

Why Should We Be Afraid of Kitsch?

English original of “Waarom moeten we bang zijn voor kitsch,” transl. Jan Willem Reimtsma, *Nexus*, 2007, no. 47, pp. 127-147. The essay developed my contribution to the symposium “A Kitsch Culture”? (with Sidney Blumenthal, Hendrik Hertzberg, Menno Meyjes, Jack Miles, Jonathan Taplin), part of the Nexus Conference “New Notes Towards the Definition of European Culture. The Classics, Art and Kitsch,” Amsterdam, November 11, 2006.

1. Nostalgia, Kitsch, and Romanticism

These reflections address questions raised by the title of the most recent Nexus Conference: “New Notes Towards the Definition of European Culture. The Classics, Art and Kitsch.” Its keynote was sounded, in the brochure I was sent, by the expression *Kultur-Herbst-Gefühl*,² with reference to a letter Nietzsche wrote on June 21, 1871 to his friend Carl von Gersdorff, in which he responded to a report of arson said to have destroyed the Louvre and its collections. Nietzsche took it as a metaphor of a battle against culture waged by our modern civilization, leaving him for several days “entirely annihilated and dissolved in tears and doubts.” As it turned out, the report was mistaken: it was the Tuileries that went up in flames, part of the unrest that culminated in the downfall of the Paris Commune. And it was not in that letter that Nietzsche used this pathos-laden expression, so heavy with cultural nostalgia, to describe his mood, but in the first of a set of “Memorabilia,” a few words jotted down in the spring of 1878, after he had finished *Human, All Too Human* and was looking back, with much more questioning eyes, at something that now lay behind him: “Autumn — pain — stubble — rose-campions [*Pechnelken* — literally “pitch-carnations”] asters. Very similar, when the Louvre was supposed to have burned — *Cultur-Herbstgefühl*. Never a deeper pain.”¹

In keeping with the young Nietzsche’s conviction that the civilization, of which he too was part, shared responsibility for the destruction of the supposedly lost masterpieces, the first panel of this Nexus conference thus addressed the question: why

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente*, 28 = N II 6. Frühling-Sommer 1878, no. 1, in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli und M. Montinari (DDTV, de Gruyter: München/ Berlin/New York, 1980), vol. 8. p. 504.

have we abandoned the classics? But have we in fact abandoned the classics? Or were the classics simply left behind by the progress of our post-technological and increasingly global culture? And who are “we”? A small, largely self-anointed cultural elite, guardians of what remains of that culture that once provided something like a spiritual home? Does this “we” include the *ungebildeten*, i.e. uneducated masses? And finally, just what lets us call a work a classic? Does the very conception of a classic not presuppose a faith in Western culture as the custodian of enduring values, enshrined in certain key works, that can no longer be presupposed?

The second panel continued the discussion by considering the question: “Why Art, Music, and Poetry?” That these should continue to play a decisive part in shaping our understanding of what we take to matter is by no means obvious. Does this question not also betray nostalgia for something that today no longer seems to possess more than a peripheral significance?

And nostalgia was suggested once more by the question that was the title of the final session: “A Kitsch Culture”? That question does suggest that, at least in some sense, art remains significant: does not “kitsch” name first of all a certain art? To be sure, the label suggests that a culture, whose heart and soul is, to cite George Steiner, kitsch, can only be a simulacrum of true culture. As Clement Greenberg once put it, defending abstraction as a last bastion of authenticity: “Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money, not even their time.”² The suggestion is that kitsch, born of and answering to a loss of culture that Greenberg links to the industrial revolution and to the capitalism it made possible, while it may pretend to demand nothing of us except our money, ends up drowning us in inauthenticity.

² Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” *Art and Culture. Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), p. 10.

But does such elitist pathos not attribute to kitsch a sinister significance that it does not generally possess? What threat do garden gnomes and Bambi pose? Has most entertainment not always been kitsch? Who today is still afraid of kitsch? We may deplore that there is not more support for what we think really deserves to be called art, but is most kitsch, like most art, not quite harmless? Suppose ours is indeed a kitsch culture, must this be criticized?

The negative connotations of the “kitsch” label may make the answer seem self-evident: from its very beginning in the elitist art-world of late 19th century Munich “kitsch” has been used as a term to condemn, initially a certain kind of cheap, too easily produced art, relying on formulas and mechanical reproduction, a mere shadow of authentic, genuine art. But what was condemned was increasingly not just a certain kind of inferior art, but the state of mind, the ethos that produced and welcomed such art: the kitsch-personality that to find Ersatz for lacking values wants to be moved and edified without having to invest too much emotional capital in what it consumes and without really having to change. Both the producer and consumer of kitsch are here condemned, not just for having bad taste, but for having a taste that suggests something like moral failure: the consumer of kitsch wants to be deceived, refusing to open his eyes to reality as it really is and to the demands it places on us, escaping from that reality to clichéd images of some happier, better world, perhaps of the good old world of the fathers, a world that selfishness and greed are supposed to have destroyed. The producer of kitsch exploits such willingness to collude with the deception and, like the old magician of Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*, “knowingly, willingly lies,” substituting simulacra for what should be real and genuine.

Such an understanding of “kitsch” recalls what Nietzsche had to say about romanticism: “too much energy is being wasted on all sorts of resurrections of what has died. Perhaps the whole romantic movement is best understood from this point of view.”³ Nietzsche might very well have agreed with Roger Scruton that “The romantic artist is attempting to invest human life with a religious aura, to rewrite those purely

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröte*, 159.

human experiences of conflict and passion as though they originated in the divine.”⁴ But the mature Nietzsche would have us question the way Scruton opposes the romantic artist to the creator of kitsch; he would have underscored the “as though”: is “the vision of a higher life” that romanticism is said by Scruton to sustain “in the midst of bourgeois mediocrity” supported by more than nostalgia for something already overtaken by the progress of reason and the world it has shaped? Scruton calls romantic art “a heroic attempt to re-enchant the world: to look on human beings as though they had the significance and the dignity of angels.” Once again the “as though” deserves special attention. As Kierkegaard taught, we must beware of allowing the aesthetic subjunctive to obscure the indicative of reality.⁵ Do romantic attempts to re-enchant a disenchanted world not also lead to kitsch, a far more demanding form of kitsch perhaps, but because of its pretensions not as harmless as some plastic Jesus dangling from a dashboard or an entertaining Hollywood movie of the fifties?

The conjunction of kitsch, nostalgia, and romanticism invites the question: do those who invoke the culture of the past to condemn our post-culture as a kitsch culture not cling to something that belongs into a museum precisely because it no longer possesses genuine life? Are they not romantics in Nietzsche’s sense? By 1878 Nietzsche, as we know, had come to condemn not only Wagner, but his own *Birth of Tragedy*, despite all its attacks on Alexandrianism, appropriated by Greenberg in his critique of kitsch, as itself kitsch — although that word was not yet available to him — pretentious kitsch, to be sure, kitsch for a self-selected, self-validating elite, but kitsch nonetheless?

Human beings have long opposed their versions of some past golden age to the decadent present. That the distinctive ugliness of our disenchanted modern world should breed nostalgia for some bygone and supposedly more authentic, more moral, more beautiful world is only to be expected. If we can call such nostalgia the mother of kitsch,

⁴ Roger Scruton, “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament,” *City Journal*, Winter 1999, http://www.google.com/search?q=cache:suDGSDR4q2kJ:www.city-journal.org/html/9_1_urbanities_kitsch_and_the.html+%2B%22Roger+Scruton%22+%2Bkitsch&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=1

⁵ See Karsten Harries, “Transformations of the Subjunctive,” *Thought*, vol. 55, no. 218, 1980, pp. 283-294.

its father could perhaps be said to be the industrial revolution and the capitalism it made possible. But the question returns: are such nostalgia and the kitsch that issues from it necessarily to be condemned? Would our lives not be less without dreams of some never to be recovered home?

2. Kitsch and Bad Faith

Although “kitsch” originated as and remains first of all an aesthetic category, kitsch resists being discussed as just an aesthetic phenomenon, say as mechanically produced art or as art relying on well-established recipes or formulas and lacking therefore the originality and authenticity of genuine art. The same can be said after all of much other art that we would not consider kitsch: most art production through the ages has relied on routine or clichés. And, on the other hand, is there not kitsch that is undeniably original? Think of Richard Wagner or of Salvador Dali. What lets us call kitsch “kitsch” is first of all not its reliance on trusted recipes, not its lack of originality, but that we experience it as born of and catering to bad faith. Its representations of reality strike us, if perhaps not the creator or the owner of the kitsch object, as false, as not true to reality.

Kitsch so understood would seem to differ from art for art’s sake precisely in the way it refers to reality. Kitsch engages it, re-presents it in a way that elides what the consumer does not want to see. Even as it embraces, kitsch distorts reality, masking it with illusions of meaning. That can lift it beyond mere entertainment and give it a religious, ethical, and political significance that invites comparison with myth. Much pretentious kitsch thus invites us to understand it as Ersatz myth for a disenchanted world — think of Alfred Rosenberg’s *Der Mythos des 20. Jahrhunderts*.

We condemn kitsch as “kitsch” because we experience it as born of and as catering to bad faith. But this also helps to explain why today the category “kitsch” should be becoming increasingly elusive: just like “dreaming,” “bad faith” is a contrast term: as dreaming retains its sense only as long as we can oppose it to waking, “bad faith” retains its sense only as long as we can distinguish it from good or authentic faith. “Kitsch” is thus an aesthetic category that demands to be discussed with reference to

faith. Its history is bound up with the history of faith, its rise bound up with the Enlightenment and its questioning of religion in the name of reason. Nietzsche might have said, kitsch is a phenomenon that has its origin in the death of God of which, in *The Gay Science*, he has this to say: “Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night and more night coming on all the while? Must not lanterns be lit in the morning? Do we not hear anything yet of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition.”⁶ The distinctive perfume of kitsch may be said to be part of the odor of God's decomposition.

But if, as Nietzsche claims, God is and remains dead, what then becomes of good faith? Today the very distinction between “good” and “bad faith” seems to be slipping away from us. And if so, must the same not be said of “kitsch”? This is one question any thoughtful discussion of kitsch needs to address. Today the once so stridently negative connotation of the term “kitsch” are fading. The philosopher Robert C. Solomon is not the only one to have written in defense of kitsch and sentimentality.⁷ Nor is the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum the only artist to have embraced kitsch self-consciously — not ironically, as so many much more accepted artists have done in the past few decades, camping up their beloved kitsch, while keeping their avant-garde credentials — but in the name of a quite traditional humanism, difficult to square with the shape of our modern world and for that reason easily condemned for its lies, for its nostalgia and sentimentality. Not so very different is the embrace of the “kitsch” label by Lisa Small, the Associate Curator of New York's Dahesh Museum, dedicated to European academic art of the 19th and early 20th century, not in order to criticize that art, but in order to call into question that label's all too easily taken for granted negative connotation. As Jan Maarten Boll observes, “Kitsch is becoming art. Anyone who denies that has no eyes and is doomed to irrelevance.”⁸

Consider, for example, the self-styled “painter of light” Thomas Kinkade, said to be the commercially most successful American painter. More than that: today his

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, III, par. 125

⁷ Robert C. Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 49 (Winter, 1991)

⁸ Jan Maarten Boll, *Kitsch unedited*. Letters and texts of friends compiled by Jan Andriess (De Pont museum of contemporary art, 2006), p. 16

nostalgic paintings of rustic homes are beginning to be translated into housing developments; his version of kitsch is beginning to shape the built environment. As Dan Byrne, CEO of The Thomas Kinkade Company, puts it: "The Thomas Kinkade brand stands for the values associated with home and hearth, peace, joy, faith, family and friends. Partnering with HST in the creation of homes inspired by the artwork of Thomas Kinkade delivers on what collectors tell us inspires them most about Thom's work — that they wish they could step into the world created in the painting. The Thomas Kinkade Company is pleased to align itself with such a visionary home builder."⁹ And what is wrong with an art that so self-consciously seeks to edify and is unafraid to rely on recipes drawn from the art of the past to achieve its end?

The changing fortunes of the word "edify" are instructive: once it meant simply to raise a dwelling or structure. Religious and moral thinkers appropriated the word — were they not raising spiritual edifices in which human beings might discover their spiritual home — Kierkegaard wrote *Edifying Discourses*. The term thus came to mean, "to improve morally or spiritually" by offering guidance and giving faith. Why then did this word come to acquire an increasingly negative connotation, as suggested by such synonyms as "preach," "indoctrinate"? Today "edifying art" suggests "kitsch," suggests attempts to embalm what has lost genuine life as if it were still alive. This is how long ago a Schopenhauer experienced the neo-Gothic churches rising in his day: as in bad taste, because born of bad faith: "In the interest of good taste, I am bound to wish that great wealth be devoted to what is objectively, i.e. actually, good and right, to what in itself is beautiful, not to that whose value rests merely on the association of ideas. Now when I see how this unbelieving age so diligently finishes the Gothic churches left uncompleted by the believing Middle Ages, it seems to me as if it were desired to embalm a Christianity that has expired."¹⁰

Does this not provide us with a definition of kitsch: production experienced as being in bad taste, because born of bad faith, supported only by an association of ideas,

⁹ Press Release. Source: The Thomas Kinkade Company. New Housing Community in Columbia, MO Features Thomas Kinkade. Homes. Monday August 14, 9:01 am ET. <http://biz.yahoo.com/bw/060814/20060814005221.html>

¹⁰ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 2, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966), p. 418.

but no longer rooted in experiences of the sacred that once gave the greatest art its meaning? But in the absence of such experiences, what alternative can we point to? Is bad faith not better than no faith at all, edifying kitsch better than post-modern irony or abjection? Is it not part of our human condition that we should dream ever again of some lost and perhaps never to be recovered home? And can such beautiful dreams not cast a light into our world, compensate us for its deficiencies, perhaps even move us and that world slightly closer to what we dream of? In a world that makes it difficult for us to call it home, where too many demonstrate a cold heart, must one not welcome a bit of kitschy sentimentality, even when all too often it lacks the energy or the will or the means to transform reality? The romantic nostalgia of a Schiller or a Hölderlin for a Greece that never quite was as they imagined it lets many of us long for an age still innocent enough to make such nostalgia possible: today many have become nostalgic for nostalgia — and not just for the demanding nostalgia of the romantics.

Consider the current vogue enjoyed by the kitsch of the fifties. And have we not learned to love the Wagnerian kitsch of the 19th century. Think of paintings by Meissonier, Bouguereau, Böcklin, or Makart and of the age they represent. What our fathers or grandfathers, still filled with modernist fervor and conviction, were able to condemn wholeheartedly as inauthentic, sentimental, or false may well suggest to us, despite, or rather because of its operatic theatricality, an innocence we have lost. Who, concerned about the uncertain future of a Europe burdened with memories of holocaust and war, preoccupied with terrorism, will not look back with tenderness and nostalgia at what Hermann Broch called the *Backhendzeit*, at Robert Musil's *Kakanien*, at a Vienna that convinced modernists experienced as the epitome of decadence? If our age is indeed, as Broch thought, the age of the value vacuum, why call bad faith bad? What better faith is there?

3. Authenticity and Kitsch

Representing reality, kitsch masks it. Just this sugary embrace of reality Clement Greenberg took to be a characteristic of kitsch that distinguished it from what he considered the only authentic art still possible today, which, he insisted, had to keep its

distance from reality and avoid representation. The Nietzschean presuppositions of his imperative demand thoughtful consideration: "All values are human values, relative values, in art as well as everywhere. Yet there does seem to be more or less general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages of what is good art and what bad... this agreement rests, I believe, on a fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and values that can be found elsewhere. Kitsch, by virtue of its rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice."¹¹ Greenberg, too, insists that there are no absolute values. That seems to leave only the alternative of either bad faith or a heroic nihilism, expressing itself in authentic, but finally futile acts of self-assertion. As Greenberg understood it, the avant-garde of his day responded thus to the same value vacuum that Broch, took to be a presupposition of kitsch, but it did so, not by dressing reality up with simulacra of past culture, but with a proud claim to a godlike self-sufficiency. "Retiring from the public altogether," the artist sought to maintain art's high level "by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute on which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or besides the point."¹² "The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape, not its picture, is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself."¹³ Lucifer presides over art and over modern authenticity so understood. Just as Sartre made the fundamental project of the human being the project to become like God, only to declare God a contradiction and this project vain and doomed to failure, so Greenberg's understood the project of the avant-garde artist as a heroic attempt to substitute for the absent absolute the totally self-justifying art-work. And once again like Sartre, Greenberg recognized that all such attempts must fail: "But the absolute is absolute, and the poet or artist, being what he is, cherishes certain relative values more than others. The very values in the name of which he invokes the absolute

¹¹ Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," p. 13.

¹² Ibid., p. 5.

¹³ Ibid., p. 6.

are relative values, the values of aesthetics. And so he turns out to be imitating, not God — and here I use ‘imitate; in its Aristotelian sense — but the discipline and processes of art and literature themselves. This is the genesis of the ‘abstract.’”¹⁴ Greenberg criticized kitsch for aiming at the effect, not the process: the spectator here takes over from the creator. But he himself ended up describing the art of the avant-garde, supposed to offer authenticity a last refuge, in similar terms, as aiming at no more than the effect of autonomy, seeking Ersatz for absent divinity in simulacra of plenitude. That Hermann Broch should have associated kitsch and art for art’s sake is therefore hardly surprising. As Adorno knew so well, dreams of authenticity also open the door to kitsch.¹⁵

4. The Golden Calf

The avant-garde artist’s proud escape from the world in which we all have to make our way into abstraction is impossible to reconcile with a full self-affirmation. How much more life affirming and human would seem to be the beautiful lies on which the kitsch condemned by Greenberg relies. The question returns: just what is wrong with its illusions? If Nietzsche is right to claim that today the beautifully seductive and tranquillizing utterances about “the dignity of man” and “the dignity of labor” are no longer effective,¹⁶ that reason is unable to discover any absolute values, must human beings not themselves create whatever aesthetic constructs will allow them to experience their own lives as having dignity and to matter?

The story of the golden calf comes to mind, a story of Moses, delaying to come down from the mountain to mediate between God and the people of Israel, and the people who, unwilling to bear the delay, demand of Aaron that he fashion of gold a simulacrum of the absent divinity. Something finite, a human artifact, validated by the value of gold, is put in the place of the transcendent. Such replacement operations are a defining characteristic of all kitsch: the work of art, no longer the product of a struggle to re-

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1997). Already in my *The Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968) I had insisted that abstract art, too, is all too often kitsch. See p. 82.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 18.

present a reality that transcends the reach of our concepts, now replaces that reality. Hermann Broch spoke of the kitsch personality, which, faced with what is all too often ugly and disgusting, demands a more beautiful world. The origin of kitsch he located in the Enlightenment and its exaltation of reason and freedom. Within him- or herself the individual discovered infinity. "This brought the act of revelation into every single human mind and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, a responsibility that the Church had previously borne. The mind settled the account and became presumptuous and boastful, became presumptuous because it had been assigned this cosmic and divine task, and it became boastful because it was well aware that it had been given too much credit, that it had been burdened with a responsibility that exceeded its resources. This is the origin of romanticism; here is the origin of, on the one hand, the exaltation of the man who is full of artistic (and spiritual) energy and who tries to elevate the wretched daily round of life on earth to an absolute or pseudo-absolute sphere, and, on the other, the terror of the man who senses the risk involved."¹⁷ Romanticism is tossed back and forth between aesthetic exaltation and fear and trembling, between a sense that the free subject had opened up a path to the absolute and a nihilism that had left human beings adrift in a meaningless world. Once it was religion that had allowed the individual to experience the world as a meaningful whole, as a cosmos. But the faith that supported such certainty could not survive the Enlightenment's liberation of humanity from the authority of the Church. The other side of such liberation is the experience of what Milan Kundera was to call the unbearable lightness of being. A new faith was demanded to restore a weight to things.

But where was such faith to be found? Could reason discover within itself the bond that would bind freedom and thus lead to true autonomy, as Kant had insisted? Broch speaks of "The religion of reason that the French revolution tried to establish when, having dethroned God, it saw the need of basing its virtue on something absolute and accordingly had to invent its 'Goddess of Reason.' But as things proceed rationally in the kingdom of reason, this 'Goddess of Reason' was soon forgotten."¹⁸ Reason soon

¹⁷ Hermann Broch, "Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit," *Dichten und Erkennen. Essays*, vol. 1 (Zürich: Rhein Verlag, 1955), pp. 55-56.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

turned against itself and demonstrated its inability to furnish the kind of certainty and bond demanded.

Could beauty come to the rescue and take the place of the sacred, as not only the young Nietzsche had hoped? “This divine beauty is the fundamental symbol of all the symbolist schools and is at the root of their aspiration to set up a new religion of beauty (which one can detect both in the Pre-Raphaelites and in Mallarmé or George). Without calling into question the greatness of Mallarmé or the important artistic work of George, or even the admittedly considerably lesser value of the Pre-Raphaelites, we can safely say that the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess kitsch.”¹⁹

Broch himself called this claim into question: “One can raise the objection that every artistic act generates beauty. This is true, just as it is true that every cognitive act generates truth. But has there ever been a human eye capable of contemplating ‘the beauty’ or ‘the truth’? ... A scientist who puts no more than his own love of truth into his research will not get very far; what he needs is rather an absolute dedication to the object of his research, he needs logic and intuition; and if luck (which plays a rather more important part than the idea of truth in such cases) is in his favour, truth will appear all by itself when his work or experiments come to an end. The same is true of the artist. He, too, has to subject himself unconditionally to the object; his capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object (regardless of whether it presents itself as an interior or exterior object), to seek out the laws that it obeys — think of Dürer’s experiments with perspective, or Rembrandt’s experiments with light — does not depend on the artist’s love of beauty.”²⁰ What distinguishes kitsch from genuine art, according to Broch, is this “capacity to listen to the secret voice of the object.” “Art is made up of intuitions about reality, and is superior to kitsch solely thanks to these intuitions.”²¹

We may well feel that science and art have been brought here into too close a relationship. Both are considered explorations of reality. “Reality,” to be sure, does not mean quite the same thing in the two cases: the reality of the scientist is an already objectified reality. Such objectification is the condition of a pursuit that remains ever

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 61.

²¹ Ibid.

open because the scientist knows that the reality he seeks to understand transcends and grounds whatever truths science is able to establish.

The reality that calls the artist towards ever new expression also calls him beyond that objectified reality explored by science. Broch could have agreed with Heidegger's statement: "Beauty is one way in which truth occurs as unconcealedness."²² Also with Heidegger's claim that such occurrence requires an openness to what transcends all our attempts at mastery, an openness to what Heidegger called the earth. Kitsch does not know such openness, such responsibility, which presupposes the ability to respond. What blocks it is precisely the insistence that the artist make beauty the end of his striving. Kitsch, as Broch understands it, instead of exploring an ever-elusive reality, is content with what has been established and has come to be accepted and manipulates it to achieve the desired effects. Does the art of the past not teach us what is beautiful? How to achieve sublime effects? How to be interesting? Past achievements assume an authority that lends itself to the formulation of rules and recipes and to mechanical reproduction. "Reducing the infinity of God to the finitude of the visible, the faith of the mere moralist is dragged down from the sphere of the ethical into that of the aesthetic, the infinite demand of faith is debased into an aesthetic demand."²³ "Aesthetic demand" here means a demand to produce a certain appearance, the sort of effect that precisely because it answers to quite definite, established expectations, invites the formulation of definite rules. Kitsch so understood has its moral equivalent in pedantry: only a pedant believes that being moral reduces to following a set of rules.

"Aesthetic demand," kitsch, and rationalism belong together. The kitsch producer knows what will let the consumer enjoy a certain experience or state of mind — and it does not matter whether the goal is erotic titillation, a religious state of mind, or patriotic fervor. The ultimate goal of kitsch is self-enjoyment, happiness so understood. Reality matters only to the extent that it offers occasions for such self-enjoyment. Kitsch thus renders those who fall under its spell irresponsible: no longer concerned to respond to the humanity of their fellow human beings.

²² Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 56.

²³ Broch, "Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst," *Essays*, vol. 1, p. 341.

From this perspective an abstract art that resolutely turns its back on reality to find solace in simulacra of divine self-sufficiency seems less of a danger than kitsch that, in the spirit of Nietzsche's pronouncement in *The Birth of Tragedy* that only as an aesthetic phenomenon can life be justified, embraces reality only to conceal it with its lies.

5. The Political Significance of Kitsch

Most of us do not think of kitsch as deserving the attention demanded by such obvious problems as the environmental crisis, mass starvation, war, genocide, disease. What harm is done after all when someone, instead of finding relief from the depressing world situation by listening to Beethoven, escapes to some trashy soap opera? To be sure, we may, with Kant, deplore the aesthete who allows the pursuit of self-enjoyment to trump duty to his fellow human beings. But we also have learned to live with and accept such failure as human, all too human. And does it really matter whether our aesthete escapes to the most demanding work of art or settles for kitsch? Are garden gnomes more disturbing than Schubert? Is not the price of all aesthetic enjoyment a certain irresponsibility, an escape from reality? How then are we to understand the fervor of so many condemnations of kitsch? As long as kitsch offers no more than a momentary escape from reality, it seems no more blameworthy than other such escapes.

But kitsch is not so innocent when it invests reality with an aura of significance that has no foundation in reality. This recognition led Nietzsche to condemn his own *Birth of Tragedy*, which demanded just such an investment when it claimed that only when represented as an aesthetic phenomenon does our existence appear justified. That demand presupposes that both religion and reason have failed us. And does that twofold failure not still determine our spiritual situation? To be sure, our science and technology have shown us that the Cartesian promise that the progress of reason would render us the masters and possessors of nature was anything but idle. But the Enlightenment's, and still Hegel's, conviction that reason would not only grant us mastery over nature, but also reveal to us what truly matters and thus allow us to feel spiritually at home in the world has been shattered, both by the history of the past two centuries and by critical reflection on the claims of reason. Did Nietzsche not have good reason to claim that we have art so

that we would not perish over the truth, that the only justification of life is finally aesthetic? And if so, does this not demand that aestheticization of reality, of religion, morality, and politics that defines the kitsch personality? Could it be that, given our spiritual situation, we need illusion, need kitsch, be it high or low, Wagner or Kinkade, to defend ourselves against a world in which greed, terror, and money again and again trump whatever remains of Enlightenment faith in reason and culture?

The attempt to aestheticize reality has to lead kitsch to descend into life. The translation of Kinkade's paintings of homes oozing with faith, joy, and happiness into actual buildings is a relatively harmless if quite characteristic example. Far more disturbing is the descent of kitsch into the political arena. Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's Wagner and Hitler films are significant in this connection. That such a blurring poses an incomparably greater danger than art that turns its back on reality to find solace in simulacra of divine self-sufficiency is shown by Menno Meyjes' film *Max*, which imagines the transformation of the young Hitler, still a struggling artist, responding to a Germany left shattered by World War One with kitschy images of a Germany that existed only in his dreams, into a politician. We see here how kitsch can render those who allow it to rule their lives irresponsible, prevented by the aesthetic phenomenon that appears to justify their lives, from responding to the humanity of their fellow human beings.

We have learned to associate such an aestheticized politics with fascism — and with kitsch and bad faith. But this does not answer the question: how are we to distinguish good from bad faith? In *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* Robert Jan van Pelt struggles with this question. In the process he provides us with an eloquent description of a Nazi ceremony that took place in Munich on November 9, 1935, centering on the flag that in 1923 had fallen into the blood of one of the putschists killed in that failed coup and that had now been elevated into a sacred relic. Hitler understood very well the political potential of art, and so he commissioned the architect Ludwig Troost to transform Munich into a worthy setting of the new national cult. The buildings were indeed celebrated as an enormous success. Did architecture here not achieve that repetition of the Greek in the modern of which Nietzsche and also Heidegger dreamed? How are we to distinguish the genuine from the counterfeit?

Van Pelt provides us with a first answer:

When Pericles reminded his fellow citizens of the city they had inherited from their fathers, and when the monks of Centula preached the resurrection of Christ, they had a reasonable or moral certainty that their pronouncements agreed with what their audience recognized as common sense... Yet any German who watched the shamanic Munich rituals had to suspend reason. Only when submerged within the carefully manipulated atmosphere of collective hysteria did the proclamations make sense.²⁴

But this appeal to common sense invites questioning: the common sense of Periclean Athens was not that of Carolingian Centula: what separated them was the rise of Christianity. Imagine how a secular, educated Roman might have responded to those who claimed that Christ's death on the cross constituted a cosmic victory and longed themselves for martyrdom. Could they not have used arguments against these early Christians rather like that advocated by van Pelt against the Nazis and their so-called martyrs? Measured by the common sense of such a Roman, what these Christians were willing to die for must have seemed nonsense and he would have been incredulous to hear one of his fellow Romans predict that some day this nonsense would come to be accepted as a new common sense.

Common sense should have led the Germans who witnessed these events to dismiss what they saw as nonsense. But as Meyjes' film *Max* suggests, what remained of common sense was then fraying. What happens to culture when there is no longer a robust common sense; when what was once a seemingly well established firmament of values is disintegrating, when appeals to ideals and talk of *Bildung* have come to have a hollow ring?

Van Pelt points to what distinguishes what is genuine from what is sham when he suggests that the Nazi ideologues reoccupied places that they borrowed from both the Greek and the Christian tradition, when they "assimilated the ideology of the Athenian cemetery and the Holy Sepulcher." Especially important here is the rhetoric of martyrdom, of blood-witnesses, of sacred blood, of self-sacrifice for the sake of the flag

²⁴ Robert Jan van Pelt, "Apocalyptic Abjection," in Robert Jan van Pelt and Carroll William Westfall, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Historicism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 332-333.

that would reward the martyr with eternal life. It is a rhetoric no one raised in a Christian tradition would have had trouble understanding. Such rhetoric can be likened to a venerable vessel into which the Nazis now proposed to pour new wine. Only they had no wine, they had in fact nothing substantial to pour into this vessel.

6. Windows to Transcendence

To be able to deny that all justification of life is finally aesthetic, we have to be convinced that meaning cannot be created by us, but must be discovered, that to live responsibly we must be able to respond to these given meanings. But this presupposes that we do indeed still experience such meanings. Can such experiences be reconciled with the shape of the world we live in?

Science and technology have rendered us the masters of nature. Today artifice threatens to embrace reality so completely that at moments it seems to all but vanish in the embrace, pushed to the periphery of our culture, where we may still meet, as Jean Baudrillard puts it, with vestiges of what once was "the desert of the real itself."²⁵ At least postmodern culture is here said to still possess a periphery, and that means also an outside. But Baudrillard conjures up a world where image is no longer "the reflection a profound reality," no longer "masks and denatures a profound reality," no longer even "masks the absence of a profound reality," but instead "has no relation to any reality whatsoever" and "is its own pure simulacrum."²⁶ Half fascinated, half appalled, Baudrillard envisions a world that seems to announce its coming in phenomena like the giant Mall of America next to the Minneapolis airport.

To be sure, the thought of an image "that has no relation to any reality whatsoever: that is its own pure simulacrum" is finally as incoherent as the Cartesian thought experiment of a dream standing in no relation to any reality. And I only note that the world in which most of us most of the time still live, love, suffer, and die, remains fortunately quite distant from such postmodern fantasies. But let me accept Baudrillard's

²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1994), p. 1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

dismal prophecy as an illuminating caricature and ask: what makes this caricature so disturbing? How are we to understand the nostalgia for a reality uncontaminated by simulacra that shows itself in the kitsch that surrounds us everywhere in the Mall of America, in stores and restaurants that by their look, especially their choice of materials, are meant to evoke a very different time and place, in an Alpine stream, cascading through mock rock, in art shops specializing in cheap representations of landscapes from which everything that might suggest technology has been banished, in travel agencies that with their posters call the visitor to the sand, water, and air of some pristine Caribbean island?

What Baudrillard gestures towards with the phrase “the desert of the real itself,” a desert that we are said to encounter only on the periphery of our modern culture, Heidegger gestures towards with the word “earth”:

A stone presses downward and manifests its heaviness. But while this heaviness exerts an opposing pressure upon us it denies us any penetration into it. If we attempt such a penetration by breaking open the rock, it still does not display in its fragments anything inward that has been disclosed. The stone has instantly withdrawn again into the same dull pressure and bulk of its fragments. If we try to lay hold of the stone's heaviness in another way, by placing the stone on a balance, we merely bring the heaviness into the form of a calculated weight. This perhaps very precise determination of the stone remains a number, but the weight's burden has escaped us. Color shines and wants only to shine. When we analyze it in rational terms by measuring its wavelength, it is gone. Earth thus shatters every attempt to penetrate into it. It causes every merely calculating importunity upon it to turn into a destruction.²⁷

Shattered here is the Cartesian conviction that it is clear and distinct reasoning that presents to us things as they are. The art that Heidegger here envisions lets us understand matter differently, makes us responsive to reality as transcending what reason can

²⁷ Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," pp. 46-47.

comprehend, to that special aura that attaches to every thing we experience as real. Kitsch has lost this aura.

I choose the word “aura” to invite the objection: has Walter Benjamin, no doubt also with Heidegger in mind, not taught us to question such nostalgic longing for experiences of aura as incompatible with the essence of this age of the technical reproducibility of not just works of art, but of so much more? Is whatever science comprehends not in its very essence reproducible? What does aura still matter in today’s world? Does Heidegger’s celebration of the earth not also invite the kitsch label?

An answer is suggested by Benjamin himself when he links aura to the experience of a person as a person: “Looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned by the object of our gaze. Where this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes can apply equally to the look of the mind and to a glance pure and simple), there is an experience of the aura to the fullest extent.”²⁸ To experience the distinctive aura of the other is to experience an incarnation of spirit in matter so complete that there is no distance between the two. Objectifying reason does not know anything of such incarnations.

As Benjamin recognizes, something of the sort is present in every experience of aura. That is what makes the still spreading loss of aura in the age of the technical reproduction of all sorts of things so frightening: are not even human beings today in danger of losing that special aura that distinguishes persons from their kitschy simulacra, pretty perhaps, but without spirit? The loss of aura threatens the loss of our humanity.

That threat is recognized by Baudrillard when, in his discussion with the architect Jean Nouvel he takes the task of art today to be that of tearing away the masks aesthetics and culture have placed over reality. Art he insists should preserve the “enigmatic side” of things, should break open modern culture, which today is “everywhere ... a homologue of industry and technology ... A work of art is a singularity, and all these singularities can create holes, interstices, voids, et cetera, in the metastatic fullness of culture.”²⁹ Whatever artifice can produce can in principle be reproduced. That is true

²⁸ Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” *Illuminations*, p. 188.

²⁹ Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), pp. 13, 20-21.

also of kitsch. But what then allows us in this age of the technical reproducibility, not just of works of art, but increasingly of everything, to hold on to the aura of human beings, works of art, and natural objects? The threat technological reproduction poses to our experience of the aura of things is also a threat to our humanity. This makes it important to open windows in the architecture raised by objectifying reason, windows to dimensions of reality that resist comprehension and therefore cannot be reproduced. A successful work of art should have something of the enigmatic presence we experience in the face of a person. No more than we lay hold of a stone's heaviness by measuring it, do we lay hold of what makes a person a person deserving respect when we understand that person in the image of complicated robot with a computer brain.

To experience a person as a person is to experience meaning incarnated in matter. Without such experiences all talk of ethics is idle. Matter so understood may not be thought in opposition to meaning, but as an incarnation of meaning. What lets us experience incarnations of meaning in matter is first of all our own body, where it is important to keep in mind that the embodied self is also a responsive, caring, desiring self. Such a self experiences, not an assemblage of mute givens, but inevitably meaningful things and persons. To discover meaning in reality we have to be able to respond to the countless ways in which it claims and calls us, in pity and in anger, in love and in hate, in joy and in despair. There was and there still is art born of such response-ability. And there was and is thinking born of the same ability to respond. The main task both the arts and the humanities face today is not to decorate the house objectifying reason has built with the remains of past culture, but to open windows in that house: windows to transcendence.

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