Articles

KITSCH AS A REPETITIVE SYSTEM

A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy

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Abstract

In this article, an attempt will be made to elaborate a theory of kitsch that dispenses with the traditional hierarchical framework within which kitsch is often understood. Avoiding both the populist approach of cultural studies, and the elitist approach of mass culture theorists, an argument is made for a uniquely kitsch aesthetic that employs the thematics of repetition, imitation and emulation as a distinct aesthetic style. Breaking from traditional analyses of popular conventionality in the realm of taste which aligns taste habits with class identities (such as that offered by Pierre Bourdieu), it is argued instead that the repetitive quality of kitsch addresses a general problem of modernity, that of 'disembeddedness', or the undermining of personal horizons of social and cosmic security (a model drawn from Anthony Giddens). The basis of this argument is drawn from a reconstruction of traditional theories of kitsch, though illustrative cases are offered.

Key Words ◆ Bourdieu ◆ class ◆ Giddens ◆ kitsch ◆ popular culture ◆ taste

> As a system of imitation kitsch is in fact obliged to copy art in all its specific features.
>
> (Broch, 1970: 73)

INTRODUCTION

In what follows, an attempt will be made to elaborate a theory of kitsch that is responsive to a real cultural climate in which a taste for kitsch

thrives, while at the same time remaining contemporary with current debates in the analysis of culture where the term 'kitsch' carries the baggage of an antiquated view of culture. Avoiding the moribund critiques and the elitist pitfalls of the theorists of 'mass culture', whose legacy still haunts much analysis of culture, requires some rather intricate weaving around an issue with a complex and contentious history, rife with theoretical and polemical pot-holes of various kinds.

For several generations of sociologists, historians and other commentators on modern society, the spread of commercial culture in the working and middle classes has presented a travesty of gargantuan political and moral dimensions. The conditions of this crisis are well known: since the industrial revolution, an unprecedented volume of durable goods, many with domestic, decorative functions, has glutted urban markets, presenting even the most pauperized consumer with aesthetic choices unknown to previous generations. These chattels were widely disdained as 'kitsch': knock-off imitation luxury products, 'fine art' items crudely and glibly manufactured to resemble the posh, high art objects of the old aristocracy, and soon became the common token of even the lowest wage earner of the industrialized world. Fake-gilded furniture, glass-beaded jewelry, highly ornate candelabras, imitation oil paintings, miniature ceramic copies of ancient statues and other 19th-century domestic delights were believed to be the early progenitors of the later forms of 20th-century kitsch that came with the consumer boom of the 1920s, and later with the emergence of the age of the new prosperous middle classes of the 1950s and 1960s. The rise of kitsch has been variously blamed, by critics on both the left and the right, for the erosion of elite 'high culture', for the eclipse of revolutionary consciousness, for the depletion of moral solidarities necessary for a healthy civic culture, and for the uprooting of pre-industrial folk and ethnic traditions.

More recently, contemporary sociologists have exposed the myth of cultural hierarchy upon which these readings of kitsch depend as the thinly disguised prejudices of a cultural elitism. High and low culture are now understood to have much more in common than was once realized: consumers of popular culture are critical and creative in their reception of goods, while producers of 'high' arts are themselves constrained by institutional and commercial strictures, as sociologist Howard Becker has revealed in his studies of 'Art Worlds' (Becker, 1982; Zolberg, 1990). When in the mid 1970s, in *Popular Culture and High Culture*, Herbert Gans used the term 'taste cultures' to replace the hierarchical distinction implied by 'popular' and 'high', his aim was to dispel the authority conveyed by these terms by exposing the institutional limits and creative freedoms that are distributed evenly up and down the cultural ladder. Taste is taste, Gans stated, a claim which effectively reversed half a century of theorizing on mass culture (1974). And if the

aim of Gans' book was to dislodge the high/low distinction from any *suis generis* aesthetic criteria, the arrival of British cultural studies in America in the 1980s further undermined any implicit cultural hierarchy by revealing the important political elements that designate the cultural divide separating high from low. Andrew Ross described this divide in 1989 in terms that confronted directly the assumptions of natural cultural hierarchy:

> the status of popular culture – what is popular and what is not – is . . . an unstable political definition, variably fixed from moment to moment by intellectuals and tastemakers, and in this respect, is often seen as constituting, if not representing, a political identity for the 'popular classes'. (Ross, 1989: 8)

In either case, the implicit aesthetic, moral and political criteria that served to separate high culture from low, art from kitsch, have been effectively dismantled in much sociological and historical work. The strong use of the term kitsch, rife with parvenu Victorian arrogance, has largely disappeared from the vocabulary of serious contemporary cultural analysis. The issue here is: might this reversal of the kitsch thesis have been too hasty, and might the term kitsch still offer some theoretical and empirical assets to the study of material culture and the consuming habits of modern people? This question can only be broached by way of a keen awareness of the history of the critiques of kitsch.

The mass culture theorists (a tradition that spans such figures as Alexis deToqueville (1957), Clement Greenberg (1961), Jose Ortega y Gasset (1957), Dwight MacDonald (1962), Adorno and Horkheimer (1991), Irving Howe (1957) and others) defined kitsch as a style derivative of higher art styles, imitative, given to formulae and stock motifs, and thus radically inferior to the creativity and innovation found in high culture, and indeed symptomatic of a uniquely modern form of aesthetic corruption. Against this position, I will argue for the uniqueness of kitsch as a distinct style, one which celebrates repetition and conventionality as a value in itself. The kitsch sensibility I will uncover is one which employs the thematics of repetition over innovation, a preference for formulae and conventions over originality and experiment, an appeal to sentimental affirmation over existential probing – a unique and quite 'healthy' sensibility that can rightly be called kitsch (without invoking the prejudices this term often implies). However there is another interpretive goal to be considered: much contemporary scholarship on popular culture (whose authors, often grouped under the rubric of 'cultural studies', whose leading authors include Andrew Ross (1989), Lawrence Grossberg (1992), John Fiske (1989), Stuart Hall (1996) and others, though much recent sociology of culture can be included here) has rightly challenged such intrinsic hierarchies, arguing instead

the intrinsic creativity and criticality of popular cultural consumers, who instill new meanings in the objects they acquire. Moreover, new analyses of popular cultural producers and products themselves have uncovered the symbolic richness of goods, which often undermine various forms of social power (one has only to think of the volumes of feminist writings on Madonna that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s). The approach of cultural studies, pursuing its dogged critique of the mass culture model, has led it to assume that all culture, high and low, is 'creative', and to conclude from this that the very distinction between high and low is fundamentally without grounds. This welcome and necessary change, particularly in its overcoming of intrinsic distinctions between popular and high culture, represents a clear advance over the old assumptions of cultural hierarchy. However, some problems emerge: this perspective tends to gloss over a distinct category of cultural artifacts which deflect creativity and innovation, which cultivate continuity, conformity and routine, which celebrate sentiment and banality. These are the characteristics traditionally attributed, in a highly pejorative sense, to kitsch, presuming that this sense of continuity and unity could only take place in an aesthetic vacuum. Against this assumption, I will argue that kitsch's unique aesthetic of repetition, its affirmation of rhythm and meter, far from representing a failure of the creative will, must be understood on its own terms for the aesthetic world that it unfolds.

In short, the hermeneutic approach proposed here aims to distinguish itself from the analysis of culture promoted by recent sociologists of culture and practitioners of cultural studies, where the creative and critical dimensions of popular culture are emphasized, just as it seeks to avoid the elitist arguments of the mass culture theorists, where the popular is labeled and sequestered as creatively void, and therefore aesthetically pathological. Yet, what I am suggesting is an interpretive approach that borrows from the assets of both: mass culture theorists had it right when they identified the repetitive conventionality of kitsch, but got it wrong when they failed to recognize the social meanings that a repetitive, derivative style might hold. Practitioners of cultural studies and interpretively informed sociologists of culture got it right when they dismantled the taste hierarchies that restricted kitsch to the lowest rungs on the cultural ladder, but botched it when they assumed that 'creativity' (formal innovation) could be the only mark of a lively culture, and that innovative and critical qualities were distributed evenly throughout all segments of popular culture. Kitsch, I will argue, preserves a unique aesthetic sensibility that spurns creativity per se while it endorses a repetition of the familiar and a grounding in an affirmation of the everyday, something akin to what Pierre Bourdieu has called the 'taste of necessity': an aesthetic expression that endorses the sense of conventionality,

rhythm and meter of aesthetic forms, and their embeddedness in daily life (Bourdieu, 1984: 371).

Indeed, the problem of embeddedness is central to any theory of kitsch, as it is to any theory of modernity. Moreover, part of what defined the mass culture approach to the study of kitsch was the link it forged between a theory of aesthetics and a general theory of modernity, though, as I have stated, it badly misinterpreted that connection. I will argue that such a theoretical connection can be made, without the apocalyptic anxiety of the mass culture theorists, around the problem of embeddedness. Embeddedness, a condition of daily life in which uncertainties, existential questions and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought which penetrate the deepest crevices of the quotidian, is broadly taken to represent the forms of sociability characteristic of pre-modern societies. Modern societies, on the other hand, compose a set of what Anthony Giddens has called 'disembedding institutions': institutions and practices that uproot individuals from the 'protective cocoons' that flood social interactions, cultural outlooks and experiences with cohesive meanings, and tie daily life to fundamental patterns of trust and reassurance (Giddens, 1991: 40). Modern societies, confronting individuals with unprecedented choices in consumer goods, ethical outlooks and life plans, undermine the security of conventional life with the promise of creative freedom – the freedom to choose oneself through one's own taste expressions – with all the risk and danger this freedom invokes. What Giddens calls 'ontological security' is jeopardized as choices multiply and social life is increasingly disembedded, and as routines, recurring practices, comforting cosmologies and world views are shattered. Disembeddedness expresses the

> 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across different tracts of time and space, [disembeddedness is] the key to the tremendous acceleration in time–space distanciation which modernity introduces. (Giddens, 1991: 18)

I will argue, in short, that kitsch, which glories in its embeddedness in routines, its faithfullness to conventions, and its rootedness in the modest cadence of daily life, works to re-embed its consumers, to replenish stocks of ontological security, and to shore up a sense of cosmic coherence in an unstable world of challenge, innovation and creativity. Particularly where kitsch makes its most aggressive demands on our aesthetic sensibilities, in its appeals to sentiment, kitsch aims to re-embed its consumers on the 'deepest' personal level. Precisely by deflecting the creative, the innovative and the uncertain, kitsch advances the repetitive, the secure and the comfortable, supplying the reassurance that what is to come will resemble what has gone before, that the hazards of

innovation and uncertainty are far away, and that one is safe and secure in the routines of an unadventurous genre. By attributing kitsch to the general and deeply personal problem of existential certainty, the terms of the debate are shifted: issues of hierarchy and aesthetic value, of popular creativity in the consumption process, are resolved into a general problem of meaning and its depletion. However, this turn, while it straddles the horns of the cultural studies/mass culture theory dilemma, and dispenses with problems of cultural hierarchy, does not so easily avoid the problem of the relationship between cultural consumption and social structure in general. In short, is it really possible to argue that kitsch has nothing at all to do with class? The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu stands to shed important light on this question.

For Bourdieu, the repetitive quality of kitsch is not so much a grasping for a solution to distinctly modern existential problems as a tactic of social valorization between competing class elements, whereby economic scarcity is translated into aesthetic thrift, observable in a taste for the obvious, the direct and the blatantly – even garishly – pleasing. In short, where Giddens considers a general problem of social disembeddedness (a condition to which I interpret kitsch as a cultural response) as fundamentally a problem of modern social and personal life, Bourdieu describes a tension between the embedded and the disembedded as competing class agents. For Bourdieu, disembeddedness, autonomous art, freedom from convention, expresses the taste habits of those who are relatively free from economic constraints. And the forms of radical embeddedness I am calling kitsch, represent the clinging to necessity typical of those whose economic lives are governed by scarcity of resources and other functional concerns. I will give this problem more serious treatment in the conclusion of this study, but by and large, I will argue Giddens over Bourdieu, particularly for the American context, where stratification of taste (if it still exists at all) is not evenly distributed along the axis of economic stratification. In short, it seems more appropriate to interpret kitsch as a general existential corrective, shoring up a sense of ontological insecurity in a world of myriad choices and high risks, than to look for class tensions between consumers whose economic positions seldom if ever align with their taste habits.

On these grounds, I will argue, a theory of kitsch can be conceived which entertains both the interpretive sensitivity of contemporary cultural analyses, while salvaging some of the classical features of the mass culture theory of kitsch (without endorsing the elitist underpinnings or the overall conclusions of mass culture theory itself). Indeed, I offer this theory as a corrective to what I perceive as an orthodoxy that continues in cultural studies and cultural sociology, whose hostility to the model of the passive 'cultural dope', so celebrated by mass culture and Frankfurt School theorists, has led to a celebration of the creative consumer

on every level, to the extent that some modes of popular taste (kitsch) are obscured. This 'mass culture theory in reverse' shuts out many important dimensions of cultural consumption: those modes which celebrate repetition and the deflection of creativity and criticality.

Theories alone are limited, and this study, as a work of theory, operates within those constraints. I will leave a more complete empirical analysis of the disparate forms of kitsch, their various historical, regional and contextual valences and variations for another study. The scatter-shot examples raised in the course of this investigation serve more to explicate theories through illustration than to confirm them on the basis of evidence. What is at stake here is a tradition of theorizing which, while clearly flawed in its overall attempt to reconcile a theory of aesthetics with a theory of modernity, puts its finger on a distinct quality of modern taste, and retains some usefulness for a hermeneutic interpretation of the meaningful content of the taste of kitsch.

KITSCH: A TRANSVALUATION OF IMITATION INTO REPETITION

Though its precise etymology is uncertain, the term 'kitsch' is widely held to have originated in the Munich art markets of the 1860s and 1870s, used to describe cheap, hotly marketable pictures or 'sketches' (the English term mispronounced by Germans, or elided with the German verb *verkitschen*, to 'make cheap'). Kitsch appealed to the crass tastes of the newly moneyed, though aesthetically puerile Munich bourgeoisie who, like most *nouveaux riches*, thought they could achieve the status they envied in the traditional class of cultural elites by aping, however clumsily, the most apparent features of their cultural habits. In that early usage, the main elements of kitsch were fixed: kitsch defined an aesthetically impoverished object of shoddy production meant more to identify the consumer with a newly acquired (and badly managed) class status than to invoke a genuine aesthetic response. Kitsch was aesthetically impoverished and morally dubious, and more than anything else, kitsch sacrificed aesthetic life to a pantomime of aesthetic life, usually, but not always, in the interest of signaling one's class status.

One of the most insightful comments on kitsch, and the only one to properly assess the positive content of kitsch's repetitive aesthetic nature, appears in a 1953 essay, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', by the Austrian writer and essayist Hermann Broch (1970: 49–76). For Broch, kitsch has its beginnings in the original anxiety faced by the European bourgeoisie of the 19th century, men of favorable economic fortune struggling to come to terms with their new positions of cultural dominance. Broch discusses the shattered cultural conventions of the Church and feudal aristocracy, where art and decoration functioned in an

'ascetic' mode, that is, within a fixed and limited system of symbols and meanings. Against this asceticism, the new middle classes advanced the enlightened libertinage which permitted them an expressive departure from convention, an indulgence in sensuality, pleasure and a decorative affirmation of daily life: a new form of secular art that opened up an infinite number of new artistic and decorative possibilities. Distinguishing their open, infinite system of a romantically affirmed quotidian from the closed, finite system of the court and the clergy, the bourgeoisie promoted the earthly joys of a life common to all those outside the priestly and aristocratic caste: particularly in Romantic art, nature and the simplicity of the quotidian were exalted in decoration and design, and thus raised to a cosmic status rivaling any product of ecclesiastical or aristocratic art.

With indulgence, however, usually comes anxiety, and the shattered cosmology and the limitless freedom to create proved too much for this new indulgent class, who ultimately longed for closure. From the mid-19th century on, Broch tells us, the bourgeois system of art developed its own 'anti-system' – kitsch, the closing of an artistic system that is premised on its creative openness. Soon, the secular exaltation of decorative pleasure sought to restore this ruptured cosmology, and the bourgeois open system, with all its constituent elements, gradually closed in upon itself, composing its own fixed systemic limits, whose symbols and meanings were not invented, but imitated. As bourgeois art routinized its innovations, kitsch appeared as an imitative cultural system, which, without ever relinquishing its claim to the cosmic relevance once bestowed upon original art, became duplicitous, imitative, and corrupt. Importantly, for Broch, kitsch's repetitive quality was more than a circumstantial failure: it expressed a positive quality of moral perversion. Broch goes as far as to claim: 'kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art' (Broch, 1970: 63).

In a note from 1933, Broch describes this evil in such diverse modern phenomena as pulp literature and the midnight rallies of the fascists.

> . . . the detective novel offers nothing but an unchanging sequence of victory over criminals; the sentimental novel offers an unchanging series of good acts being rewarded and wicked acts being punished (the method governing this monotonous arrangement of the terms of reality is the primitive syntax, of the constant beat of the drum). (Broch, 1970: 66)

Broch's statement provides an insight into an important aspect of kitsch as a failed imitation; kitsch is understood to derive a positive value (if an evil one) from its inversion of the bourgeois commitment to openness and innovation. He uncovers the positive character of this imitation, though he remains profoundly committed to its indictment, not only on aesthetic and political terms, but on the terms of an abstract morality.[1]

Moreover, this quality is one that allows a subordination of the exceptional to the prosaic, and through this invites a desire for closure and security as the open system of infinite possibilities is sucked up into the closed pattern of imitative rhythms.

Several important works of aesthetic, cultural and historical commentary have taken the problem of kitsch's assault on integrity quite seriously, and since the 1930s, kitsch has been the target of volumes of malevolent writings by a host of disgruntled critics, charging, in all cases, a uniquely modern aesthetic deception of one sort or another. Most notably Clement Greenberg voiced the general contempt for kitsch in his treatise, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', making clear the poverty and danger bound up in a parasitically derivative art. The failure of kitsch as an original aesthetic gesture had profound historical implications for an epoch of ersatz culture, expressing 'all that is spurious in the life of our times' (Greenberg, 1961: 102). In Germany and Austria, important works by Broch (1970) and Ludwig Giesz (1969) explored the cultural habits of the *Kitschmensch* (kitsch-man) and by the 1950s, commentators on mass culture (Irving Howe in 1957, Dwight MacDonald also in 1957, and others) frequently used the term to disparage the products of a rising post-war 'middle-brow' consumerism. Probably the last significant all-out assault on kitsch appeared in the late 1960s with Gillo Dorfles' anthology of Italian criticism, translated as *Kitsch, the World of Bad Taste* (1969), which combined aesthetic and socio-historical critiques with a venomous reproach of popular culture and its pretenses. Though lacking a clear consensus on many issues, much of this work seems to coalesce around a few central themes.

Kitsch was convicted for its dependence on clichés, well rehearsed formulas, derivative content, and its use of obvious, easily triggered aesthetic responses, most typically sentimental feeling. However, kitsch was not just bad taste, it was worse than bad taste: kitsch expressed the perversion of taste by the beautified will-to-self-deception. As an interest in taste rather than a taste for aesthetic experience, kitsch was thought to have substituted the image of oneself as a great feeler for the experience of aesthetic feeling itself (Greenberg, 1961: 101). Kitsch provided a mawkish satisfaction in the image of oneself deriving aesthetic value, thus supplanting actual aesthetic activity with a self-satisfying lie. Kitsch achieved the ends of deception by short-circuiting the work of aesthetic appreciation, substituting an obvious, easy and direct sign of the kind of aesthetic response one would like to picture oneself having – a sign imitated from some familiar stock of such signs – for the provocative aesthetic probing by which one might 'earn' such a response. Thus for both aesthetic and socio-historical interpreters of kitsch, kitsch expressed sheer pretense, duplicitous where it pretended to be authentic, derivative where it pretended to be unique. In short, these 'classical' writings

on kitsch variously diagnosed the passing off of an imitation for an original, and on that basis judged kitsch a forgery. Kitsch was bad – lower than the bottom rung on the ladder of taste, because it failed the test of creativity, and imitated where it pretended to be original.

Most commentary on kitsch follows the logic of kitsch's imitative strategy only as far as its misplaced emulation of high art styles and its delusions of aesthetic grandeur. An analysis of kitsch that stops at its derivative manipulation of culture reads imitation as simply imitation, and misses the key feature of kitsch as a unique mode of aesthetic valuation which Broch partially uncovered: kitsch pulls off a neat trick in the transmutation of failed imitation into a repetitive character, an aesthetic value itself. Meiti Calinescu, for example, explains part of the kitsch process: kitsch strikes the posture of meaningful art without departing from a stockpile of tried and true devices, though Calinescu stops at the diagnosis of an aesthetic failure brought on by kitsch's being taken in by its own tricks. Calinescu writes:

> The aesthetic falsehood of kitsch should not be confused with that of a forgery. A forgery is meant to be taken for an original. While a forgery illegally exploits the elitist taste for rarity, a kitsch object insists on its antielitist availability. The deceptive character of kitsch does not lie in whatever it may have in common with actual forgery but in its claim to supply its consumers with essentially the same kinds and qualities of beauty as those embodied in the unique or rare and inaccessible originals. Kitsch pretends that each one of its potentially innumerable fakes, and fakes of fakes, contains something of the objective aesthetic value of the styles, conventions and works that it openly counterfeits. Kitsch offers instant beauty, maintains that there is no substantive difference between itself and original eternal beauty. (Calinescu, 1987: 252)

While there is much in this analysis that is of value, Calinescu fails to grasp the full implications of this gesture of 'anti-elitist availability'. Kitsch's copy is not simply a short cut to an identical aesthetic experience (a short cut that fails to convince in the case of most critics), it is a transvaluation of insincerity into sincerity, of imitation into willful repetition, and thus of forgery into an all too sincere gesture of human good will. Kitsch surpasses bad taste through a curious reversal which rehabilitates its failure, its conventionality and its duplicitousness into a sign of its humanity, redeeming its shortcomings by applying them to the maximization of charm. In short, kitsch turns its failures into cute: cutely conventional, quaintly repetitive. It's dishonesty, its derivation and its apparent failure to be original are transformed into a charming gesture of sincerity and a self-conscious effort to affect the sincere appeal of *naïveté*. In its transvaluation of a failure of the imagination into a faithfulness to conventions, kitsch converts imitation into modesty, conventionality into faithfulness, dependence on stock formulas into frankness

and straightforwardness, and conformity to prescribed rules of beauty into a truthful resolve to remain faithful to authentic 'human' aesthetic pleasure. In short, kitsch discovers forms of embeddedness, links with repetitive conventions that ensure the exclusion of surprise, dissonance and thought. Moreover, this frankness, modesty and directness amounts to more than just cute: it is held to be fundamental to human nature itself. The 'antielitist availability' which Calinescu points out is only partially explained by its fallacious belief in an 'original eternal beauty': the failure of the kitsch artifact to realize the aesthetic objectives of high art brings the taster of kitsch closer to his own fundamental human quality – not the existential quality of disembedded man, but the all-too-human quality of folly itself, which, humanly, makes no bones about mistaking an imitation for an original. At this point, where the banality of the kitsch consumer makes a pretentious appeal to the banality that ultimately lies within us all, the kitsch taste has manifested itself in full: kitsch converts its creative failures into the charm of conventions faithfully repeated, and, humbled but enduring, kitsch advances that charm as a total gesture of universal human value.[2]

In other words, this imitative and conventional character is not, as Gillo Dorfles, Dwight MacDonald, Clement Greenberg and others would have it, a transparent (and failed) effort at duplicating the aesthetic ends of high culture, a bad attempt at originality, but instead it expresses a taste for derivation, imitation and a faithfulness to the tried and true, and on this basis poses a system of aesthetic values, a taste not only for the modest sincerity of imitation and conventionality, but for the charm of failed innovation, derivation and repetition itself. This failure of autonomy must be read as an achievement of dependence, as the completion of a style or as participation in a rhythm, and as the fabrication of an ontological 'cocoon', within which the existential tragedies of modernity can be deflected. Failures thus endorsed – or forgiven – appeal to a universal sense, a 'supersensible substrate of humanity', which acknowledges and reflects the modest and mundane ways in which we all ultimately return to our own human folly. As a celebration of a particular humanity, kitsch negates the pretenses of the robust individuality of high culture, allowing its subordination to the conventions of a more modest humanity, the humanity of petty vice, cutely forgiven. For many critics of kitsch, this redemption of everyday human vice is precisely the site of kitsch's most dangerous element. Accomplished in a reactive gesture, kitsch's sweetness represents only a domesticated anti-intellectualism, which sometimes carries political implications in its desire for destruction and violence: kitsch redeems itself from its devaluation at the hands of a cultural elite, opening up a new, 'antielitist availability' – and therein lies the destructive element. Kitsch is often thought to be, sometimes in a subtle fashion, reactionary and populist, and at its core it wages a modest war

on the cosmic importance attributed by high culture to the autonomy and singularity of the modern 'disembedded' individual.

THREE REPETITIVE FEATURES

Specifically, it is possible to detect three distinct ways in which kitsch aestheticizes repetition. First, there is kitsch's emulation of other cultural products, which often copies the signs of class status, though kitsch can also be found to emulate the rustic qualities of vanishing folk traditions or the exotic products of non western cultures. Second, as a decorative feature of the household or the office, kitsch achieves an aestheticization of the everyday, and the repetitive, imitative habits this implies. Kitsch taste is expressed in many home-bound objects of mundane pleasure that provide, through a contrived modesty, a comfort that deflects any significance that might disturb the tranquillity of the patterns and habits, the repetitive schemes themselves that constitute the fabric of daily life. Third, and most importantly, there is kitsch's love for all things sentimental, expressing a joy in feeling itself, whether that feeling is elation, sorrow, or fondness. This feeling for feeling lies at the root of kitsch's imitative scheme – the 'idiotic tautology' Milan Kundera discovered in the communist slogan 'long live life' (Kundera, 1984: 249). As a feeling for feeling, kitsch sentiment is thought to be fundamentally imitative, and, as stated earlier, this sentiment elevates imitation itself to a universal value, emulating, in hackneyed fashion, the universal aesthetics of high culture. With each of these three aspects of kitsch, the same structure is expressed: kitsch repeats and imitates what has gone before, it transforms its proclivity for imitation into a frankness and sincerity, it fabricates a web of familiarity and comfort. Moreover, kitsch's repetitive style reaches out to a humanity whose fundamental essence is imitative, just as it expresses an attitude toward daily life, inviting us to affirm our true human essence, to return to our imitative life, taking our place in the rhythm and cadence of familiar time and familiar forms. Kitsch tucks us in, making a home in the repetitive fabric of imitative cultural objects, producing a sense of belonging in a rhythmic pattern of routinized experience. For the sake of clarity, these features will be elaborated with passing reference to some illustrative cases which serve, not so much to corroborate theoretical points with empirical evidence, but only to flesh out by example.

First, on the question of emulation: sociologists from Thorstein Veblen (1948) to Vance Packard (1959) and Erving Goffman (1959) have discussed the manipulation of signs in the consumption process for the ends of status, though not all of them concern themselves with the consequences of this phenomenon for the experience of taste. Most typically, kitsch emulation clumsily parrots the most obvious indicators of

privilege: twin cement lions guarding the entrance of a well-to-do sub-
urban home, for example, show the taste of kitsch as class status emu-
lation. Likewise, the marble sidewalk, the candelabra, the Rembrandt
reproduction over the fireplace, the mail order CD set featuring all your
favorite classical music hits, and of course the garden ornaments fash-
ioned in the image of Greek statuary – the earmarks of kitsch pecuniary
emulation are well known. In these cases, kitsch imitates with the simple
belief that the reproduction of elite styles will convey an aesthetic
response and a class identification equal to that of the original, though
kitsch does not restrict itself to status emulation alone. In the 'exotic'
cocktail music of Martin Denny, soothing xylophone melodies chime
amidst the chatter of jungle noise in a clumsy imitation of the allure of
the African exotic. Most tourist kitsch can be implicated in this emula-
tive ploy, copying in plastic and ceramic the jewelry and statuary of
ancient Egypt or Greece, preserving a trace of exotica to show off to one's
friends.

The apparent fallacy that emulation betrays, as Calinescu demon-
strates, is the naive belief that the aesthetic value of exceptional art can
simply be injected into its cheap copies, and through those into the
routines of everyday life, as if the plaster Venus among the bushes in the
suburban back yard could actually enrich the next family barbecue in
the same way that Classical statuary enriched the houses of the ancients.
In short, the kitsch aesthetic is an emulative, repetitive aesthetic, which,
even in its most ambitious moment, subordinates the significance of cul-
tural innovation to the already familiar 'message' intended by its appro-
priation. Daunting monoliths signify profundity, and replicas of the Venus
signify an aesthetic experience comparable with that of the ancients.

Second, kitsch artifacts tend to be consumed within the spaces and
habits of daily life, expressing a sentimentally idealized image of the
quotidian. Perhaps the American painter most typically regarded as the
virtuoso of the ordinary is Norman Rockwell, whose illustrations
provide a rich assortment of artifacts often implicated in the taste of
kitsch and the banal elevation of the quotidian to a level of cultural
importance. Take for example an illustration titled 'Special Handling',
painted for the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*, February 1922 (Figure
1). The image depicts a postal clerk in a quaint local station, sorting the
day's mail. The clerk, a pudgy, middle-aged man with wire rimmed
glasses has become distracted from his duties and stands engrossed in a
post card addressed to 'Miss Daisy Dell', obviously from a lover, with a
line of Xs running along the bottom of the card (Walton, 1978: 51). Rock-
well's fawning affection for everyday human weakness expresses his
unmistakable valuation of the trivial as the single most enduring of
human qualities. Everyday curiosities, desires, jealousies and indul-
gences are for Rockwell the common stuff of human nature, the point

to which we all inevitably return, despite our pretensions to do otherwise. His postal clerk, given over to a petty interest, is forgiven his weakness by a viewer who is forced to admit the ultimate humanity of pettiness and weakness as such, and by a work of art which itself stands implicated in the same, trivial, human shortcoming. For Rockwell (the artist whose weakened sense of creativity compelled him to work within the imitative formulas of his art), as for all kitsch, it is precisely human weakness, the adherence to repetitive codes, exposed in our everyday conduct, that brings us all together, and it is precisely this image of the everyday as infinitely forgiving of human folly that

FIGURE 1 Norman Rockwell, 'Special Handling', *Saturday Evening Post*, February 1922
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typifies kitsch's ultimate triumph over comedy, tragedy and cosmic aspiration: everything comes back to the repetitive fabric of daily life. Nowhere is human folly more apparent than in daily, mundane life: the life of the home, the office, the street, the waiting room, with its rhythms, routines and imitative patterns. Rather than distancing itself from the everyday in art galleries or high-brow films, kitsch retains its embeddedness. It nestles right into the mundane, savoring its secure patterns and its meter. This is also why kitsch appears so often in the real spaces of the quotidian itself (offices, waiting rooms), in the decorative, the comforting and the trivial trimmings of daily life.

Greeting cards are a renowned source of kitsch imagery extended into the organization of lived time. They function not so much to excite introspective feelings as to domesticate the experience of empathy, absorbing the complexity of caring and compassion into the exercise of routines and ceremonies. The regularity with which greeting cards are circulated guarantees the subordination of thought-provoking activity to the intervals dictated by holidays, birthdays and special occasions. Similarly, elevator 'muzak' allows us to distract ourselves from the awkwardness of

each other's presence by foregrounding the trivial, just as shopping mall art simply fills what would otherwise be a disturbingly empty space with superfluous visual material, blotting out the uncomfortable and the anxious, enabling everyday time to pass unhampered by extrinsic events, protecting routine habits from interruptions and disturbances that might induce reflection, discomfort or introspection. One of kitsch's most noted techniques, the combination of high culture imagery with everyday functional objects, achieves precisely this effect: images socially marked as unique and the exceptional for their aesthetic uniqueness and their propensity to speak to human uniqueness are subordinated to the practical everyday problems of the household. The bust of Beethoven that forms the decorative base of a lamp, or the ash-tray with the David painted on the bottom demonstrate kitsch's reduction of the ambitious aesthetic endeavor, the provocative questioning and the aesthetic engagement with dilemmas of human significance back to the bosom of daily life, reducing the cosmic and the exceptional to the familiar concerns with just getting by. The repetitive quality of kitsch provides the existential security of a closed cosmology of cultural objects, where novelty and innovation are safely excluded. The blotting out of introspection preserves this link with the meter of the quotidian, and with the sense of ontological certainty that this logic implies.

The third and most important aesthetic feature of kitsch is its taste for sentiment: kitsch sweetens raw human feeling with melancholy and nostalgia. Kitsch reduces all the complexity, desperation and paradox of human experience to simple sentiment, replacing the novelty of a revealed deeper meaning with a teary eye and a lump in the throat. And sentiment too is part of the repetitive character of kitsch – sentiment takes us back to our common roots in the practical wisdom of daily life, and calls out our forgotten love and wonderment in all things wholesome, simple and contained within a closed system of signs. Nostalgic for a simpler time of chivalry and convention, kitsch repeats the past. Milan Kundera provides a penetrating statement on kitsch and sentimentality in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

> Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass!
> The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!
> It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. (Kundera, 1984: 72)

Kitsch raises up its image of happiness to an absolute universal value. Kitsch joy has room for anyone and everyone, it is the most fundamental form of human happiness that enlivens us all, if only we could be brought to admit it. Kitsch happiness expresses a universal human fellowship so inclusive and so fundamental as to be undeniable, and this

universality is what knits together its various strands into a reassuring cosmic web: there simply is no one on the outside. Perhaps the most widely known insignia of this universal happiness, the 'happy face', expresses precisely this appeal: its basic form, two points over a semi circle against a yellow disk, calls out 'have a nice day' from T shirts and lapel pins in a language that is at once the most fundamental, trivial and universal of languages – simple human love of joy. This 'idiotic tautology' is nonetheless captivating in its ability to elevate the unique charm of the commonplace to a value of universal significance.

In this gesture kitsch combines the elements of status emulation (imitating the appeal to a universal quality of beauty implied by the taste for high art) with a celebration of the quotidian, producing a gushing zeal for sentimental ordinariness. Bourdieu (1984: 1–96), following Kant (1987 edn), points out that it is a quality of aristocratic taste to pretend to speak to universal properties of the beautiful. High art stands apart from traditional cultures, attending only to what is intrinsically beautiful, possessing universal qualities of beauty. The taste for what is universally beautiful is fundamental to an emancipated, autonomous and disembedded aesthetic disposition, free from the 'interests' of politics, status and daily life. The disinterestedness of the sophisticated aesthetic gaze depends on the universality of its aesthetic values, which it achieves through a disengagement from everyday interests and traditions, and the enactment of a pure, disinterested appreciation for beauty.

This disembedded, disinterested freedom is precisely what troubles the consumer of kitsch, and precisely what makes it necessary that kitsch produces its own universalistic claim. Thus, kitsch mimics this assertion of universality. But in place of the disinterest of the aristocratic taste, kitsch asserts the petty interest, the everyday folly, the failure to escape interest and the failure to be autonomous and original – a failure which defines the true stuff of common humanity. As Calinescu points out, this mimicry is not intended to operate with the success of a forgery. Kitsch fails the test of autonomy and freedom from social interests, of its disengagement from the concerns of daily life, but it turns that failure into a gesture of 'antielitist availability', of human sincerity. For this, kitsch assumes our forgiveness, and in turn forgives itself as it forgives us for warming to such a transparent seduction in the first place. Thus, the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch expresses the self-satisfying moment by which kitsch rejoices in its own feeling, and closes and completes its own system: kitsch wants to see itself participating in a universal happiness, not of high noble accomplishments, but a real universality of modest origins, of common fellowships between all people, of love for that which is commonly, undeniably and obviously lovable. And who could deny the cuddliness of a cute little dog, especially one recently soaked by rain, peering up through enormous sad eyes? Who could deny the hominess of

a rustic farm landscape? Who could withhold a tear of joy when faced with the spectacle of happy frolicking children? Who is without the simple love for simple things, for one's fellow man? Kitsch parrots the universality of elite culture with the sentimental appeal to the tautological (and repetitive) love of the lovable, one's natural home and one's own humble beginnings. For the unqualified lover of 'man', banality has become the truly human quality, and the suppression of that quality by a cultural elite provides the occasion for an eruption of sentiment that many read as a potential aestheticization of antielitist conceit. In his mid-1970s defense of 'silly love songs,' Paul McCartney offers a very appropriate piece of verse that perfectly expresses the quality of a redeemed mediocrity raised to the level of a human virtue. Wondering aloud why the multitudes 'wanna fill the world with silly love songs', McCartney chimes back 'what's wrong with that? I'd like to know. . .' 'cause there he goes . . . again. Cascading into a delirium of 'I love yous', the song finds its way out of the problem of aesthetic depletion through repetition by giving value to that depletion itself.

And by 'going again', McCartney makes no bones about his subordination of creative individuality to the rhythmic, repetitive conventions of lite radio . . . and 'what's wrong with that'? Like Rockwell, McCartney proclaims his failure as a truly autonomous artist, but assumes in advance a shared bond with the failed artist in us all. Another illustration of Rockwell's demonstrates this recovery of the autonomous artist into the familiar human follies of everyday folks: 'Student of Abstract Art', created for a cover of the *Saturday Evening Post* in January 1962 (Figure 2), depicts a man in a museum standing in front of an enormous Jackson Pollock painting. Viewed from behind, the figure holds
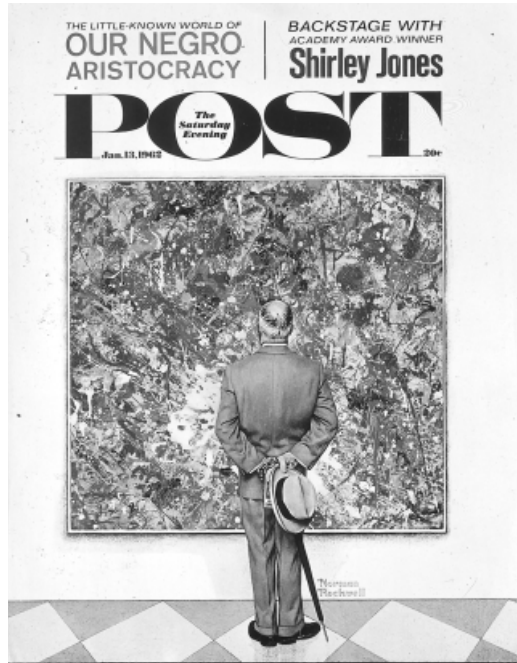

FIGURE 2 Norman Rockwell, 'Student of Abstract Art', *Saturday Evening Post*, January 1962

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his hands neatly tucked behind his back, clutching an umbrella, a hat and a museum guide. Typical of Rockwell's loving derision, the character is prodded for his pretentious taste, though ultimately welcomed back, lovingly, into the America he thinks he has left behind. For this painting, which is largely filled with the dribbled surface texture of Pollock's enormous canvas, Rockwell himself got down and dripped Pollock's drip-method style onto his own canvas, which he described as 'a lot of fun' (in contrast to the flowing existential creativity that Pollock was reputed to experience), but not something he would want to do too much of (Walton, 1978: 223). The piece, in its outward innocence seems to express a pleasant, comic harmony in which even aspiring existentialists have a safe and warm place, but this happy unity contains a coercive element. Like all sentimental responses, this happy demystification of human pretense is both more and less than a taste, it is an interest in a taste and a taste for failed artistry condemned to rhythm and repetition in a closed system of cultural objects. No one understood the political uses for kitsch 'antielitist accessibility' better than Ronald Reagan, who harnessed the image of a sentimentality redeemed from the condescension of a cultural elite and shaped it into the basis for a powerful conservative backlash. In 1982, on White House stationery, Reagan wrote a foreword to a book of Rockwell's paintings, *Norman Rockwell's Patriotic Times*. Reagan writes:

> The pictures focus not on the rich or mighty, but on everyday Americans and the pleasures of home, outdoors, and family that all of us can enjoy . . . Our Nation has changed profoundly since the days of the America that Norman Rockwell so skillfully portrayed. Yet the values that he cherished and celebrated – love of God and country, hard work, neighborhood, and family – still give us strength, and will shape our dreams for the decades to come. I hope you will enjoy as much as Nancy and I have the poems and other patriotic selections assembled here . . . As we build America's future, we will do well to take inspiration from our Nation's past, and no one captured that past more lovingly than Norman Rockwell, artist and patriot. (Reagan, 1982)

It was perhaps one of the greatest strengths of the Great Communicator that a sense of ontological security, so recently drained by a culture gone haywire with demands for change and ruptures with traditional fabrics, could be repaired in the image of a new America whose future, curiously, promised to imitate its past.

CONCLUSION: KITSCH AND THE TASTE OF NECESSITY

We have seen how the positive content of kitsch as a taste for repetition achieves a transmutation of the conventional aesthetic values so prized in the West: originality, creativity and the power to induce existential

reflection on the nature of one's being, outside of time and place. In constructing this argument, I have tried to avoid the rhetoric of hierarchies, and the reduction of rich cultural artifacts to social determinations generally, whether economic, aesthetic or symbolic in any other sense. Kitsch, I have argued, is not the property of a distinctive strata, in any of these respects, but a general corrective to a general modern problem, that of existential and personal disembeddedness, loss of assurance in the continuity of life and one's place in the world. The excessive personal freedom, the uncertainty and the risk of modern social life is countered, in kitsch, with a return to a sense of continuity, a 'closed system', in Broch's phrase, in which cultural forms are predictable, continuous and repetitive – a quality of culture not easily pinned to a given social group or consuming segment, much less to an intrinsic hierarchy of forms. In short, the repaired existential cocoon offered by kitsch addresses a general problem in a society torn by individual freedoms, uprooted traditions and personal uncertainties: troubling fissures that undermined individual sense of personal security with an onslaught of consumer, career, lifestyle and existential choices. This assumption dislodges kitsch from the traditional frameworks of hierarchy, caste and class. Thus, it seems fitting to close by returning to the strongest argument for an alignment of taste habits along a hierarchy of economic stratification, an argument presented by Pierre Bourdieu.

In *Distinction*, his mammoth study of the taste habits of the French consuming public, Bourdieu presents two competing modes of aesthetic valuation: a working-class taste, or a *taste of necessity*, expects a practical, sensual correspondence between content and form: beautiful art should depict beautiful things (flowers, sunsets, children . . .). In contrast and opposition to this, there is the bourgeois or aristocratic taste, or the *taste of reflection*, for whom beauty comes from that which transcends the narrow dictates of artistic convention: beautiful art should refuse the easy and obvious logic of aesthetic pleasure and surprise us with unlikely choices (photographs of dirt, cabbages or dead trees). Though Bourdieu does not discuss kitsch in any manner that might distinguish it from practical tastes in general, one finds throughout *Distinction* statements on objects and aesthetic tendencies that have been defined here as kitsch. Bourdieu writes:

> . . . the taste for the trinkets and knick-knacks which adorn the mantelpieces and hallways [of the working classes] is inspired by an intention unknown to economists and ordinary aesthetes, that of obtaining maximum effect at minimum cost . . . (Bourdieu, 1984: 379)

In many respects, Bourdieu's analysis of kitsch is consistent with the study offered here. His 'taste of necessity' deflects the detachment and introspection characteristic of more autonomous tastes, as it reinforces

the practical equation of aesthetic form and effect, claiming an embeddedness in the practical meter of daily life. However, there are important differences separating his argument from the one just presented: where Bourdieu speaks of antagonistic class actors, vying for cultural capital, I have chosen instead to consider kitsch in terms of a general modern dilemma, one close to the individual sense of self, and one's sense of place within a social and cosmic framework. This disagreement, while it is theoretical in its core, is supported by some convincing empirical evidence.

As Richard Peterson has shown, the traditional model of cultural stratification is no longer adequate to the terms of contemporary cultural life, which has moved from 'elite and mass to omnivore and univore' (Peterson, 1992: 243). Where once it might have been possible to align Bourdieu's 'trinkets and knick-knacks' along an economic axis, such is no longer the case, and it is the character of contemporary consuming populations to combine broadly from various levels of the taste hierarchy. Indeed, dispersion along a diversified taste axis is what characterizes elite tastes, according to Peterson. This would suggest that kitsch, which offers a reinforcing sense of the repetitive, addresses needs that exceed those of status emulation and the assertion of social and class interests: that the rich hermeneutic content of social tastes generally cannot be reduced to the social structures they mediate, or to the production of social identities or the shoring up of class legitimacy. My argument has been that kitsch responds to needs that are irreducibly personal – concerning an inner sense of ontological security – a crisis that is part and parcel of the conditions of modern social life itself.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. For a discussion of Broch's piece, see Boyers 'On Kitsch: A Symposium', *Salmagundi* no. 85–86, Winter–Spring 1990: 197–312.
2. It is important at this point not to confuse kitsch with its close cousin, camp. Camp also acknowledges and makes much out of its own aesthetic failures, but camp never attempts to recuperate that failure into a greater gesture of sincerity, or a total aesthetic expression. Camp performances derive endless pleasure from the irreconcilable elements of its unsuccessful masquerade, while kitsch brings together its humble elements into a unitary, but modest statement of sincerity. This distinction is discussed by Susan Sontag in her famous piece 'Notes On Camp': *On Interpretation* (1969), and Andrew Ross, 'Uses of Camp', in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (1989): 135–70.

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