to smear, to pick up from the street or to make cheaply (from verkitschen). It has also been derived from the English word sketch, indicating a relationship to cheap and multiply-produced tourist art in the later nineteenth century. It has been presented as a metathesis of the French word chic, as well as related to a Russian word for being puffed up and haughty. Some commentators state that the term is first used in the 1860s and 1870s amongst Munich art dealers to describe aesthetically worthless paintings. Kitsch signals a lack either in the artwork or the viewer, though kitsch might be ironically appreciated by a viewer who is clued in. The concept of kitsch made its way to various countries and languages – in English from 1920. It signifies that which is gaudy, sentimental and tasteless. Its inauthenticity results in the provision of standardised, easily recognisable subject matter – which is usually an idealised version of what exists. It draws on stock emotional responses in the perceiver, which are to be enjoyed for their excessiveness, be they feelings of joy or melancholy. Automatic emotional reactivity replaces critical aesthetic reflection, according to many accounts of kitsch. Kitsch evokes generic scenes and feelings – or atmospheres - rather than specific ones. It censors the world that exists, in favour of a prettier, heightened or more colourful one. As Milan Kundera put it: Kitsch 'is the absolute denial of shit'.¹ Or, kitsch edits reality, such that where suffering is portrayed, it appears in order to allow the beholder a sort of cathartic and pleasurable reaction of non-specific pity.

Though the word kitsch does not appear, the conceptual origins might be found in disputes over the idea of beauty in relation to nature and artifice in Idealist aesthetics, the ambit of Romanticism. Where did aesthetic value reside, in the chamber filled with charming art or in untouched nature? Is beauty the property of a thing and can it exist in the representation of a thing?² Can the depiction in art of brooding nature of brooding and cataclysmic nature convey sublimity, or does it simply contain and constrain it? For those who asserted the superiority of artifice, art comes to be released from nature. To go on reproducing nature in artworks implies that nature offers a refuge, or an antidote to the social world. Nature, and representations of it, appear ahistorical and asocial, as in the prettified nature on souvenirs relating to tourist beauty spots.

For some thinkers, though, kitsch, despite (or because of) its cheapness and social resonance, facilitates exploration of social desires. Kitsch preserves and articulates rarely fulfilled longings. The exotic hints in a lamp express yearning for an elsewhere that is not here. The beautiful snowy landscape in a painting signals the wish to begin again or to reside in eternity. T.W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Siegfried Kracauer, Franz Hessel all focus in on the phantasmagoric, frozen world of commodity-forms which surround people, only to be jettisoned, through technical adjustments and economic impetus, onto the junk heap of the outmoded. Kitsch is most rapidly used up. Who remembers the popular, commercial successful poems of Eddie Guest or the Indian Love Lyrics, two of Clement Greenberg's examples of US kitsch, in his essay *Avant Garde and Kitsch* from 1939?³ The

¹ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. New York: Harper and Row Inc., 1984, 248.

² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, New York: Hafner, 1951, 154.

³ Clement Greenberg in *The New York Intellectuals Reader*, Neil Jumonville (ed.), New York: Routledge, 2007, 143-157.

dross produced for the industrialised masses is ersatz-culture. Kitsch, for Greenberg, is instantly and vividly recognizable, miraculous, sympathetic and self-evident. Kitsch is an enhanced reality made dramatic. It is absorbed effortlessly. It provides a shortcut to the pleasure of art. It is an effects-driven form. Where the avant-garde investigates the processes of art, kitsch imitates its effects. It uses for raw material the debased and academicised simulacra of genuine culture. Kitsch relies on a fully matured cultural tradition whose discoveries it can plunder. Where Greenberg conceived kitsch as the degraded form of the avant garde, using aspects of its style or its palette, but thoroughly inauthentic, Benjamin perceived a symbiotic relationship. It is evident that Benjamin's list of Surrealist muses, which includes stars of stage, screen, billboard advertisements, illustrated magazines, has endured only little better than Greenberg's instances of a failure in taste: Luna, the Countess Geschwitz, Kate Greenaway, Mors, Cleo de Merode, Dulcinea, Hedda Gabler, Libido, Friederike Kempner, Baby Cadum, Angelika Kaufmann.⁴ No canon preserves it, and yet it spoke both to the critical theorists, who perceived social desires at work in it, and the Dadaists and Surrealists, who found stimulus therein for their urban poetry and their rejections of modern rationality.

Clement Greenberg's 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' is an early example of the designation of the artistic output of the Third Reich as kitsch. Kitsch too was the art of the Soviet Union. Greenberg stresses that the choices in cultural policy do not emanate from the philistine preferences of the rulers, but rather because 'kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else'.⁵ It is a genuflection to mass industrialised taste. Conveniently for the totalitarian leaders, Greenberg notes, kitsch culture was a far more efficient vehicle of propaganda, with sugar-coated stories of nation and heroes, and it provided an inexpensive way to tug the heartstrings of the masses. This is the culture that Saul Friedländer, more recently, defined as kitsch: dripping with excessive heroism, bravery against the odds, and an overwhelming emotionalism as we imagine the prospect of devastation.⁶ Kitsch is designed to prettify life, but it oozes death. In contemporary poetics, kitsch performs a further contradiction. It becomes strategic, with its use of cliché and bathos countering any inflated seriousness and mocking what has become over time the banal obviousness of the Romantic sublime of nature, art as emotional resource and rhetorical manipulation. It plays with kitsch in order to salvage poetry from marginalisation by mass culture.⁷

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard, 2000, 839.

⁵ Greenberg, 154.

⁶ Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

⁷ See Pawel Marcinkiewicz on kitsch in John Ashbery, Glyn Maxwell and W.S. Merwin in 'Contemporary Anglo-American Poetry and the Rhetorical Bomb', *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture*, Justyna Stępień (ed.), Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014.