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What Is Kitsch?

> Romanticism is outmoded, symbolism disused, surrealism has always appealed to a small elite but kitsch is everywhere. Even more pervasive and indestructible now that it is fused to a civilization based on excess consumption.
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> —Jacques Sternberg

One of the questions often raised in connection with kitsch is whether it is a distinctly modern phenomena, or whether it has accompanied art throughout its history. Is kitsch historically dated, having made its appearance some hundred and fifty years ago, or is it as old as art itself?

Most of the authors who have dealt with this issue believe that kitsch is indeed a relatively recent arrival in Western culture. Although the reasons they cite in support of this claim vary, two distinct lines of argument can be discerned. The authors who focus on the sociological and sociocultural aspects of the phenomenon emphasize that the proper conditions for both the consumption and the production of kitsch did not exist prior to the modern era.[1] They invoke factors like the emergence of the middle class, urbanization and the influx of peasant populations to the towns, the decline of aristocracy, the disintegration of folk art and folk culture, increased literacy among the proletariat, more time for leisure, mass production, and technological progress, as preconditions for kitsch. Thus, for example, Clement Greenberg, who sees the emergence of kitsch as more or less simultaneous with that of modernism, claims that "[k]itsch is a product of the industrial revolution" (*Art and Culture* 9).

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[1] This view was presented most forcefully by Clement Greenberg in his influential essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," first published in the *Partisan Review* 4, no. 5 (Fall 1939), and reprinted in his *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 3–21. His views are echoed by John Morreall and Jessica Loy, "Kitsch and Aesthetic Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*

Authors who are more concerned with its art-historical, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects consider kitsch to be an offspring of the Romantic movement.[2] Hermann Broch, for example, maintains that "every form of kitsch . . . owes its existence to the specific structure of Romanticism." He claims that Romanticism, "without being kitsch itself, is the mother of kitsch and that there are moments when the child becomes so like its mother that one cannot differentiate between them."[3]

The two perspectives support each other, since they claim roughly the same starting point for the appearance of kitsch. This stance seems to be further strengthened by the fact that the term *kitsch* has nowhere been recorded before the second half of the nineteenth century.

Yet there are dissenters. Arthur Koestler, for example, maintains that when Petronius in his *Supper of Trimalchio* describes the bad taste of the newly established class of the merchants, he is clearly referring to kitsch.[4] A similar claim is made by Susan Sontag about Cervantes, who makes fun of seventeenth-century chivalric romances.[5] Others maintain that the small Hellenistic painted statues that were produced in large quantities mainly for export, as well as many of the objects in Pompeii, can be seen as examples of kitsch from the distant past.

It is clear that only historians of art can resolve this issue. Nevertheless, I

23, no. 4 (winter 1989): 65–73. See also Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

[2] See, for example, Gillo Dorfles, ed., *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1969), especially the essay "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" by Hermann Broch (49–76).

[3] "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," 62. Broch argues that "Romanticism . . . was uncapable of producing average values. Every slip from the level of genius was immediately transformed into a disastrous fall from the cosmic heights to kitsch" (52).

[4] "The earliest examples of this phenomena," says Koestler, "are the truly Victorian horrors described by Petronius in the *Supper of Trimalchio*, and the latest, the developments in the Soviet applied arts"; see his *Insight and Outlook* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 397.

[5] "*Don Quixote* is a book which is, first of all, an attack on a certain kind of literary kitsch." Susan Sontag, from a symposium "On Kitsch," *Salmagundi: A Quarterly of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, nos. 85–86 (Winter–Spring 1990): 249.

believe that there are true and important insights in both of these views, and that they need not be considered so irreconcilable as they may seem. Kitsch *as we know it* cannot be divorced from the socioeconomic conditions described by those who see this phenomenon as a product of industrial revolution. It also seems true that of all artistic movements it is the Romantic movement that created the most fertile grounds for kitsch. One can hardly deny that Romanticism, with its emphasis on dramatic effects, pathos, and overall sentimentality, displays intrinsic affinities with kitsch. It seems also plausible to claim that since the term *kitsch* is relatively new, there was probably no acute need for its use in earlier times. Yet, the denial of the existence of kitsch prior to the nineteenth century seems too strong.

Naturally, there is a problem involved in the attempt to establish the existence of kitsch before the term was coined. The question is not whether we can find something in earlier times that we would call kitsch *today*. (Perhaps our respect for history—for works of art more than two hundred years old—prevents us from making such judgments.)[6] The question is whether there were works (prior to Romanticism) that were perceived as kitsch *at the time they were created*. One cannot prove that people would have used a term they didn't have. Would Petronius have used the term *kitsch* in the same sense that we use it today? We cannot know. What we do know is that he was describing things that were popular but done in bad taste (at least according to his judgments, or the judgment of the elite he represented)[7]—that is, things that were well liked despite their worthlessness (or perhaps just because of this worthlessness). But isn't this the very category kitsch belongs to? The question thus is whether those who believe that it would be anachronistic to speak about kitsch prior to the nineteenth century want to imply that bad taste is also a modern invention. Some authors assert just that. Thus, for example, Gillo Dorfles says that "in every age before our own, there was no such thing as 'really bad taste' i.e. kitsch" (*Kitsch* 9–10). This conclusion is somewhat surprising. Why should such a universal phenomena as bad taste be confined to modern times? Dorfles goes on to explain: "In ages other than our own, particularly in antiquity, art had a completely different function compared to modern times; it was connected with religious, ethical or political subject matter, which made it in a way 'absolute,' unchanging, eternal (always of course within a given cultural milieu)" (10). It is true that art used to serve various extra-aesthetic purposes. Its aesthetic function might have been subordinated to ceremonial, religious, ethical, or political aims. But does this mean that its aesthetic aspects were ignored or considered unimportant, that classical artists were not concerned with aesthetic merits, or with the "problem of taste"? Dorfles seems to suggest just that: "when we talk about the art of the past . . . we shall have to apply a totally different judgement from the one we would apply today; and this is also why it would be absurd to refer to 'bad taste' in connection with the kind of art which was never concerned with the problem of taste" (10). Are we to believe that Michelangelo, or Praxiteles for that matter, was not concerned with the aesthetic impact of his works? And how are we to interpret Vasari's praise and criticism of the artists he wrote about? Discussions of the nature of beauty are almost as old as philosophy itself, and concerns with the problem of taste in connection with art are too well documented to need further argument. Bad taste, like poor judgment in general, is such a universal human failing that it is difficult to imagine that it could have appeared only some one hundred and fifty years ago.

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[6] We come back to this issue in Chapter 2.

[7] Petronius was Nero's *elegantiae arbiter* (judge of good taste—a sort of *maître des spectacles*).

However, even if bad taste is not a modern invention, and even if we can find kitsch before Romanticism,[8] it can certainly be argued that kitsch became a widespread phenomenon with a strong cultural impact on the masses only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that this impact has been steadily growing ever since. Whether kitsch began at some point in recent history, or whether it is as old as art itself, one thing is beyond dispute: Kitsch has become an integral part of our modern culture, and it is flourishing now more than ever before. You find it everywhere. It welcomes you to the restaurant, greets you in the bank, and smiles at you from advertising billboards, as well as from the walls of your dentist's waiting room. The phenomenal success of *Dallas* and *Dynasty* seems already to have vindicated Milan Kundera's prophetic dictum that the "brotherhood of men on earth will be possible only on the base of kitsch."[9] The appeal of these soap operas has obliterated differences of traditions, ideologies, religions, and cultures, as they were watched with equal addiction by T.V. audiences all over the world. Kitsch has become an embarrassment of modern culture and an easy prey for those who want to discredit

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[8] It would be probably best to look for pre-Romantic kitsch in those periods of art history when the prevailing artistic style had already passed its climax and begun to degenerate into mannerism.

[9] *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 251.

it. "Kitsch isn't limited to a few categories or examples," says Jacques Sternberg. "It's long ago taken over the world. If Martians were to take a cool look at the world they might well re-name it Kitsch."[10]

Does Sternberg overstate the issue? Probably. Valuable works of art are still being produced today in all artistic genres and disciplines. Yet Sternberg certainly isn't far off. If works of art were judged democratically—that is, according to how many people like them—kitsch would easily defeat all its competitors.

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of kitsch is central to our culture, very few theoretical studies have been devoted to the subject. Given that kitsch is generally considered an aesthetic category, it is even more surprising that the little attention it has received has come from historians, novelists, sociologists of culture, and art critics, rather than from aestheticians. There are some very interesting studies of the relationship between kitsch and politics, especially totalitarian politics. Milan Kundera exposed kitsch as a main instrument for the manipulation of the masses by Communist regimes (*Unbearable Lightness* 251), while Saul Friedlander showed how central a role it played in the mobilization of the masses in Hitler's Germany.[11] However, the question of how kitsch performs such wonders, as well as the question of what its appeal consists of—which are essentially questions of aesthetics—have not been fully answered. The same applies to the question of why kitsch is worthless.

In Gillo Dorfles' anthology *Kitsch*, all the different authors consider kitsch to be aesthetically bad, but none of them actually explains what this badness consists of. The authors deal informatively with those aspects of human conditions that have contributed to the emergence of kitsch, its proliferation, and rise to prominence. They do not, however, explain the nature of kitsch from the aesthetic point of view. Socioeconomic factors may explain why kitsch fell on a fertile soil; they do not explain its seductive powers, nor what is aesthetically wrong with it. We may have a sociology or social anthropology of kitsch but not an aesthetic theory of kitsch.

Why is this so? Why has kitsch been neglected by aestheticians? One reason is probably that from the point of view of contemporary aesthetics, which is primarily understood as the philosophy of art, kitsch—which is at best considered to be on the periphery of art—seems of marginal interest to the discipline. Aestheticians have been traditionally more interested in questions such as "What is beauty?" than in questions such as "What is ugliness?" Questions such as "What makes a good work of art good?" have received all the attention of theoreticians, while questions such as "What makes a bad work of art bad?" or "What disqualifies a work from being regarded as a work of art?" have been neglected altogether. Philosophers of art concerned with questions of aesthetic value have concentrated on the analysis of artistic success, while artistic failures have been relegated to art critics, as if they were of no theoretical interest. It has been contended that kitsch has been neglected because its analysis raises no interesting theoretical questions, or cannot contribute much to the understanding of more central issues of philosophy of art. I hope to disprove this contention.

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[10] *Kitsch* (London: Academy Editions, 1972).

[11] *Reflections of Nazism: Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984).

There is a general methodological rule that studying the borderline cases of a system provides insight into the principles of the system itself. "Since the system of classification depends upon exclusion," notes Jonathan Culler, "one looks at what is apparently marginal to the system in order to understand the system." Culler goes on to say: "One must consider ungrammatical sentences in order to work out the grammar of the language, or look at what is 'unthinkable' in a particular milieu in order to discover its deepest assumptions, or at what is unfashionable in order to reconstruct the code of fashion."[12] According to the same principle one can expect that a closer look at the phenomenon of kitsch will shed light on the nature of art itself.

The term *kitsch,* we have seen, is of a relatively recent origin. According to Matei Calinescu, "it came into use in the 1860s and 1870s in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was employed to designate cheap artistic stuff" (*Faces of Modernity* 234). Later the word entered other European languages, and by the end of the 1920s "kitsch" became by and large an international expression. There is no consensus among scholars as to the etymology of "kitsch." Some believe that it derives from the English "sketch," mispronounced by the Germans,[13] while others link it to the German verb *verkitschen* (to make cheap).[14] Ludwig Giesz maintains that the origins of "kitsch" can be traced to the German verb *kitschen,* meaning *den Strassenschlam zusammenscharren,* literally, "to collect rubbish off the street."[15] There have even been speculations that "kitsch" comes from the inversion of the French *chic.* The experts do, nevertheless, agree that ever since the word was coined, in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has borne distinctly negative connotations. "No matter how we classify its context of use," says Calinescu, "kitsch always implies the notion of *aesthetic inadequacy*" (*Faces of Modernity* 236). People often say that kitsch is sketchy, cheap, that it is artistic rubbish—the very opposite of *chic.* Should we survey the entries under "kitsch" in standard dictionaries, we would find expressions like "worthless art," "pretentious art," "artistic rubbish," or simply "bad art." Yet "kitsch" is by no means coextensive with bad art. Though kitsch is bad, not all bad art is kitsch. If I were to portray my dog, the readers might not think much of the result; yet I doubt that they would classify it as kitsch. Kitsch isn't simply an artistic failure, a work that has somehow gone wrong. There is something about kitsch that sets it apart from bad art.

The peculiarity of kitsch consists, no doubt, in its appeal. People like it; at least many do. Commercially, kitsch competes successfully with serious art. The mass appeal of kitsch has been exploited by advertising agencies to promote commodities, just as it has been used by political parties to promote their ideologies. (The official art in Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia may illustrate this point.)

These observations yield the following conclusions: (1) kitsch has a very strong appeal, and (2) despite this appeal, kitsch is considered, at least by the art-educated elite, to be aesthetically bad. These facts also prompt the following basic questions:

Question 1. What does the mass appeal of kitsch consist of?
Question 2. What does the aesthetic badness of kitsch consist of?

A theory of kitsch should thus explain why it is that so many people are attracted to kitsch; that is, why kitsch is so successful, as well as why, despite this success, kitsch is not entitled to the status of respectable art.

There is a tension between the fact that kitsch has a strong appeal and the judgment that it has no appreciable degree of aesthetic value. If the appeal of kitsch is aesthetic, why should kitsch be regarded as aesthetically worthless? This prompts yet another normative question:

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[12] *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 168.

[13] See Gero von Wilpert, *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur* (Stuttgart: A. Kröner, 1969).

[14] See *Trübners Deutsches Wörterbuch,* vol. 4 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1934).

[15] Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches* (Heidelberg: Rothe, 1960), 21.

Question 3. Should the appeal of kitsch be properly regarded as aesthetic?

One way to resolve this tension would be to show that the appeal of kitsch is not of an aesthetic nature. To do this, however, one would have to show that the attitude of consumers of kitsch is not an aesthetic attitude, and that their interest in kitsch is not an aesthetic interest. But can we really show this?

It seems, at least prima facie, that we are in no position to do so. We learn from *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* that to have an aesthetic attitude, or to view things aesthetically, "one must perceive for perceiving's sake, not for the sake of some ulterior purpose."[16] Kitsch clearly seems to be perceived in this way. Its consumers value it not as a means to something external to it, but as an end in itself. They seem to be interested in kitsch pictures for their own sake. The interest and attitude of consumers of kitsch often appears to be even more purely aesthetic in this respect than that of typical consumers of high art. Unlike art lovers, who buy their paintings from respected art dealers, consumers of kitsch are more interested in the pictures themselves than, for example, in the reputation of their creators, or in the social status they might gain by acquiring these pictures. They buy these pictures because they like them, without being concerned about whether they have made a good investment, as more sophisticated buyers of art often are. Judging by all the external, behavioral indications, people who like kitsch derive the same kind of pleasure from its contemplation that others experience in their encounter with so-called serious art. However, if we concede that the appeal of kitsch is indeed an aesthetic appeal, and cling to the generally accepted assumption that art is appreciated for its aesthetic appeal, then how can we dismiss kitsch as aesthetically worthless artistic rubbish?

This question need not disturb the skeptics, who agree with their Scottish master that "beauty is not a quality inherent in things" since "it only exists in the mind of the beholder."[17] For radical relativists or subjectivists the problem of how to reconcile the appeal of kitsch with the dismissive attitude of the art-educated elite does not even arise. For them, aesthetic judgments are not genuine statements about works of art that may be true or false, but mere expressions of subjective preferences of an essentially

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[16] John Hospers, "Aesthetics, Problems of," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 1:36.

[17] David Hume, "Of the Standards of Taste," *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963).

autobiographic nature. *De gustibus non disputandum est.* Just as some people prefer tea to coffee, others prefer kitsch to so-called serious art.

But what if we do not want to embrace radical subjectivism or relativism of this kind? Can we reconcile the mass appeal of kitsch with the dismissive attitude of the art-educated elite without interpreting aesthetic judgments as essentially autobiographic statements expressing subjective preferences? There seems to be another easy way out. The question of why so many people like kitsch if it is aesthetically bad is often dismissed as posing no real problem; indeed, it seems to be self-explanatory. The worthlessness of kitsch is assumed to be self-evident. Its mass appeal is then explained by the alleged fact that most people simply happen to have bad taste, which is demonstrated by their attraction to kitsch. This view differs from the relativist or subjectivist answer by investing the differences of taste with normative, or if you like elitist, implications. However, it doesn't really resolve our problem. Making kitsch synonymous with bad taste does not answer the question of what makes kitsch appealing. If anything, it suggests that aesthetic worthlessness has aesthetic appeal, which sounds somewhat perverse. Nor does it touch upon the question of what makes kitsch worthless. The circularity of the answer that the mass appeal of kitsch consists of its being liked by so many people and the explanation of its deficiencies by reference to their bad taste is hardly philosophically illuminating.

Moreover, making kitsch synonymous with bad taste is questionable on empirical grounds as well. Bad taste is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for explaining the seductive powers of kitsch. In order to demonstrate that kitsch is simply a manifestation of bad taste, one would have to show that consumers of kitsch also consistently prefer bad works of art to good ones, outside the realm of kitsch. But do we have sufficient evidence to support such a claim?[18] Conversely, it is also not altogether clear whether the art-educated elite is entirely immune to the seductive powers of kitsch. Even if we do not regard kitsch as a high form of art, aren't we sometimes touched by it? Aren't we sometimes attracted rather than repulsed by kitsch? "None of us is superman enough to escape kitsch completely," says Milan Kundera. "No matter how we scorn it, kitsch is an integral part of human condition" (*Unbearable Lightness* 256). His words are echoed by Eugene Goodheart who says: "There must be something in all of us that wants kitsch, that needs kitsch. . . . It is an appetite which everybody shares."[19]

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[18] One could, of course, plausibly argue that the attraction to kitsch is a clear sign of a lack of aesthetic sophistication that is also likely to manifest itself in judgments of serious art. But whether or not this is true (and to some extent it probably is), making kitsch synonymous with bad taste requires much more than that. One would have to show that consumers of kitsch *always* prefer artistic failures to artistic successes.

Satisfactory answers to the questions of why kitsch is worthless, what makes it work, or why it is appealing, should be considered as adequacy conditions for any comprehensive theory of kitsch. These basic questions, however, have not received much serious attention. This applies especially to the question of the alleged worthlessness of kitsch, which has been largely assumed rather than explained.

However, before we address these questions we have to answer another even more basic question: What kind of objects are correctly classified as kitsch? Or simply, What is kitsch? One of the reasons we do not have satisfactory answers to the above normative questions is that we do not have a clear characterization of the nature of the phenomena we are dealing with. I shall thus propose now a classificatory definition of kitsch that will also help answer the normative questions about the alleged worthlessness of kitsch and the nature of its appeal. (I shall expand upon this definition in Chapter 2.)

A Note on the Problem of Definition

In his *Confessions* Saint Augustine asks the question, "What is time?" He ponders and comes to the rather puzzling conclusion that when no one asks him he knows, yet when someone asks him he does not know. Despite obvious differences, the situation is similar with respect to the question "What is kitsch?" We use the term often, and we presume that its meaning is reasonably clear. Yet once the question of what kitsch actually is, or what the conditions that govern the application of this concept are, is asked, we realize that we are caught without a satisfactory answer. This may not be surprising. To define kitsch is not an easy task. Authors who have tried to analyze the concept have soon noted its extraordinary complexity and elusiveness. Thus, for example, Hermann Broch opened his lecture "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" with the warning: "Do not expect any rigid and neat definitions. . . . Otherwise I am afraid that at the end of this lecture

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[19] From the symposium "On Kitsch" (see note 5), 222.

you will find that too many questions have been left open, to which I could only reply in a study of kitsch in three volumes" (49).

"We are dealing here indeed with one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics," says Matei Calinescu, and goes on to explain: "Like art itself, of which it is both an imitation and negation, kitsch cannot be defined from a single vantage point. And again like art—or for that matter antiart—kitsch refuses to lend itself even to a negative definition, because it simply has no single compelling, distinct countercept" (*Faces of Modernity* 232). The relation of kitsch to art is indeed far from simple. Why we have no satisfactory definition of kitsch may, however, go beyond the elusiveness of the concept. Hermann Broch's warning not to expect any neat definitions was amplified in the 1950s by influential philosophical arguments purporting to show that defining categories of art and aesthetic concepts is logically impossible. Most of these arguments were designed to refute the Aristotelian assumption that concepts apply in virtue of some common characteristics that constitute the *nature* or the *essence* of the entities designated by them. One may speak about the *anti-essentialist* turn of analytically minded philosophers and aestheticians (influenced by the writings of the later Wittgenstein), which led to the conviction that it is a mistake to offer generalizations concerning aesthetic categories and concepts; or, to put it differently, that it is a mistake to discuss what art, or tragedy, or poem, or kitsch *essentially* is. One might mention here influential and frequently anthologized essays like "The Dreariness of Aesthetics" by J. A. Passmore,[20] "The Function of Philosophical Aesthetics" by W. B. Gallie,[21] "Does Traditional Aesthetics Rest on a Mistake?" by W. E. Kennick,[22] "On 'What is a Poem?' " by C. L. Stevenson,[23] "The Task of Defining a Work of Art" by P. Ziff,[24] and "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" by M. Weitz.[25] None of these authors actually deals with the concept of kitsch, but since "kitsch" is an aesthetic category the anti-essentialist claim should apply to it as well.

The most influential formulation of the anti-essentialist argument can be found in the above-mentioned essay of Morris Weitz. One can hardly find an anthology on modern aesthetics that does not include a reprint of

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[20] In William Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954), 36–55.
[21] In Elton, ed., *Aesthetics and Language*, 13–35.
[22] *Mind* 67 (1958): 317–34.
[23] *Philosophical Review* 66 (1957): 329–62.
[24] *Philosophical Review* 62 (1953): 68–78.
[25] *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 27–35.

Weitz's famous article. It purports to show that there is no set of defining characteristics for aesthetic categories, since the objects to which aesthetic concepts and categories apply do not have properties in common. Such concepts, Weitz argues, are by their very nature "open concepts," which means that necessary and sufficient conditions for their application will never be forthcoming. "Aestheticians may lay down similarity conditions but never sufficient and necessary ones."[26] Under the sway of the anti-essentialist argument, whose influence is still felt today, aestheticians were naturally discouraged from trying to define aesthetic concepts, since this argument appears to establish that finding defining characteristics is not a factual difficulty related to the complexity of the subject matter, but a logical impossibility.

Another well-known argument that also implies that defining the concept of kitsch would be hopeless has been put forward by Frank Sibley.[27] Sibley too does not deal specifically with the concept of kitsch as such; his thesis applies to aesthetic concepts in general. While Weitz's anti-essentialist argument focuses on the alleged impossibility of finding necessary conditions for the application of aesthetic concepts, Sibley's is directed against the possibility of sufficient conditions. His claim is that "there are no non-aesthetic features that serve in any circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms," that "[a]esthetic or taste concepts are not in *this* respect condition-governed at all" (66). Sibley claims that although the aesthetic properties of objects are caused by their nonaesthetic features (that is, that what makes a painting graceful or kitschy *is* the configuration of the colored spaces that cover the canvas), there are no rules for translating the information about the nonaesthetic features into the information about the aesthetic ones. The ultimate reason for this is that the configurations of those nonaesthetic properties on which the aesthetic ones supervene is always unique. Generalizations are thus always doomed to failure. As Sibley's criterion for aesthetic concepts is that the faculty of taste or aesthetic sensibility is required for their correct application, "kitsch" clearly qualifies as an aesthetic term.

These arguments thus not only explain why we have no workable definition of kitsch at this time, but also stipulate that we shall never have one. I want to propose a definition of kitsch in terms of necessary and

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[26] "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15 (1956): 127; reprinted in J. Margolis, ed., *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978). All page references are to this edition.

[27] Frank Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts," *Philosophical Review* 18 (1959): 64–87.

sufficient conditions, and I want to base these conditions on features that do not require aesthetic judgments for their recognition; both of these arguments, however, directly clash with my proposed task. Before proceeding any further it is therefore necessary to examine these arguments and show where they go wrong, or why they do not apply to our case.

I do indeed believe that these arguments are misconstrued. Doing them justice, however, requires a careful analysis, and showing where they go wrong requires a discussion of more general philosophical issues. This would divert the attention from the main topic. I have therefore decided to proceed with the main task and put the explanation of the inapplicability of these arguments in the Appendix to this book. Readers who feel that these arguments are compelling can read the Appendix first.

Kitsch and Its Object

Let us begin by imagining the following situation: Our friend, a competent artist, needs, for some reason, to produce a commercially successful work of kitsch. However, he has no idea what kitsch actually is, and is requesting our advice. What kind of advice could we offer him for creating convincing kitsch? What kind of instructions could we devise, which, if properly executed, would produce a successful kitsch painting?

As we can distinguish between the subject matter of a painting and the manner of its rendering, we can accordingly distinguish between the instructions pertaining to the question of *what* to paint and those pertaining to the question of *how* to paint it. In other words, let us consider what sort of objects would be most suitable as a subject matter of kitsch, and what kind of rendering would be best suited for this task.

Since figurative and nonfigurative painting are equally legitimate today, the first question is whether our painter should go for a figurative picture or for an abstract one. The answer is clear. It would be evidently more difficult to produce a commercially successful abstract kitsch picture than a figurative one. We seldom call an abstract work kitsch, even if we think it is bad.

The next question is whether all objects or themes are equally suitable as the subject matter of kitsch. Clearly, some are more suitable than others. Fluffy little kittens or children in tears would surely do better than an ordinary chair or a washing machine. Let us list some more examples of typical subjects exploited by kitsch. Among the themes that figure most prominently in kitsch pictures are puppies and kittens of various sorts, children in tears, mothers with babies, long-legged women with sensuous lips and alluring eyes, beaches with palms and colorful sunsets, pastoral Swiss villages framed in mountain panorama, pasturing deer in a forest clearing, couples embracing against the full moon, wild horses galloping along the waves of a stormy sea, cheerful beggars, sad clowns, sad faithful old dogs gazing toward infinity . . . the reader could easily extend the list.

What do these themes have in common? The answer is: they are all highly emotionally charged. They are charged with stock emotions that *spontaneously* trigger an unreflective emotional response. The subject matter typically depicted by kitsch is generally considered to be beautiful (horses, long-legged women), pretty (sunsets, flowers, Swiss villages), cute (puppies, kittens), and/or highly emotionally charged (mothers with babies, children in tears). This emotional charge does not just typically concur with kitsch; it is a sine qua non. Consider ordinary objects of everyday life that are devoid of any emotional charge: an ordinary chair, or a washing machine. It would, of course, be easy enough to paint bad pictures of chairs or washing machines. However, no matter how hard our painter tried, his efforts would not be rewarded by clear-cut examples of kitsch. Take, on the other hand, an object that is generally considered cute and elicits a ready emotional response: a fluffy little kitten, for example. Not only would it be quite easy to produce such a kitten-depicting work of kitsch, it would actually take some ingenuity to steer clear of it. This dependence on the emotional charge of its subject matter may also explain the difficulty of producing a nonfigurative work of kitsch.[28] Our first advice to our painter should thus be: Choose a subject matter with a clear emotional charge that triggers a ready emotional response.

Before turning to the question of *how* to paint—that is—to the question of the stylistic properties of kitsch, let us consider what further specifications should guide the choice of the subject matter, and what type of emotional response the painter should aim to elicit. Let us take, for example, the theme of the crying child that figures so prominently in kitsch depictions. Our painter should be advised to choose a nice and cute little child rather than a wicked or ugly-looking one. The cry shouldn't be irritating or hysterical, but rather a sob of the soft and quiet variety; the

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[28] More will be said about the possibilities of abstract kitsch in the discussion of kitsch in music and architecture.

child should elicit a sympathetic response. The painter should avoid all unpleasant or disturbing features of reality, leaving us only with those we can easily cope with and identify with. Kitsch comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them. It works best when our attitude toward its object is patronizing. Puppies work better than dogs, kittens better than cats.[29] The success of kitsch also depends on the universality of the emotions it elicits. Typical consumers of kitsch are pleased not only because they respond spontaneously, but also because they know they are responding in the right kind of way. They know they are moved in the same way as everybody else. This psychological aspect of kitsch was also stressed by Milan Kundera: "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" (*Unbearable Lightness* 251). The aim of kitsch is not to create new needs or expectations, but to satisfy existing ones. Kitsch thus does not work on individual idiosyncrasies. It breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone. Since the purpose of kitsch is to please the greatest possible number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators.

The examples of kitsch themes mentioned above belong to what one may call universal kitsch. They play on basic human impulses irrespective of religious beliefs, political convictions, race, or nationality. They exploit universal subjects such as birth, family, love, nostalgia, and so forth, which could, perhaps, be further analyzed in terms of Jungian archetypes. However, alongside universal kitsch we also find more specific types of religious, political, national, and local kitsch. "Kitsch has its source in categorical agreement with being," says Kundera. "But what is the basis of being? God? Mankind? Struggle? Love? Man? Woman? . . . Since opinions vary, there are various kitsches: Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Communist, Fascist, democratic, feminist, European, American, national, international" (*Unbearable Lightness* 256–57).

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[29] John Morreall and Jessica Loy have some interesting observations on this point: "A good example here is the use of cuteness in kitsch. Cuteness is a group of features that evolved in mammalian infants as a way of making them attractive to adults. These 'releasing stimuli' for nurturant behavior, as ethologists refer to cute features, include a head large in relation to the body, eyes set low in the head, a large protruding forehead, round protruding cheeks, a plump rounded body shape, short thick extremities, soft body surface, and clumsy behavior. The manufacturers of dolls, children's books, and greeting cards exaggerate all these features to get a positive response from customers" ("Kitsch and Aesthetic Education" 68).

We may thus distinguish between different types of kitsch of varying degrees of universality. Christian kitsch—exemplified by plastic Jesus babies, pictures of the Virgin Mary, or scenes of the Crucifixion—combines the universal elements of kitsch with symbolism relating to the articles of Christian faith. Communist kitsch—depicting smiling workers in factories, young couples on tractors cultivating a collective farm or building a hydroelectric power station—played on the mythical values of the joy of work and the enthusiasm for building a classless society. Capitalist kitsch, exemplified by advertising, on the other hand, uses class distinctions and status symbols to create artificial needs and illusions to foster the ideology of the consumer society. There can also be even more specific national kitsch that exploits the sentiments associated with national symbols and leaders: Mao Tse-tung leading the Great March, Lenin speaking to the workers, or good-hearted Hitler holding a child in his arms. The subject matter of kitsch may vary considerably in accordance with beliefs and traditions. What remains constant is that the consumer of kitsch is never emotionally indifferent to what the picture represents.

Let us sum up the above considerations and state the first condition for the application of the concept of kitsch:

Condition 1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.

Identifiability

It seems that our first condition already provides the answer to question 1: "What does the mass appeal of kitsch consist of?" (or "Why do people like kitsch?"). People are attracted to kitsch because they like its subject matter; its emotional charge elicits a ready positive emotional response. However, condition 1, by itself, is not really sufficient. We forgot something; or rather, we made an implicit assumption, that—despite its obviousness—should be spelled out. The positive response to the depicted object obviously depends not only on *what* is represented but also on *how* it is represented. The depicted subject matter has to be represented *successfully*. In order for the spectator to respond appropriately to the represented subject matter, he must be able to recognize it. People have to be able to decipher the configuration of color patches *as* the beautiful or emotionally meaningful subject they are familiar with. What characterizes kitsch is the *instant and effortless identifiability* of the depicted subject matter. The next question is, What accounts for this instant identifiability?

First of all, the depiction has to be reasonably skillful. An incompetent drawing or painting that makes it difficult to grasp what it is that we are looking at certainly wouldn't produce the appropriate effect. Our artist is, however, assumed to be competent enough. Yet competence is also not enough. Not every competently painted sunset will turn out to be kitsch. The pertinent question is, What are the stylistic constraints that should guide our painter in the choice of the specific manner of the rendering?

Let us assume we have chosen a fluffy little kitten or a crying child as our subject matter. Can we produce such a kitten-depicting or child-depicting work of kitsch in any artistic style? Clement Greenberg says that "[k]itsch changes according to style, but remains always the same" (*Art and Culture* 10). This may suggest that kitsch is indifferent to style, that the little kitten, or the crying child, lends itself equally well to different artistic styles. Yet some artistic styles are clearly much more suitable than others. Our artist would be more likely to succeed by painting in compliance with the stylistic conventions of nineteenth-century Romanticism, or the socialist realism of the 1950s, than by adopting a cubist or futurist style. It is very hard to imagine a convincing kitsch depiction of a crying child executed the way Picasso painted his *Woman in a Chair* (see Fig. 1). With pictures like this, it takes some time and effort to figure out what is represented in them. Or try to imagine what would happen to our fluffy little kitten if it were rendered the way Marcel Duchamp painted his *Nude Descending a Staircase,* or the way Severini rendered his *Lady with the Dog.* A kitten decomposed into multiple time-sliced phases, exhibiting twenty-three legs, would hardly succeed as kitsch, no matter how fluffy it was.

Should we thus conclude that kitsch employs a very naturalistic, or *realistic,* mode of representation? The answer depends on what we mean by "realistic." Realism has traditionally been conceived of as a mode of representation that is particularly "true to nature." It has been thought of in terms of faithful imitation. The degree of realism has been assumed to be proportional to the degree of resemblance between the object and its depiction. However, Ernst Gombrich taught us that representational success has little to do with imitation.[30] Moreover, Nelson Goodman has shown

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[30] Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960).

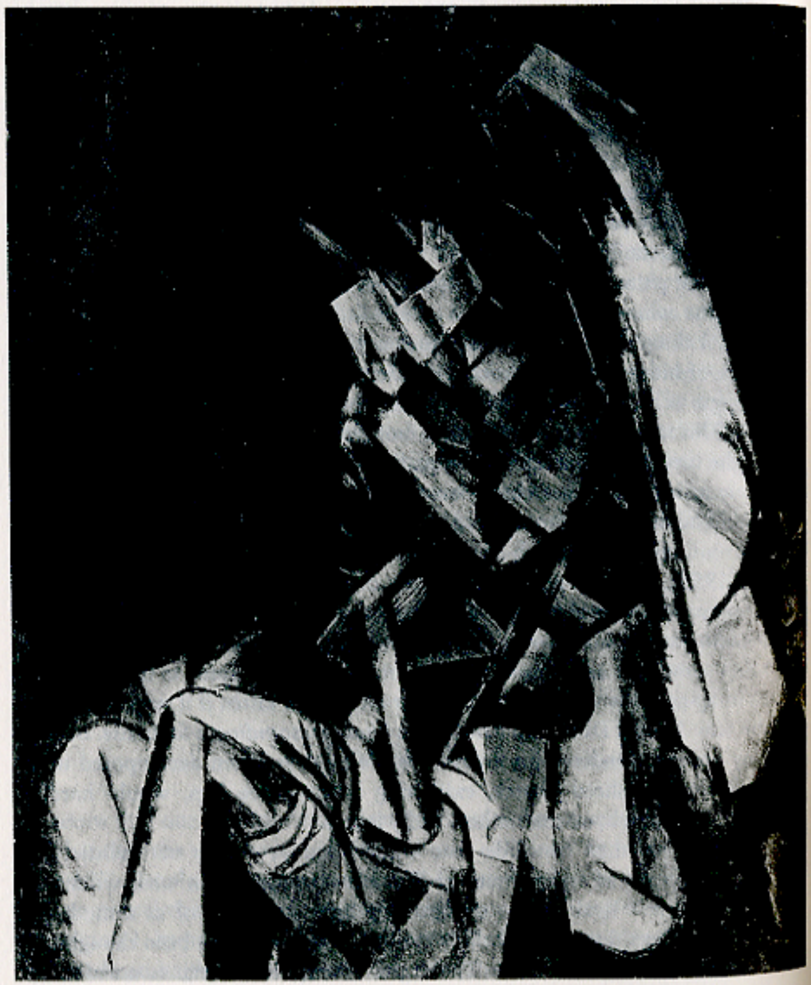

Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso, *Woman in a Chair,* 1910. Oil on canvas, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alex L. Hillman. (Photograph © 1955 The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

that similarity is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition of representation, and has argued that "realism" is no less a matter of convention than other modes of representation.[31]

This is not the place to engage in a philosophical debate on the complex issue of the nature of pictorial realism. However, even our commonsense conception of realism indicates that it would be hasty to identify the stylistic features of kitsch with its mimetic likeness.[32] The eyes of the crying child in kitsch pictures are disproportionately large, and the tears are roughly five times the size of any real tear you are ever likely to see. Kitsch also typically displays considerable disregard for detail. It could thus hardly be naturalistic or realistic in the traditional sense. Kitsch can, nevertheless, be regarded as "realistic" in the conventionalist or Goodmanian sense, according to which realism is "determined by the system of representation *standard* for a given culture or person at a given time."[33] Kitsch invariably uses the most conventional, standard, well-tried, and tested representational canons. Any departure from the accepted conventions is undesirable for kitsch, as it may make unnecessary demands on the spectator. The deciphering of the picture must be as effortless as possible. Kitsch should speak the most common language understandable to all. It shouldn't venture into esoteric jargons (like cubism) or idiosyncratic dialects (as in Jackson Pollock's biomorphic period). Kitsch artists never have to explain how their pictures should be looked at, what categories and concepts are relevant for their comprehension. Kitsch cannot afford to be, and hence never is, confusing.[34]

The adherence to the accepted representational conventions of one's time is thus conducive to instant identifiability. We may note further, however, that this compliance need not enhance the artistic qualities of the depiction. Originality and artistic innovation, which are generally considered positive features of works of art, often challenge the accepted representational canons. Within the framework of accepted representational conventions there is often enough space for innovation. However, sometimes this space becomes so saturated that artists feel a need to expand, modify, or altogether abandon the accepted canons of representation. It is on such occasions that we speak of emerging new styles. New styles often meet with hostile reactions.[35] This is because the novel kind of presentation is not readily acknowledged by the conservative public as a "correct" or "realistic" representation. Let me illustrate this point by just one example. This is what the official art critic of *Le Figaro* wrote in his review of the second Impressionist exhibition:

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[31] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), chap. 1.

[32] It seems that this is what Clement Greenberg does (*Art and Culture,* esp. 14).

[33] *Languages of Art,* 37. "Realism," writes Goodman, "is not a matter of any constant or absolute relationship between a picture and its object, but a relationship between the system of representation employed in the picture and the standard system" (38).

[34] As John Morreall and Jessica Loy observe: "The effortless response kitsch aims for is manifested in kitsch's lack of risk taking and genuine novelty. Kitsch always use representation, for example, in a straightforward way; there is no question of the relation of the representation to what is represented, as there is in so much twentieth-century art" ("Kitsch and Aesthetic Education" 68–69).

> The Rue La Peletier is really very unlucky. First there was the great fire at the Opera, and now a second disaster has come to upset the district. An exhibition—supposed to be an exhibition of paintings—has just been opened at the Durand-Ruel Gallery. . . . It really is frightful seeing such an aberration of human vanity and lunacy. Do tell Monsieur Pissarro that trees aren't really purple and the sky isn't really the color of butter; tell him the things he paints don't really exist anywhere and no intelligent person can be expected to accept such rubbish. . . . Try and make Monsieur Degas see reason and tell him that there really are such things in art as drawing and color and technique and meaning. . . . Try and explain to Monsieur Renoir that a woman's body is not just a bundle of decomposing flesh with green and purple patches that show what an advanced stage of putrefaction the corpse is in.[36]

All this is quite relevant to our subject. In the 1870s Impressionist paintings were considered "unrealistic," "incorrect," and therefore inadmissible representations because certain salient features of those paintings (for example, the presence of green and purple patches in the rendering of a nude) were not conducive to the instant identifiability of the depicted subject matter. Today, when we are well acquainted with the manner of Impressionist rendering, the same pictures appear to us as natural and thoroughly convincing. Impressionism has become part of our "realism."

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[35] The names of new styles originally carried distinctive negative connotations that have been forgotten by now. *Gothic* was originally a synonym for "barbaric," *baroque* originally meant something like "twisted" or "badly shaped," and the terms *impressionism* and *cubism* were invented by critics to ridicule the emerging movements.

[36] Albert Wolf, *Le Figaro*, 3 April 1876, quoted by Maurice Serullaz, *Phaidon Encyclopedia of Impressionism* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978), 20.

Since the appeal of kitsch derives its force from the emotional charge of its subject matter, it must be readily recognizable as such. This, as we have noted, is best achieved by *compliance* with the accepted conventions of the time. However, it was the very *violation* of these conventions that eventually secured the Impressionists their esteemed place in the history of art. The requirement of instant identifiability thus works against stylistic innovations. Kitsch never ventures into the avant-garde, or into styles not yet universally accepted. It can jump on the bandwagon only after the novelty wears off and becomes commonplace. This accounts for the ultraconservative and stylistically reactionary nature of kitsch. Our kitsch artist would thus be well advised to refrain from any stylistic innovations and keep well within the most widely comprehensible representational conventions. He should consider all features that do not directly contribute to the instant identifiability as superfluous and—since they may also distract our attention from the associations evoked by the represented subject—potentially harmful to kitsch. This is why kitsch is likely to be unexciting, or even boring, from the artistic point of view.

Let us summarize the above considerations by stating the second condition for the application of the concept of kitsch:

Condition 2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.

This condition should also be regarded as a *necessary* condition, since a failure or even a slight difficulty in our ability to identify the depicted object would destroy its kitschy impact.

Transformation and Enrichment of Associations

We have stated two necessary conditions governing the application of the concept of kitsch. Does their conjunction also constitute a sufficient condition? The answer is no. Not only kitsch but also the *Venus of Milo*, Goya's *Maya*, Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, and many other great works of art will satisfy them. To single out kitsch we need additional constraints. What we need to ask then is what distinguishes kitsch from respectable works of art in which the depicted subject matter is generally considered beautiful or highly emotionally charged, and the mode of rendering conforms to representational conventions accepted at present. Consider *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (Fig. 2). The theme of this painting—a beautiful woman serving at a cabaret bar—is instantly and effortlessly identifiable, and could be easily exploited by kitsch. What is it, then, that places this painting at a safe distance from kitsch? Let me quote from James Ackerman's description of Manet's painting:

> The point of this picture is not that it tells you about a bar and a barmaid and how it was at the Folies-Bergère . . . *the picture distills an exhilarating experience* that can be shared with the artist, in which the objects in the theatre bar, bottles, glasses, gas lights, anonymous barmaid, and reflections in a mirror lose their mundane character and are *transformed* by a perceptive human intellect into a magical image. *The picture does not simply represent a bar, it presents the end product of a transformation,* we value it because it is like experiences we ourselves have had of suddenly seeing the ordinary world changed and exalted, but *the picture is different from and superior to our experience.* . . . [O]nce having witnessed this *transformation,* we are prepared to be exhilarated more often and more intensely. *Knowing the picture can actually make the real environment more worthwhile. The value of Manet's image, then, lies in the isolation of an experience* of the environment—an experience most viewers share with the artist—*and its intensification.*[37]

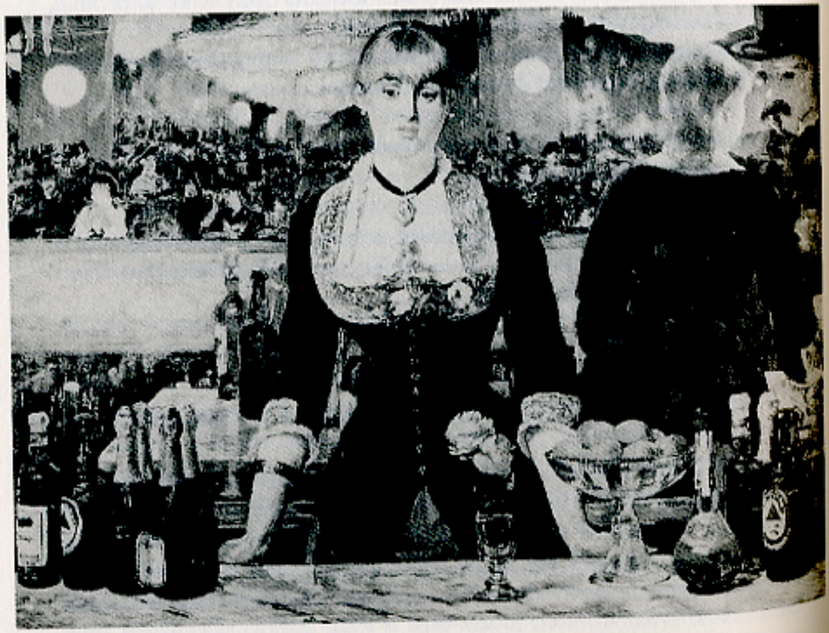

Fig. 2. Edouard Manet, *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère,* 1881–82. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London

What we should note is that the aesthetic appeal of the painting is not simply parasitic on the projected beauty of the barmaid. The picture (unlike kitsch) creates beauty of its own. The subject matter is presented in a manner that is, as Ackerman says, superior to our experience. The picture transforms and intensifies our experience. The key point here is that "the picture can actually make the real environment more worthwhile." The artist transforms the subject of his depiction so that his painting evokes something we might have not noticed or felt before. He elaborates its unique and often overlooked features to reveal new aspects of reality. It was John Dewey who emphasized this function of art when he wrote: "Art is not nature, but nature transformed by entering into *new* relationships where it invokes a *new emotional response.*"[38]

When we perceive depicted objects in pictures we spontaneously draw upon our past experience of the actual objects of the same general kind. The standard associations stored in memory are evoked by the identification of the familiar object. This holds for all representational pictures. Some paintings, however, transform the familiar ideas and associations related to the depicted object in various ways. Standard associations can be sharpened, amplified, intensified, or altogether transformed. "[W]hen we leave an exhibition of the works of an important person," says Nelson Goodman, "the world we step into is not the one we left when we went in; we see everything in terms of those works."[39] The enrichment and transformation

[37] "On Judging Art without Absolutes," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (Spring 1979): 462; my emphasis.

[38] *Art as Experience* (New York: Putnam's, Capricorn Books, 1958), 462. Essentially the same idea has also been expressed by Nelson Goodman, who says: "How representational painting makes worlds is strikingly clear to anyone who has stepped into a new world after seeing an exhibition of works that work"; "Aesthetics and Worldmaking: Reply to Jens Kulankampff," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 (Spring 1981): 275.

[39] Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 192.

of associations can be achieved in many different ways. Surrealist paintings, for example, typically exploit the tension between associations related to the depicted object, whose surface details and style of depiction are reassuringly naturalistic, and their arrangement, which is disturbingly unnatural. By breaking objects into fragmented brushstrokes of discontinuous patches of pure prismatic colors, and by emphasizing the immediacy of the changing effects of light, the Impressionists not only enriched our associations, they actually helped us look at our environment in a more perceptive manner. "Where, if not from the Impressionists," asks Oscar Wilde, "do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blousing the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them . . . do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of art."[40] Wilde has also been reported to have said that there was no fog in London before Whistler painted it.[41] In a similar vein Georg Schmidt and Robert Schenk remarked that "although the color-saturated atmosphere of Paris is older than the city itself, its beauty was first revealed by impressionists."[42]

Our experience of the world can be enriched not only by revolutionary stylistic changes but also by much more mundane means. Standard associations can also be enriched by presenting objects from unusual angles that emphasize often overlooked features. "Pictures . . . that are not revolutionary," says Nelson Goodman, "may have qualities enabling us to see . . . somewhat differently, discern differences, and make connections that we couldn't make before—to see things in terms of new patterns" (*Of Mind and Other Matters* 192).

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[40] "The Decay of Lying," in *Intentions and the Soul of Man*, reprinted in Melvin Rader, ed., *A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), 27–28.

[41] I have been unable to locate this remark about Whistler. The following passage, however, makes the attribution more than likely: "Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. . . . At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say they were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them" (*Decay of Lying* 28).

[42] *Kunst und Naturform* (Basel: Basileus, 1958), quoted by E. M. Haffner, "The New Reality in Art and Science," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11 (October 1969): 389.

Examples of representational pictures that enrich or transform our standard associations could easily be multiplied. My claim is that kitsch does *not* belong to this category. Kitsch does not exploit the artistic possibilities of structural elaboration, extension of expressive potentialities, elaboration of unique individual features, interpretation, and innovation. It does not sharpen, amplify, or transform the associations related to the depicted subject matter in any significant way. As opposed to real art, which involves an enhancement of certain experiences, kitsch tones them down.

Our artist should thus be advised to strive for a stereotype. The subject matter should be presented in the most standard and schematic manner, without any individual features. The picture should be totally explicit and one-dimensional; no ambiguities, no hidden meanings. There should be just one interpretation. What you see at the first glance is all there is to be seen. If verbal labels (like "Cheerful Beggar," "Sad Clown") were attached to the pictures, the following rule should apply to kitsch: The "message" of the picture should be roughly the same as the "message" of the label. The associations triggered by kitsch depictions should not substantially exceed the associations triggered by its label. Apart from the obvious differences due to the different media, the label and the picture should have roughly the same effect. They should be, so to speak, interchangeable. The label sums up the picture; the picture sums up the label.

Let us then sum up what has been said in this section by stating our third condition for the application of the concept of kitsch:

Condition 3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

Concluding Remarks

Let us restate our three conditions and consider some objections to the proposed definition of kitsch.

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.

3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

Condition 1 restricts the range of themes that can be profitably exploited by kitsch, while conditions 2 and 3 pertain to the stylistic properties' manner of presentation. Each of the three conditions is considered to be necessary: if our artist violates any of them he will not produce kitsch. Taken jointly, they are considered sufficient: the artist who fulfills them is most likely to produce kitsch.

Let us consider two possible objections. One may argue that any definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is bound to be too simplistic, because such conditions tend to cut too rigidly and dichotomously. A definition is inappropriate for at least two reasons: (1) the boundaries of kitsch are not clear-cut but fuzzy, and there are bound to be many borderline cases; (2) even among works that are clearly recognized as kitsch, some are more "kitschy" than others. A classificatory definition with dichotomous criteria cannot account for degrees of "kitschiness."

It is quite true that some manifestations of kitsch are more "kitschy" than others and that there are bound to be many borderline cases. Kitsch is not an all-or-nothing category. The reasons for stating the suggested definition in categorical terms are didactic ones: clarity and simplicity. It should be understood from the context that the categorical formulation of the three conditions is just an attempt to summarize the observations made in the respective sections. The criteria for kitsch need not be seen as dichotomous; all the conditions allow for degrees. The high emotional charge of the objects depicted by kitsch pictures can be graded. Some highly emotional themes are more universal and have stronger impact than others. The same applies to the conditions of easy identifiability and the absence of significant enrichment of associations. The proposed definition can thus be understood in the following qualified sense: The more clearly, saliently, and unambiguously the picture complies with our three conditions, the more paradigmatic an example of kitsch it is.

One may also object that a definition in terms of necessary and sufficient condition is bound to be too rigid to account for a concept that is essentially context-dependent and culture-bound. It could be pointed out that kitsch is a flexible, context- and culture-dependent concept, the application of which changes from period to period and from culture to culture. What is considered kitsch in our society today might not have been so regarded some one hundred years ago, or in a culturally different society. Doesn't this argue against any attempt to use a rigid model of necessary and sufficient conditions?

No. The fact that the proposed definition is stated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions does not mean that it cannot account for different identifications of kitsch in different cultures or at different times. The definition is flexible enough to account for differences in cross-cultural and historical identifications of kitsch, since the culture-dependent and time-dependent factors that may influence these differences are already built into our three conditions.

Consider the first condition. Whether or not a given subject matter is considered beautiful or emotionally charged may differ from culture to culture. The subject matter of the painting depicting a slim, naked, long-legged lady playing a violin on the seashore (see Fig. 3) is likely to be considered beautiful by Western standards. The picture can thus be considered as a paradigmatic example of kitsch in our society. However, for Bedouins or for some African tribes, where beautiful women have to be fat, this picture is unlikely to elicit the requisite emotional response.[43] The emotional charge of pictures of Israeli soldiers praying and dancing at Jerusalem's Western Wall trigger the appropriate response in Israel. They might not be appreciated in a similar way in Baghdad or Teheran.

As to the second condition, we have already noted that the instant identifiability of the depicted subject matter depends on how well we are accustomed to the given representational convention. Radically novel ways of rendering impair the ease of identifiability. When we recall the reactions to the first Impressionist exhibitions we may safely assume that in the 1860s and 1870s it would have been virtually impossible to paint an Impressionist picture that would be (at that time) considered kitsch. There is, however, no problem to produce impressionistically styled kitsch today, since Impressionism has by now became a "realistic" mode of representation.[44] The cubist mode of representation, however, is even today still seen as "unrealistic." This is why even our lady violinist wouldn't quite come out as kitsch if rendered in truly cubist manner.

Our third condition too is clearly context- and culture-dependent.

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[43] The picture might also fail qua kitsch in a society in which the violin would not be recognized for what it is.

[44] Indeed, Impressionism seems to us today so "realistic" that we find it difficult to understand the objections and the hostile reactions it was greeted with. For today, as Impressionism has become part of our "realism," these paintings strike us as far more convincing than the "realistic" paintings of the same period.

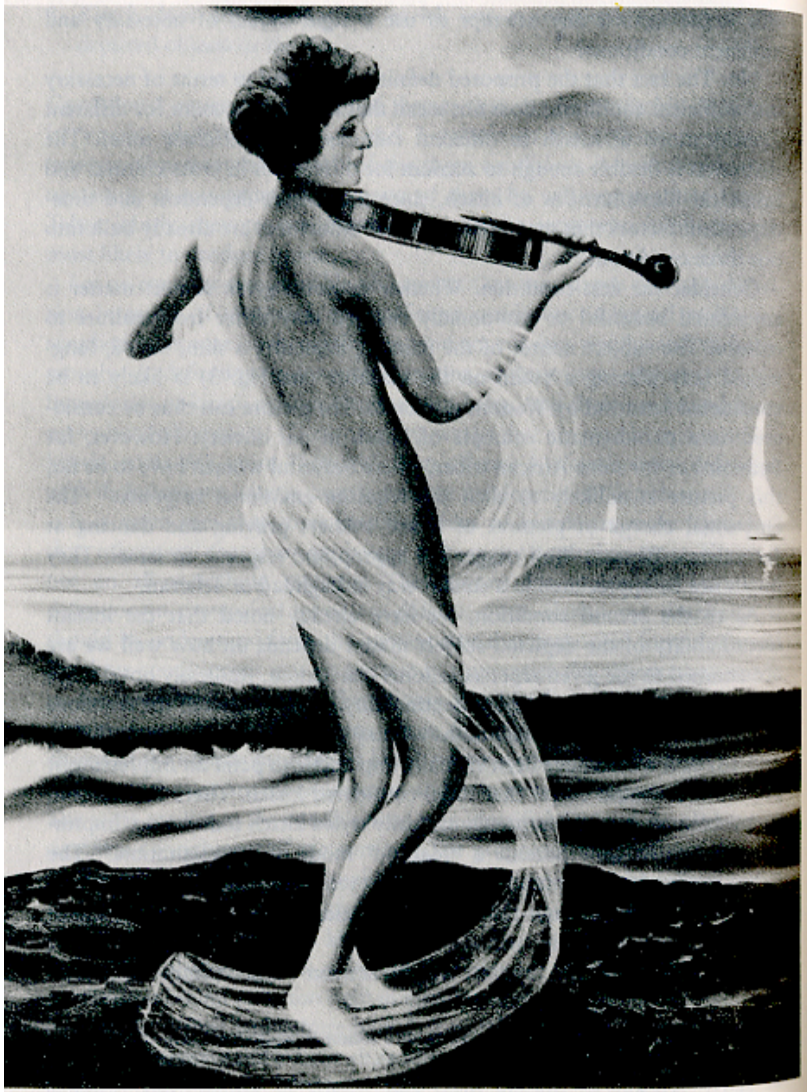

Fig. 3. *Lady Playing the Violin* (reproduced from *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste,* ed. Gillo Dorfles [New York: Universe Books, 1969])

Whether the picture transforms or enriches the associations related to the subject matter (that is, whether we may "learn" something new through the work in question about its subject matter), depends on what we "know" about it in the first place. The cultural dependence of kitsch thus does not invalidate our definition; indeed, the existing differences in the identification of kitsch may actually be *explained* by its conditions. They may help us understand why people disagree about kitsch and point out what it is they are actually disagreeing about.

The term *kitsch* was originally applied exclusively to paintings; only later was its use extended to other artistic disciplines. Our discussion has so far been restricted to pictorial kitsch; I shall consider manifestations of kitsch outside visual arts in Chapter 3. Let me just note here that everything that has been said about kitsch paintings applies to kitsch sculptures as well. This shouldn't be surprising, since there is no reason why bringing in third dimension should affect any of our three conditions. Just like kitsch paintings, *typical* kitsch sculptures are never abstract. The choice of the subject matter usually betrays sentimental leanings and its execution conforms to the most conservative representational conventions of the time. We are never in doubt what kitsch sculptures represent, because they use stereotypes. There is no need for interpretation, and the associations triggered by kitsch sculptures are roughly the same as those invoked by the objects of their representation.

We should also note that the suggested definition is a classificatory one. Its task is to provide an answer to the question of what kind of objects are correctly classified as kitsch. Just as a classificatory definition of gold need not explain why gold is valuable or why it glitters, it is not the task of this classificatory definition to answer all the questions that can arise in connection with the phenomenon of kitsch. Let us nevertheless see what our conditions may suggest in connection with the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter.

As to question 1, "What does the mass appeal of kitsch consist of?" I believe that we can extract an answer from our definition. Conditions 1 and 2 suggest that the appeal of kitsch essentially consists of the strong emotional charge of the easily identifiable subject matter to which we are positively predisposed. For questions 2 ("What does the badness of kitsch consist of?") and 3 ("Should the appeal of kitsch be properly regarded as aesthetic?"), the answers are less definitive. If we consider our three conditions jointly, they point to the essentially *parasitic* nature of kitsch.

They suggest that kitsch does not create beauty of its own, that its appeal is not generated by the aesthetic merit of the work itself but by the emotional appeal of the depicted object. This is quite unlike the situation with real works of art. It should be noted that serious artists typically refrain from depicting objects that are generally considered to be beautiful or emotionally charged. And even when they do, such artists do not simply capitalize on the emotional charge of their subject matter. They are not interested in ready-made effects.

These observations may suffice to cast doubt on the contention that the appeal of kitsch should properly be classified as aesthetic. A more comprehensive analysis awaits us in Chapter 2.