

# **KITSCH**

**A MATTER OF TASTE**

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A MATTER OF TASTE

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To  
Urgel and Gilda and Hilan

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**But if life is a bad joke, with neither goal nor initial accouchement, and because we believe we ought, like clean chrysanthemums, to make the best of a bad bargain, we have declared that the only basis of understanding is : art.**  
Tristan Tzara, Dada Manifest, 1918

**Where are the truths of our century? I like shipwrecks very much. Our age is wonderful because it is the ruin of ideologies, concepts, conventions. But this dissolution of the world is natural. I don't see in it the end of our civilisation but the sign of life.**  
Federico Fellini, The false true interview, Arnaldo Jabor

## Note

I have always regretted being born long after the great artistic and political ideals that, early this century, transformed our age. Why am I condemned to live in a time in which the only ideal I can reflect is the lack of ideals, a time with no place for ideologies or beliefs? Everything would certainly be different if only I was able to conceive of art as an instrument to change the world, or as some kind of spiritual and moral force, but I cannot. Admitting this seemed quasi-immoral to me, so I distanced myself from the present in order to avoid confronting this reality.

Few month ago that feeling of detachment began to give way to an increasing sympathy and curiosity for our epoch. The (long) process of producing this essay has altered the gloomy state. I guess all the readings about mass-culture, consumerism, romanticism, pop art, and taste, have changed my understanding of the relationship between art and society and art and nature; and, in doing so, it set me free me from the trap of modern art melancholy.

I have not found any ideology or solution to console myself, but I have realized that human imagination transforms and reigns over the facts.

\*

**At the island of Caliban and Ariel, Prospero transforms the cruelty, the darkness and the blood in comedy, in clouds steeped in light.**

## Introduction

The way I chose the subject of my essay was almost as obscure as the process that I have to go through in each painting I do. For someone like me, there is no straight way of getting somewhere if the journey demands emotional involvement. The process I lived through from the time I first thought about kitsch as a good clue to understanding my work, until I built up the last sentence of this essay, could be described, by analogy, as the way we try to see in a blackout: we try to take it easy, until our eyes get used to the darkness. I have just allowed myself to experience the sensation of being totally lost, driven by a sort of mystic conviction, that I was going the right way.

In my blind optimism I was not wrong, after all. For in this cramped "room" called kitsch, where I have encountered many of the contemporary issues, I could, if not find answers, at least build up a better understanding of my work and of myself.

In order to make the subject of my writing more interesting, and maybe because not being linear has become a bad habit, I have decided to organise my reflections on the material I collected in the form of a collage rather than an essay, with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument.

The collage has reminded me of Roland Barthes' "Lovers' Discourse", with its interminable conversations between the author and those amazing literary excerpts, and I have borrowed him the style. Therefore, what one has here is an attempt to put different voices together: one impersonal authority on the subject, a cool anonymous voice which gives to the text its body; a countless number of quotations, representing the sometimes contradictory emotional echoes / chaos of this body; and my own *calliente* voice, trying to set an informal dialogue with this invisible personage. In order to make the reading easier, I have numbered the cool voice and I have put my own in italic.

I have divided the main subject into three parts or chapters. The first one refers to kitsch itself, its definition and historical context. The second chapter is about the relationship between kitsch, mass culture and the ideas of the modernist avant garde. The closing one is about taste, more specifically, about bad taste.

The titles of the chapters are a homage to the famous romantic composer Chopin, whose name became associated with kitsch when, in the words of Gillo Dorfles, some of

his tunes were "dragged down to the level of sentimental songs". I found these three waltzes suggestive as titles to the subjects treated in each respective chapter. The first one is translated as "The great brilliant waltz"; the one following, "A minute waltz", and the last one, nicknamed "L'adieu", is my favourite.

Maybe my analysis and style may not be quite equal to the task I was given. It may perhaps indicate an insufficient cleverness to handle the material. Still, I feel I am a little further from the point where I started.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to Lawrence Preece, Cynthia Hamlin, Philip Jones and Tania Flamigni, who, in different ways, generously contributed to the making of this 'thesis'.



**Walzer Nr. 1 Es-dur Op. 18 'Grand Valse Brillant'**

**Kitsch, that "pinnacle" of good taste in the absence of taste, of art in ugliness - a branch of mistletoe under the lamp in a railway station - art adapted to life where the function of the adaptation exceeds that of innovation. All this is kitsch, the hidden, tender and sweet vice.**

**And who can live without vices?**

Saul Friedlander- An Essay on Kitsch and Death

1-The term kitsch is quite recent. It came into use around 1860 in the jargon of painters and art dealers in Munich, and was employed to designate cheap artistic material. It was not before the first decades of the 20th century, that kitsch became an international term. Some authors believe that the German word derives from the English "sketch". According to others, its possible origin has to do with the German verb "verkitschen", meaning "to make cheap". It also can be linked to the German verb "kitschen", in the sense of collecting rubbish from the streets or to make new furniture from old.

2-In a nutshell, it came to mean "to produce trash", to use or manipulate art, even the art of past ages, in the manufacture of articles for mass consumption.

Kitsch means all those cheap, vulgar, sentimental, tasteless, trashy, pretty cute objects the vast majority of people in this country like to live with.

(Jenny Sharp)

*What do I know about kitsch? Well, I have to say I have always considered myself a lover of kitsch, but, I must confess, I don't have more than a vague and personal idea of what kitsch is . For instance, I normally label as kitsch all these middle-class images from magazines and books I used to look at when I was a child in the sixties, images that bring me a kind of nostalgia for my happy and luminous childhood, and that I now use as a source of inspiration to my paintings... oh, and all the romantic songs I adore: boleros,*

*tangos, I think all these things are considered kitsch, aren't they? What about souvenirs, plastic flowers and all these childlike objects I like to be surrounded by? I certainly never thought about them as trash or rubbish, but if they are so, I wouldn't be ashamed to admit that I love all these vulgar and tasteless objects. Actually, it is quite exciting to think about my personal taste from that point of view, for it can give me lots of material with which to build up a kind of psychological and aesthetic treatise on myself and on my work (don't you know "A woman of No Importance"?: **I adore simple pleasures. They are the last refuge of the complex!**).*

3-Currently in Germany, the adjective "kitschig" is used to describe an object or person in bad taste. Kitsch, as applied to art, people or objects, has no longer a precise meaning. Probably because it is linked with the idea of bad-taste, that is sufficiently vague in itself. It is not only a matter of individual opinion, but of the time, the place, the circumstance.

### **BAD TASTE**

#### PRECIOUSITIES IN MATERIAL:

- china flower vases in the form of hollowed-out tree trunks
- ashtrays made of postage stamps
- senseless combinations of materials
- linoleum imitating wood or leather
- chocolate busts of the Kaiser

#### FAULTS OF CONSTRUCTION:

- metal vessels for hot fluids
- unstable vases
- uncomfortable chairs
- pincushions in shape of velvet animals
- thermometers fashioned like riding whips

#### BRUTALITIES OF DECORATION:

- wide margins in books
  - senseless simple bindings
  - religious and patriotic motifs
  - liver sausage decorated with images of Bismark
- (Adapted from Gustav Pazaurek, Catalogue of the Museum of Art Indiscretions, 1909)

4-No matter how it is classified, kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy. Such inadequacy is often found in the attitude of the individual who, when confronted with artistic and natural phenomena, immediately transforms them into something no longer genuine, for instance, by mistaking the religious impulse of a sacred music for sentimentality; or when one's adaptations from one medium to another is not appropriate. Normally, we can find it in the objects whose formal qualities (size, shape, material, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention. The archetypal image evoked by the word kitsch is the garden gnome.

Kitsch augments the variety of forms presents in the world very considerably,  
and, at the same time, substantially **reduces** their significance.  
(Vittorio Gregotti)

5-Excess and curiosity are key words in connection with kitsch. That is why kitsch is so often allied to the bizarre, to fantasy or to abnormality. And it is not a surprise that the surrealists, who swore by the baroque dreams, should be the firsts to submit to the fascination of a certain kind of a bad-taste kitsch...

Art itself is really a form of exaggeration and selection, which is the very spirit of art. It is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis.  
(Oscar Wilde)

Kitsch is the contemporary form of the gothic, the rococo, the baroque.  
(Frank Wedekind)

In 1890, a time that saw the apotheosis of kitsch, a drawing room was a collection of useless objects some way extravagant, cluttered but out of the ordinary. In 1960, at the time of realism and anti-kitsch, we found that the living room had become an extension of the bathroom. A sadly functional place. No room for dreams and fantasies.  
(Jacques Stern)

*Excess, curiosity, dream, bizarre ... these are all words I could use to describe some important elements of my taste and personality. And my painting, I would risk to say. Probably because everything (and nothing) is autobiographical in a work of art.*

*I think reality is not enough for me: "Imagination, the power that infuses meaning into that inanimate cold world!". Don't you think it can lead to a reality much sharper and penetrating than the quotidian and visible one? Apollonius of Tyana, when asked ironically how his artists knew what the Gods were like ("... by going and seeing them in heaven?") replied: It is purely imagination!*

6-The whole concept of kitsch centres on questions of imitation, forgery, and counterfeit. As such, it has to do with the modern phenomenon that beauty, as any other commodity, may be bought and sold. It appeared at a moment in history when beauty in its various forms came to be socially distributed like any other commodity. Once beauty had lost its elitist claim to uniqueness, it turned out to be rather easy to fabricate.

Wahrol banished the mysteries of artistic creation from his factory, where making a painting had roughly the same number of steps as a cake mix, and selling involved "small, medium or large?" and "how many?"  
(Trevor Fairbrother)

7-Kitsch then is a recent phenomenon. It appeared concomitantly with the rise of the middle-class and one can say it is the expression of its life style.

Kitsch is very often the kind of art that the average consumer might desire to show and display in his home. Kitsch suggests some sort of artistic intimacy, an atmosphere saturated with beauty, a beauty one would wish to see one's daily life surrounded with.

(Matei Calinescu)

*The way you talk, it seems you miss a time only a privileged group of individuals could really enjoy what was great and beautiful! Of course I can understand your claims, but sometimes it sounds as though, between an aristocratic society and a more democratic one, you would choose the former, only for fear of breaking down the crystal tower in which someone decided that beauty should live. I just can't agree with this kitschphobia of yours! I see the bringing down of culture to the level of the masses as positive. And I don't think we should despair for the future of art. Yes, I can see how dangerous it can be, but I can see how it is much too easy to turn this into a black and white situation, as you do...*

*And, if kitsch is really an enemy, as you believe it to be, then I think it must be infiltrated, and subverted. I believe in taking risks!*

8-Kitsch must be considered as a product of a certain category of artistic makers or designers who, addressing themselves to a well-defined audience of average consumers, apply definite set of rules. The producer of kitsch thinks, in the first place, about impressing and pleasing the consumer.

For a very long time art has not been very effective and artists have not taken their responsibilities to communicate... I would like to do **everything** that is possible to assist in returning this responsibility to art, to manipulate and seduce an audience in order to communicate effectively with them.

(Jeff Koons)

The contemporary existence is involved with the "**existing of communication**", an ecstasy that is obscene.

(Jean Baudrillard)

*One day I was in a seminar and one of my colleagues said that one thing she hated about abstract painting was that it only communicated to a select audience, and she thought this was insulting. As a political artist, she wanted to produce a work that could be understandable by ordinary people, people that are out of the art world. I probably never thought in these terms because I don't believe art can save lives or change people's political views and attitudes. Even if we artists communicate to a mass audience, I don't know whether this communication is effective. But I quite envy artists that may be fired by a*

*sort of political ambition. Well, I am not saying that I don't think about seducing people with my work. Yes, I do. What I am saying is that I am content if I succeed in giving people, even if only a select group, an instant gratification.*

9-As a system of imitation, kitsch is in fact obliged to copy art in all its specific features. It is impossible, however, to imitate methodically the creative act from which the work of art is born, only the most simple shapes can be imitated. It is the impossibility of copying a creative work, that leads the system of imitation to compensate for that impossibility by appealing to sentiment. Every ambiguous, emotional exaggeration, brings about the kitsch attitude. Art then is seen as a kind of background music, a decoration.

10-Even if one can discover some formal relationship between kitsch and mannerist or baroque art, kitsch seems to be a result of romanticism. The romantic revolution brought about an almost complete relativism of the standard of taste; on the other hand many romantics promoted a sentimentally oriented conception of art, which in turn opened the way to various kinds of aesthetic escapism.

Romanticism, without therefore being the kitsch itself, is the mother of kitsch  
and there are moments when the child becomes so like its mother that one  
cannot differentiate between them!  
(Herman Broch)

11-The origin of romanticism is the origin of the exaltation of the man who is full of spiritual and artistic energy and who tries to elevate ordinary daily life on earth to an absolute sphere.

12-In romanticism, just as love itself has to come down from its celestial height to take part in everyday human act of love, in the aesthetic field beauty has to be incarnated in every work of art. A sort of religion of beauty.

*It is true I have a romantic spirit. It was certainly my mother's fault. She brought me up in this atmosphere of Mussetas, Lucias, M. Butterflies ... I still remember the first time I burst into tears at the cinema (I was around eight), listening to Caruso singing the duet of Rodolfo and Mimi. Yes, I know opera is considered a kitsch genre par excellence. In fact, I have only finded up that very recently, and it gave me another clue to understand my personal taste. Romanticism... I can't deny I can find its shadow pervading all my work. The way I surrender to imagination, the combination of the grotesque and the terrible, of comedy and tragedy, the addition of strangeness to beauty, and my fascination with themes such as love and death; that would be enough to denounce me. I wonder whether it is not related to an unconscious desire to astonish people... I don't know, but most certainly I can tell you I myself like being astonished by the images I find. You know, I like to indulge in the idea that all these images can have their own existence and I just happen to catch them,*

*by a sort of lucky accident ...*

13-Romanticism is inclined to make the platonic idea of beauty the immediate and tangible goal for any work of art. This process constitutes the basic precondition of every form of kitsch. We can say that the goddess of beauty in art is the goddess kitsch.

The kitsch system requires its followers to " **work beautifully** ", while the art system issues the moral order: "**work well**". Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art!  
(Herman Broch)

Ethic and aesthetic are the same.  
(Wittgenstein)

*I would really like to tell you a recent illustrative experience I had at the expense of my goddess Kitsch. By chance I found myself watching one of these new Hollywood mega-success films, "Show-Girls", and dear... after everything I heard these days about what kitsch is about, I would probably choose this film as the kitsch trophy's winner. The whole conception was kitsch. I couldn't find anything in there that would escape the label, from the script to the music. Well, if I hadn't had my lessons on kitsch universe " trash, fake and evil", I would just say that it was a bad film, a really bad one, to be precise, and I wouldn't give more attention to it than regretting the time I have lost. But since I've been attending these meetings on kitsch ( because I am the first to recognise my former ignorance on the subject), I must confess this film disturbed me awfully. No, not literally. What I mean is that this film made me understand all your worries concerning kitsch bad influence on contemporary culture. And because I understood, and in some sense I have agreed with you, I have found myself a bit confused. All in all, which kind of kitsch lover am I? Allegedly, I was expected to enjoy the film, or not?*

*Well, I had some insights about that, which came up in a very chaotic and non systematic way. So, I don't know exactly how accurate and convincing they really are, but they did enough for me then. The first question I asked myself was: Am I obliged to enjoy everything that comes from kitsch? It is likely that there is good and bad kitsch. But, if so, how can I distinguish one from the other, how can I state this is good and these are bad? The ones I feel morally disgusted by? (lots of people feel morally indignant about kitsch images or objects I consider nice and inoffensive, or nothing of the kind, but just a matter of what is in vogue nowadays? What do I mean? That I may possibly like some sort of "fashionable" kitsch and I may possibly dislike the non "fashionable" one. Maybe I do appropriate kitsch in a half way between naivety and irony, and I am just being snob when I discard some sort of pure, genuine and ... contemporary kitsch!*

*On the other hand, what justifies me in associating qualities like badness or ugliness with evil? And, consequently, conclude bad kitsch is the one that is aesthetically and ethically dangerous? To some of you, any kitsch is ugly and, therefore, evil, isn't it? Well, well, in the end isn't only a matter of taste to enjoy "Show-Girls" or not? Or does our innocent taste have some ethical implications? Supposing it does, and going further,*

*supposing kitsch is really an immoral system because it is bad taste and fake art, then, should we, in some way, ban, restrain, or avoid the enjoyment of kitsch in order to improve our taste and consequently our "morality"? Should an earnest artist keep a certain distance from kitsch in order to avoid involving his or her work in a moral and aesthetic pitfall?*

*Right! But if so, shouldn't artists rebel against any sense of obligation? And how should we read artistic interventions and investigations in moral terms? I should confess: the idea that kitsch can be ethically dangerous makes it even still more attractive to me, for I think I pursue a kind of edge in my work, an edge where good can become evil and vice-versa... Some artists try to preserve themselves and their art from any contact with "evil"; others, like me, may believe "one has to sleep with the devil in order to find one's redemption", even if one risks finding only one's destruction.*



**Walzer Nr. 6 Des-dur Op. 64/1 'Minutenwalzer'**

**Mass-existence constitutes in a qualitative sense an escape into divertissement.**  
Matei Calinescu

1-Nature has been exploited technologically and has become more and more artificial. It has been burdened with a multiplicity of objects, as often as not, linked only by a process of addition. This imposes upon us the laws of a second nature, whose characteristic, in the great majority of cases, is kitsch.

*I really like the word "artificial". To me, it sounds, far more exciting than the word "natural". I imagine I secretly fancy living in a realm of dreams and fantasies: Light - not the one the sun produces, but the one fabricated in a studio - and Sea - do you remember the miraculous silvery sea Fellini used in "La Nave Va"? (What? Am I wandering too much? "The impardonable sin in a good society is to let the mind wonder". All right! But Shakespeare would reply to Lord Chesterfield: "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, are of imagination all compact!").*

*Anyway, do you know I come from an "artificial" city, Brasilia? Even the local lake and the vegetation were not there some thirty years ago. And I have often asked myself whether, at the end of the day, it would really make any difference to live in a totally artificial environment. You know the way the romantics used to admire nature, the sensation of quasi-eternity they felt in contemplating a sunset or a mountain? I used to sit in front of my lake and wonder if not only the lake was artificial, but even the sky above my head, and the wind in my face, and the hot sun on my skin. Would it be such a different or inferior experience to the romantic one? My bet is that it wouldn't.*

2-Only the easy reproduction and quick distribution, of art objects, have made it possible that culture and industry meet. Culture now is affected by methods that influence the whole of the production system.

People believe they should demand hard execution as an inseparable part of the genesis of a work of art. In fact, in comparison with the inventive mental

process of the genesis of work, the question of its execution is important only in so far as it must be mastered to the limits. The manner, however, whether personal or by assignment of labour, whether manual or mechanical, is irrelevant.  
(Laszlo Moholy)

Paintings are too hard. The things I want to show are mechanical. Machines have less problems. I would like to be a machine, wouldn't you? I think somebody should be able to do all my paintings to me.  
(Andy Warhol)

*It is funny, with me exactly the contrary happens : the more I realise how hard painting is, the more I feel interested in it. Is it hard to understand how I can conciliate such romantic ideals with my sympathy for pop culture? Well, in fact I just accept these contradictions and the incoherence of feelings, opinions, or wishes as part of my nature or, rather, of my psychology. Maybe such contradictions are just the product of my ignorance and incapacity to understand things in their entirety, or maybe they are just the mark of our time, I don't know... but what is really significant in all that, is that my painting is an attempt to translate that state. Something like "how-to-be-a-romantic-in-the-age-of-mass-culture"!*

*Although I see my painting as having a strong pop aesthetic, I try to preserve some sort of attitude that a pop artist, like Andy Warhol, would probably reject. What I am saying is that I want to (and I think I do) incorporate the mass culture aesthetic into my painting, but without suppressing some ... let me say, "old values", or, the humanistic possibilities, I believe, one can still find on a canvas.*

3-The great discovery on which kitsch is founded, is the fact that nearly everything, directly or indirectly associated with artistic culture, could be turned into something fit for immediate consumption, like any other commodity.

Kitsch is efficient art, the expendable cultural aspect of society, and one of the most direct manifestation of the triumphant aesthetic and ethic of **consumerism!**  
(Gillo Dorfles)

4-Nowadays almost everything can be manufactured one way or another. And the interests of mankind coincide with those of a great mass of people, who have no affinity with the values of the past and have no idea about the principles inherent in the use of materials. Instead of authentic pieces, they are content with substitutes.

**Kitsch people** are, by analogy, like lorry drivers who decorate their cabs with cuttings from magazines, to create a fictitiously beautiful world in which they can sleep in parking-places.  
(Aleksa Celebonovic)

*Hey, stop for a while, please! I can't refrain from saying something ... it is annoying the way you tend to reduce things! Why is having substitutes worse than having nothing else? What is the danger of having the interests of ordinary people dictating taste? You shouldn't worry so much about the destiny of high culture, it is not going to disappear, my dear! Nevertheless, it will have to incorporate the conflicts with mass culture. No?*

*It is so curious, and probably elucidative, that **there** where you look with aversion, I am able to see the presence of beauty. Most certainly this image of the lorry drivers' cab doesn't cause me nausea but tenderness, for it is a poetic idea... that of the "fictitiously beautiful world"! I am clearly drawn by human imagination ... What? Am I being irresponsibly romantic? Human imagination can frequently lead to evil? Well, well, I suppose the point between us is that you are a pessimist about human nature. I am more optimistic. I do not have this moral objection. I wanna embrace the tastes of the masses. Why should I point a finger at society?*

5-The sight of reproduced images is no longer capable of transmitting a truly, lived experience. The result is a split between the eventual acquisition of the idea and the real experience of the images we see.

6-That problem of "falsification" of the image produced by modern methods of reproduction, is closely connected with the problem of taste. Even if reproduction has made it possible to spread artistic and historical knowledge to wide sections of the population, it has resulted in works and objects which are only apparently similar to the original being treasured

What is the status of the original with facsimile multicolour reproduction? Most of Europe's main cathedrals, if destroyed, may now be reconstructed from their detailed photogrammetric records...

(John McHale)

*I think we ought to feel grateful to be living in a time when we can preserve our cathedrals for future generations! All right, all right, let me say **reconstruct**, to be more accurate... Be that as it may, reconstruct, or preserve, I believe we are perfectly able to accept living with copies, instead of with "unique" art objects. What I am trying to say is that if we have the original one, good, but if we don't, let us enjoy our fake Monalisas... Is it not good to think that nowadays we can all have access to many of the treasures of humankind without much effort or expenditure of money? (it gives me a sort of feeling of safety). Could you imagine, for instance, how it would be for a Brazilian art student, without practically any important museum around, if there wasn't all this sort of cheap art images available? Only for the few chosen ones... Ah, I know, I know it is a "second hand" experience. All right, but it is better than none, isn't it? (and it is better than many "first hand" experiences, I can tell you) To be honest, I am not really sure about the minor nature of this "second hand" experience. When I went to the Louvre last year, as I joined the long queue to see the Monalisa, I had this uncomfortable sensation I didn't have any*

*reasons for being there, and I felt like a fool. What was in there I hadn't seen yet? Was there some quality conveyed by the action of time on the work or/and by the materiality of the painting in itself? And couldn't a photo ever capture the "essence" of this painting?*

*All this quarrel on the validity of "second hand" experiences has reminded me of Plato's theory of art, according to which art should be banned from the ideal city because its product was a "copy-of-an-already-copy". That made the value of art dubious for him, since it was far from being "true". According to Plato's view, thus, even the "original and unique" Monalisa would be considered just an elaborated trompe l'oeil, and therefore a lie... In a curious way, my ideal city would be quite different from Mr. Plato's, because if I were to ban anything, I would probably ban the right of banning... My **city** would "digest" everything, because it would be the city of a Brazilian whose ancestors were used to anthropophagic practices, aiming at embodying the best of the unknown enemy...*

7-There is no more form of differentiation in enjoyment. No longer a privileged moment in attaining artistic nourishment. All trace of rite has been lost, depriving the work of art of that aura of mystery and sacredness that once characterised it.

*I would just like to tell you that, in the end, I remained at the queue to see the Monalisa. I realised I was underestimating the value of the ritual. Then I decided I was going to play the game... The painting was there, silent in its box of glass, roped off some two or three meters away from my reach. And I was there, surrounded by japanese, videos and flashes. Even so I felt touched by some invisible power...Well, what was that? Pure mystery or just cultural arbitrariness?*

*Anyway, as long as one can afford going to Paris to have a "**first hand**" experience of Monalisa, I have nothing to say against that.*

8-The incessant quest for new products has introduced into mass-produced art some of the elements belonging to a higher level of culture and vice-versa. This demand for novelty, without any aesthetic or technical motivation causes the frequent emergence of kitsch objects.

9-The fundamental trait of modern middle-class hedonism is that it stimulates the desire to consume to the point that consumption becomes a sort of regulating social idea. More than a mere fulfilment of certain basic needs, consumption has become a way of apprehending and understanding the world.

People want to have **fun**...The whole sphere of cheap commercial entertainment reflects the desire for relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously. It induces relaxation because it is patterned and pre-digested.  
(Theodor Adorno)

To me consumer objects still have meaning. I'm not interested in emptying out, I am not a pessimist and I don't believe that everything is dead and that

things don't have meaning. Things **do** have meaning.  
(Jeff Koons)

*I should confess that sometimes I am assaulted by terrible doubts. I wonder whether I am opting too easily for the fake "splendour" of pop culture because it serves as a kind of cue to project my own inner misery into the world. Would my experience of the world lead to a victory of aesthetics over morality? Fortunately, or not, I am more and more confident in my intuitions. I am immersed in mass culture, I am partly a product of it, and I do enjoy "made in Chinas" and a bit of some "cheap commercial entertainment"... What should I do then? Should I be suspicious of all that? I rather agree with J.Koons's ideas. It sounds so unlikely that the things around me are all devoid of meaning. Even while admitting that the relation Mr. Adorno sets among tedium and cheap divertissement is quite convincing, I would never deduce from that that this is the only way one can read the relationship of the consumer of kitsch and consumption, because people relate to things in ways that are quite diverse.*

*As a matter of fact, I find there is a bit of intellectual dishonesty on the part of **some** theorists who, taking advantage of their position, try to impose their apocalyptic beliefs on us. I am afraid you are right, dear colleagues, I am **deliberately** provoking Mr. Adorno! In fact, I would like to take advantage of your presence here to tell you, Mr. Adorno, that I find it **extremely** irritating the way you **despise** consumption society in your writings. It makes some people take the opposite side almost instinctively, even if it is just for the sake of going against your opinion.*

10-A recent phenomena, limited mainly to our age, is the way certain *avant garde* art movements borrowed elements from consumer products, attempting to redeem kitsch.

11-The appearance of kitsch in the domain of high art was influenced by the tendency of kitsch towards irony. If one thinks of kitsch as the style of bad taste, one can arrive at the paradox of consciously using bad taste to subvert the conventions of good taste.

12-From Rimbaud's praise of "poetic crap" and "stupid paintings" through Dada and Surrealism, the *avant garde* movements have made use of a variety of techniques and elements directly borrowed from kitsch in order to satisfy their anti-artistic urge.

Dada remains within the framework of European weaknesses, it's still **shit**, but from now on we want **to shit** in different colours, so as to adorn the zoo of art with all the flags of all the consulates.  
(Tristan Tzara)

Then came the great ambassadors of feeling, who yelled historically in  
chorus: psychologie, psychologie hee hee  
Science, Science, Science  
Long live France

We are naive  
We are successive  
We are exclusive  
We are not simpletons  
and we are perfectly capable of an intelligent discussion.  
**But we, Dada, don't agree with them, for art is not serious,** I assure you, and if  
we reveal the crime so as to show that we are learned denounciators, it's to  
please you, dear audience, I assure you, and I adore you.  
(Tristan Tzara)

*Can I see a clear influence of the avant garde ideas in my work? Curiously enough, people tend to think I am keen on surrealist painting, but it never impressed me. Well, at least not as painting, maybe as an interesting and funny riddle to be deciphered... Of course, surrealist cinema was a product of genius (and I would dare to say the manifestos and Bunuel's films were the best the surrealists left us!). Anyway, even if I can see a sort of uncanny imagery in my paintings, I feel neither an atmosphere of dreams in there, nor the strong presence of a narrative element. Now, I couldn't say my work didn't suffer the influence of surrealism, or any of the other avant garde movements. Some of their artistic theories and their attitudes to art are clearly reflected in my work. For instance, my naive-kitsch family background got a much more sophisticated coating at the university, when in contact with some of the modernist ideas. And I have to confess, it reinforced my tendency towards kitsch. In the beginning, it became quite a habit to look at things in an intentionally kitsch way, to respond to things within a kitsch aesthetic - even if at that time I didn't know the way I was looking at things was called kitsch. Nevertheless, I think that in my work the elements or attitudes I borrow from kitsch become quite diluted. I use kitsch as a starting point because it is normally the material I feel attracted to, aesthetically and emotionally. But I don't feel that the end result of my work is kitsch. Not even ironic.*

*Yes! There is one thing I would like to make very clear: **I don't use kitsch for being ironic about ordinary people's taste!** I see myself as totally convinced by the intrinsic value of my choices; they are good and beautiful and are not intended to be a parody of something else. They are the "thing" itself ... In fact, I think irony is a trap of contemporary art, and a very dangerous one because it apparently shows an interesting way to subvert the conventions. But when one is hooked, there is nothing there... for irony despoils things of their meaning. I think it is an sterile land, irony!*

13-The idolisation and snobbish cult of *avant garde* art can be included within the boundaries of kitsch.

Kitsch and avant garde look very different but are correlative in substance. Just as avant garde places novelty and originality above all else, so banality and vulgarity are lionised in Kitsch. **Both** violate every-day conceptions of good taste.

(Stephen Bayley)

Where there is an avant garde, generally we also find a reargarde.

(Clement Greenberg)

14-When the avant garde became fashionable, especially after world war II, kitsch came to enjoy a strange prestige in some of the most sophisticated circles. This seems to have been one of the main factors in the emergence of the so called camp sensibility.

*Believe it or not, I only discovered the idea of camp recently. It is true! I didn't even have a clear idea of what kitsch was about, and hardly any theoretic knowledge of art... I read some notes on camp some weeks after I saw Show-Girls - the film, that made me reflect on the nature of my "kitschism" - and I realised that I had found something that spoke to me. I can't tell you if I felt relieved or offended by that. Was I really drawn to this sort of snobbish way of feeling and reacting to outer world events?*

*I think I am probably not even close to being classified as a snobbish person (and this seems to be an essential part of a camp personality), but a bit of me (which bit(ch)?) is there, in some of the weird items of the extensive definition I have read: the love for the unnatural, the sentimental relation to the past, a sort of neutrality with respect to the content of facts or objects, an exaggeration in the quality of the ambition, the spirit of extravagance, an attraction and appreciation of vulgarities, an aesthetic experience of the world, and so forth...*

*As a matter of fact, I think I am not wholly aesthete (as camp is supposed to be), in the same way I am not wholly moralistic. I am certainly some(tense!)where between aesthetics and morals.*

15-Camp cultivates bad taste, usually the bad taste of the past, all that was kitsch yesterday. It is as if bad taste, consciously acknowledged and pursued could outdo itself and become its own clear-cut opposite.

What is intoxicating about bad taste, is the aristocratic pleasure of being  
displeased...  
(Baudelaire)

16-Camp has to do with admiring everything that is artificial, and also everything that is a mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naive.

The more we study art, the less we care for nature...  
(Oscar Wilde)

I prefer plastic plants. They are the same in their appearance and they  
demand much less!  
(Pedro Almodovar)

*By now everyone here must realize that I too love plastic plants! And fake animals as well! But, I don't agree with you they are the same in appearance as their living counterparts... In other words, it is not for that reason that I appreciate being surrounded*



by those sorts of things. I like to be conscious of the trick, I like the "they-pretend-to-be-but-they-are-not", I like them exactly for what they are, not perfect substitutes but pretenders...

*I think the realm you call "second nature" augments, rather than reduces, the quality of the experiences of the physical world. Oh, yes, I am very much a sensorial person, but, for instance, I don't like having a "real" dog sniffing around me. See my handbag? Don't you feel strangely moved by my synthetic bulldog? And he is only a bad fake. I think we have this sort of immediate empathy for Chirac ( of course he has a name! But you can call him Tony Blair, if you prefer). As I was saying, I think we all have this empathy for my handbag because all these objects that imitate or refer to living things seem to bring with them some of the essence of the beings they are related to ( no, not Jacques Chirac; I am talking about bulldogs! The fake offers us a sort of nostalgic, re-collective memory of what was once a dog, or a flower ... like the way we feel looking at dinosaurs in a museum!*

17-Camp, like kitsch, is a direct product of consumer society. And externally, camp is hard to distinguish from kitsch.

Camp is the modern dandism. Camp is the answer to the question "How to be a dandy in the age of mass-culture?".  
(Susan Sontag)

Camp taste transcends the nausea of a replica!  
(Susan Sontag)

18-However, camp must be considered anti-kitsch, given that the camp attitude shouldn't even exist if there were no possibility of saving neglected or deviating cultural elements.

19-The attempt to redeem kitsch can lead to some misunderstandings. The first one is related to the belief that kitsch objects, from the moment they are adopted by refined people or artists, can become a paragon for good taste for the general public. The second one is the confusion between art and non-art.

*I'm sorry, but I don't see these misunderstandings! I see little, or no influence of the artistic world on the life of ordinary people. And also, there is a tendency for these people to interpret the use of kitsch by an artist as a matter of personal eccentricity, not as something which should be taken seriously. Further, I think that it is good to question the paragons of good taste because, if one enlarges such concepts, one creates more possibilities for people. Why not wear a classic costume with trainers? Or drink your champagne in a plastic glass? What did you say? We would risk enlarging concepts so much that, in the end, concepts would have no meaning. According to you, we wouldn't know anymore how to differentiate good from bad taste. Well as far as I am concerned, I am not particularly worried whether good taste is going to be preserved or not.*

*As to the confusion between art and non-art, surely this is far wider issue than just*

*one of camp. I think this subject is argued about throughout art history and it seems a bit unfair just to hold the camp people responsible for it.*

20-The recent pop process has brought to light the fact that we are surrounded, almost everywhere, by kitsch elements. And the highest contradiction is that these kitsch elements have an undeniable charm of their own, which was translated into authentic works of art by the pop artists.

The flea market school: **Pop Art**  
The master: **Andy Warhol**  
(Hilton Kramer)

My painting is a statement of the symbols of the harsh, impersonal products and brash materialistic objects on which America is built today. It is a projection of everything that can be bought and sold, the practical, but, impermanent symbols that sustain us.  
(Andy Warhol)

It's Duchamp's celebrated silence, his abandonment of art, which has here, in Pop art, been invaded, colonised and exploited. Pop art does not tell us what it feels like to be living through the present moment civilisation, it's merely part of the evidence of that civilisation. Its social effect is simply to reconcile us to a world of commodities, banalities and vulgarities, which is to say an effect indistinguishable from advertising art. This is a reconciliation that must, **now more than ever**, be refused if art, and art itself, is to be defended against the ties of contrived public symbols and pretentious commerce.  
(Hilton Kramer)

**Please**, don't look beneath the surface. It is completely superficial!  
(Andy Warhol)

21-At least partially, the emergence of Pop art was motivated by the increasingly obvious contradictions between mass-culture and high-culture production and the need to incorporate these contradictions within an aesthetic frame. High culture seems to function as a late narcissistic refuge, as a domain of privileged experience, devoid of conflicts with the world of commercial mass culture.

22-Current cultural art movements regard kitsch as a form of exorcism of the mass-consumption. There is a wave of sympathy for those products that, by their "naive" quality, demonstrate the blindness of industrial production and the assumed dispensability of the intellectual. The adoption of kitsch arises as an opportunity for disguising and dismissing the usefulness of the objects which we are offered.

*That is clever! It never occurred to me... it seems so reasonable, this thesis about exorcism... and what is better, it appeases part of my worries! Which worries? Hmm, the fear of having no choice other than classifying my adoption of kitsch as pure camp snobbery! What? Do you think both attitudes are akin to each other? But, even so, camp is less naive. And this exorcising attitude seems more moral as well, can't you see? If you put together things that are contrasting, you bring out their qualities (or their lack of qualities) that would otherwise remain hidden. In doing so, you overcome the stereotypes and give yourself, and the others new ways of looking at mass produced things. Brilliant!*

23-There is a hope of completing the historical phase that is characterised by the journey of the kitsch object through the growth of mass culture; and a manifesto which restates questions of taste and the traditional relationship between producers and consumers, quantity and quality, major and minor cultures, style and method. A new set of symbols and values emerges in contrast to the old conception of the contemplative enjoyment of a work of art. The tendency is towards a grasp of the many ways in which an object can be handled and used, towards an understanding of the way in which it communicates, towards clearing up the relationship between ends and means, and towards an unprejudiced view of it as means of expression.

24-As a result of this new tendency the demarcation line which separated kitsch and the *avant garde* now appears to be broken. Post modernism re-assesses the nature of kitsch and considers it in cultural terms. It is prepared to regard kitsch's possible use with an optimism which may lead to the discovery of new and more comprehensive methods of controlling the process which shapes our material environment.

But it should not surprise anyone if the art of our time can be cursed by the vampire kitsch, who is in fact creating mere kitsch objects, instead of art.  
(Gillo Dorfles)

*Mr.Gillo, you are so boring with your apocalyptic foresights! We are talking about optimism and you are always bristling up...and aimlessly! Can't you see that us, post-modernists, cannot be apocalyptic anymore? We are post-apocalyptic, dear! Leave this rhetoric of "death of art" to our old comrades! We now have to create within the horizon of this death, with the hypothesis that it is possible to create within this death... and stop mumbling, pleeeeeease!*

*Namely Mr Gillo: **God save the kitsch!!!***

**Waltzer Nr 9 As-dur Op. 69/1**

**De gustibus non est disputandum.**

anonymous

**Beauty, that evanescent gasp between one cliché and another.**

Ezra Pound.

1-We call taste the faculty we use to discern, from among the material things we are surrounded, which one we perceive as pleasant or unpleasant. The one certain thing about taste is that it changes. Each epoch finds its own specific preferences for certain things. Different times demand different values!

McDonalds is the most beautiful thing in the world. Peking doesn't have a  
Mc Donald's yet, but Florence does!

(Andy Warhol)

Walter Dorwin Teague, apparently without any irony, compared one of the  
texaco filling stations he had designed to the temples of Greece

(Stephen Bayley)

Today in Pompeii, tourists are visiting murals depicting Romans with huge  
penises; originally meant as adverts for brothels, they are now considered  
great art. In the 18th century, Telemann was thought a greater composer than  
Bach; in the 19th century, Eugene Sue a greater writer than Balzac. In 200  
years, we may consider Picasso inferior to the man currently responsible for  
the Coca cola commercials...

(Umberto Eco)

*I am confused now! Taste and art, what is exactly the nature of that relationship? I mean, does the same sensitivity that makes us choose a particular dress, make us prefer*

*Picasso to the man currently responsible for...?*

*Is art as subject to the influence of "seasons" as high fashion? Do you all accept that so easily? Is the non-existence of permanent values in art so clear to you? "The estimation of the value of art depends on the social and cultural conditions of a particular viewer!". Great! What about the qualities embedded in the work itself? No good or bad art, but only my, yours, or their taste. I know it makes sense if one just looks back at history, but I can't avoid feeling how odd is the idea that in 200 years Picasso ... Never mind, I have this bloody habit of thinking about history as a "building erected on the top of the former one". I forget we have to destroy... You can't see the point? I can tell you the point, the point is: why not "Coca-cola" man plus Picasso? God, I am more confused now! Suddenly, everything I said doesn't seem to make any sense. Does it really matter to me what people are going to think about Picasso in the future?*

2-In every age before ours, there was no such thing as that we now call bad taste. When we now use the expression bad taste to discriminate an object or a person, we are making a kind of value judgement that never happened until the 19th century.

3-During the Middle Ages disinterested aesthetic experience didn't exist. Art and life were seen as one, and since life was completely ruled by religious ideas, the idea of beauty as deriving from divine inspiration was the common.

4-In cultures that had only one class with the economic capacity to make discriminating judgements, the question of whether taste was good or bad was, not so much, irrelevant, as inconceivable. The simple homogeneous relationship between consumer and producer can only change when a society accumulates enough wealth to make it possible for the consumer to demand a costly or elaborate work of art. It is at this point, that the individual or the community is likely to start discriminative consumption. For a long time, however, aesthetic discrimination remained comparatively undeveloped. The renaissance produced an extraordinary diversity of achievement and response in the arts. Nevertheless, there still was a certain persisting homogeneity. But by the 19th century, that homogeneity was almost entirely destroyed!

5-An explosion in production opened up consumption to social classes that had been excluded from that process until then. The idea of taste came to represent not a commonly held view, but the interests of the market, composed by innumerable individuals with many varieties of personal feelings.

*Did you know that this word, taste, formerly meant "discrimination"?*

6-On the other hand, that same phenomenon enabled artists to choose their style, using their freedom to seek a profitable market; to conform as nearly as they could to the taste of the majority. But the most interesting aspect of these changes was the rejection of the

established taste by some artists. All the preconceived ideas about beauty were challenged.

A work of art shouldn't be beauty per se, because it is dead; neither gay nor sad, neither light nor dark; it is to rejoice or maltreat individualities, to serve them up the cakes of sainted haloes or the sweat of a meandering chase through the atmosphere. **A work of art is never beautiful**, by decree, objectively, for everyone!  
(Tristan Tzara)

Beauty and truth in art don't exist; what interests me is the intensity of a personality, transposed directly and clearly into its work, man and his vitality, the angle under which he looks at the elements and the way he is able to pick these ornamental words, feelings and emotions, out of the basket of death.  
(Tristan Tzara)

*I have been thinking about my use of the word "beauty". I would be lying if I said I don't use expressions like "that is horrible" or "that is so beautiful" to describe, for instance, the feelings a picture produces in me. But perhaps I am not thinking about beauty when I say that. I am probably thinking about something like the "honesty" that a work of art must have, that which makes it convincing. Yesterday, I went with a friend to one of those shops that sells posters. She wanted my opinion about the pictures she was planning to buy. When I saw the pictures in the shop, I said straight away I didn't like them, and she asked me why. The only thing I could say, was that there was something unconvincing about them. They were more like advertisements than art, in the sense that everything there was perfectly and artificially arranged to catch the viewer's eyes. In fact, they were neither ugly nor poorly made but... they were not art, in my opinion. (Listen, I am not saying "honesty" is a sufficient condition for something to be considered as art, what I am saying is that **I** think it is a necessary one).*

*I believe that what I call "honesty" and what Tristan Tzara calls "the intensity of a personality" are the same thing. I used to appreciate works of art for the feeling or emotion which they conveyed, but now I feel that this is not enough. Do you know what I mean? When one focusses on feeling and/or emotion, one automatically valorises either strong emotions - which limits one to a certain kind of work - or one tends to overestimate works that communicate nothing more than easy emotions. "Honesty" seems to me a more generous word, because it measures "the intensity of a personality" without pointing towards any particular kind of "hot" personality. It is funny! Nowadays, we avoid using words such as beauty and truth, but in a strange way words like honesty and expressions like "intensity of personality" seem to imply the concept of truth. In fact I do mean something like the medieval (divine) idea of beauty when I say "honesty". But the contemporary use of the word beauty to describe a work of art has become worn out by overuse.*

*I am just wondering whether I would use this same concept of "honesty" to justify the quality of a picture, when I look at a medieval or renaissance painting, for instance. I*

*mean, whether this request for "honesty" in a work of art isn't a category only for what is contemporary. Think of Giotto: isn't it odd to talk about honesty when we look at "Annunciation to St Anne" or "Lamentation"? And the funniest thing is that the painter was, in some way, **trying to sell something**, a divine thing, sure, but he was trying to sell something. Do you know what I mean? Most certainly paintings were planned to affect the viewer in a very specific way. Perhaps what I call honesty is not incompatible with the intention to affect or persuade the viewer.*

7-The rebel artists showed a total disregard for public feelings. The establishment considered that the artists of the avant garde were either negligible or despicable. In the eyes of the vast majority, theirs was bad art. Within half a century this judgement was reversed.

8-Avant garde is fundamental to an understanding of modern taste. With *avant garde*, the concept of novelty became inseparable from the idea of advance in art. And this endless quest of the new is as much a product of a consumerist age as kitsch, its reflex.

The chief task of a genius is precisely to invent a stereotype!  
(Baudelaire)

Anything really new is repulsive, because it is abnormal and unreasonable!  
(Asger Jorn)

*I've been wondering why this word "new" acquired so much importance in the modern movement, and why nowadays it has become a trap... Well, anyone can easily imagine why the moderns were so enthusiastic and optimistic about the benefits of the new. Early this century, the belief in the idea of progress was taken as almost common-sense. Moreover, the moderns saw a direct relationship between external forms and our internal mechanisms. Pooh! If one destroys the past, one will be able to build up a new society: for the modern, new forms would generate a revolution in the human spirit and, consequently, would promote the dream of a progressive homogeneous society (based on the avant-garde's taste, of course). What happened, then, to these ideals? I think that the explosion of mass-production and consumption showed how the modernist beliefs were fragile. Our society absorbed the form, but got rid of the content of the modernist ideas. Do you know what I mean? We too crave for the new, but merely in order to crucify boredom!? Novelty for the sake of novelty?*

*I think I have been resisting the temptation of considering the new as an easy way of attracting attention of a public that is each day more in need of seeing unfamiliar things (to dig them up, excavate them, dust them off and start from scratch). But it is too hard to know exactly how much of one and one's work is contaminated by that "Zeitgeist"...*

9-The *avant garde* had a stabilising effect on the already conservative middle class taste. Since art no longer corresponded to the reality recognised by the general public, and artists ceased to communicate with people, a reactionary resentment toward culture arose and



people turned toward kitsch, which could be enjoyed without effort.

Art is a private thing, the artist makes it for himself; a **comprehensive** work is  
the product of a journalist.  
(Tristan Tzara)

Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creation, and the  
peasant finds no natural urgency towards Picasso.  
(Clement Greenberg)

*I can't see when there was ever as much popular interest in art as there is now! Today there is a huge audience who rush around from one gallery to another, and who will go to every museum exhibition in the books...Oh yes! It probably hasn't anything to do with purifying people's life, but just to spend time, because there is much more leisure time now for cultural activities, and because art seems to be perfectly attuned to the 20th century predominantly minimal-attention-span visual culture. What do I mean? It is so obvious! If you listen to music or read a book, it takes (imposed!) hours or days, whereas you can look at a work of art at your own tempo ( I dare say that is practically no more than the blinking of an eye).*

*I read somewhere that the dilemma of culture in our century is that, if noble it had to remain rare, if common it had to become vulgar. I think this has already started being refuted by situation I mention above. In fact, I believe that the tendency is for us to reach a midway between the extremes of an aristocratic society and a plebeian one. Our age is an age of eclecticism, and each day we become more and more adapted to live together with things that are absolutely opposite to each other, without refuting some in favour of another. There is no inherent contradiction implied in enjoying Bach and Elvis Presley. Don't you think so? No? Do you think I adopt a relativistic position that can be very baneful? You call this "moral laxity"? That is a good point! And you, what did you say Stephen Bayley said? "Contemporary eclecticism differs from the common idea one has about eclecticism, because today everything becomes a cliché too quickly, therefore potentially kitsch!" Uhm, interesting...And then, what? You conclude, I guess, that my praise for eclecticism is nothing more than a praise for kitsch! But, Mr. Bayley, when you are not wearing your glasses, you may make such broad generalizations. But allow your view to come into focus and, I think you will find, that contemporary eclecticism is not so different from the traditional kind. Do you think when I used to enjoy opera and hip-hop I was eclectic, but now that I have a CD that mixes both, (bought from HMV!) I am merely a cliché?*

*Mr.Clement, as a last comment, I would like to say that I agree with you in that for enjoying Picasso one needs a considerable amount of "conditioning" (which demands time, of course). Well, if I am not mistaken, in the same essay you seem to insinuate that a superior culture is made possible only where you have the labour of serfs or slaves, so that some can spend time only with culture. All right! Your statement about slaves and serfs is irrelevant to me now. But I am quite interested in the relationship you set between free time and culture. What I don't understand is: if leisure time is the essence of this "conditioning"*

*of a superior culture, then why don't you consider us in a privileged position in comparison with other societies, since we now have an increasing quantity of spare time? Instead, you (romantically) miss slavish societies. This question, it seems to me, can no longer be put as a matter of having, or not having, enough time to enjoy culture. Rather, it has to do with what people want to do with their spare time. We do have more leisure time than any other age, but maybe we want to use it for watching TV (or even going to museums).*

10-Taste is a matter of choice. But more than anything else, modern taste is a matter of discrimination because in consuming we reveal our social and cultural attitudes. And art is clearly used as a means of exclusion in the sense that a class consolidates its identity by developing certain aesthetic values and collecting certain types of objects.

#### HIGH CULTURE

- interest in creative process and symbolism.
- preference for experimentation.
- introspection preferred to action.
- accepts different levels of meaning.
- expects consideration of philosophical, psychological and social issues.

#### UPPER MIDDLE CULTURE

- a less literary verbal culture.
- figurative and narrative art preferred, especially if illustrative of individual achievement or upward mobility.
- enjoys 19th century art and opera, but not early music or contemporary art.

#### LOWER MIDDLE CLASS

- form must unambiguously express meaning.
- demands conclusion.
- interested in performers, not in writers or directors.
- influenced by word-of-mouth judgement.

#### LOW CULTURE

- no concern with abstract ideas, form must be entirely subservient to content.
- demands crude morality with dramatic demarcation but usually limited to family or individual problems.
- performer is paramount, enjoys vicarious contact with stars.
- considers ornateness attractive.

(Adapted from Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*, 1974)

Taste is an allusive subject since it is both a mirror and a window.  
(Stephen Bayley)

*That image of the mirror and window is so inspiring... In a mirror we see ourselves, and from the window we see the world! I never thought about taste in terms of a window. And by that I mean I never visualised my own taste as a circumscribed space from where I*

*look to the outside. This means that everything I see is contaminated by my taste, since it is from there that I look at things. This means taste governs almost all of our choices. It means that if I am a lover of kitsch (in a sort of camp way, sorry), then I tend to turn everything I put my eyes upon, including my work of art, into kitsch.. Uhrrr!... I am dramatising things, as always! First, I love things other than kitsch, that means what I call "my taste" is a complex combination of tastes; second, no one said taste is the only window.*

*What about that list? Yes, the one that was going around ... is its purpose finding out about our "rank"? Let me see in which category I will be "framed". It is not difficult! Judging from my operas and figurative paintings... OK! And you say this list is not trying to set what is good or bad in terms of taste. I don't know what happens with me, but I immediately associate words like high and low with judgement of values. I mean, to be high is to be good, and to be low is to be bad! Am I wrong? Hmmm! "**Our pride is more offended by attacks on our taste than on our opinion!**" (La Rochefoucault)*

*Anyway, I think there are at least ... urm ... three hundred good tastes, and if someone comes to me with a good taste, that is not like mine, I would ask that person, **gently**, to stay with his or her good taste, and **I. Will. Stay. With. Mine!***

11-But are aesthetic convictions or beliefs, as subject to the capricious depredation of time, as taste? How can we now be able to distinguish what is good or bad in art?

In the long run, there are only two kinds of art, the good and the bad. And **experience** is the only court to appeal in art. Without enough experience no one has the right to be heard on this subject.  
(Clement Greeberg)

I believe that the quality of badness in a work of art derives from an awareness of beauty. The ability to resist the dynamic forces of taste or this power to say something personal, comes near to a definition of what in the present century we find admirable in art.  
(Quentin Bell)

*Am I a person who is able to resist "taste"? Well, on the one hand, I would say no! Because my strong adaptive capacity would hardly allow me to impose myself on the world. I would probably be moulded by it. But, on the other hand, I see this attribute of being unconscious of beauty as a characteristic one can find in children. And I think I have a kind of personality that retains certain childish characteristics; and which allows me to paint with a sort of detachment from certain adult aesthetic rules. Of course I no longer have the same entirety between thought and action as I had as a child, but excitement and pleasure are still the strongest elements in that balance. (I would like to make it clear that the words excitement and pleasure are being used here in a context that has to do with my memories of childish games, and the sort of emotion I got from them). I think painting is one of the few things I do that allows me to re-experience, with reasonable intensity, some sensations I had when I was a child; and which I associate with feelings of total harmony with the*

*world. If I could I translate into words, the sort of harmony I am talking about, I would describe it as losing the notion that makes me distinguish between what is inside and what is outside myself or... being able to be someone else for a while ... You know, that sort of thing.*

12-The belief of restoring man's cultural autonomy, resisting consumer society and its manipulation of mass taste (which implies the encouragement of kitsch), is still a controversial one. While for some, kitsch is the product of a disintegrated world (to be compared with the last days of the Roman empire), and as such, cannot but represent aesthetic evil; for others, this is the moment for redeeming kitsch intentionally and consciously, since it belongs by right to our age: "The most natural way toward good taste passes through bad taste!"...

The pedagogical function of kitsch has been neglected because of the innumerable bad connotations of the term and also because of the instinctive tendency of the writers on this subject to overrate their own aesthetic judgement.

In a bourgeois society, and generally in a meritocratic one, the passage through kitsch is the normal passage in order to reach the genuine...Kitsch is pleasurable to the members of mass society, and through pleasure, it allows them to attain the level of higher exigencies and to pass from sentimentality to sensation!

(Abraham Moles)

*Tonight is our last meeting! And I have prepared something to show you... May I? I am lucky you are in a good mood, because it is quite a big...Don't worry! I think you are going to have some fun. Moreover, it's interesting ("You know, Ward, there's only one thing that matters, only one. Is it interesting?", Georgia O'Keeffe)! I promise you, I will try to be as short as I can... I know, I know, I still have "to weave" my ultimate comment on kitsch!*

*Let me start! We have been talking so much about taste, that it is quite impossible to go home and just forget about that. In the last few weeks I became a bit obsessed by the subject, because I suddenly realised that taste doesn't belong to the realm of purely subjective preferences, as I ingeniously would have liked to believe. Rather, it seems to have lots of implications concerning our relation with ourselves and others. I have here with me a list I have been writing, in a completely unpretentious way, just by observing my own attitudes towards taste. Let me read it to you:*

*1) Taste is present not only when I choose my clothes or objects, but when I choose my friends, my feelings, and my attitudes as well.*

*2) I think eclecticism in taste doesn't mean I have many different tastes, but that I have only **one** taste, that is to be eclectic.*

*3) I can see good taste in tastes other than mine, but I can see as well bad tastes in tastes like mine... Does this prove I am impartial to judge the taste of others? Or does it mean that every judgement I make is based only, **and only**, in my own taste?*

*4) I imagine there is a big taste, and then a taste a bit smaller than that inside it, and successively so until it becomes one only taste, mine (taste should be as singular as our personalities!).*

5) *The idea of a world where everybody has the same taste as mine is unbearable. It would be not only boring, but imprisoning!*

6) *Taste has to do with a way of differentiating myself from other people.*

7) *My taste changed as many times, during my life as the group of people I relate to. I can't tell you precisely what changes first, whether friends or taste...*

7) *I have the impression that my taste improves as time goes by. In fact, what I am saying is that each day I feel not only that I know more about my own taste, but that I am more open to "amplify" the sets of things which are contained in my taste (probably a characteristic of having an eclectic taste!).*

*Well, I would have more things to say, but I think I should rather stop, before I reveal to you my whole essence (or taste?)... What? Did you? I think spending time with silly lists means that we are both in need of a psychoanalyst?*

*Kitsch? Where was I? Well, I am not sure whether I have something to say that I haven't already said but the feeling I have is that we are all ending this night more convinced that kitsch is not that bad, am I wrong?... No? Your position is still that of "The last days of the Roman Empire". OK, I am not going to involve any of you in my conclusion. You all know I embraced kitsch from the start. Good! I should confess that I often got really worried about myself during the last few weeks. Yes! I worried because I wondered if I was mistaken. As I am easily influenced, some days I almost thought of becoming modernist ("Less is more!"- Rudwlg Mies Van der Rohe), and forgetting about these bloody days as a plebeian post-modern. I started then being suspicious of my "romantic" side: Sibelius, Mahler, why did they need to express their feelings that way? It suddenly seemed so obvious... the ups and downs...; And why did I need "to leave my blood" in a painting? Wasn't that a disgusting analogy in the end? Or was it just a sign of bad taste? And all these feelings I used to think of as being so pure, raw, and genuine, weren't just easy-too-easy cheap emotion? Poor me! But I recovered Mrs Modernists, "**Less is boooore!**" Well, it is not exactly like that, because, in my eclecticism I have enough space in my heart for the modern as well. In fact, if Mr Abraham was right in his theory, here I am, on the way to purifying my taste through the horrendous Kitsch bad-taste (You know, I started enjoying early music, contemporary and experimental classical music during the time we were having our intensive "Kit-Kat" debates!).*

*Ultimately, my comment for the adorers of the motto "Rome and the Apocalypse", is that their implied idea that the presence of a uniform style is what characterises a culture, is an outmoded one. At a time when nations are uniting, we will probably find a wide variety of styles, and that doesn't mean the end of an age, that means the start of a new one. So I guess!*

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