

## KITSCH (GERMAN)

ENGLISH junk art, garish art, kitsch

► AESTHETICS, ART, BAROQUE, CLASSIC, CULTURE, GOÛT, NEUZEIT, PEOPLE, SUBLIME

The word *Kitsch* is German in origin and had previously been translated into French as *art de pacotille* (junk art) or *art tape-à-l'œil* (garish art), but the original term has now become firmly established in all European languages. Used as an adjective, *kitsch* or *kitschy* (dis) qualifies cultural products intended for the masses and appreciated by them. As a noun the term designates a category of taste, certainly linked to an aesthetics, but even more so to an ethics whose political consequences are obvious. The subtitles of two works devoted to kitsch (Moles; Dorflès) indicate why some people find it attractive while others judge it severely: it is both an art of happiness and an expression of bad taste.

### I. A Question of the Public or of Artistic Value?

The notion of *Kitsch* first appeared in the nineteenth century. It became the object of keen attention when mass society—helped by increased leisure time—had at its disposal a “culture for the masses” that, by its nature, seemed to threaten the very existence of authentic culture. *Kitsch* covers all different means of expression once they abandon rigor in order to cater to a wider public. The art of the chromos, pleasantly eye-catching photographs, the religious keepsakes collected by pilgrims, the souvenirs designed for tourists, but also the popular literature sold in railway stations, the comic theater of the boulevards, or the music that simply creates an ambiance: these are all examples of *Kitsch*. As a kind of debased popularization, it offers a decadent model that is all the more alluring for being so easily accessible. This is, at least, what its detractors say.

Hermann Broch, one of the first critics to write seriously about *Kitsch*, sees it as a form of “radical evil” that destroys value systems, since its essence “is the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category” (“Evil in the Value-System,” 33). In search of the pleasing effect, one that offers the most inexpensive seduction, kitsch art does not aim to be the product of good work but merely to be an attractive end product. This perverse method means that *Kitsch* uses tried and tested techniques and that it turns its back on creation in order to achieve a risk-free success in its effort to seduce. As Albert Kohn explains in an introductory note to his French translation of Broch’s 1955 book *Dichtung und Erkennen*:

The German word *Kitsch* has no equivalent in French. It refers to all genres of objects in bad taste, of artistically pretentious junk, popularizing commonplace forms through their mass-production, but it also applies to literary, artistic or musical works which aim for easy effects (such as melodrama) and pomposity, and cultivate sentimentality or mindless conformity. For want of being able to use the German word, we have translated it depending on the context as “*art de pacotille*” [junk art] or “*art tape-à-l'œil*” [garish art]. In actual fact, these two meanings are often combined.

(Broch, *Création littéraire*, 17)

There are many disadvantages to translating the term in this way. The two attributes that are substituted for the semantic richness of *Kitsch* greatly reduce its complexity. By devaluing it from the outset, they take as a given what needs to be elucidated. So when Broch writes, “The essence of kitsch is the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category. It is not concerned with ‘good,’ but with ‘attractive’ work; it is the pleasing effect that is most important,” the translation of *Kitsch* as *tape-à-l'œil* [garish art] is wholly inadequate, first of all because not everything that is “garish” has to do with aesthetics, and then because the second sentence would therefore merely state a banal tautology, namely that the only aim of “garish” art is to produce a “pleasing effect.” It is an entirely different matter if we retain the term *Kitsch*. What is more, other linguistic traditions had not hesitated to use the notion in its original language.

Clement Greenberg, for example, published an article in 1939 entitled “Avant-garde and Kitsch” in which he returned to Broch’s idea that *Kitsch* borrows “tried and tested techniques,” uses “prefabricated signs which, in its hands, solidify into clichés” (11). The merit of Greenberg’s article is that he connects the appearance of *Kitsch* to that of another controversial phenomenon, the avant-garde, which also permanently destabilized established aesthetic values. Greenberg contrasts *Kitsch* with the avant-garde. The avant-garde alone seems capable of “continuing to change culture in the midst of ideological confusions and violence” (17):

In the first place it is not a question of a choice between merely the old and merely the new, as London seems to think—but of a choice between the bad, up-to-date old and the genuinely new. The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch. . . . If the avant-garde imitates the processes of art, kitsch imitates its effects.

(Ibid., 13–15)

■ See Box 1.

### II. Taste, Effect, or Attitude?

After the war Hannah Arendt reflected upon the mass culture that was developing and of which *Kitsch* remained one of the main components. She pointed to the structural links between the world of aesthetic taste and that of political opinions, which both require a certain persuasiveness. In more general terms culture and politics belong together “because it is not knowledge or truth which is at stake, but rather judgment and decision, the judicious exchange of opinion about the sphere of public life and the common world, and the decision what manner of action is to be taken in it, as well as how it is to look henceforth, and what kind of things are to appear in it” (*Between Past and Future*, 223). Understood from this perspective, *Kitsch* becomes all the more disturbing since, as Hermann Broch had noted, “one cannot work in any art without adding to the mixture a drop of effect” (*Création littéraire*, 361), that is, without adding some drop of *Kitsch*. It was no doubt for this very reason that *Kitsch*, an alarming corruption that could be found even in the most uncompromising works of art, was contested so vigorously.

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### Avant-garde and Kitsch

In his article "Avant-garde and Kitsch" (1939) Clement Greenberg writes:

Where there is an avant-garde, generally we also find a rearguard. True enough—simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *Kitsch*: popular, commercial art and literature with their chromotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap

dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. For some reason this gigantic apparition has always been taken for granted. It is time we looked into its whys and wherefores.

The precondition for *Kitsch*, a condition without which *Kitsch* would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness *Kitsch* can take advantage of for its own ends. It borrows from that tradition devices, tricks, stratagems, rules of thumb, and

themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest. It draws its life blood, so to speak, from the reservoir of accumulated experience. This is what is really meant when it is said that the popular art and literature of today were once the daring, esoteric art and literature of yesterday. Of course, no such thing is true. What is meant is that when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new "twists," which are then watered down and served up as kitsch.

(Greenberg, *Avant-garde and Kitsch*)

Over the years the definition of *Kitsch* expanded and became more complex. When Broch returned to the subject in 1951, he stated that he was not talking "truly about art, but about a determinate attitude of life" (ibid., 311) deeply rooted within "kitsch-man." Abraham Moles pursued this logic in his work on *Kitsch*:

It is not a semantically explicit denotative phenomenon, it is an intuitive and subtle connotative phenomenon; it is one of the types of relationships that human beings have with things, a way of being rather than an object, or even a style. Of course, we often talk of "kitsch style," but as one of the objectifiable supports of the kitsch attitude, and we can see this style becoming more formalized into an artistic period.

(Moles, *Le Kitsch*, 7)

Nevertheless, at a time when pop art was blurring the ordering of established values in the avant-garde world, a new form appeared that staked a claim to *Kitsch*, and this was "camp." This American term is used to describe "something so outrageous or in such bad taste as to be considered amusing" (*Webster's New Ideal Dictionary*, 2nd ed., 1989). Since then, artists in Europe as well as in the United States have been exploiting both the first level—their works are crude, and the second level—they are doing this deliberately, joyously combining what is pleasing to the eye and what is revolting (for example, Jeff Koons). We can no

longer tell with such works whether *Kitsch* is simply amusing—there is a kitsch-man perhaps ready to be awakened in every lover of art—or whether it is both funny and critically insightful.

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