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Schlock, Kitsch, and Camp

Esther Leslie

Schlock horror is a type of horror that, even within the realms of what horror normally offers, appears excessive, too much. Its horror may be extremely graphic, gore-filled, aiming for great effects and the provocation of intense emotions, and yet, like kitsch, it fails, because something rings untrue, even for the false word of film or pulp fiction – the acting, the scriptwriting, the sets, the too-bright red blood. Camp horror paints its themes bright and large, pretending to be deadly serious, when it is really not, either intentionally or unintentionally. These modes of horror have long been a part of the genre, but they wax and wane across time, victims of technological demands within the culture industry or vagaries of fashion. Artworks that were designed more or less earnestly might come to be seen as schlocky, and artworks designed to become cult objects of bad taste might find themselves elevated into the zone of high art. It is pertinent to look at the longer history of the terms – schlock, kitsch, and camp – and to consider how various cultural critics have derived meaning from often disdained productions.

Starting with etymologies, definitions, first usages, and so on is sometimes useful. The etymological origins of “schlock” are as uncertain as those of its companion concept, “kitsch,” and the first usage of “camp” to indicate exaggerated, artificial gestures is likewise difficult to locate with any certainty. It

derives possibly from the French *campagne* or from *se camper*, to strike a pose, or maybe from British Polari gay slang, or from military cant, or from the Scots. Schlock and kitsch – both, apparently, in the linguistic realm of Yiddish or German – are words whose hard *ks* and compacted *schs* sound less like proper terms, aesthetic categories, or philosophical adjectives and more like uncontrolled ejaculations – *sch*, *kkk*. These words onomatopoeically eject something from the mouth a little violently, like an improper gobbet of gloopy sick or a sudden spray of crimson blood, but there may also be some joy in articulating the unfamiliar, words that linger in their sibilance and entertain the mouth, lips, teeth. The very sound seems to resonate with expressions of disapproval. The words seem vulgar – but also funny. Camp has a different quality. It sounds simple, recognized, and yet, conceptually, cannot be quickly described and, indeed, goes only in the illusory guise of transparency, while being actually opaque.

All three of the words are fuzzy in their origins and signify something that is itself indistinct, indefinable, or in-between. With certainty, though, it can be said that the words “schlock,” “kitsch,” and “camp” are descriptors for sloppily put together cultural entities – films most predominantly in the case of schlock, various visual or musical forms in the case of kitsch, theatrical productions when it comes to camp. Pulp fiction books, with covers as schlocky as the contents, are kitsch, and take their cue from films. These descriptors – pulp, camp, kitsch, schlock – name artworks that are as stupid as they are captivating, as repulsive as they are funny, as superficial as they are deep. They aim for one thing and achieve something else. Schlock, for one, might promise bloodcurdling shivers

and horror – but delivers, along with those effects, ludicrousness and crassness. Kitsch and camp dangle before audiences a promise of experiences of extreme intense emotion, only to serve up banality, cliché, laughter, and derision, when the excessiveness of their scenarios and gestures marries with the inadequacy of the realization and – in the case of film – when the strings are visible, the corpse still breathes, the grotesquery is so over the top that the narrative is suspended and only groans echo around the auditorium. Audiences might, at best, in watching these low-rent efforts marvel at what special effects can wring into being and simultaneously negate – and through the agency of just how sick or cynical an imagination. The adjectives or nouns describing these works – schlock, kitsch, camp – sound alien, suggesting something odd, off the track of the known, and yet a space can be found for this weirdness, and it will be one in which the unfamiliar becomes familiar, or groaningly predictable. These artworks will live up to the low expectations, or they will simply be forgotten.

The pleasures that schlocky films and gory literature, kitschy overblown paintings or mawkish music provide are multiple and erratic: thrills and terrors, farcicality and heart tugs. Fear can be dissipated in a moment, laughs pivoted rapidly to a chill. It is, as the clichéd blurb on some video packaging or back of the pulp book might say, a rollercoaster experience. The viewer might, at first, take what is presented seriously, only to be ejected suddenly into the realms of the absurd and implausible. The sensibility cultivated in audiences is as rickety as the props and settings in a schlocky film. The pleasures derived from enjoying this substandard fare might be called vulgar – and to be vulgar means to have a failure of taste, in the tenets of bourgeois aesthetics from David Hume and

Immanuel Kant onward; that is to say, to possess bad taste is to know that something, in the realm of art or design, is poor quality, but to indulge in it anyway. Where can these confections sit in any canon formation? Or are they condemned to hover at the margins, not welcomed into academic literary, cultural or film studies, which have themselves had to fight for serious attention, or for attention to their objects as serious forms, artworks worthy of analysis. These shoddy products of schlock and kitsch, overblown but underfinanced, excessive in their gestures, but falling short of their ambitions, detract from the claims to legitimacy of the serious partakers in the cultural field. These grotesque products evidence a mismatch between the means or the acting ability or storytelling capacity and its realization. The lack, the failure to achieve what it thinks it could do opens up a chasm between the artwork-as-is and the imagined artwork. Out of this chasm, hollow laughter echoes. Outliers, they threaten to unmask all cultural analysis as a pretentious game, in which the throwaway – and it is all throwaway – gets taken far too seriously. Or they exist as markers of what not to loiter on, the depraved relative that exists to let the good ones shine all the more brightly. What can be done with these kitschy, schlocky, camp things? And what were the beginnings of the trash aesthetic?

Kitsch

While the origins of the words “kitsch” and “schlock” are murky, it can be said with confidence that these words are somehow bound up with developments within industrial production. Most sources declare the origins of “kitsch” to lie in German and Germany and that “kitsch” means, variously, something that is

chucked together hurriedly, gathered up from the streets, or constructed cheaply. Its derivation has also been supposed from the English word “sketch,” signifying a relationship to inexpensive and mass-produced tourist art in the later nineteenth century. It may be a metathesis of the French word “chic,” as well as related to a Russian word for the state of being puffed up and haughty. Some commentators argue that the term first appears in the 1860s and 1870s among Munich art dealers to describe paintings that are aesthetically worthless. Kitsch, in any case, whatever its origins, is that which is gaudy, sentimental, and tasteless. Tastelessness is significant, because it signals a failure to play by the rules of philosophical aesthetics. To partake in the realm of aesthetics is to share an understanding of what is tasteful. To be tasteful is to remain within boundaries – not to spill across lines of what ought or ought not be seen or thought, not to let bodies spill from their flesh bags or allow the lesser – penetrated – senses of smell and touch to overwhelm the body, in contrast to the more abstracted senses of hearing and sight. In kitsch, an audience of the industrial age is produced, one that allows itself to respond to what is seen with an automatic emotional reactivity, rather than critical aesthetic reflection. Kitsch, according to the most vocal commentators, signals a lack, in either the artwork or the viewer, though over time, kitsch achieves ironic appreciation by viewers “in the know.” The concept of kitsch likely originated in Germany, and the scholarship on it remained a German-language concern until the 1970s – after which significant contributions to its analysis appeared, notably in the United States, as in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Attempts to make more precise the distinctions between kitsch and other trash aesthetic categories was often in dialogue with

the key text from 1964 by Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp.” The word “kitsch,” however, had already made its way to various countries and languages – appearing in English in 1920, which makes it contemporaneous with the establishing of film as a cultural form in the process of becoming industrialized and which will play into burgeoning arguments about cultural value.

Schlock

The word “schlock” may have been borrowed from Yiddish, from a word that means dross, first used in the fourteenth century and itself derived from Middle Low German. Or it may stem from a word that means to strike or a stroke, which designates in some way a calamity. This is probably unlikely, according to the *OED*. “Schlock” is negative, in any case. It crops up as a term in the United States, with various spellings from the start of the twentieth century – schlag, slock, schlock – and it means cheap, shoddy goods or material, such as inferior-quality suits, picked up for a dollar downtown. It takes sixty-odd years for “schlock” to be applied to films, which is where it really comes into its own, but arguably many films in the early years were schlocky, by any measure that valued quality: acting in the silent era was exaggerated, stories were simplified, sentimentality was rife, implausibility and lapses in continuity were prevalent. When Universal Pictures produced the monster movies that made Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi household names at the beginning of the 1930s, with *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), *The Invisible Man* (1933), and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), they invented also a genre of horror film, a “Universal

Horror” that already established the characteristics of schlock and camp: creaking staircases, spooky castles, and mobs of incensed peasants.

It could be argued that the propensity toward a rather exaggerated and ultimately brittle terror aesthetic was particularly pronounced in the United States – and that schlock is a peculiarly American form. If so, its roots could be traced to the epoch of bourgeois revolution and burgeoning industrial capitalism. Karl Marx wrote, in 1852, in his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that, owing to the youthfulness of the nation, there was a different quality of existence in the United States, one that was too busy acting, building, eradicating, and settling to spend time dealing with the past. As a result, that past lingered like a pile of rubbish that no one bothered to throw out – thematically it will take on filmic form in haunted house movies, including comedically, as early as 1932 in James Whale’s *The Old Dark House*, with its exploration of class tensions and other hangovers of the past.

where, though classes already exist, they have not yet become fixed, but continually change and interchange their elements in constant flux, where the modern means of production, instead of coinciding with a stagnant surplus population, rather compensate for the relative deficiency of heads and hands, and where, finally, the feverish, youthful movement of material production, which has to make a new world of its own, has neither time nor opportunity left for abolishing the old world of ghosts.

(Marx, 195)

In the United States, spiritualist movements proliferated with table-knockers and aura photographers. Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels contributed some thoughts in a letter to F. A. Sorge in 1886, addressing the consequences of a fervent world of spirits, in which various extraordinary events were unmasked as frauds and hoaxes:

[T]he Americans are worlds behind in all theoretical things, and while they did not bring over any medieval institutions from Europe they did bring over masses of medieval traditions, religion, English common (feudal) law, superstition, spiritualism, in short every kind of imbecility which was not directly harmful to business and which is now very serviceable for making the masses stupid.
(Marx and Engels, 451)

European popular culture, with its superstitions and subjection to folkloric illogic, arrived in the baggage of immigrants on the *Mayflower* and all the other ships. The US masses are made stupid, are made vulnerable to an imbecility that does not impede business, indeed might even champion it. The coalescence of duped masses, shoddy culture, and burgeoning capitalist activity is a theme that will recur again and again in relation to critical theories of schlock culture and kitsch entertainment.

Camp

The word "camp" appears in print in the first decade of the twentieth century. It refers to exaggerated gestures and mannerisms and came to be associated with gay male subculture. The first theorist proper of camp is said to be the novelist

Christopher Isherwood, whose episodic novel *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), on which the film *Cabaret* (1972) was based, contained depictions of Weimar culture at its campest. The hero, with his non-judgmental camera-eye, trails through the demimonde of queer Berlin and finds in Sally Bowles a campy tragic heroine. She is a performer, and camp sees existence as playing a role. She is decadent, living life intensely, and in the moment, vulnerable and resilient at once. When all the campiness, all the queerness – as it is played out in cabarets and in bars and studied sympathetically at Magnus Hirschfeld's Berlin Institute of Sexology – is eradicated by the Nazis, there remains only death and deadly seriousness. Isherwood gives a sense of that, as he says goodbye to Berlin and speculates on the awful fate of his friends and their worlds. Camp thrives on tragic gestures, on lament at the transience of life, on an excess of sentiment, an ironic sensibility that art and artifice is preferable to nature and health, in a Wildean sense.

In camp, the enemy is the straight world, the suburban ordinariness that may turn out to be unmasked as a cover for dangerously perverse or brutal practices. Camp cannot survive when the deathliness becomes all too real. Isherwood flees Berlin, escaping to the United States, from where he reflects on camp in the novel *The World in the Evening* (1954). Isherwood's character insists on a serious core to camp: "True High Camp always has an underlying seriousness. You can't camp about something you don't take seriously. You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it. You're expressing what's basically serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance." Camp is a stance, a disguise under which what is core appears only as a surface, an irrelevancy – all

the better to parade it, under the nose of those who might outlaw it. His character's insistence that there is a serious, critical core to camp is what emboldens Susan Sontag to write her much-cited *Notes on Camp* in 1964. A quotable line is: "Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste" (291). This is the "so bad it is good idea" that occurs in both kitsch and schlock, the pleasure taken in excessive stupidity and ludicrousness. That which delegitimizes the cultural proposal for it transgressing the boundaries of taste becomes that which legitimizes it, according to another set of evaluations: knowing pleasure, ironic appreciation, critically aware enjoyment. In film history, this idea of "so good it is bad" can lead back to Berlin, to Isherwood's location in the years between the wars and to battles around the status of film in relation to art. An example serves to show an early example of schlocky, kitschy, camp horror film replete with the attitude that is prepared to receive badness as part of what makes it so good. One evening in 1927, the expressive dancers Anita Berber and Henri (Chatin-Hoffman) perform nude prior to a screening of a film version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which film critic Leo Hirsch describes as "So dire it was truly magnificent." The film is dire – which means it is schlocky, kitschy; the film technologies of the time – of any time? – cannot contain the immensity that is Dante's vision of Hell. But furthermore, in this place where camp is born and will die, only to die a thousand deaths in the fascist repression, the high culture of Dante meets film along with the decadent Weimar culture of expressive cocaine-fueled dance. It is excessive – more excessive than a depiction of Hell, in a strange way. It is over the top and

bound for tragedy, a tragedy that will indeed soon befall Berber and guarantee her place in the pantheon of camp heroines.

Kitsch things are rapidly used up. No canon conserves it, and yet it appealed to the Dadaists and Surrealists, who found spurs therein for their urban poetry and their dismissals of modern rationality and the compulsions to be up-to-date, because that contemporaneity is what powers economy: buy today, buy again tomorrow. The Surrealists polemicize against good taste, speak in favor of bad taste – for example, Louis Aragon in *Le libertinage*, from 1924 (21). Objects of bad taste, in Walter Benjamin's interpretation, require less sublimation and provide a more immediate vector to desire and pleasure. He observes that "what really matters is the undisturbed unfolding of the most banal, most fleeting, most sentimental weakest hour" in a life (238). Kitsch reminds us of childhood. Kitsch has not kept up with the technical and aesthetic standards of the time. Kitsch has ambition but poor means. Kitsch fails to achieve what it sets out to do – to terrify, to affect greatly, to be art – and so becomes pathetic.

Kitsch was a key concept for Benjamin. Kitsch, he argues, is "art with 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption" (395). In its absoluteness, sheer effect, excessive sentiment, imperfections and decaying nature, and lack of requirement for sublimation, it signals much about desire, fantasy, social shifts, historical obsolescence, and transient ideology. For Benjamin, experience is something linked to tradition, bodily apperception, and unconscious desires. One of its vessels was religious ritual, which is displaced in the modern world, as existence is organized around fragmentary and disrupting events, momentary distractions, incoherent partial glimpses, perceptual worlds

rapidly obliterated by new techniques. There is no collective language – in place of traditional religion, it will dream up new cults: cult fashions, cult novels, cult films (Menninghaus, 46).

If Weimar and its progressive theorists could perceive in trash culture hints of desire and longing, this case was not transferred unequivocally to the United States. In 1939, art critic Clement Greenberg wrote *Avant Garde and Kitsch*. Coming out of super-modern New York, Greenberg was writing in a setting plagued by anxiety about Old World values and whether the New World could compete on this ground when its cultural contributions were not, apparently, drawn from centuries of high art practices but drawn instead from jazz and cartoons and “the funnies.” It was an environment in which a spat arose over something called “middlebrow” culture – a parochial, conservative form promulgated by enterprises such as the Book-of-the-Month Club, classical recordings, or the *Reader’s Digest*. For anyone interested in so-called high culture, such stuff was simply an embarrassment – culture for those who knew nothing about culture or, worse, for those who knew but did not care, did not care about the development of culture into new forms, following avant-garde progression according to art’s own immanent necessity. Its antithesis was, in short, kitsch. For Greenberg, the dross produced for the industrialized masses was ersatz culture. Kitsch, for Greenberg, is that which is instantly and vividly recognizable. Kitsch is an enhanced reality made dramatic, absorbed effortlessly. It is an effects-driven form, providing a short-cut to the pleasure of art. Kitsch steals from genuine culture and makes a meaningless facsimile of it. Its results are forgettable, because there is always more to replace it. Who remembers the

popular, commercially successful poems of Eddie Guest or *Indian Love Lyrics*, two of Clement Greenberg's examples of US kitsch?

What Greenberg brings out in his essay, though, is that the most kitschy, most schlocky of modern industrialized culture is that approved and championed by the totalitarian states of Germany and the Soviet Union, under the rule of Nazis and Stalinists. Far from camp and kitsch being expunged in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy or Stalinist Russia, it colonizes all culture, if it is to be understood as that which is cheap, inauthentic, worthless. Greenberg stresses that the choices in cultural policy derive not from the philistine predilections of the rulers, but rather because "kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else" (154). It is obeisance to mass industrialized taste. Expediently for the totalitarian leaders, Greenberg notes, kitsch culture was a far more efficient vehicle of propaganda, with sugar-coated stories of homeland and heroes, and it provided a low-cost way to tug the heartstrings of the masses. In the United States, kitsch culture sold well and was forgettable enough to sell well day after day.

Greenberg's critical take on products of US culture parallels debates on the value of mass culture as conducted in the 1940s by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. These German theorists had relocated to the United States and were confronted by a lively, popular culture that they called, famously, the "Culture Industry." Culture is an industry, like shoe making or steel, produced for profit and without even a semblance of artistic integrity. Indeed, where there is a pretension to artistic integrity, it is even worse, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, because it falls short and thus is kitsch. Cinema is the prime

example of culture made industrially and, like any other industrial product, made for profit. Film exists merely with an eye to its exchange value: “Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through” (Adorno, *Culture Industry*, 86).

Involved in market machinations, film tends toward standardization and typecasting and, in the process, creates audiences in its image, who are subjected to easily interpretable messages. It turns its audience into spoon-fed passive children and draws on their bad, sadistic, and negative impulses. It attunes people to the monotonous cruelties of life under capitalism, in a training for what Adorno calls the “life in the false,” that is, a life survived in an over-technologized, pitiless, machine-driven, alienating environment, which resembles the one depicted in film:

People give their approval to mass culture because they know or suspect that this is where they are taught the mores they will surely need as their passport in a monopolised life. This passport is only valid if paid for in blood, with the surrender of life as a whole and the impassioned obedience to a hated compulsion.

(Adorno 1942: 80)

The imagery is itself horror-laden – payment in blood, compulsion to go on in this blighted life, asymmetric power, cruelty. But could it be that horror – the most exaggerated horror – teaches us something about our hellish existence, by laying out so explicitly the violence, the often unpredictable, unjust brutality of the system? In a line in *Minima Moralia*, written for rhetorical effect, Adorno notes, “In psychoanalysis nothing is true except the exaggerations” (29). Might

the exaggerated reality of schlock horror hint at social truth? Not absent from the artwork, the existing world is there in its exaggerations. In "Commitment" (1962), Adorno points out how Kafka's disturbing novels or Samuel Beckett's absurdist drama, which refuse and distort empirical reality, provoke a fear, or a "shudder" – a term Adorno uses again and again, and which is intrinsic to many analyses of the aesthetics of horror. This shudder exists in a pact with the bleak truth of our existence ("Commitment," 190). As Adorno phrases it: "He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgement that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in the resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away" (191).

Evil's domination in the world can be dislodged by the exaggerated and unreal depictions in Kafka's stories. Is it only these Old World, higher art contributions that achieve this?

In "Transparencies on Film" (1966), which to some extent revises his extremely negative thinking on film, in light of new developments in 1960s German cinema, Adorno adheres to the criticism that there is something potentially fascistic about film, which consists of "mimetic impulses which, prior to all content and meaning, incite the viewers and listeners to fall into step as if in a parade" (*Culture Industry*, 158). Through ostensibly photocopying the world, film confirms and reaffirms the world as it endures. No modification is imaginable. But might there be a chink here that allows for the grand guignol of horror films, especially tacky ones, to escape the mimetic drive? Adorno's

negative aesthetics logs a space for a connection to the world that is not guided by the constraint to emulate the surface of reality.

But Adorno did not see the uses of schlocky horror for a dialectical enlightenment or, if he did, he kept it quiet. It took the urbane and critical producers of something akin to, if not identical with, popular culture to articulate the ways in which something could surface from even the most kitschy and rubbishy of mass culture's outputs. The epoch of schlock arises only with the emergence of postwar mass culture, a culture industry that had upped its production and, to extend it even further, had manufactured new consumers, notably teenagers. These teenagers needed a plentiful supply of entertaining stuff to fill evenings at the movies, drive-in, or grindhouse. B-movies, lower budget, slightly shorter films, had long existed, to extend time spent at the cinema. In the 1960s, a number of subgenres developed, owing to a more lax regime of censorship. What came to be known as exploitation films moved toward the mainstream, drawing from the type of film that pruriently presented cautionary tales for moral educational purposes. Their pleasure lay in the transgressing of taboos, rather than in the commitment to them. The lurid nature of these films was taken up in various subgenres and scored a success in Alfred Hitchcock's psychologizing drama *Psycho* (1960), which was comparatively low budget and did not rely on the glamour of Hollywood stars. Others emulated the film's tense and nasty shock-aesthetic as slasher and gore or splatter films pushed the dark side of human nature further along the line. The films advertised themselves as tests of endurance and stamina, offering sick bags or declaring themselves to be the most terrifying film ever made. Jack Curtis' *The*

Flesh Eaters (1964), Herschell Gordon Lewis' *A Taste of Blood* (1967), and George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) are three prominent examples from the period. In this last, amid the lasting template of zombie shuffling, the period's emergent racial and social politics were focused dramatically.

This was this period that saw the efflorescence of films made on a low budget with excessive gore and lots of erotic content, put out by production companies such as Roger Corman's New World Pictures or New Line Cinema. They cost little and made a lot – some of them, at least. Such successful industrializing of trashiness, but in its own way now rather slick and competent, left some nostalgic for an earlier epoch, where the blood looked more like ketchup and the plainly plastic monsters moved through wobbly sets. Amid the shadows cast by the well-oiled and well-financed machinery of studio Hollywood and an equally efficient emerging genre cinema of sexploitation and blaxploitation, which the major studios were also beginning to produce, something else, something from the detritus emerges. A cult cinema develops, one that venerates a failed culture, holds up, in a most knowing way, the kitschy, schlocky, and campy low-budget films of the immediate postwar B-movie culture. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a stage production in 1973, made into a film in 1975, is the most prominent transgressive tribute to the glorious tackiness of low-budget science fiction and horror films from the 1930s to the 1960s. The turn to cult is tracked in Frank Zappa's critical look at US culture in a song on his 1974 album *Roxy and Elsewhere*. "Cheepnis" begins with a two-minute monologue about the film *It Conquered the World*. Zappa praises the exigencies forced on filmmakers by low budgets: "true cheepnis is exemplified by

visible nylon strings attached to the jaw of a giant spider.” He describes the monster in Corman’s film:

The monster looks sort of like an inverted ice-cream cone with teeth around the bottom. It looks like a (pew!), like a teepee or ... sort of a rounded off pup-tent affair, and, uh, it’s got fangs on the base of it, I don’t know why but it’s a very threatening sight, and then he’s got a frown and, you know, ugly mouth and everything, and there’s this one scene where the, uh, monster is coming out of a cave, see? There’s always a scene where they come out of a cave, at least once, and the rest of the cast ... it musta been made around the 1950s, the lapels are about like that wide, the ties are about that wide and about this short, and they always have a little revolver that they’re gonna shoot the monster with, and there is always a girl who falls down and twists her ankle ... heh-hey!

The scenarios are predictable – as might be discerned from the fact that sets were reused in days won back from already punishing production schedules. The roles are stereotypical. The things that should be scary fail to scare or scare only in surprisingly stupid ways. Zappa goes on to observe that the filmmakers are loathe to reshoot, despite the fact that the monster’s wooden base is wrongly in view: “and then obviously off-camera somebody’s goin’: ‘NO! GET IT BACK!’ And they drag it back just a little bit as the guy is goin’: ‘KCH! KCH!’ Now that’s cheepnis.” The band then launches into a song that evokes all the clichés of trashy film making and ends up blending images of napalm assaults in Vietnam with attacks on oversized poodles. Like Adorno’s critique of the violence

underpinning the glossy outputs of the US culture industry, crummy films draw together the most throwaway items of the culture and the imperialist domination of the US state and military. That it is poorly thrown together, shoddy goods means that the joins can be seen not just between the monster and the transportation wooden frame but also between the culture industry and the military industrial complex. The truth was in plain sight: It conquered the world.

It could be said that kitsch, schlock, and camp, far from being naive products of a rampantly capitalist enterprise or the immature outputs of an insufficiently cultured set of producers made for an ignorant and work-weary audience, are, rather, outputs of the revenge of mass culture. This cheaply made but affective culture of the masses refuses marginalization by gatekeepers of cultural value and sets itself against the self-seriousness of art that is really just the knowledge of some codes that are themselves banalized and conventional. Every mass market pulp paperback with a garish cover and a screamingly obvious name – like James Herbert's *The Rats* (1974) or *The Fog* (1975) or Shaun Hutson's *Slugs* (1982) or *Spawn* (1983) – hopes to affirm a delight in over-the-top excess. The energies of Romantic aesthetics, with their tasteful evocation of sentiment and reined-in provocation of emotion, are long depleted – or themselves kitsch – in an age of commodity capitalism (Marcinkiewicz). There is an honesty displayed in gore – the false life is shown in its falseness. Things are pushed so far, become so ludicrous, it can no longer be believed, as when in a thousand films, such as *Sleep Away Camp* from 1983, the deaths come thick and fast, but importantly they come stupidly – bee stings, death by curling tongs. This is how stupid the violence in our world is, how cruel and apparently arbitrary. It

is a life lesson. Kitsch and camp horror is in and not in our world – its realism is compromised, there but not there. Therein lies a considerable power – because it may evoke things buried deep within, fantasies from childhood, the reality that contorts in dreams – and Benjamin notes that dreams are kitsch, for they are unseemly, infantile, effort-saving, clichéd, improbable (Benjamin, 3). Schlock draws on the half-remembered and deeply feared truths of the world that elude us in daylight. Or, to take another stance, could it be that kitschy, campy products such as the TV series *The Addams Family* or *The Munsters* (both airing from 1964 to 1966) have meaning because they cast a light on how that Old World Gothic came over to the New World as an unreflected form, a bit of stuff left in an old suitcase and never dealt with – but only imperfectly, stupidly mobilized, a kitsch version, not serious, but also not really itself? Maybe those titles that named so many schlock horror movies – *It Came from ...*, *The Thing from ...*, *The Return of ...*, *Plan 9 from ...*, *Killer Klowns from ...* – are hints at this transposition from the past to the present, from out there to over here.

Schlock becomes a genre for itself, rather than a by-product of low-budget production methods. In 1973, a film with *Schlock* as its title appears, featuring a prehistoric ape-man on the rampage in Southern Californian suburbs. Schlock dies – like King Kong dies before him. Of course, he has a son. The next hastily put-together movie is already storyboarding. Such is schlock – which has its glory days in the 1970s and is tied up with the specific economics of the film industry of the time, with B movies' needs or shorter product, with drive-in movies for American teens, with the shift to video rental stores and the desire for content. These are the years of grindhouse – low-rent cinemas devoted to

exploitation movies. Spawning uncontrollably like something in a horror film, the genres multiply from the early nudies, roughies, and gore: shocksploitation, teensploitation, blaxploitation, hixploitation, mondo, zombies, slashers, and more. John Waters begins his “Trash Trilogy” with *Pink Flamingos* in 1972, whose tagline is “An exercise in poor taste.” His lead actor, Divine, appears in the sequel *Female Trouble* (1974), but is replaced in *Desperate Living* (1977) by another cult entertainer, Liz Renay. Waters’ setting is suburban Baltimore, his childhood home. The suburbs are the proper home of kitschy campy schlock. Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), for one, takes place in a world of stifling normalcy – Avon ladies, pastel-colored houses, lonesome housewives, tidy lawns, a kind of ever-time 1950s. In the normals’ rejection of creative strangeness, they reveal themselves in truth to be inhabitants of the weird home of scary consumer conformity.

Kitsch and camp and schlock horror does not ever stop being made, but it is now, as it tangentially was since the 1970s, at least, something to be regarded nostalgically, or through a twice- or third-time removed nostalgia for an age of paradoxically innocent cynicism or unintentional badness. Some things become camp and kitsch. Others are made to be so. Some things become cult. Others aim at that status from the start. Schlock and kitsch horror becomes a quality or set of styles to be evoked in art, as, for example, in Ryan Trecartin’s *A Family Finds Entertainment* (2004), with its garish colors, excessive makeup, and zombie-like behaviors of confusion and broken language – a homage to the homage to gory films made by first-year students in art college. The slasher films of the 1980s are revisited as camped-up camp in *Final Girls* (2015), *The Cabin in the Woods*

(2012), the TV series *Scream Queens* (2015–16). “Not blood, red,” stated Jean-Luc Godard in response to an interviewer observing the gory violence in *Pierrot Le Fou* (1972) (Godard, 217). This garish color is not real blood, not a sign of actual violence, but a trace of artifice, as is all film. This is pleasure and terror and all that is sublime and ridiculous, scary and funny, all at once.

chapter-references

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