

**THE QUEST FOR HEIMAT**  
**DISCOURSES ON KITSCH**  
**IN THE REALM OF ART PRACTICE**

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR PHD

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## ABSTRACT

This practice-led PhD investigates the complexities of the concept of kitsch in relation to art and aims to open up its discourses to new questioning in the context of artistic practice. The first part of the written element offers an analysis of the literature that established and developed the field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Greenberg, Adorno, Olalquiaga and Kulka as key theoreticians. With a focus on kitsch as a structural cipher in the shaping of modern and post-modern concepts, an argument is built for a correlation between its previous conceptual modifications and a discourse on belonging. A term or sentiment rendered problematic by Fascism, globalization and mass migration, the theorization of this correlation between kitsch and belonging is directed at a necessary re-orientating task for art itself. Rejecting both modernist arguments against kitsch and its contemporary nostalgic recuperation, an understanding of kitsch as a heterogeneous element is elaborated through Bataille's notions of the 'formless' and 'non-productive expenditure'. This understanding dispenses with previous conceptualizations of dialectic oppositions and instead interprets kitsch as a dynamic agent of cultural politics. Explained as an unassimilable remainder in the context of philosophical discourse and as surplus/waste in material terms, an argument is constructed for kitsch as a cultural 'recycling machine' and a marker between the useful and the useless that frees it from traditional hierarchies of class and taste. Arguing for an art that proclaims its status *vis-à-vis* the commodity not antagonistically but rather paradoxically, by embedding itself further within commodification, the concluding chapter addresses the practical implications for kitsch elaborated here. Through a consideration of the works of Jeff Koons, John Currin and Damien Hirst it proposes a strategy for artistic practice which can neither be reduced to contradictions nor appropriated, but deranges art itself from its traditionally allocated position.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	1
CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION .....	4
CHAPTER 2 : HOME AND A WAY .....	30
GREENBERG.....	35
ADORNO.....	54
CHAPTER 3 : BELONGING AND BELONGINGS.....	77
OLALQUIAGA .....	77
KULKA.....	124
CHAPTER 4 : KITSCH AFTER KITSCH.....	153
CHAPTER 5 : CONCLUSIONS – DISCOURSES ON KITSCH IN THE REALM OF ART PRACTICE .....	194
KOONS.....	204
CURRIN.....	219
HIRST .....	233
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	243
APPENDIX .....	257

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Jeff Koons, *Puppy*, steel, soil, plants, 12.4m, 1992 (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao).

John Currin, *Anniversary Nude*, oil on canvas, 86.4x106.7 cm, 2008 (Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ London).

Damien Hirst, *For the Love of God*, platinum, diamonds and human teeth, 17.1x12.7x19.1 cm, 2007.

## STUDIO PRACTICE 2003 – 2007 (SELECTION)

*Landscape after Bruegel*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 116x200 cm, 2003.

*Landscape after Bruegel*, detail.

*Pussycat*, combed and trimmed fake fur, 160x120 cm, 2003.

*Trace*, oil, varnish and light-reflecting glass beads on cotton, 88x71 cm, 2004.

*Skin*, spray paint and cotton thread (detail), 2005.

*Grauzone*, oil and spray paint on cotton (detail), 2005.

*Puddle*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 160x210 cm, 2006.

*Pitcher Picture (VII)*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 125x105 cm, 2006.

*The Day After*, oil and gloss paint on cotton, 163x122 cm, 2006.

*When Platitudes Become Form*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 174.5x141 cm, 2006.

*Reflector*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 150x170 cm, 2007.

*Chandelier Verona*, oil and varnish on Perspex, 150x120 cm, 2007.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*As a child I longed to have a garden gnome. However, as I grew up in a flat high above the ground with no garden my wish was deemed inappropriate and not taken seriously by my parents. The desire persisted nevertheless and I decided to buy myself one with the first money I earned as an adult. I would do this regardless of living circumstances and if I still chanced to inhabit a home with no garden, so I thought, I would simply put my gnome on the sideboard in the living room.*

Why another text on kitsch? It can be argued that the topicality which kitsch had within modernist discourses in relation to art and politics, has been superseded by what we refer to today as postmodern conditions<sup>1</sup>. Conditions, which are characterised by an all-encompassing embrace of 'low' and 'high' culture, that seems to have made any renewed discourse on kitsch and art redundant. Kitsch, as a term of critique that denotes aesthetic inadequacy, has become stripped of its potential for aesthetic offence. As pastiche, irony, the employment of marketing strategies and the appropriation of an aesthetic iconography of 'low' culture in high art have become institutionalized and acknowledged as common strategies of contemporary artistic practice, so kitsch has lost its currency as an aesthetic judgment and its status as a trope for a critical discourse on art. In contemporary consumer culture, kitsch is integral to everyday life and has lost its urgency even to the point of the term becoming outmoded, old-fashioned and nostalgic.

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<sup>1</sup> There is no agreement amongst theoreticians regarding the conceptualization of Postmodernism and its relation to Modernism. J. Habermas (I refer to his acceptance speech for the Adorno Prize, September 1980) and J. Frow (*Time & Commodity Culture – Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity*, 1997) argue that Postmodernism cannot be conceived of as a radically new period. Habermas and Frow suggest that it rather has to be understood as a means for periodization, as 'Modernity: An Unfinished Project' (Habermas) or as a concept to come to terms with the immanent contradictions of a 'Modernism that has been going on for too long' (Frow). M. Augé (*Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 1995) rejects the term entirely and refers to Postmodernism as the 'Hypermodern'. C. Olalquiaga (*Megalopolis – Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*, 1992) conceives of Postmodernism as the kitsch period *per se* and as radically distinct from Modernity. Her position is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Kitsch permeates all spheres of Western society to the extent that in Post-modernism the antagonism between art and kitsch has lessened. As kitsch has become a recognized artistic strategy, the question for a renewed discussion is, whether kitsch asks for a new formulation as it re-appears in guises within the contemporary spectacle. Not unlike the allegorical figure of *Baldanders*<sup>2</sup>, whose name literally means 'soon different', which vexes *Simplicius Simplicissimus* in Gimmelshausen's seminal novel of the Baroque (1669), kitsch 'haunts' a wide range of objects and phenomena, re-appearing in new disguises as a dis-empowered cipher of aesthetic, economic and social politics, confronting us with our own pretensions in regard to notions of civilized taste. Kitsch does not mean the same in different historical and cultural contexts. Modernist theoreticians see kitsch as a transcultural value. For Greenberg it is a given. Adorno regards it as a potential means for demarcation, albeit one that can only consolidate his pessimistic stance. Postmodern discourses adopt the modernist stance of the given. They either attempt to redeem kitsch within this conceptual framework or, by expanding on modernist concepts, develop an argument for its rejection in postmodern conditions. In my contribution I aspire to develop notions of kitsch not as a given but as a tool. I understand this distinction between kitsch as a 'given' and kitsch as a 'tool' in the context of Rorty's<sup>3</sup> differentiation between what he

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to H. J. C. Gimmelshausen, *Abenteuerlicher Simplicius Simplicissimus* (München: Wilhelm Goldmann Verlag, Goldmann Klassiker, Band 7506, Book 6, Chapter IX, pp. 425-428). Towards the end of his life *Simplicius* has a strange encounter with a classical statue which, on closer examination, addresses him with the words: "Leave me in peace! I am *Baldanders*," *Simplicius* replies: "I very well see that you are soon another. At first you were a dead stone but now you are a living body; but who are you besides that: the devil or his mother?" *Baldanders* explains that he has been *Simplicius*: "Other throughout his life. After this statement *Baldanders* transforms himself into a mighty oak tree, then a pig, a sausage, the farmer's faeces, a meadow of clover, a cow-pat, a flower, a twig, a mulberry tree and a beautiful silk rug before finally re-assuming human shape. *Baldanders* then confesses 'inconsistency is his home and consistency his fiercest enemy' and in saying this transforms himself into a bird and flies away, leaving *Simplicius* bewildered and with no further explanation. (The passages quoted here are taken from the German original and are my own translations. None of the English publications of this book I consulted includes this final part of the novel to which I am referring.)

<sup>3</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: New York, Port Chester, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

calls a 'final vocabulary', employed to justify actions and beliefs in order to formulate praise and contempt and the 'ironist' vocabulary which does not seek to establish a relation to real essence and remains open to doubt and questioning. This differentiation applies to different modes for kitsch: kitsch as a term of critique and marker for exclusion and kitsch as a notion that is constantly tested against different realities and as such connotes doing and making rather than judging. However, the difficulty for any discourse on kitsch persists that although kitsch remains elusive, ill-defined and relative to history and standards of taste it has, in the everyday, a common-sense meaning. It is familiar to us and we can recognize it without difficulty, but simultaneously we cannot conclude from this common-sense understanding any particulars that this concept definitively entails. Kitsch cannot be pinned down as a specific category or form<sup>4</sup>. According to Calinescu it is one of the "most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics."<sup>5</sup> The problem is to find a context for a discussion that neither pre-empts itself by being too open and accommodating too many facets of kitsch, nor starts a discussion with a foreclosure on the subject by an over-simplistic alignment to 'bad taste'. Kitsch has been discussed in economical, sociological, ethical, psychological, political, aesthetic and historical contexts and it can be explained and understood within all these categories. What remains its common denominator in all these discourses is that kitsch, a word with negative connotations by definition, is always an 'Other'. This points toward the complexities that are involved in an investigation of kitsch: immanent to its discourse are issues of taste linked to civil moral codes of conduct (ethics) and class hierarchies within specific historical contexts. Whether something is considered kitsch is intimately linked to locality and personal sensibilities

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According to Rorty the discourse of "final vocabulary" is characterized by terminologies such as "good", "right", "beautiful", "true", "Christ", "professional standards", "progressive", "rigorous" and "creative" (R. Rorty, 1989, p. 73).

<sup>4</sup> The abstract notion of kitsch lacks specificity and cannot be related to particular things that speak of its essence.

<sup>5</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 232.

which change with time. Kitsch as a term of negativity is applied as a verb<sup>6</sup> or noun to (mass-produced) objects in bad taste, certain experiences and people with sentimental attitudes<sup>7</sup> and descriptions of many phenomena from low art and popular culture, Social Realism and moral debasement<sup>8</sup>. Its use metamorphoses through various discourses conveying moods as diverse as the celebratory, the Dionysian, the tacky, the dull, the banal and the suburban. As these moods however remain changeable surface attributes of kitsch and habitual without ever becoming its essence, kitsch is only anecdotally available and remains an un-nameable and a void into which a wide range of meanings can be superimposed. And due to this "open-ended indeterminacy" and its "hallucinatory power"<sup>9</sup>, kitsch stays an ill-described term to be determined by the predilections of particular discourses.

I argue that kitsch remains a sign that can contribute to the concept of art in the present as it throws illumination on how complex this very concept has evolved. As kitsch has become obsolete as a modernist critical category we now have the necessary distance to discuss kitsch as an agent within the dynamics of aesthetic politics and social formations. My interest in renewing a discourse for kitsch is based in an exploration of kitsch as a 'hinge' or lever within the dynamic of previous discourses and narratives and by doing so sketches out some trajectories of 'kitsch after kitsch'. Consequently the focus of my practice-based research is not limited to kitsch as subject matter and a stylistic device in painting but also directed at the dynamics of kitsch within cultural politics that shape the conditions of contemporary painting practice.

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<sup>6</sup> Bernese Swiss-German dialect has the slang verb 'kitsche' meaning to buy something useless at a cheap price.

<sup>7</sup> I refer to L. Giesz, "Kitsch-man as Tourist", in *Kitsch – an anthology of bad taste*, ed. G. Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), pp. 156-173. 'Kitsch-man' is a term coined by H. Broch in his essay "Some notes on the Problem of Kitsch", first published in 1933. I refer to "Some notes on the Problem of Kitsch", in *Dichten und Erkennen*, vol. 1 (Zürich, 1955), p. 295.

Giesz defines 'kitsch-man' as a person with "a specific inclination [...] to produce kitsch or to take pleasure in it" (L. Giesz, 1969, p. 159).

<sup>8</sup> I refer to H. Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch", in *Kitsch – an anthology of bad taste*, ed. G. Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), pp. 49-76. Broch characterizes kitsch as 'ethically evil' and the 'Anti-Christ'.

<sup>9</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 228.



Kitsch is a notion with shallow historical depth<sup>10</sup>. Closely associated with Romanticism as a period of transition “from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendental ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty”<sup>11</sup>, the emergence of kitsch as a counter-concept to ‘good taste’ is linked to the overthrow of court societies, (as centres and arbiters of good taste) and an emerging capitalist civil society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that asserts itself by appropriating the platonic ideals of a cultural elite, such as ‘truth’, ‘love’ and ‘beauty’, transforming them into tangible earthly sentiments.

Calinescu conceptualizes kitsch as a concept, structurally necessitated by Modernism’s inner contradictions, where its concern with the present has found its “parodic counterpart in the ‘instant’ beauty of kitsch”<sup>12</sup>, a commodified beauty that “in its various forms is socially distributed like any other commodity subject to the essential market law of supply and demand.”<sup>13</sup> The emergence of kitsch as a term of critique among artist circles in Munich in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>14</sup> is concomitant with early modernization, industrialization, the urbanization of the masses and the availability of new technological means for production and dissemination of commodities and cultural goods. Originally exclusively used among artists as a term of critique for artistic dilettantism and to demarcate amateurism from professionalism, its terminology soon became associated with mass-produced culture and craft in general. Before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the distinction between popular culture and high art did not pose major problems. Popular culture became subsumed as naïve uneducated cultural production,

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<sup>10</sup> Most theoreticians agree that kitsch and Modernity are concomitant phenomena.

<sup>11</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>14</sup> According to Calinescu, the term kitsch came into use in the 1860s and 1870s. For further reading on the etymology of kitsch I also refer to *The Reclam Compendium on Kitsch: Kitsch – Texte und Theorien*, eds. U. Dettmar und T. Küpper (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2007).

linked with low taste and producing 'innocent' kitsch'<sup>15</sup>. During the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, with art gaining autonomy from patronage, and in the presence of urbanization and industrialization, the delineation between high and low art manifested itself as a struggle between popular art and commodified culture'<sup>16</sup>. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (with the emergence of artists such as Rousseau [le douanier]) this struggle became increasingly problematic as the classic definition of popular culture itself became more complexified. Due to these developments kitsch gained further momentum in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and established itself internationally as a term of socio-political importance. Because of rapid improvements of technological means for mass-production and dissemination kitsch now no longer primarily expressed aesthetic inadequacy in artistic production but rather an aesthetic incompetence located in the viewer/audient/consumer. As a means of demarcation between a culturally educated elite and an unsophisticated populace, kitsch became a political issue at the heart of class hierarchies'<sup>17</sup>. Defined as a lack of aesthetic sensibility in the populace, it gained political importance within pedagogical movements'<sup>18</sup>, which considered the

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<sup>15</sup> I understand 'innocent kitsch' as folk art in its original meaning and function: art that has been authentically made but which nevertheless might be judged as kitsch.

<sup>16</sup> World Exhibitions conceived as a means to educate the taste of the masses became the major mass-cultural phenomena of the time.

<sup>17</sup> This shift paves the way for Greenberg's employment of kitsch as a structural cipher to reinstate values in art through a demarcation of a cultivated elite and the uneducated masses, who have neither the appropriate knowledge nor enough leisure time to appreciate art and must therefore 'content themselves with kitsch'.

<sup>18</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reform movements aiming at a general education of the populace in matters of taste developed within most industrialized countries of Europe. For these movements the dissemination of good taste became the most important political and cultural task of society. For further reading I refer to G. E. Pazaurek, *Guter und schlechter Geschmack im Kunstgewerbe* (1912) in *The Reclam Compendium*, a manifesto for aesthetic education Pazaurek wrote while Director of the National Arts and Crafts Museum in Stuttgart. *The Reclam Compendium* enlists other German taste reform movements with similar aims, such as the "*Deutscher Werkbund*" (German Work Association), the "*Kunsterziehungsbewegung*" (Art Education Movement), the "*Dürerbund*" (The Dürer Association) and the "*Jugend-schriftenbewegung*" (The Movement for Youth Literature [all my translations]).

In "Who's afraid of kitsch? The impact of taste reforms in the Netherlands" I. Cieraad and S. Porte examine the 'campaign against the beguilement of taste' at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands through staged exhibitions which sought to demonstrate 'right' and 'wrong' design. For further reading see I. Cieraad and S. Porte, "Who's afraid of kitsch? The

dissemination of good taste through education to be the main political and cultural tasks of a general policy of taste reforms to further a feeling for national identity and economic sense. These movements of taste reform reflect on a shift in focus surrounding the concept of kitsch. Alongside these attempts at an extensive aesthetic education emerges the need for a systematic and comprehensive overview of kitsch, in which kitsch can be categorized and displayed as a didactic tool. Whilst these early endeavours for a general reform of taste are still characterized by an optimistic belief in the possible benefits of education to improve the aesthetic sensibility of the masses, kitsch becomes in the 1920's and '30s a diagnostic term for the prevalent *Zeitgeist* and a means for high art to legitimize itself antagonistically to these conditions, indicating a general cultural crisis.<sup>19</sup>

Modernist theoreticians<sup>20</sup> discuss kitsch as a cipher of negativity. Writing within the context of late Capitalism and the climate of an escalating political crisis in Europe, they employ kitsch as a structural feature conceived antithetically to the modernist project. Modernism's emphasis on the antitraditional, the experiment, and the 'here and now', its quest for novelty and constant change are conceived in opposition to a concept of kitsch that suggests repetition, tradition, banality and triteness. According to Calinescu "[The] relationship between kitsch and the avant-garde may in a sense be taken as a caricature of the central principle of modernity"<sup>21</sup> by which he means that kitsch unmasks the inherent paradox of High Modernism as what Octavio Paz called the 'tradition against itself'. As a caricature of both, what is

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impact of taste reforms in the Netherlands", in *Home Cultures, the Journal of architecture, design & domestic space*, Berg, vol. 3, issue three (November 2006): pp. 273-292.

The World Exhibition at Crystal Palace in London was similarly conceived of by Prince Albert as a defence against the onslaught of mass production and a means to enhance aesthetic sensibility in 'common' people.

<sup>19</sup> I refer to Y-A. Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 1995). Interpreting the striving for essentialism in Modernist painting as a result of a larger historical crisis caused by industrialization and its impact on painting, Bois argues that the emphasis on touch and gesture in 'Modernist painting' is less an expression of its self-reflexivity and more a device to offset its mode of production against industrialized technologies.

<sup>20</sup> I refer to the representatives of modernist anti-kitsch positions discussed here.

<sup>21</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 254.

commonly termed the Baudelairian Modernity as a critical, aesthetic project and the bourgeois conception of modernization as a social practice and a project of progress, kitsch can be understood simultaneously as the embodied sentiment of a “fascination for the present with a longing for another time”<sup>22</sup> and a product of industrial revolution with its core values of profitability, excess and rapid obsolescence.

Kitsch as Modernism’s repressed ‘Other’ suggests, according to Calinescu, an understanding of kitsch as the uncanny *Doppelgänger* of Modernism, hinting at a dependency in which kitsch is structurally necessitated by a Modernism which, in order to overcome its inherent contradictions, defines itself on binary oppositions. As a fixed counter-concept to high art<sup>23</sup>, kitsch becomes a cipher for mass production, the entertainment industry, popular culture, Social Realism and the “culture industry” (Adorno), against which Modernism develops its own narrative. As this antidote to the modernist project, kitsch applies to “virtually anything subject to judgments of taste”<sup>24</sup> as a synonym for “rejecting it outright as distasteful, repugnant, or even disgusting”<sup>25</sup>. Similar to Calinescu’s statement, Musil comments in his essay “*Über die Dummheit*”<sup>26</sup> (On Stupidity) on ‘stupid’ and ‘kitsch’ as underdeveloped terms of criticism with no fixed meaning, commonly used indiscriminately to reject something outright.

As a generic term of critique, kitsch lacks in modernist discourses specificity and social agency as it is equated with the culture and entertainment industries, against which avant-garde art defines itself as autonomous and permanently homeless within a society/culture to which it can no longer belong.

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<sup>22</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> In modernist discourses the term avant-garde art is employed as a synonym for high, serious, genuine, authentic or autonomous art.

<sup>24</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 235.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>26</sup> R. Musil, “Über die Dummheit”, lecture to the *Österreichischen Werkbund* (The Austrian Workmen’s Association [my translation]), 11<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1937.

Contemporary literature on kitsch expands the concept and attempts to redeem (parts of) kitsch within the context of popular culture, valuing it as an aesthetic manifestation of cultural significance and establishing it as a valid category of popular taste and as a means to express identity. Focusing on cultural and social processes (mass migration, globalization), these inquiries analyse kitsch as a phenomenon with redemptive potential saturated with humanity. The focus of kitsch is shifted from the object into experience. As a mediator of individual memory with concrete reality these approaches conceive kitsch as a means of knowing and dealing with reality that cannot be reproduced otherwise. As this means to create subjective 'homeyness' and shared communality, kitsch can fulfil a positive role in the formation of sociality and local identity. As kitsch is united from a discourse on taste and the context of class-hierarchies, rather than discussing kitsch within art *per se*, these positions contextualize it together with popular art as two sides of a concept within material culture that are closely linked.

The distinctive shift between the modernist and the contemporary conceptions indicates a relationship between kitsch and a notion of belonging as a bifurcated concept: belonging as an artificially produced sentiment, serving political and ideological purposes and belonging too as a fundamental human need (the longing for a state before alienation) that reaches beyond political, geographical and ideological borders. The fascist notion of 'Blood and Soil' substitutes any inherent feelings of localised identity with a constructed sentiment through a false sublation of the art/life dichotomy, where politics are displaced into a persuasive display of rituals and spectacle. This sentiment is continuously created, represented, nurtured and perpetuated by symbols, which replace genuine political debate by iconographic aesthetics of Fascism. Belonging as a fundamental human need, in contrast, acknowledges that belonging has to remain a quest as the *topos* of its longing can only be arrived at through death.

Both notions of belonging are ultimately utopian in deputizing for real experience as belonging has become impossibility, either on moral or existential grounds. In this context I ask how modernist concepts of kitsch are reflected in 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of belonging (expressed through the vehicle of nationalism) as they have been hijacked by Fascism and the 'culture industry', rendering this fundamental human need deeply problematic and also ask how contemporary discourses on kitsch attempt to reinstate meaning to belonging? If belonging has to be considered as fundamentally unattainable, a notion that indeterminately oscillates between its realization and its impossibility, what role could kitsch as a prop, fetish or transitional object play for providing notions of belonging? Has kitsch even been made a scapegoat or smokescreen for a more fundamental discussion that lies beyond it? I am thinking here of a populace that has been disparaged through aesthetic means and of a re-orientating task for art itself, which could recharge kitsch and belonging.

Due to its multifaceted connotations to notions of belonging (localized identity and nationalism); to high art and mass culture; to class hierarchies and capitalist market conditions, kitsch is a complex issue in relation to art and politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I am an artist; this is the proper definition of my daily occupation and this is the premise of my investigation into kitsch. Within this definition I am a painter, working within the context of discourse of art practice, in which 'the end of painting' has been proclaimed on various occasions<sup>27</sup>. Painting has been declared outmoded, a pre-industrial mode of production in the face of the ready-made and developed technologies, which have opened up the scope for artistic expression and new media in artistic production. The proclamation of 'the end of painting' creates room for different scenarios: we believe in it and welcome its demise as a sign for a new beginning; we

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<sup>27</sup> With the invention of photography the 'end of painting' was for the first time proclaimed by Delacroche in 1839.

remember painting nostalgically and try to overcome the loss or, as Kermode suggests in *The Sense of an Ending*<sup>28</sup>, we regard the “end as immanent to our fictions”<sup>29</sup> as a means to carry on that enables painting to be affirmed as an ongoing artistic practice that has neither lost its importance nor its vibrancy. Kermode outlines the story of the end as a mythopoetic<sup>30</sup> event, establishing an intimate link between prophecies of the end throughout human history that reflect “our deep need for intelligible Ends”<sup>31</sup> as they initiate a sense of beginning/origin and “a need in the moment of existence to belong.”<sup>32</sup> As we establish “models of the world [that] make tolerable one’s moment between beginning and end”<sup>33</sup> they enable us to “project ourselves [...] past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle.”<sup>34</sup> As with ‘the end of painting’, Kermode states that “[A]pocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited”<sup>35</sup> as disconfirmation of the end is “quickly followed by the invention of new endfictions” which are sought to “restore the pattern of prophecy rather than to abandon it.”<sup>36</sup> This “deferred homecoming”<sup>37</sup> allows us to “make little images of moments which have seemed like ends”<sup>38</sup>, periodizing the continuous flow of time into epochs. Within this understanding of the end, ‘the end of painting’ becomes itself an eternally deferred ‘not yet’, a meditation about its origins/beginnings and ends. Painting, a medium that so often has been pronounced ‘dead’ over the past decades and just as often has been

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<sup>28</sup> F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending - Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> I refer to G. Dorfles’ analysis of myths as constitutive forces of societies in *New rites, New myths* (Turin, 1965). Dorfles distinguishes between a generative *mythopoetic* energy and a deplorable, ill-amended *mythagogic* projection, which gives rise to fetishization and mystification of its own achievements.

<sup>31</sup> F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

resurrected, recalls the figure of a zombie, a cipher and archetype of popular culture and classic horror movies.

To a certain extent there are corollaries between the theoretical positions on kitsch throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the scenarios outlined above that reflect on 'the end of painting'. The first scenario epitomizes modernist positions which project the end onto kitsch and segregate it from art with the aim of conceiving a 'new' autonomous art as a resistance to Fascism and capitalist consumer culture, that detaches itself from former traditions and develops its own specificity through an ongoing process of self-reflexivity. The imperatives of progress and purity, that are inherent in Greenberg's programme for avant-garde art, condemn it to self-annihilation.<sup>39</sup> Greenberg, however, provides neither for a story of the end nor for the narrative of an endlessly deferred home-coming. Out of that theorization Adorno argues that the only possible stance avant-garde art can envisage for itself is a state of permanent homelessness. It is an outcome that is viewed by Adorno with pessimism, anticipating avant-garde's inevitable end; 'death' as its only possible remaining home in an all-encompassing culture industry.

The second scenario is epitomized by the positions of contemporary discourses<sup>40</sup>, within which kitsch surfaces within the category of the outmoded as an embodied sentiment of longing. In the context of mass-migration and globalization, where localized identity and authenticity have become historically lost domains with alienation and displacement as their key issues, these discourses focus on sentiments of nostalgia and melancholia as two modes of a collectivized cultural memory and possible means to overcome loss. Emphasizing the relationship between kitsch and

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<sup>39</sup> In the chapter "Painting: The Task of Mourning" (*Painting as Model*) Bois argues that an apocalyptic myth of the 'end of art' was essential in the inception of abstract painting.

<sup>40</sup> I refer to the representatives discussed in this thesis: Celeste Olalquiaga, Svetlana Boym and Susan Stewart. Tomas Kulka's contemporary contribution aims to accommodate modernist formalism within postmodern conditions. In due course my distinction between modernist and postmodern discourses implies that Kulka, despite his postmodern context, will be subsumed under modernist discourses.



memory, they stress kitsch's potential to trigger and nurture emotions as kitsch represents in these approaches the very traces and residues of a repressed history.

At the core of the third scenario lies the question of whether 'the end of painting' will ever occur. A question which acknowledges that the modernist task of working through 'the end of painting' can neither be abandoned nor denied<sup>41</sup>, but simultaneously maintains that this end has to be conceived as endlessly deferred.<sup>42</sup> In *Painting as Model* Bois discusses the theory of games by Hubert Damisch. Focusing on Damisch's distinction between the generic *game* and the *match*, its specific performance, Bois outlines a postmodern model for painting acknowledging that the historic conditions determining modernist's 'end of painting' – reproducibility and fetishization – are features that have now "permeated all aspects of life".<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, Bois argues, accepting that the "the match 'modernist painting' is finished"<sup>44</sup> means "accepting our project of working through the end again, rather than evading it through increasingly elaborate mechanisms of defence".<sup>45</sup> Through my contribution to a discussion of kitsch I aim to outline trajectories for a painting practice that understands itself as suspended between its origins and an endlessly deferred end.

At the beginning of the third millennium painting enjoys a new revival and calls for its end have again become quieter and gone out of fashion. In spite of this, the legacy of painting, its history and tradition which inform its contemporary conditions, is ever-present, as it has to be as I work in my studio. What contributions to an artistic culture can painting still offer after the monochrome and the ready-made? What does that entail for a painting practice today? What does it mean to work in a pre-industrial mode of artistic practice in the face of new technological and digital media? It is in this context

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<sup>41</sup> Otherwise painting would be reduced to becoming a mere commodity in the art market.

<sup>42</sup> Otherwise painting would have to succumb to a historicist model of linear progression.

<sup>43</sup> Y.-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, p. 242.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

that I ask the question of whether painting is *a priori* kitsch and if so whether it should embrace its intimate proximity to kitsch rather than trying to ignore or camouflage it?

Discussing Damisch's essay "*Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*" Bois cites Damisch: "What does it mean for a painter to *think*?"<sup>46</sup> And expanding on Damisch's questions of the relation between painting, thinking and critical theory, Bois continues:

"Not only what is the role of speculative thought for the painter at work? but above all what is the mode of thought of which painting is at stake? Can one think in painting as one can dream in color? [...] is painting a theoretical practice? Can one designate the place of the theoretical in painting without doing violence to it, without, annexing it to an applied discourse whose meshes are too slack to give a suitable account of painting's irregularities?"<sup>47</sup>

These questions are central to my approach of this practice-led thesis, in which the theoretical research has to develop as an ongoing dialogue with my practice. In order to address these questions in the context of my investigation of kitsch, I ask whether there are different implications between kitsch as a means for expression in artistic practice (in order to address an audience as a maker) and its conceptualization as a term of critique (how it is received by an audience). To investigate kitsch as a topic for a practice-based PhD entails not only discussing it within a theoretical framework, but also addressing it simultaneously as a practitioner. This opens up new perspectives to illuminate this concept. In contrast to the critic and theoretician, the artist is in a position to highlight kitsch as producer and audience, as it is implicit in every artistic practice that the artist produces for a potential audience, an audience, however, from which he himself is never excluded. Practice-based research has to begin with the quotidian – my daily practice as a painter, the projection of my subjectivity onto the world and its re-presentation through the agency of being an artist. The theoretical

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<sup>46</sup> H. Damisch, "*Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*" (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), p. 59; quoted in Y-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, p. 245.

<sup>47</sup> Y-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, p. 243.

research begins with the question of what my philosophical framework is, within which conceptual context I want to situate my inquiry. However, I do not believe that theoretical research and artistic practice sit comfortably side by side as they require different modes of thinking and remain separate fields. The theoretical research interrupts the practice, the practice interrupts the writing. It is within this mutual rupture which reveals the gaps between theory and practice that I see the potential of practice-based research.

My interest in kitsch and its many facets, ranging from attraction to repulsion, informed my artistic practice from its very beginning. What started off as a personal fascination, which initially informed my choice of subject matter and the rendering of my motifs in a highly theatrical manner and illusionistic style, developed into a wider awareness of the relationship between kitsch and painting. Thinking about kitsch in relation to the conditions of painting today I became interested in it as a practice that constantly re-affirms itself as an ongoing vibrant means of human expression against its own outmodedness. Within contemporary critical discourse, due to formal and contextual reasons, such as its intimate connection to mimesis, its suitability for commodification by the (art) market and its long tradition, painting seems of all artistic media the most vulnerable to becoming kitsch<sup>48</sup>.

In my studio practice over the last years, I have developed two strands of painting: 'Dot'-paintings and paintings made with materials, which do not belong to the tradition of painting practice.

Around 2002, I started to do paintings by arranging circular stencils on a canvas, either randomly or following a certain pattern, building up various layers. These paintings are executed with oil, spray paint and latex in a highly

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<sup>48</sup> By 'formal' reasons I understand properties such as illusionism, representation, painting's pre-industrial production mode and its long tradition (a historically grown vocabulary of different styles). Contextual conditions relevant here are issues such as its potential for being a status symbol (fetishization) and its proximity to craft, artefacts, (home) decoration, ornamentation, design and advertising, all of which make it vulnerable to commodification and appropriation.

illusionistic manner, where each dot is rendered as a three-dimensional object (often casting a shadow), contradicting the abstract language of modernist painting that they employ. These works are painted in reverse process: the layer perceived as background is applied last whilst the dots, sitting most prominently on the surface, are done at the very start. The resulting paintings with their overlapping round shapes, which can be read as either tablets/discs or holes, convey an ambivalent space/image. Whilst the dots, read as tablets, discs or coins appear as sitting on the surface, the dots that are perceived as holes mark the space beyond it. This heightens the notion of the 'in-between', the infinitely thin membrane of the painting surface, which separates what is in front from what is behind. Employing the rhetoric of modernist art in an illusionistic manner, these paintings raise questions surrounding the distinction between figuration and abstraction as they become legible neither as abstracts nor as figurations. In the more recent dot-paintings an additional dimension is created by introducing an overall perspectival space through ellipses and the integration of popular images into the overall dot-pattern, a device which heightens their ambivalence further, as in these works the dots become both part of an overall 'abstract' pattern and part also of the pictorial motif.

Parallel to the dot paintings I developed paintings executed with industrial materials, such as fake fur, light-reflecting glass beads used in road markings, net curtains, cotton thread and perspex. Using spray paint applied in several layers sprayed through net curtain, I have created opulent floral patterns, seemingly hallucinating their own 'double' that unfolds into space. The work done in fake fur and with cotton thread attempts to mimic 'painterly' effects through materials that are not specific to painting. Thin cotton thread wound around a stretched canvas gives the impression of a monochrome or a giant brush stroke (as for example in Jason Martin's work). Stretched fake fur is combed (and sometimes cropped) in order to create highly illusionistic, ephemeral enlarged 'portraits' of soft toys in ambivalent poses. I have also produced a series of paintings of crystal chandeliers. The chandeliers painted

with light-reflecting glass beads change in appearance according to the light conditions and the position of the viewer, ranging from invisibility to luminosity. The chandeliers painted with clear varnish on transparent perspex hover between the picture plane and what lies behind it as they are only visible as shadows on the wall when properly lit. Because of their different stylistic appearances these works mutually reinforce each other in the complex discourse of kitsch on various levels: whilst the chandeliers and the paintings involving textiles invoke with their appeal to general notions of 'craft', 'beauty' and 'cuteness' our popular understanding of kitsch, the connection between kitsch and the dot paintings is more ambivalent. Appropriating stylistic devices of 'high' art, these are simultaneously undermined as the modernist repertoire is rendered as an illusion.

The apparent lack of a unified signature style has always been a decisive element of my studio practice and a conscious device of my artistic strategy. The question of how to calibrate a practice between diversity and a personal signature style (which is also a device for marketability), informs one of my interests in kitsch in relation to my painting practice. The relationship between style and kitsch is complex as it involves formal and contextual issues that have changed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the twenty-first. A lack of personal signature style as a characteristic of kitsch and a benchmark that demarcates kitsch from 'proper' artistic production evokes modernist arguments against kitsch, as they conceive it as a perpetuated stylistic cliché and parasitic on a fully matured and recognized style. Within post-modern conditions the relationship between kitsch, style and professionalism has become more complex and controversial. The contemporary context of artistic practice with its core values of freedom, diversity and liberalism has shifted the focus from style as an expression of an epoch to a contemporary fetishization of personal signature style as a means of branding, manifested in today's cult of the artist as celebrity. The contemporary canon to 'do

whatever'<sup>49</sup>, implying an opening up of the formal horizons for artistic practice, is met with a renewed restraint, as personal signature style has become the hallmark of an artist's logo and recognisability in the marketplace. This suggests a general crisis at the centre of contemporary art indicating the inherent contradictions of an art that proclaims total 'freedom' and tolerance as its preconditions but simultaneously insists in retaining its specificity as a distinct discipline.

I moved to London in 1992 but never quite left Switzerland. I grew up in a middle-class family in a suburb of Bern, Switzerland's capital founded in 1191, a small medieval town with 160,000 inhabitants. Both my parents' origins are rural. Their exile from the countryside to an urban environment, from a Catholic to a predominantly Protestant community, was not a voluntary decision. The displacement of my parents left its mark on the environment I was brought up in. The apartment of my childhood, although modern from the outside, was filled with Catholic and rural paraphernalia, which – taken from their original environment of use – transformed the place of my upbringing into a rural and religious *tableau vivant*, which we inhabited in its modern setting.

For the most part, Bern has retained its medieval appearance. The government of Bern takes great pride in protecting its cultural heritage. The limestone façades of the old town are beautifully preserved, whilst the interiors of the buildings have been modernized to accommodate contemporary needs. Due to this modernization behind the still-ancient façades there is a strange tension between the exterior look of these old town houses and the buildings' internal lives, which in the main no longer serve as homes for Bern's inhabitants but now accommodate shops and offices instead. The city of Bern is a museum of reconstructed history that preserves its own history in the Museum of local heritage. The ancient themed

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<sup>49</sup> I refer to T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1999).

fountains, for example, for which it is famed, are all replicas. The originals are exhibited in the Museum of local history, at least, since some political activists from the Canton of Jura, fighting for independence from Bern, beheaded 'Justice' in 1979 toppling her with a lasso from her pedestal above the fountain.

Why this detour about Bern? The multiple connections between my interest in Kirsch and Bern as a cleaned-up model town, Bern as a replica of its former self, Bern as a place where the outmoded and the modern rub shoulders, Bern as a lived-in museum, Bern as the site of my origin and Bern as my *Heimat* are tentative. These myriad connections can only be approached anecdotally, but nevertheless, I believe, they are decisive for my investigation. Bern is my natural habitat; it is the semiotic map of my being that constitutes my early cultural identity. Bern is not only a prototypical modern town, which in its attempt to accommodate present needs in its historical setting, developed into a simulacrum of its former self, it is also my hometown and this notion of *Heimat* was only brought into sharper focus through my leaving of Switzerland. Working as a practising artist in voluntary exile, I ask to what extent our notion and experience of *Heimat* can still be authentic, or whether *Heimat* is something gone forever and now only accessible through memory? Does *Heimat* always refer to a particular place of origin or can *Heimat* signify anywhere where we have settled and have become familiar? Does *Heimat* today simply mean to be accepted, recognised and known, regardless of where we live? What would that imply for a contemporary artistic practice that seems to have lost the incentives to provide for notions of belonging, substituting them with a sentiment of *Heimat* in this register - the artist as celebrity?

My inquiry into Kirsch is then not only informed by the contextual conditions of my work as a painter. As indicated by the title of my thesis, I want to expand the discussion of Kirsch beyond the field of aesthetics into a wider context of belonging. Belonging understood here as a fundamental human need that

has been undermined by Fascism and Modernism's detachment from traditional cultural values, which hitherto nurtured and cultivated a feeling of localized identity. It is this lost feeling of belonging which I try to regain through my discussion of kitsch in the context of *Heimat*. The term *Heimat* refers simultaneously to one's native country and to a subjective feeling of being at home – with oneself.<sup>50</sup> The relevance of this bifurcated notion of *Heimat* to kitsch, which is particularly poignant in Germany due to its Fascist past, lies in *Heimat* being a construct of the opposed notions of the dystopic and the *Lederhosen*<sup>51</sup> utopic.

I have made the deliberate choice to use the German expression '*Heimat*', which refers to notions of 'home', 'homeland', 'land of origin' and feelings of 'belonging' rather than merely a physical space for living. *Heimat*, a notion that is so deeply rooted in German speaking mentality that it is ultimately culturally untranslatable<sup>52</sup>, has become a problematic term in the course of European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>53</sup> as it simultaneously evokes two

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<sup>50</sup> My approach closely follows Edgar Reitz's monumental TV project *Heimat*. Reitz's film cycle, covering German history from 1919 to the dawn of the year 2000, was first broadcast on German television in 1984. Reitz's contribution may be seen as an attempt to rebuild some sort of positive notions of a German idea of *Heimat* contaminated by its fascist past and to renew its availability to the German nation. We are presented with a fictional portrayal of five generations in the lives of the Simon family in the village of *Schabbach*. This depiction is interwoven with actual historical events, touching on Nationalism and explorations of subjectively experienced *Heimat*. Reitz's *Heimat* is a modern German *Odyssey*, beginning as it does with Paul Simon's return from the First World War to his native village and his subsequent feeling of alienation due to his ordeals during the war and lengthy absence from home. Without warning Paul one day leaves his wife and children and sets sail for America. After 18 years he returns a successful businessman, only to discover that his native *Heimat* is not his home anymore, and that with the loss of his origins, the family and place he left behind, he himself no longer belongs.

<sup>51</sup> Literally translated 'leather trousers', an item of national dress worn in Bavaria, commonly associated with German nationalism.

<sup>52</sup> I refer to S. Boyrn, *Common Places* (Cambridge, Massachusetts/London, England: Harvard University Press, 1994). Boyrn suggests that "every cross-cultural study should begin with a glossary of untranslatables and cultural differences, to prevent the transformation of a culture into a mere exotic movie backdrop or kitsch object" (S. Boyrn, 1994, p. 3).

<sup>53</sup> I refer to C. Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials – The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1990). Applegate conceives belonging as a basic human need that is expressed in an idea of *Heimat* and argues that it is a central task today to re-invest *Heimat* with a contemporary notion of meaning. In her investigation of what this notion might today entail, Applegate argues that the German word *Heimat* connotes a burden of references and implications that cannot be adequately conveyed by the term



connotations: an intuitive, atavistic one, and a constructed, social one. Homer's *Odysseus*<sup>54</sup> and *Captain Nemo* of Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*<sup>55</sup> will be the companions on my journey for my quest of *Heimat*. I ask how kitsch asserts feelings of belonging exemplified through these literary journeys, and how it functions as an interlocutor between belonging as a fundamental human feeling and belonging as an artificial sentiment. Both characters *Odysseus* and *Captain Nemo* are ultimately homeless. Although for both protagonists the ship stands as a metaphor for a temporary home and suspense between 'Home' and 'Away' the implications for their individual journeys are quite different. Whilst in Homer's tale the tensions between 'Home' and 'Away' are enacted dialectically, epitomized in the relationship between *Odysseus* and *Penelope*, with Verne they become antithetical, as *Captain Nemo* fails to create an 'elsewhere' in order to make himself real in the world. As a narrative but also due to its formal structure, the *Odyssey* neither has a beginning nor an end. *Odysseus'* eternal quest for *Heimat*, in which the home is never realized indeterminately, vacillates between 'Home' and 'Away'<sup>56</sup>. The ultimate home-coming takes on a mythical

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'homeland'. According to Applegate the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a shift from an idea of *Heimat* as an unified concept of moral and political discourse about belonging and identity to a fragmented notion 'of provincial cultures' and a 'celebration of German nationhood'. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century both these understandings of *Heimat* have become deeply problematic: firstly due to Germany's political past (the appropriation of *Heimat* by the Nazis into a fascist notion of 'Blood and Soil'), subsequently due to Modernism's oppression of popular folk culture and more recently still to globalization and mass-migration.

<sup>54</sup> Throughout my thesis I refer to Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (Harmondsworth, Middlesex U.S.A.: Penguin Books, 1946).

<sup>55</sup> Throughout my thesis I refer to J. Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, ed. C. Miller (Köln: Könnemann, 1997). First published in French in 1870, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* was first translated into English in 1872. In 1916 the book was made into a film (written and directed by Stuart Paton) and cinematized again in 1954 by Walt Disney (directed by Richard Fleischer). Verne's fictional tale of *Captain Nemo*, set in 1866/67, is a paradigmatic novel epitomizing the *Zeitgeist* at the onset of Modernity. Combining two relatively unknown territories, the empiricism and technology of the Industrial Revolution with the unknown topography of the ocean bed as a projection screen for the exotic and fantastic, it exposes the tensions of alienated existence within the conditions of early Modernization.

<sup>56</sup> I refer to W. B. Thalmann, *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992). *Odysseus'* journeys teach us that we cannot authenticate ourselves when we are defined within either the 'Home' or the 'Away'. Only through a departure from the 'Home' can we gain *kleos*, a reputation for being known and 'talked about', but equally (and as the book on *Circe* demonstrates) if we lose ourselves in the 'Away' and forget about the 'Home', we cease to be human and are turned into swine.

dimension. Becoming a paradigm for the journey of man's life, we learn that his departure from the island of *Ithaca* is a prerequisite for an endlessly deferred but nevertheless constantly anticipated return. It is *Odysseus* himself who tells the events of his delayed homecoming upon his successful return, not as they actually were, but as he remembers them. In *Odysseus' récit* the past erupts into the present as his storytelling unfolds as a continuous oscillation between present and past.<sup>57</sup> *Captain Nemo*, in contrast, is a man with no nationality "who has broken all ties that bound him to humanity"<sup>58</sup> as he explains that

"[The] day my Nautilus [his submarine] plunged for the first time beneath the waters the world was at an end for me. That day I bought my last books, my last pamphlets, and my last newspapers; and since then I wish to believe that men no longer think nor write."<sup>59</sup>

*Captain Nemo* confronts the social dysfunctionality brought upon him by Capitalism with a retreat to "the bosom of the waters"<sup>60</sup> as only the

"sea does not belong to despots. On its surface iniquitous rights can still be exercised, men can fight there, devour each other there, and transport all terrestrial horrors there. But at thirty feet below its level their power ceases, their influence dies out, their might disappears. [...] There alone is independence! There I recognise no masters! There I am free!"<sup>61</sup>

Rejecting the terrestrial but simultaneously staying aloof to the aquatic which he attempts to master and domesticate in traditional Western manner, *Captain Nemo* exercises in this peculiar interface between interior and exterior, surface and depth, the anthropomorphism typical of Romanticism and furthered by Modernity: the interpreting of everything as a reflection and

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<sup>57</sup> I draw here a parallel to Benjamin's distinction between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in his essay on Proust [W. Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust", in *Illuminations*, eds. H. Arendt, H. Zohn, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 237-38]. Benjamin's distinction between a 'finite' experience "confined to one sphere" and the 'remembrance of an experience' as an "event [that] is infinite, because it is merely a key to everything that happened before it and after it." (W. Benjamin, 1968, p. 238).

<sup>58</sup> J. Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues*, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

extension of the human sphere. "A masterpiece of modern industry"<sup>62</sup>, his submarine, the *Nautilus* is – not unlike its natural namesake – built with chambers spiralling inwards, epitomizing *Captain Nemo's* own persona that has sealed itself off from the world. A mobile home that conflates the domestic and nomadic, the *Nautilus* evokes the inherent contradictions of being simultaneously mobile and territorial as it reduces *Captain Nemo* to the role of an observer of his own search for a home that can never be recovered. *Captain Nemo* is condemned to a state of permanent homelessness as 'Home' and 'Away' have become indistinguishable. The conflation of 'Home' and 'Away' in the single point of reference, namely *Captain Nemo's* own persona, cancels out any trajectories for departure or return. *Mobilis in Mobile*, *Captain Nemo's* motto, becomes a symbol for a trajectory that lacks momentum and destination, and turns him into an aquatic *flâneur*<sup>63</sup> in search of a home that is everywhere and nowhere.

Discussing Greenberg and Adorno's contributions as key texts that are pervasive for subsequent contemporary inquiries, I analyse in the first and second part of my thesis how kitsch operates as a cipher within modernist and postmodern binary oppositions of high art versus mass culture or good versus bad kitsch. I argue that, in the contemporary context of globalisation and mass migration, the modernist binary opposition of avant-garde art and kitsch becomes in contemporary inquiries a binary coupling with nostalgia and melancholia. These oppositions, be they high art versus mass culture, novelty versus tradition or good versus bad kitsch, are ultimately epitomized in the tension which I call 'Home' and 'Away', conceived as two mutually exclusive poles between which Modernism and Postmodernism unfold their own narrative. Examining kitsch within this tension, I understand by 'Home' all that is excluded from modernist discourse proper and by 'Away', as its

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>63</sup> *Captain Nemo* evokes another *flâneur* of his time, Baudelaire who, drifting about in the underworld of Paris, sets out "to explore the forbidden realm of evil, whose most recent flowers, dangerously beautiful, he is supposed to discover and pluck" to "reveal the poetry hidden behind the most horrifying contrasts of social modernity." (Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 951, quoted in M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 54).

antithetical projection screen, the site of a congealed sentiment of nostalgia and melancholia that re-surfaces in contemporary discourses as a category for a reinvigorated discussion of kitsch.

The third part of my thesis proposes together with Bataille's notion of the 'formless' as well as his distinction between 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure' a concept of kitsch that un-harnesses it from metaphysics and dispenses with the dialectical framework of binary oppositions. Explained beyond these traditional hierarchies of class and taste, kitsch is elaborated as a dynamic contextual force, an agent of periodization and a marker between the useful and the useless.

In the concluding chapter I return to art as a practice. Focusing on the contemporary context of artistic practice in which art stipulates nothing by itself and operates in free relation to material, form and presentation<sup>64</sup>, I propose a practice-based approach to kitsch within a discussion of the works of Jeff Koons, John Currin, and Damien Hirst<sup>65</sup> with the aim of outlining some trajectories for kitsch as an intriguing rhetoric in artistic expression in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To do restorative work on kitsch cannot *a priori* mean a defence of the garden gnome as non-kitsch or a piece of good taste. Rather than aiming the restorative work on kitsch at redeeming it as an aesthetic quality, I focus on the negative connotations it has by definition and placing these in the foreground. I seek its meaning in its potential to interrupt a homological discourse of art. My methodological approach is informed by my former training as a psychologist. In my work with families I specialized in a

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<sup>64</sup> I refer to A. C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box: the Visual Arts in Post-Historical Perspective* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1992).

<sup>65</sup> I have not arrived at my selection of exclusively male artists without some consideration. Although several contemporary female artists' work can be contextualized around kitsch (such as Cindy Sherman, Sylvie Fleury, Pipilotti Rist and Inka Essenhigh), I had difficulty in choosing a female artist suited to my discussion. This difficulty might reflect the tradition of modernist discourse associating kitsch with the feminine, a tradition that to a certain extent is still in operation today, resulting in greater complexities for a female artist to introduce kitsch as rhetoric in her practice.

therapeutic model conceptually embedded in the pragmatics of systemic family therapy<sup>66</sup> with its core beliefs that a personal symptom<sup>67</sup> should neither be considered nor treated as an isolated phenomenon. A symptom is regarded as an indicator of a problem in the dynamics of a system, a 'creative' expression, even, of a system to maintain its homeostasis, be it a family or any system in the wider social, cultural or political context. Following this understanding systemic therapy maintains that a (dysfunctional) system not only displays the very symptom that most adequately reflects its inner workings, but simultaneously that the symptom can be made available to induce processes of transformation. The reason why I draw this parallel to my own methodological approach to kitsch lies in this emphasis on the symptom as a means to induce pragmatic changes; an emphasis which expands on the classical understanding of a symptom as a manifestation limited to diagnostics. Stressing this dual aspect, namely that a symptom is a system's 'poison' as well as its potential 'cure', systemic therapy re-defines the symptom itself, transforming it into an active agent employed to unhinge the *status quo*. The correlations established here provide me with a dynamic model to explain kitsch as a contextual cipher, as a symptom in the system of art and to conceive of it simultaneously as the very 'thing' that has the potential to transform the structural conditions that have brought it into being in the first place. With this in mind, to do some restorative work on kitsch implies, I am using here Rorty's<sup>68</sup> terminologies, a 'relativist' and an 'ironist' stance. This is a stance that must remain open and inquisitive as it implies an understanding of kitsch as a dynamic agent in sociological, anthropological, historical, political and cultural contexts, rather than as a fixed and unified aesthetic category. Within this understanding my aim is to open up the concept of kitsch to renewed questioning within contemporary painting

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<sup>66</sup> For further reading see M. Selvini, L. Boscolo, G. Cecchin and G. Prata *Paradox and CounterParadox* (New York: J. Aronson, 1978).

<sup>67</sup> Within the pragmatics of systemic family therapy, the term 'problem' is substituted by 'symptom', indicating an emphasis on relativity, dynamics and hierarchies rather than fixed conditions.

<sup>68</sup> R. Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

practice. Not unlike a child whose psychological problems point to issues within the dynamics of the family, kitsch has served since its emergence as a 'symptom' for underlying wider discourses of belonging, which are still relevant today. It is this notion of belonging that reaches beyond its connotations of nationality and local identity which I seek to investigate through my discussion of kitsch, that I call "The Quest for *Heimat*". What I mean by restorative work on kitsch is an attempt to retrace those residues of kitsch that could recoup some notions of belonging. Adorno's famous dictum that kitsch is 'a parody of catharsis' is usually interpreted with an emphasis on 'parody'. It, however, *also* entails the element of catharsis and as such, and as Boym puts it, it can "protect us from facing the catastrophe, the unbearable, the ineffable" explaining why "for the major inexplicable areas of human existence—birth, death, and love—we have the maximum number of clichés."<sup>69</sup>

I aim to demonstrate through my thesis that a renewed discussion of kitsch and art can still be relevant today if it departs from an either/or conceptualization and deploys an attitude towards kitsch, which takes Derrida's metaphor of the "pharmakon"<sup>70</sup> to its heart, acknowledging that kitsch can indeed be both: poison as well as cure.

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<sup>69</sup> S. Boym, *Common Places*, p. 15.

<sup>70</sup> I refer to S. Maharaj, "Pop Art's Pharmacies: Kitsch, Consumerist Objects and Signs, The 'Unmentionable'", in *Art History*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 1992): pp. 334-50. Maharaj borrows Derrida's notion of the 'pharmakon', a term used by Derrida that represents both poison and cure. Maharaj refers to J. Derrida, *Dissemination* (London: 1981), pp. 70-1.

## CHAPTER 2: HOME AND AWAY

This chapter focuses on the literature of kitsch in relation to art that historically establishes the field in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The modernist positions are discussed with Greenberg<sup>71</sup> and Adorno<sup>72</sup> as main representatives whose conceptions formulate most prominently the relationship between avant-garde art, modern consumer society and kitsch. Greenberg and Adorno's contributions are pervasive for the shaping of a contemporary understanding of kitsch and are discussed here as key texts in their importance for constituting a platform of subsequent theorizations. Whilst Greenberg's conceptualization of kitsch invokes its understanding within a contemporary everyday use, Adorno's contribution reaches beyond kitsch as a historically placed and fixed category, pointing towards an understanding that unites the concept from metaphysics and dialectics and paves the way for a post-structural approach.

Interpreting Greenberg and Adorno's positions as reflections on Modernism that have to be understood within the particular political, social, cultural and economic conditions of their time, I contextualize their expositions on kitsch with the theorizations of Walter Benjamin<sup>73</sup> and Hermann Broch<sup>74</sup>. Matei

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<sup>71</sup> For my discussion of Greenberg I mainly focus on Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" first published in *Parisian Review*, IV, no. 5 (Fall 1939), pp. 34 – 49. Throughout my thesis I refer to two publications of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch": to C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. C. Harrison & P. Wood (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 529-541; and to C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in *The Collected Essays and Criticism Perceptions and Judgments, 1939-1944*, ed. J. O'Brian, Vol. 1 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 5-22.

<sup>72</sup> For my discussion of Adorno I mainly refer to: T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry – Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001); first published 1991 by Routledge from T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann, Volumes 8, 10 & 3 (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972, 1976, 1981); to T. W. Adorno, "Kitsch", in *Essays on Music*, ed. R. Leppert, trans. S. H. Gillespie (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 501-504; essay first published 1932 and to T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (London, New York: Verso, 1997); first published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Assoc., Inc., 1944).

<sup>73</sup> The influence of Benjamin's writing on Adorno is well-documented. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (*Passagen-Werk*) and analysis of Baudelaire are here of particular relevance. Benjamin's contributions are discussed in greater depth in Chapter 3.

Calinescu's<sup>75</sup> and Andreas Huyssen's<sup>76</sup> more recent inquiries into the structural dynamics of Modernism, as well as other key authorities such as Hal Foster<sup>77</sup> and Thierry de Duve<sup>78</sup>, are employed to draw out my arguments in the contemporary context. With Susan Stewart<sup>79</sup> and Svetlana Boym's<sup>80</sup> contemporary writings on longing and nostalgia I re-contextualize the

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<sup>74</sup> Broch's "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" gives a different emphasis to the concerns here considered: "All periods in which values decline are kitsch periods [...]. Ages which are hallmarked by a definite loss of values are in fact based on 'evil' and the fear of evil, and any art which is intended to express such an age adequately must also be an expression of the 'evil' at work in it" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 75). Broch rejects any attempt to define kitsch as an aesthetic category. Following the modernist narrative of binary oppositions he explains art and kitsch with reference to open and closed systems and outlines authentic art as a creative act that aims at finding "new expressions of reality" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 66) as a relentless move forward following "some inner logic from one discovery to the next" whereby "the goal remains outside the system" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 62). Kitsch, in contrast, is characterized as a closed "system of imitation" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 72) which renders "the open concept of art" into 'a finite system' as it emphasizes effects, turning them into symbols and hardened clichés. Sociological and historical conditions threaten the autonomy of art, as they subjugate it under the service of another value system.

Informed by ideas of moral conduct he explains kitsch as a category resulting from a confusion of the ethical with the aesthetic imperatives in artistic production where the artist is compelled to 'work beautiful' instead of 'working well'. From a historical perspective Broch establishes a correlation between times of political uncertainties and kitsch as a means to propagate values which "communicate to man the safety of his existence so as to save him from the threat of darkness" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 72). As a consequence, Broch argues, kitsch can be nothing but a reactionary "escape from the irrational, an escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 73). Broch interprets this attempt "to establish an immediate liaison with the past" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 73) as an expression of personal nostalgia that operates with easily recognizable symbols through an imitation or copy of what immediately precedes history. Because kitsch is unable to copy the creative act *per se* these symbols, the vocabulary of kitsch, are loaded with irrational stock emotions that appeal to a pseudo-sentiment that "sentimentalizes the finite *ad infinitum*" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 76). It is on these moral grounds, the realm of pretence, deception and self-deception that Broch insists on kitsch's being "ethical 'evil'" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 76). As a consequence Broch states that "[T]he producer of kitsch does not produce 'bad' art, he is not an artist endowed with inferior creative faculties or no creative faculties at all. It is quite impossible to assess him according to aesthetic criteria; rather he should be judged as an ethically base being, a malefactor who profoundly desires evil [...] kitsch should be considered 'evil' not only by art but by every system of values that is not a system of imitation" (H. Broch, 1969, p. 76).<sup>75</sup> I refer to M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Calinescu's theorization is an investigation into the different strands of Modernity (Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism) from its beginning to the onset of Postmodernism.

<sup>76</sup> A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide – Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1988).

<sup>77</sup> H. Foster, *Recodings – Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (Seattle, Washington: Bay Press, 1985).

<sup>78</sup> T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

<sup>79</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>80</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* and S. Boym, *Common Places*.



modernist opposition of avant-garde art and kitsch within the tension of 'Home' and 'Away', arguing that the binary coupling of avant-garde art and kitsch is reinvigorated today as a new site of discourse within the binary coupling of kitsch and (be)longing.

Greenberg and Adorno's manifestoes for avant-garde art as an adversary culture are rooted in the contexts of economics (Capitalism), sociology (the urbanization of the masses) and politics (Fascism), aiming at a rescue of 'genuine' or 'serious' art as a synonym for human values in the face of totalitarian regimes and an all encompassing culture industry of industrialized Western democracies. The texts of Greenberg and Adorno draw their energies from the problems brought about by Modernization and the political conditions of their time. They are informed by the shared assumptions that there is still a meaningful distinction between avant-garde art and kitsch and between 'authentic' art and popular culture. Linked to ideas of social change their main focus aims at reaching a suitable definition for art as a counter-concept to non-art that establishes art's autonomy within a notion of authenticity and art as resistance to ideological propaganda.

The autonomy of art raises the question of its function. Greenberg and Adorno's inquiries reveal an underlying agenda, implicitly contained in their left-wing approach to art: art's function/utility to offer its audience critical enlightenment and the fear that if cut off from this emancipatory project, it will be reduced to ornament and advertising strategies. Sociologically they demarcate kitsch from art within class hierarchies typified by two distinct audiences that explain kitsch and art in terms of two different aesthetic encounters: the distracted gaze of the uneducated masses and the private contemplation of the informed elite.

Greenberg and Adorno's focus on kitsch is not primarily informed by aesthetic considerations (which would refer it back to the bourgeois tradition), but carries moral and politically motivated implications resulting from kitsch's potential to manipulate and mobilize the masses.

Against this notion of kitsch, avant-garde art is conceived as a progressive unified project that - as the only Modernism - normalizes a particular and gendered set of practices. Within this set of practices the domestic and its connotations of the 'private', craft and ornament are segregated, to the extent that 'Home' becomes a place that has to be left behind in order to do something significant.

Politically Greenberg and Adorno's contributions are responses to an escalating crisis in Europe, the repression and destruction of avant-garde art by totalitarian regimes and its replacement with an official 'state' art, Social Realism. Ideologically their contributions are outlines of cultural practices as guarantors of the 'heroism' implicit in the modernist project. These practices assert themselves in the public sphere in resistance to a 'dumbing down' of culture by consumerism. Although they both situate their arguments in Modernism's antagonism to previous art they contextualize art and kitsch in different ways: Greenberg theorizes the terms as homological and antithetical. Invoked in Greenberg's dichotomy of avant-garde art and kitsch are the binaries of 'Home' and 'Away' as two mutually exclusive poles. Adorno conceives them as two interdependent notions that are dialectically entwined in negativity. Greenberg seeks to assert a 'normative' notion for an artistic practice through a discussion of kitsch which privileges the object, in order to re-establish categories for both 'high' and 'low' culture within traditional hierarchies. In order to do so he theorizes the concept of kitsch in correlation with Marx's writing on economic conditions and alienation in Capitalist societies; within commodity fetishism and an aesthetic inadequacy in the populace. Adorno emphasizes kitsch's condition of being without defining the thing itself.<sup>81</sup> His theorization of kitsch as an inherent feature of modern conditions evaluates the concept of kitsch by emphasizing the structural conditions which

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<sup>81</sup> This point is further elucidated in my discussion of Adorno in the second part of this chapter.

originally instigated the tension between 'high' and 'low' culture. Adorno's position provides the possibility to analyse kitsch and art as interdependent relational and contextual categories linked to issues of social and mental deprivation. His theoretical framework of dialectic negativity stresses the dynamics of the culture industry and its implications for both high and low art, a dynamic that points toward an uncoupling of their binary opposition.

## GREENBERG

At the core of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) is Greenberg’s aim to formulate Kirsch as a historical notion and a counter-concept to avant-garde art<sup>82</sup> which, as a modernist aesthetic<sup>83</sup>, can ‘save’ art from instrumental use and asserts America’s cultural identity<sup>84</sup> against Western bourgeois tradition. Conceived as “something entirely new and particular to our age”<sup>85</sup> Greenberg conceives avant-garde art as something that neither wants to belong to the prevalent nor to the previous cultural tradition. According to Greenberg this tradition has become “less and less able, in the course of its development, to justify the inevitability of its particular forms”<sup>86</sup> as all its

“verities involved by religion, authority, tradition, style are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works.”<sup>87</sup>

Greenberg reinstates aesthetic normative principles of ‘quality’ and ‘value’ into the system of art, which he regards as having become culturally deprived by academicism and kitsch. “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” can also be understood as a manifesto that provides the foundations for his later programme for ‘Modernist painting’ where he states:

“I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. [...] The essence of Modernism lies, as I see

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<sup>82</sup> Throughout “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” Greenberg uses the term ‘avant-garde art’ as a synonym for autonomous art, serious art, and genuine art. ‘Abstract Expressionism’ and ‘Modernist painting’ are the terms more commonly used in his later writing.

<sup>83</sup> Modernist aesthetics are commonly characterized by a radical separation from mass culture and everyday life, defined through self-reflexivity, self-consciousness, a quasi scientific experimentalism and expression of individual consciousness.

<sup>84</sup> “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, a programme and manifesto for avant-garde art, already outlines the foundations of what was to become known in the 1960’s as the first American tradition under the terminologies of Modernist painting, Abstract Expressionism or ‘The New York School of painting’.

<sup>85</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 530.

<sup>86</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1986, p. 6.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

it, in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself – not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.”<sup>88</sup>

This manifesto, envisaging the main endeavour for ‘Modernist painting’ as a suppression of everything that is extraneous to the medium’s qualities, de Duve<sup>89</sup> observes, provides painting with “a coherent aesthetic and historical rationale for professionalism in painting”<sup>90</sup>. It gives painting a “renewed intellectual credibility and the avant-garde a new sense of direction.”<sup>91</sup> In order to outline this rationale Greenberg assesses in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” the contemporary conditions [in 1939] of art, which de Duve summarizes as follows:

“The advent of modern democracies has broken the traditional boundaries between the professional artist and the class of their patrons; the Church has lost its position of purveyor of public art obeying strict aesthetic, technical and ideological constraints; the universal spread of capitalism has thrown artists into the marketplace where the encounter between producers and consumers is more or less haphazard; industrialization has eroded the technical definition of all crafts, including fine arts, the Salon has brought artists into contact with an anonymous crowd and rendered their art vulnerable to its verdict; the Academy has lost its quasi-monopoly on the schooling of artists and since then no one really knows beforehand whom art addresses and who is legitimately an artist.”<sup>92</sup>

Greenberg argues that in late Capitalism the only possible serious art is prompted by a formal and historical immanence, self-criticality and by a knowledge specific to its own field. The avant-garde artist has to turn his attention “upon the medium of his own craft” through a “pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors.”<sup>93</sup> Greenberg’s emphasis on the restriction of expressiveness within a given

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<sup>88</sup> C. Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”, in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. C. Harrison & P. Wood (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 754 – 760. Essay first published 1961.

<sup>89</sup> de Duve is writing about “Modernist Painting” for which Greenberg sets out his initial argument in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”.

<sup>90</sup> T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, p. 202.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 460.

<sup>93</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 532.

medium, limiting the medium entirely to its own specificity, suggests that he envisages some kind of authenticity for painting that grounds artistic practice in objectivity which, according to Peter Osborne, resides for Greenberg exclusively in the physicality of the medium that 'imposes' a style.<sup>94</sup> Avant-garde art is valued and developed by and for a minority specialist audience, constituted of intellectuals, effectively in charge of cultural progress. As a monolithic counter-concept to avant-garde art kitsch takes the role of ersatz art, serving up similar emotions to a mass audience with neither the knowledge, necessary education nor the sufficient leisure to be able to enjoy the demands of avant-garde culture.

Kitsch is either explained in terms of academicism, advertising strategies, manifestations of the entertainment industry and mass culture<sup>95</sup> such as "popular commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies"<sup>96</sup> or as political propaganda, the means of "totalitarian regimes [...] to ingratiate themselves with their subjects."<sup>97</sup>

Greenberg employs the philosophies of Kant and Marx to conceive avant-garde art with regard to its mode of production and reception contrasted to kitsch as mass consumption. He uses Marx's terminology of 'use' and 'exchange' to explain kitsch marked with the concept of exchange-value in opposition to avant-garde art having use-value in order to address kitsch and art as two specific modes of cultural consumption. His distinction between an 'ignorant' populace and the cultivated elite enables him to reintroduce two values in art in aesthetic attitudes: consumption through the diverted gaze of

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<sup>94</sup> P. Osborne, "Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting", in *Thinking Art – Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, ed. A. Benjamin & P. Osborne (London: ICA, 1991), pp. 59-79, p. 68.

<sup>95</sup> Greenberg states: "If kitsch is the official tendency of culture in Germany, Italy and Russia, it is not because their respective governments are controlled by philistines, but because kitsch is the culture of the masses in these countries, as it is everywhere else" (C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 539).

<sup>96</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1986, p. 11.

<sup>97</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 539.

the 'ignorant' urbanized masses and the consumption through the Kantian disinterested aesthetic experience of a cultivated elite in the city. Greenberg's binary opposition of avant-garde and kitsch is essentially ideologically rooted within the master narrative of Modernism: its dichotomies of novelty and tradition, the private contemplation (of the individual) and the diverted gaze of the masses.

Greenberg illustrates these two modes of cultural consumption with a comparison of the different reactions elicited by a painting by the Russian Social Realist painter Repin and a painting by Picasso. However, various theoreticians<sup>98</sup> argued that Greenberg's essay has to be understood in a wider context than the particular political conditions of the late 1930s this comparison evokes. Foregrounding Greenberg's ideological rather than formal concerns, they interpret his approach primarily as a general defence of human values that attacks the state of art in both totalitarian regimes and capitalist conditions. Salzman states, for example, that "even Greenberg was able to recognize in the late 1930s [that] the problem with kitsch as a cultural category and strategy is primarily ethical, not aesthetic."<sup>99</sup> She recognizes that "kitsch gives a function to form, an agenda to aesthetics"<sup>100</sup> that is not limited to political propaganda but also applies to marketing strategies in capitalist conditions. Similarly John O'Brien characterizes in his introductory remarks to *The Collected Essays* Greenberg's intellectual position as Marxist in origin. It is this stance of being mutually in conflict with Stalinism, Communist culture, Fascism in Europe and Capitalism, which informs according to O'Brien Greenberg's rejection of both political propaganda and commercial advertising and instigates Greenberg's 'art for art's sake', an art in which "subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a

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<sup>98</sup> See for example L. Salzman, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch' Revisited", in *Mirroring Evil*, ed. N. L. Kleeblatt (New Brunswick, New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 53 - 64; R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Massachusetts London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968); F. Frascina, *Pollock and After*, ed. F. Frascina (London: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>99</sup> L. Salzman, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch' Revisited", p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

plague.”<sup>101</sup> In the same context Orton and Pollock<sup>102</sup> point out that “Avant-garde and Kitsch” operates on two axes: it offers a particular historical perspective on Western bourgeois culture since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and simultaneously addresses the contemporary condition [in 1939] of that culture. As such they understand “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” as a manifesto for a “special socio-artistic intellectual agency through which culture can be advanced” which operates on a general level “against a network of particular ideological, social and economic conditions.”<sup>103</sup> This resistance against political and commercial appropriation ultimately results in a notion of avant-garde as a high-cultural paradigm which, in striving towards aesthetic purity, seemed to conceive of itself in a social and political vacuum.

In order to understand “Avant-garde and Kitsch” not only in its political and economical but also in its cultural context, it is essential to distinguish between the ‘historical’<sup>104</sup> avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and Futurism, whose ideas have traditionally been linked to political radicalism and Greenberg’s usage of the term as a synonym for (American) Modernism. This distinction has important implications for the relationship of each to mass culture, as these two notions of avant-garde art formulate their aspirations as fundamentally opposed to each other. Dadaism and Surrealism, in spite of operating in the same register as avant-garde art (resistance to the political climate and consumer society of their own time), did not seek their aim in art’s autonomy but in an integration of art and life

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>102</sup> F. Orton, and G. Pollock, “Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed”, in *Pollock and After*, ed. F. Frascina (London: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 167 – 183, p. 175.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>104</sup> I am borrowing this term from Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde* in which he analyses the striving of European avant-garde movements towards a sublation of the life/art dichotomy as closely bound to a transformation of bourgeois society itself. In that this transformation (and with it the project of the European avant-garde movements) failed, Bürger argues that the European avant-garde should be called historical. I refer to P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).



itself.<sup>105</sup> Shortly before Greenberg's publication of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", these historical avant-garde movements in Europe and Russia came to an end through political and historical circumstances: in Russia in 1934 with the official adoption of the doctrine of Socialist Realism; in Germany with Hitler's rise to power in 1933. As the European avant-garde fell into decline, Greenberg uses the term for an art that is elitist, beyond politics and everyday life and as such is diametrically opposed to its historical namesake. The ideological motifs that inform Greenberg's concept of Kitsch are revealed, namely to develop avant-garde art as a modernist strand and to turn it into an American cultural term that detaches itself from European avant-garde movements.<sup>106</sup> This new American avant-garde asserts its superiority over Europe by relegating the aspirations of the historical avant-garde into the register of Kitsch<sup>107</sup>. Greenberg's binary opposition turns kitsch into a synonym for any artistic practice that insists on the possibility of cultural transformation through everyday life.

Besides its political and social agenda, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", is also prompted by a general criticism against "the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend"<sup>108</sup> and aims at establishing avant-garde art as an artistic practice that detaches itself from its own stifling tradition. This tradition is characterized by

"a motionless Alexandrianism, an academism in which the really important issues are left untouched because they involve controversy, and in which creative activity dwindles to

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<sup>105</sup> The concept for an integration of art and life can only be an elitist concern as mass culture *a priori* entails both. The elitist separation of art and life points towards an alienation implicit in the concept of high art.

<sup>106</sup> In a footnote to "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" Greenberg refers to a lecture by Hans Hofmann stating that "Surrealism in plastic art is a reactionary tendency which is attempting to restore 'outside' subject matter" (C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, fn. 1, p. 540).

<sup>107</sup> Since the demarcation between art and life becomes for Greenberg the very marker of avant-garde art, he stresses in his comparison between Repin and Picasso's paintings that "[I]n Repin's picture the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures – there is *no discontinuity between art and life* [my italics]" (C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 536).

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 530.

virtuosity in the small details of form, all larger questions being decided by the precedent old masters.”<sup>109</sup>

Greenberg's reference to Alexandrianism as “a part of Western bourgeois society”<sup>110</sup> that has to be overcome in order to produce “a new kind of criticism of society”<sup>111</sup> is not limited to a criticism of European tradition and applies to the state of academy in general. Greenberg portrays this tradition as academic following the Late Greek classical tradition in which “[T]he same themes are mechanically varied in a hundred different works, and yet nothing new is produced”<sup>112</sup>. Greenberg's emphasis on mechanical variation against innovation correlates with his description of kitsch as “mechanical” and “operating by formulas”<sup>113</sup> and reveals some negative agenda to relegate this prevalent cultural tradition into the category of kitsch.

As a generalized and undifferentiated category of exclusion kitsch is employed by Greenberg as a cipher to generate an antidote to an art finding itself in crisis. His approach renders kitsch meaningless for a differentiated discussion of it as a phenomenon. His strategic use of kitsch is employed to prop up a definition of avant-garde art by conceiving avant-garde in terms of what it is not.<sup>114</sup>

Positioned within and against both commodified culture and high art of the past, Greenberg's concept of autonomous art asserts its identity through certain artistic devices specific to its project to legitimize its practice within a context in which such legitimization has become problematic. According to Greenberg it is kitsch that threatens to erase the Kantian assertion that there is a distinction “between those values only to be found in art and the values

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<sup>109</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1986, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 534.

<sup>114</sup> There is a contradiction in Greenberg's thinking as certain specificity is given to kitsch as a structural cipher that allows him to use it strategically.

which can be found elsewhere”<sup>115</sup> <sup>116</sup>. With his concept of avant-garde art Greenberg aims to re-instate the distinction that “[K]itsch, by virtue of a rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased [...] in practice.”<sup>117</sup> Greenberg refers here not only to new technological means for (re)production in art (whereby its traditional status for authorship, uniqueness and originality are thrown into question), but also to its dissemination and, by extension, to the democratization of culture in general. Blaming “universal literacy”<sup>118</sup> for the erasure of the dividing line between the masses and the elite, (as it is “no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined taste”<sup>119</sup>), Greenberg conceptualizes two dialectically opposed audiences for art/culture: the peasants from the country who have become the new urbanized masses and the elite of the city. Within Modernism’s master narrative these oppositions are conceived as binaries: the “urbanized masses”<sup>120</sup> and “an individual’s cultural inclinations”<sup>121</sup>, the “folk culture whose background was the countryside”<sup>122</sup> and the “city’s traditional culture”<sup>123</sup>, commodified ersatz culture for diversion/mass entertainment and difficult, serious art for individual contemplation.

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<sup>115</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 536.

<sup>116</sup> The distinction between “those values only to be found in art” and the ones “which can be found elsewhere” theoretically ended in 1917 (when Duchamp presented *Fountain* to the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists Inc. in New York). Although it is therefore the ‘ready-made’ and not kitsch that has effaced this divide, it would be wrong to interpret Greenberg’s statement in this context: The impact of the ready-made on art was not felt till a later generation – that of Joseph Kosuth in the 60s and 70s. The implications of the ready-made on aesthetic judgment are only acknowledged by Greenberg in his later writing, such as “Counter-Avant-Garde” (first published 1971), where he states: “[S]ince [Duchamp’s ready-mades] it has become clearer too, that anything that can be experienced at all can be experienced aesthetically; and that anything that can be experienced aesthetically can also be experienced as art. In short, art and the aesthetic don’t just overlap, they coincide” (C. Greenberg, “Counter-Avant-Garde”, p. 129, quoted in T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, p. 293).

<sup>117</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 536.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

Greenberg states:

"Ultimately, it can be said that the cultivated spectator derives the same values from Picasso that the peasant gets from Repin<sup>124</sup> [...] Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him *effort* [my italics], provides him with a *short cut to the pleasure of art* [my italics] that *detours* [my italics] what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."<sup>125</sup>

Greenberg's emphasis on this "detour"<sup>126</sup> is significant not only with regard to its implicit opposition of avant-garde art to core principles of modernization, such as efficiency and the fetishization of speed, but also through its *a priori* categorisation of 'good taste' as only available to a leisured elite. Conceived as an expenditure that runs against the imperatives of capitalist economics (maximum effect/profit through minimal expenditure), avant-garde art is accredited with a status outside the economic laws of exchange-value. This cost/expense ineffectiveness becomes its very marker, the quality of its autonomy and the measure of its value. Kitsch, in contrast, as it "pretends"<sup>127</sup> to demand nothing of its customers except their money"<sup>128</sup> is put on a par with commodification and pure exchange-value within economic market conditions.

In defining the aesthetic experience of 'serious' art as something that demands not money but rather a special effort for which a spectator will need time (and leisure), makes the detour itself into the marker of avant-garde art and its specific audience as the peasant, who is "working hard all day for his

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<sup>124</sup> Greenberg refers here to a painting of a battle scene by the Russian painter Repin. Some critics such as A. Brighton [A. Brighton "AvantGarde and Kitsch Revisited", in *Contemporary Art and the Home*, ed. C. Painter, pp. 239-256 (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002)] or S. Boyrn (*Common Places*) have pointed out that Repin never painted a battle scene and commented on Greenberg's mistaken identification of Repin, suggesting that Greenberg's binary opposition of avant-garde art and kitsch might itself be as ideological as the ideologies he is condemning. Following Harrison & Wood's introductory comments to "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, Greenberg corrected his mistake in a 1972 reprint of his essay.

<sup>125</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1986, pp. 16 – 17.

<sup>126</sup> I refer to Greenberg's remarks that the Russian peasant gains the same effects from a Repin painting as the educated viewer from a Picasso, but that the appreciation of a Picasso painting, however, requires a "detour" from its viewer.

<sup>127</sup> Greenberg's terminology is puzzling as his reference to pretence raises questions of what kitsch really does when not pretending.

<sup>128</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 534.

living [has] not enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso."<sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> Avant-garde art's inaccessibility to a larger audience becomes its justification as it provides a new criterion for the cognoscenti to distinguish and recognize themselves as the cultural elite.<sup>131</sup> Greenberg recodes Kant's aesthetic judgment (a judgment that is subjectively experienced but universally valid), as a 'vocabulary' of norms and rules that retains claims to cultural supremacy. As a negative category kitsch serves as a means to reinstate elitism<sup>132</sup> in the face of an ongoing democratization of art.

In suggesting that art (as opposed to kitsch) needs its own special 'conditioning' Greenberg establishes a ritual of initiation only available through education, time and class, thus establishing codes that are unavailable through any other means. The mass appeal of kitsch, in contrast, is characterized as undifferentiated emotional 'blackmail'; kitsch as a subcategory of the trivial which can never be critical in itself.

Explaining kitsch in terms of industrialization and alienated existence and autonomous art as an art beyond the everyday and economic conditions, Greenberg employs the philosophies of Marx and Kant in order to ground art ontologically and epistemologically through a separation of cultural and economic realms. As autonomous art seeks its goals exclusively within its

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<sup>129</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1986, p. 19.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer analyse *Odysseus'* encounter with the Sirens as a pre-modern example demonstrating that the enjoyment of culture is rooted in oppression, based on a division between master and labourer. Lashed to the mast of his ship, only *Odysseus* is able to listen to the luring songs of the Sirens safely, whilst his crew (having had their ears sealed with wax) cannot hear but have to content themselves with rowing.

<sup>130</sup> Greenberg's strategy of 'detour' bears further connotations: as kitsch's etymological origins link it to rapid production and dissemination (see Chapters 1 & 4) Greenberg's emphasis on 'detour' connotes to a further fundamental distinction between kitsch and avant-garde art which implies a divide between a notion of private, subjective time (the imaginative *durée*) and an objectified, socially measurable time (time as commodity) within capitalist conditions.

<sup>131</sup> I refer to H. Foster, *Recordings* where Foster comments on this 'difficulty' as a new criterion of distinction for the elite.

<sup>132</sup> Greenberg talks about the "elite among the ruling class" (C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 533).

own specificity, Danto<sup>133</sup> detects in Greenberg's insistence to discard conventions not viable to the medium as soon as they are recognized a notion of essence implicit in Greenberg's Modernism that "[f]es [...] in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself - not in order to subvert it, but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."<sup>134</sup> Emphasizing a distinction between what Danto argues the aesthetic and the practical point of view<sup>135</sup>, Danto draws attention to the affinity of Greenberg's notion of autonomous art to Kant's Third Critique<sup>136</sup>. Both Greenberg and Kant conceive art and nature, as 'objects' of disinterested judgment that are "abstracted from all questions of use and practice."<sup>137</sup><sup>138</sup> In agreement with Danto I argue that avant-garde art is informed by Greenberg's concept to re-code art as a 'thing-in-itself'. As "an emigration from the markets of capitalism" and in "detaching' itself from society"<sup>139</sup> it aims at

"creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something *given* [his italics], increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals."<sup>140</sup>

Within avant-garde practice, as in nature, the hand of the Creator is revealed as its 'essence' gives the meaning of existence.<sup>141</sup> As art, however, never can

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<sup>133</sup> A. C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box*.

<sup>134</sup> C. Greenberg, "Modernist Painting", in *Art & Literature*, no. 4 (Spring 1965), p. 193.

<sup>135</sup> Danto draws attention to a distinction between convention (the relative values of aesthetics) and essence (the search for absolute values within the discipline of painting) implicit in Greenberg's notion of avant-garde art.

<sup>136</sup> I refer to *The Critique of Judgement* (1790).

<sup>137</sup> A. C. Danto, *Beyond the Brillo Box*, p. 187.

<sup>138</sup> Following Kant's definition of the beautiful as having no purpose, 'though appearing to be purposive', Danto asserts in the first instance that 'an artwork is beautiful only on condition that it seems like nature, and hence beautiful in the way in which nature is'. As art, however, is something we judge and as this judgment is aesthetic with reference to taste, Danto concludes 'art deserves to be called beautiful on the basis of taste, hence aesthetic judgement'.

<sup>139</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1986, p. 7.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>141</sup> This concept of nature is fundamental to the struggle between subject and object and its characteristic of ideas drawn from Romanticism and expressed in the notion of the genius who makes a work of art and yet is not himself fully aware of what he has created. In the context of Greenberg's programme of avant-garde painting this paradox is reiterated within

be the 'given' and always relies on man-made culture, I interpret the above quotation as Greenberg's attempt to conceive the avant-garde as a utopian notion of art before alienation. In order to do so he tries to reinstate a domain for art that has otherwise been lost in the market economy of commodity-fetishism. The Kantian 'purposiveness without purpose' which constitutes for Greenberg the aesthetic attitude *vis-à-vis* autonomous art is offset against kitsch, agreeable and pleasurable, the purpose of which is to satisfy the needs of the lower classes. In the words of Calinescu:

"If true art always contains a finally irreducible element, an element that is constitutive of what we may call 'aesthetic autonomy', art that is produced for immediate consumption is clearly and entirely *reducible* [his italics] to extrinsic causes and motives."<sup>142</sup>

It is not the 'beautiful' of aesthetic judgment but the 'agreeable' of kitsch that has produced "the first universal culture"<sup>143</sup> of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Kitsch is 'ersatz culture', "[T]o fill the demand of the new market" as "the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption" since the urbanized masses were "[L]osing, nevertheless, their taste for the folk culture [...] and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time."<sup>144</sup>

The blame for this alienation is assigned the label of kitsch, which, as a reaction to the constellation of drives within modern society, is in fact the only 'art' suitable to it. Framed as commodity fetish and phantasmagoria, notions that imply consumption within social relations and hence an 'interested', rather than a 'pure' aesthetic attitude, (as for Kant "those in search of such

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the artist's imperatives to strive self-consciously towards an 'unknown' goal (the essence of the medium) that is conceived as something that reveals itself as a result of ongoing self-reflexivity. To a certain extent the paradox is also epitomized in Greenberg's terminology for avant-garde painting in his later writing, where he refers to avant-garde painting as "Abstract Expressionism", a notion which unifies both the element of self-conscious expression and its concealment in abstraction.

<sup>142</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 240.

<sup>143</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 535.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

gratification willingly dispense with judgment"<sup>145</sup>), kitsch, for Greenberg, becomes a category outside of the sphere of art.<sup>146</sup> Instead of viewing both avant-garde and mass culture (kitsch) from the perspective of alienation, which would turn the high/low debate into a dynamic model and into a critique of itself, Greenberg consolidates the *status quo* of capitalist and totalitarian conditions.

De Duve points out that in seeking to provide a rational, objective basis for art Greenberg requires of the spectator an intuition, by definition irrational, but at the same time intellectual, meaning rationally accountable.<sup>147</sup> Greenberg's concept of avant-garde art is faced with the failure to banish sensation from art, or to reconcile it with an 'objective' artistic practice. Deleuze and Guattari make the point that Abstract Expressionism failed to bring art and philosophy together because it does "not substitute the concept for the sensation" but "seeks only to refine sensation" in its attempt "to dematerialise it."<sup>148</sup> Other theoreticians have critiqued Greenberg's employment of Marx's dialectical materialism, arguing that use value is a fantasy<sup>149</sup> and that there is no 'thing-in-itself' existing independently from human consciousness and practice. In *Das Kapital*, Marx comments on the impossibility of establishing value outside the field of social and economic relations:

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<sup>145</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. Meredith, part 1, section 3 (Oxford: University Press, 1952), pp. 47-8.

<sup>146</sup> Drawing on Kant's aesthetic judgment as something that is universal, Greenberg's concept of avant-garde art and kitsch reinstates the 'general agreement among the cultivated of mankind', that has been valid through the ages. Within this agreement popular culture, subcultures and other strands of Modernism are *a priori* excluded from art proper.

<sup>147</sup> Greenberg states: "Aesthetic judgment is not voluntary [...]. Your aesthetic judgment, being an intuition and nothing else, is received, not taken. You no more choose to like or not like a given item of art than you choose to see the sun as bright or the night as dark" (C. Greenberg, "Seminar One", in *Arts Magazine* 48 [November 1973], p. 45 quoted in T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 1999, pp. 213 – 14.

<sup>148</sup> G. Deleuze, & F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy* (London, New York: Verso, 1994), p. 198.

<sup>149</sup> See D. Holler, "The Use Value of the Impossible", in *Bataille: Writing and the Sacred*, ed. C. Bailey Gill (London and New York: Routledge, 1995). Holler's position is discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.



“the use value of objects is realised without exchange by means of a direct relation between the objects and man [...] their value is realised only by exchange, that is, by means of a social process.”<sup>150</sup>

Although Marx insists that art belongs to a sphere outside the economy of liberal Capitalism, Greenberg suggests that “[N]o culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income”<sup>151</sup> and that the avant-garde has always remained attached to the ruling class of society “by an umbilical cord of gold.”<sup>152</sup> As art enters the public sphere its value, however, no longer solely rests in its use value and changes, in Marx’s terminology, into something ‘mysterious’, a commodity fetish that assumes the form of a relation between things as it becomes imbued with the notion of social relations.

In *Five Faces of Modernity* Calinescu notes that Greenberg’s ideas of resistance and progress for ‘Modernist painting’ are twofold. In his earlier writing Greenberg stresses a rupture with the past and a notion of resistance through an idea of linear progress that is immanent<sup>153</sup> to the medium through a principle of self-reflexivity where painters progressively strive towards a purification of painting, focusing on specific aspects, such as flatness, surface and support. In his later writing Greenberg stresses an idea of resistance as a ‘reactive approach’ that maintains an idea of a continuation with the past, namely that throughout its history Modernism has been “nothing more than an endeavour to maintain the high standards of the old masters against the intrusions of commercialism and corrupt market criteria.”<sup>154</sup> Greenberg’s dual notions of resistance and progress point towards general problems of sustaining a concept of an inner artistic logic as avant-garde art’s possibilities

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<sup>150</sup> K. Marx & F. Engels, *Capital*, ed. S. Moore, trans. E. Aveling, Vol. 1, Chapter 1 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2003), p. 39. First published as *Das Kapital* in 1867.

<sup>151</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 533.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>153</sup> Greenberg’s emphasis on the medium as something that develops from within suggests that for him avant-garde art rests on principles implying the idea of an inner essence that reveals itself in time.

<sup>154</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 290.

for artistic expression become increasingly narrowed<sup>155</sup>. Calinescu continues, inevitably and as it progressed, the avant-garde had to accentuate its own characteristics within its field, from which any deviation “involves a betrayal or corruption of aesthetic standards.”<sup>156</sup> As the avant-garde develops in time and as its characteristic features evolve into a recognizable and recognized style<sup>157</sup>, there are increasing tensions between its anti-traditional stance and its self-declared mission to assert itself “against the prevailing standards of society”<sup>158</sup>. Developing its own stylistic properties it inevitably has to succumb to the fact of becoming history itself, of constituting its own tradition, albeit a tradition of “superior consciousness.”<sup>159</sup> Avant-garde art, as a fixed binary to kitsch, inevitably has to develop into its false counterpart: an avant-garde imitating its former self by focusing on specific stylistic aspects that it appropriates.<sup>160</sup> Greenberg’s insistence that the avant-garde has to push itself by an ‘inner artistic logic’ to its limits could suggest that the avant-garde itself “operates by formulas”<sup>161</sup>. As it strives towards “greater and greater purity”<sup>162</sup>, avant-garde art gradually becomes saturated by its own essence to the extent that it starts to mimic its own characteristics. The creation of deliberate effect always has to take recourse to “prefabricated expressions, which harden into clichés.”<sup>163</sup> It is this very ability to “mimic with profit the appearance of avant-gardism” and to feed on the “unconventionalities [that]

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<sup>155</sup> In his analysis of Greenberg’s concept of avant-garde art as a painting practice that progressively strives towards its own essence and the development of the monochrome, minimal art and the ready-made, de Duve (*Kant after Duchamp*) has commented on avant-garde painting as a project to which the end is immanent to its origins. De Duve interprets Greenberg’s scepticism towards Minimalism as a defence against the threat it poses to avant-garde art in demonstrating that the limits have been reached for pushing a medium indefinitely towards its essence.

<sup>156</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 291.

<sup>157</sup> The complex issues between kitsch and style are further explored in Chapter 3.

<sup>158</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 531.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>160</sup> It becomes what Broch characterises as kitsch, namely ‘a system of imitation’.

<sup>161</sup> I am using Greenberg’s own quotation as he is referring to kitsch (C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1986), p. 12.

<sup>162</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 291.

<sup>163</sup> H. Broch, “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch”, p. 72. I am using Broch’s explanation of how kitsch is parasitic on art.

have proved successful and have been widely accepted or even turned into stereotypes<sup>164</sup> that also characterizes, for Calinescu, kitsch.

As avant-garde art progressively developed its artistic identity<sup>165</sup> it became instantly recognisable, resulting in a familiarisation of the technique of abstraction as a style and the possibility of abstract kitsch. Embraced by the very establishment and economic conditions against which it originally defined itself<sup>166</sup> avant-garde art has inadvertently created its own 'precondition of kitsch'<sup>167</sup>, namely "a fully matured cultural tradition, the discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness of which kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends."<sup>168</sup> It seems that the utopian idea of immanent evolution provided the avant-garde with an identity as long as this was not based on particular stylistic properties, as long as it remained marginalised and was able to project its (sub) cultural status into a sign of collective identity. As an established style it was deprived of its main incentive, namely to act in resistance to mainstream culture. As de Duve writes:

"The consensus around the avant-garde is always a minority one: otherwise it is not about the avant-garde. It is always forced, since it is a result of force. It is always both alienated and alienating."<sup>169</sup>

Calinescu suggests a more relativistic and self-sceptical position would have helped avant-garde painting to overcome its intrinsic contradictions. Such a position would have transformed Modernist painting from its "rhetorical of

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<sup>164</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 231.

<sup>165</sup> By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist painting has become the foundation of America's aesthetic modern identity.

<sup>166</sup> By the 1960s, various authors commented on the transformation of the avant-garde from being anti-fashion to representing mainstream fashion. See for example L. Fiedler, *The Collected Essays* (1971) or I. Howe, "The Idea of the Modern", in *Literary Modernism* (1967).

<sup>167</sup> I am using Greenberg's own terminology.

<sup>168</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 534.

<sup>169</sup> T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, p. 27.

aesthetic conservation” into a “dynamic image of forward-looking, innovative modernism.”<sup>170</sup>

It is Greenberg’s rigid and unifying concept of kitsch in binary opposition to avant-garde art that renders the latter as a closed system, ‘freezing’ it into its own counter-concept. This dialectical relationship suggests a correlation between the reconstruction of the lost ‘Home’ through kitsch, characterized by Broch as an “escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid”<sup>171</sup> and Greenberg’s reconstruction of the lost ‘Home’ of art through an artistic practice that is “valid solely on its own terms”<sup>172</sup> as it defines itself beyond the realms of public affairs and history.

Stewart<sup>173</sup> and Boym<sup>174</sup> contextualize nostalgia<sup>175</sup> as a collective movement that manifests itself in times of crisis. Boym calls the longing for “a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home”<sup>176</sup> ‘restorative’ and totalizing utopian, as it is a nostalgia that denies the passage of time, focusing instead on the reconstruction of the lost home. Stewart explains nostalgia as a utopian desire ultimately hostile to history that seeks to close the gap between nature and culture through a longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin. Detecting ‘restorative nostalgia’ at the core of both nationalist (fascist) and communist ideologies, Boym’s concept of

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<sup>170</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 290.

<sup>171</sup> H. Broch, “Evil in the system of values of art”, in *Kitsch – an anthology of bad taste*, ed. G. Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1969), p. 73. Essay first published as “Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst”, in *Die Neue Rundschau*, pp. 157-191, Vol. 34, (8. August 1933).

<sup>172</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1986, p. 8.

<sup>173</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*.

<sup>174</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

Boym derives her notion of nostalgia from its Greek etymological roots, signifying a longing for home; the desire for the familiar, the habitual and domestic. Analysing nostalgia within the contemporary contexts of globalization, mass migration and Diasporas Boym theorizes ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective’ nostalgia as two opposing sentiments: ‘restorative nostalgia’ is described as totalitarian. A totalizing, unifying and utopian longing, it denies the passage of time and aims to reconstruct the lost home and origins. ‘Reflective nostalgia’, in contrast, is characterized as ongoing remembrance that dwells on the sentiment of longing itself.

<sup>175</sup> In my introduction I have already stated that kitsch surfaces within contemporary discourses as a congealed sentiment of nostalgia. Boym and Stewart’s concepts of nostalgia are elaborated further in Chapters 4 & 5.

<sup>176</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. xviii.

nostalgia is intimately linked with processes of repression exemplified in the “modern opposition between tradition and revolution”<sup>177</sup>, an opposition which she calls “treacherous”<sup>178</sup> as it fails to recognize that “there is a codependency between the modern ideas of progress and newness and antimodern claims of recovery of national community and the stable past”.<sup>179</sup>

In an earlier publication<sup>180</sup> Boym describes “a premodern potlatch”<sup>181</sup>, a programme launched by the newspaper *Komsomol Truth* in which an article titled “Down with Domestic Trash” aimed at propagating “an ideal revolutionary home”<sup>182</sup> in Stalinist Russia. Drawing a parallel between this “ideal revolutionary home” of Stalinist Russia, the racial purification of Nazi Germany and the repressed “hybrid tradition of impure modernity”<sup>183</sup>, Boym observes that the obsession with ‘purification’<sup>184</sup> was the shared value “of three diverse political cultures of the 1930s: United States, Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia.”<sup>185</sup>

Although Greenberg’s position is generally informed by a stance that views modern society as emptied out of spirituality and imagination, either by economic forces of commodification or the political structures of totalitarian regimes, his concept of avant-garde rests within the anti-emotional and anti-domestic paradigm of a modernist aesthetics that thereby reinstates the very processes of a Modernization it initially rejects. In his condemnation of emotion Greenberg relegates all that is threatening to his main narrative to

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>178</sup> Boym derives a dual meaning for ‘tradition’ from its etymological source which signifies both to ‘hand down’, ‘pass on a doctrine’ as well as ‘surrender’, ‘betrayal’ and ‘revolution’. Accordingly ‘tradition’ represents for Boym both cyclical repetition and the radical break; “tradition and revolution incorporate each other and rely on their opposition” (S. Boym, 2001, p. 19).

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>180</sup> S. Boym, *Common Places*.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>183</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 29.

<sup>184</sup> The representatives of the modernist anti-kitsch position often refer to kitsch as ‘impure’ in the sense of it being tainted with sentiments that undermine a ‘pure’ and ‘disinterested’ aesthetic experience.

<sup>185</sup> S. Boym, *Common Places*, p. 36.

the homogenous category of kitsch, the site of Modernism's suppressed 'Home', in order to project itself solely into the 'Away'. With kitsch as a cipher for this repressed 'Home', Greenberg's modernist project cannot leave scope for a quest for *Heimat*; for any desire of belonging. As Modernism's uncanny *Doppelgänger*, kitsch reveals what "ought to have remained hidden"<sup>186</sup>, namely that Modernism's antinomy between innovation and kitsch's repetitive banality is only apparent. Fixed in either the 'Home' or the 'Away', Greenberg's concept of kitsch and avant-garde art that theorizes the two as mutual anti-systems, maintains kitsch as banal and simplistic in as much as it only reverses the traditional order of aesthetic judgment, without breaking its chains. However, the repressed 'Home' of Greenberg's Modernism was to return as its uncanny double to haunt Modernism in the shape of the postmodern<sup>187</sup>. It is this 'repressed home' that Stewart charts as the 'object' of nostalgia: because it "never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent [...] it "continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack"<sup>188</sup>. As a cipher for the repetition of historical material, kitsch has become Post-modernism's embodiment of a nostalgia "that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition and denies the repetition's capacity to form identity."<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> S. Freud, "The Uncanny", in *The Pelican Freud Library*, trans. J. Strachey, Vol. 14 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 364. Essay first published 1919.

<sup>187</sup> Greenberg's narrative came to an end with the advent of Pop art in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For further reading I refer to A. Huyssen, *After the Great Divide Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*. Huyssen argues for an understanding of American Postmodernism alongside the European historical avant-garde. Interpreting it as a

countermovement to the success of Modernism and its establishment as the first American 'institutionalized' art, Huyssen develops an argument to conceive American Postmodernism not as a breakthrough but rather as an endgame that pronounces the fragmentation and decline of avant-garde art as a genuinely critical and adversary culture.

<sup>188</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 23.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

## ADORNNO

Adorno's theorizations of kitsch are mainly informed by his writings on music, the conditions of cultural production in late capitalist society and by Benjamin's writings, especially Benjamin's meditations on the outmoded as residues of human history and desire in the *Arcades Project*<sup>190</sup>. Adorno's opening paragraph to "Kitsch"<sup>191</sup> is reminiscent of how Freud introduces the uncanny in his essay "*Das Unheimliche*" (the uncanny) of 1919<sup>192</sup> and suggests, I believe, that for Adorno the notion of kitsch has to have "a sense of home and homeliness within and beyond which to think the unhomely."<sup>193</sup> Adorno states:

"As little as it may otherwise hit the mark, in the case of ideas that are immersed in history, to refer back to a word's lexical meaning, the term 'kitsch' has grown so remote from its lexical meaning that the latter may once again enlighten by being pointed to as a *forgotten secret* [my italics]."<sup>194</sup>

What could this "forgotten secret" be for kitsch, which is not commonly associated with the secretive but with the obvious, the familiar, the banal, the known and the tested? Adorno continues: "If the interpretation is correct that

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<sup>190</sup> At the core of the *Arcades Project* (1927 – 1939, unfinished) is Benjamin's hermeneutics as a material historicist. Discarded mass-produced objects are conceived as 'historical traces' that speak of human desires and anxieties. Initially developed as a joint project with Adorno, their ideas regarding its aim started to diverge as the project progressed. Under the influence of Fascism's exploitation of the outmoded for its ideological superstructure, Benjamin's intention to seek an emancipatory potential in the outmoded through the *Arcades Project* gave way to his emphasis on new technological means of production and dissemination as means for a 'politicization of aesthetics'. Not convinced by this change of direction Adorno insisted on Benjamin's previous concept to expose the modern through the outmoded as an ideology of the 'eternal recurrence of the same'. The *Arcades Project* is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>191</sup> T. W. Adorno, "Kitsch" in *Essays on Music*.

<sup>192</sup> I refer to N. Royle, *The uncanny* (Manchester: University Press, 2003). Royle's close reading and analysis of Freud's essay "The Uncanny" starts with an investigation into Freud's own mindset as he approaches the topic by "turning (back) for shelter in a dictionary", an approach which Royle interprets as a sign of Freud's own hesitation and apprehension towards the uncanny (N. Royle, the uncanny, pp. 8- 9).

<sup>193</sup> N. Royle, *The uncanny*, p. 25.

<sup>194</sup> T. W. Adorno, "Kitsch", p. 501.

derives the word from the English *sketch*, then this would mean, first of all, the quality of *being unrealized, merely hinted at* [my italics].<sup>195</sup> Adorno's emphasis on the etymological source of *sketch* is important. Of all sources commonly mentioned<sup>196</sup>, 'sketch' is mostly rejected in favour of *kitschen*, *verkitschen*, the German slang for selling and buying quickly and cheaply. For Adorno – a native German – this would have been the more obvious choice. And, unlike other theoreticians<sup>197</sup>, he does not establish 'sketch' in terms of it representing a quick mode of production, developed by artists at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "to sell their work quickly and cheaply."<sup>198</sup> Instead, Adorno ties the relationship of 'sketch' and kitsch to the work itself, its characteristics, concluding that "all real kitsch has the character of a *model* [his italics]."<sup>199</sup> According to Adorno, such an interpretation of kitsch leads "deeper than all notions of the non-genuine, illusory."<sup>200</sup> According to the dictionary a 'model' can signify both a "person, thing, proposed for imitation" (OED) and something that is "exemplary" (OED). Kitsch is an operational agency that demands a contextual investigation reaching beyond the well-rehearsed inquiries into its aspects of 'inauthenticity', 'falseness' and 'imitation'. It is the historicity of every commodity (including art) that is foregrounded in Adorno's concept as he states that kitsch "offers the outline and draft of objectively compelling, pre-established forms that have lost their content in history."<sup>201</sup> Like Greenberg he works with a notion of kitsch as a 'shallow' culture in capitalist and totalitarian societies, but unlike Greenberg focuses on the mechanisms which nurture such a culture. From this perspective kitsch becomes 'exemplary', forever changing, "laying bare [...] hidden forces."<sup>202</sup> Describing kitsch as "a kind of receptacle of mythic basic materials" that "sustains the memory, distorted and as mere illusion, of a formal objectivity

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

<sup>196</sup> I refer to my comments on the etymology of kitsch in Chapters 1 & 4.

<sup>197</sup> See Chapters 1 & 4.

<sup>198</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 8.

<sup>199</sup> T. W. Adorno, "Kitsch", p. 501.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p. 501.

<sup>201</sup> T. W. Adorno, "Kitsch", p. 501.

<sup>202</sup> S. Freud, "The Uncanny", p. 366.



that has passed away”<sup>203</sup> Adorno suggests that we can never quite locate the place where its discourse begins or ends.

Although Adorno maintains the modernist position of a radical separation between ‘low’ and ‘high’ art, he does not conceive popular culture and serious art as fixed binary opposites<sup>204</sup> but as dialectically entwined cultural expressions of the same civilization no longer capable of producing a culture.

“Light art has been the shadow of autonomous art. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. The truth which the latter necessarily lacked because of its social premises gives the other the semblance of legitimacy.”<sup>205</sup>

Although they might be antithetic in appearance, Adorno recognizes avant-garde art and kitsch as correlative in substance; the two sides of a Modernism that fetishizes innovation on the grounds of an “exclusion of worn-out and superseded procedures”<sup>206</sup>. As a consequence his contribution comprises both a theory of Modernism and a critique of mass culture, as both high and low culture are simultaneously addressed from the perspective of alienation. This perspective, rather than seeking distinct categories for segregation, emphasizes their dialectical entwinement as “halves of a totality which to be sure could never be reconstructed through the addition of the two halves.”<sup>207</sup> Focusing on these dynamics of ‘what does not add up’ Adorno’s investigation aims at an explanation of the mechanisms of the repression and domination of human freedom and values in late capitalist conditions. Adorno’s comment that “[T]here is no general criterion for kitsch, for the concept is itself a frame

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<sup>203</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 501.

<sup>204</sup> With the possibility of overcoming fixed binary oppositions Adorno paves the way for post-modern deconstruction of philosophy.

<sup>205</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 135.

<sup>206</sup> T. W. Adorno, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedemann, Vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970-86), p. 58.

<sup>207</sup> T. W. Adorno, “On the Social Situation of Music”, in *Essays on Music*, pp. 391-436, p. 395. Essay first published in 1932.

I also refer to J. M. Bernstein’s introductory remarks regarding Adorno’s comment on “the great divide between artistic modernism and the culture industry [...] in his letter to Walter Benjamin of March 1936. There he states that both high art as well as industrially produced consumer art ‘bear the stigmata of capitalism, [...] Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up’” (T. W. Adorno, 2001, p.2).

that is always only filled historically and has its actual justification only in polemics.”<sup>208</sup> indicates that kitsch is not an aesthetic category explicable through certain stylistic features. It rather has its use as a cipher with which critics betray their own cultural tastes as they employ it to consolidate certain ideologies. Adorno stresses this potency to “suit some powers”<sup>209</sup> not with regard to certain totalitarian/consumerist ideologies, but in general, as for him “all kitsch is essentially ideology”<sup>210</sup>, including the ideology of class distinctions. As such kitsch is not simply a means “to deceive people about their true situation”<sup>211</sup>, but foremost “an ideological means [to defend] a moderate ‘culture’.”<sup>212</sup>

Stressing these structural features Adorno addresses kitsch as an integral constituent of the human condition with the help of which he seeks to explain the cultural and economic dynamics of his time. In their investigation of these conditions Adorno and Horkheimer employ the term “culture industry”<sup>213</sup> on the grounds that ‘mass’ or ‘popular’ culture are profoundly ideological terms, in order to distinguish their concept of the ‘culture industry’ from a notion of culture that *spontaneously* emerges from the masses. This distinction between ‘mass culture’ (culture produced for the masses from an apparatus that implants it from above) and ‘popular culture’ (culture that is produced by the masses) is important in order to understand Adorno’s concept of the culture industry and its relation to high and low art.

Though Adorno makes no direct references to totalitarian regimes there is a general agreement amongst his followers that “the culture industry’s effective

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<sup>208</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 504.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p. 502.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid., p. 502.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., p. 502.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 504.

<sup>213</sup> Adorno states: “The term culture industry was perhaps used for the first time in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Horkheimer and I published in Amsterdam in 1947. In our drafts we spoke of ‘mass culture’. We replaced that expression with ‘culture industry’ in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art” (T. W. Adorno, 2001, p. 98).

integration of society marks an equivalent triumph of repressive unification in liberal democratic states to that which was achieved politically under fascism.”<sup>214</sup> Bernstein states that it is not without interest that the term ‘culture industry’ makes its first appearance in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which Adorno and Horkheimer chart the self-destructive mechanisms of the Enlightenment, an Enlightenment which in its ‘dialectic’, becomes its own darker other and “creates the uncanny in its wake”<sup>215</sup>. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that the same rationality that is at the core of the Enlightenment’s emancipatory project imposes new myths and even stronger forces of domination. Similar to the mechanisms of the culture industry working towards “inner homogeneity” for maximal “external effectivity”<sup>216</sup>, Adorno and Horkheimer argue that the Enlightenment’s domination is based in processes of homogenization which subsume the particular and individual under universal principles in order to obtain technological and conceptual mastery.

Translating Marx’s economic theory into the cultural sphere, Adorno and Horkheimer outline the ‘culture industry’ as a mechanism of social control within which, for the sole purpose of profit, “the irreconcilable elements of culture, art and distraction”<sup>217</sup> have become reunified and subjugated under the laws of economics. Employing the term ‘industry’ in a social rather than technological sense, they theorize the culture industry as an administering apparatus that regulates, schematizes, organizes and controls all cultural production so that any dialectic of affirmation and critique is abolished as both, high and low art, become equally marked by mass culture. The intrinsic rules of the culture industry are described as an “agreement – or at least the determination – of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about

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<sup>214</sup> I refer to J. M. Bernstein’s introductory remarks in *The Culture Industry*, p. 4.

<sup>215</sup> N. Royle, *The uncanny*, p.22.

<sup>216</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 110.

<sup>217</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 136.

consumers, or above all themselves."<sup>218</sup> Within this controlling framework real difference reveals itself as nothing but an illusion. Novelty becomes a parody of the new and the new is ultimately suppressed by rendering it to nothing but "improvement of mass reproduction", which is "not external to the system."<sup>219</sup>

<sup>220</sup> It is an administering culture which superficially advertises diversity as a smokescreen for total control:

"What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture."<sup>221</sup>

To portray the intrinsic mechanisms of the modern condition as eternal recurrence of the same was also Benjamin's initial intention for the *Arcades Project* in which he conceives the Parisian Arcades as a "scene for tracing the modern everyday."<sup>222</sup> Central to Benjamin's project is the idea of Modernization as a process of "incessant accumulation of debris"<sup>223</sup> that offers a methodological approach to the everyday in Modernity. Benjamin treats "the ephemera of the everyday as symptoms of much larger forces."<sup>224</sup> Initially conceived in conjunction with Adorno as some kind of 'archaeological' project into the 'prehistory of the nineteenth century', the *Arcades Project* is a vast collection of notes, images and citations from the Parisian Arcades, which, at the time of Benjamin's research, were already in a state of ruination. It is the industrialized and formulaic mass-production of this debris, left behind

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<sup>218</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 122.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>220</sup> I want to emphasize the correlations between Adorno's exposition of the 'culture industry' as a closed system and Greenberg's notion of avant-garde art as a linear and immanent project striving towards purification. Whereas Greenberg's concept inevitably leads to a contraction, a shrinking of avant-garde art's means of articulation, the culture industry, in contrast, progresses expanding horizontally with a growing proliferation of more of the same. As such the 'culture industry' reveals the mechanisms implicit in Greenberg's binary opposition and its inevitable inversion; namely that avant-garde art, as an established culture, convolutes into its binary opposite as it results in a production of more of the same.

<sup>221</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 100.

<sup>222</sup> B. Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (London and NY: Routledge, 2002), p.

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

on the scrap heap of 'progress', and its bogus pretensions and sentimentalization that constitute for Benjamin the potential for an inquest into social desire. With his research into the object world that has become obsolete, it was Benjamin's aim to demonstrate (with his concept of the dialectical image)<sup>225</sup>

"how the phantasmagorical<sup>226</sup> proliferation of new commodities which distinguished urban life under conditions of nineteenth-century capitalism in reality constituted a regression [...] it represented a return to the notion of cyclical time dominant in prehistoric life."<sup>227</sup>

as it reveals Modernism's notion of progress and fetishisation of novelty as "eternal recurrence' or 'mythical repetition."<sup>228</sup>

According to Adorno, as the by-product and waste of capitalist consumer culture, kitsch serves as a tool of periodization that demarcates the outmoded from the apparent new and delineates the useful from the useless. The same dynamics are pointed out by Stewart, who charts the significance of kitsch objects "in their exaggerated display of the values of consumer culture."<sup>229</sup> In doing so "[T]he kitsch object symbolizes not transcendence but emergence in the speed of fashion" as it "constitutes a discourse on the constant re-creation of novelty within the exchange economy."<sup>230</sup> Situated at the interstices of progress and obsolescence, kitsch reveals the hidden dynamics of Modernity, namely, as Ben Highmore states "[T]he new becomes traditional and the residues of the past become outmoded and available for fashionable renewal."<sup>231</sup> As the waste of a consumerist throw-away culture kitsch breaks open these dialectics which, as Stewart points out, lie at the basis of Modernity's utopian unity as it demonstrates that "[I]ts expendability is the

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<sup>225</sup> Benjamin conceives the 'dialectical image' as an object/image from the past that is relevant in the present. It is a 'superimposition of past and present', a 'dialectics at a standstill'. The 'dialectical image' is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

<sup>226</sup> The term 'phantasmagoria' was originally coined by Marx.

<sup>227</sup> R. Wollin, *Walter Benjamin: 'An Aesthetic of Redemption'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 174.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>229</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 168.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>231</sup> B. Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, p. 2.

expendability of all consumer goods, their dependence upon novelty as the replacement of use value and craftsmanship.”<sup>232</sup>

With Stewart’s<sup>233</sup> explanation of kitsch as objects that split into contrasting voices of past and present, mass production and subjective individuality, oblivion and reification through being “apprehended on the level of collective identity”, and as “souvenirs of an era and not of a self”<sup>234</sup> I draw parallels with Benjamin’s dialectics of novelty and obsolescence within his concept of the dialectical image and Adorno’s concept of kitsch as “the precipitate of devalued forms and ornaments from a formal world that has become remote from its immediate context.”<sup>235</sup>

For Adorno ornament cannot be an *a priori* crime.<sup>236</sup> Because he recognizes that neither can avant-garde art be exempt from history and “must be reckoned as kitsch”, if it becomes “part of the art of a former time [...] undertaken today”<sup>237</sup>, he does not envisage the possibility of criticism within autonomous art but rather conceives its relationship to kitsch as dialectical in itself. If kitsch, however, is no longer a unified concept it becomes “useless to try and draw a fine line here between what constitutes true aesthetic fiction (art) and what is merely sentimental rubbish (kitsch).”<sup>238</sup> Adorno pronounces neither kitsch nor avant-garde art as *prima facie* categories. Pronounced as the torn halves of a unity which do not add up, they mutually generate, de-generate and re-generate each other in an ongoing process. ‘Serious’ art might unmask kitsch’s revelling in imitation and ornament as a “parody of

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<sup>232</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 168.

<sup>233</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>235</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 501.

<sup>236</sup> I refer to the Viennese designer and architect Adolf Loos whose essay “Ornament and Crime” (1908) was decisive for the emerging concept of modernist architecture to strip objects of ornament and decor, paving the way for a modernist aesthetic of purity and functionality.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p.501.

<sup>238</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 340.

catharsis”<sup>239</sup>, but kitsch in turn reveals that “as soon as objectivity is wrenched free of ends, it degenerates into precisely that kind of ornamentation which it had originally denounced as a crime,”<sup>240</sup> namely that the quest for autonomy has turned autonomous art into a parody of itself.

“Thought through to the bitter end, *Sachlichkeit* itself regresses to a preartistic barbarism. Even the highly cultivated aesthetic allergy to kitsch, ornament, the superfluous, and everything reminiscent of luxury has an aspect of barbarism, an aspect – according to Freud – of the destructive discontent with culture. The antinomies of *Sachlichkeit* confirm the dialectic of enlightenment: That progress and regression are entwined.”<sup>241</sup>

In the context of my project I interpret Adorno’s quotation as follows: If the claim for art’s autonomy becomes so absolute that it cannot create any longer any notion of belonging or relate to anything at all, it becomes *barbarismos* in its original sense, meaning to speak like someone who can no longer make himself understood.

Adorno’s position towards autonomous art is ultimately pessimistic, to the extent that it is a theorization about its end.<sup>242</sup> Locked within the dialectics of metaphysics and at the mercy of the culture industry, both high and low art are weakened or maybe even rendered impotent and meaningless. Although avant-garde art remains the privileged term above kitsch, Adorno acknowledges that neither can be recognized without the other and that the either/or posed by a binary opposition, renders both unresponsive to the pluralism inherent in diversity. Within this dialectic relationship the evolution of

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<sup>239</sup> Ibid., p. 340.

<sup>240</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 78.

<sup>241</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann, trans. R. H. Kentor (London, NY: Athlone Press, 1997), p. 61.

<sup>242</sup> It is a theorization of its end and beyond. Anticipating the problems of an unreserved reconciliation of high and low culture within Postmodernism, Adorno recognizes that the uncritical reconciliation of high art and popular culture propagated by the culture industry is based on a false promise for a home. This reconciliation, Adorno states, disregards that the “division itself is the truth: it does at least express the negativity of the culture which the different spheres constitute” (T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, 1997, p. 135). Under the name of appropriation ‘low’ art has become Postmodernism’s mainstream culture and as such it has been emptied out of its possibilities to pronounce the contradictions implicit within this separation.

avant-garde art cannot rely on principles of linear progress in Greenberg's sense, as its immanent striving towards its own specificity inevitably results in an 'internal' and 'external' familiarity – its style and tradition<sup>243</sup>. According to Adorno this familiarity is further consolidated through commodification and over-exposure by new technological means for reproduction and dissemination. Adorno establishes familiarity here not simply as a quotation of high art that turns it into kitsch, but also as something that addresses the meaning of recognition splitting it into contrasting voices: to be recognized as confirmation, namely to be identified on the basis of familiarity and to be recognized as a demand for creation and inauguration with regard to having success.<sup>244</sup> Acknowledging this double meaning Adorno outlines familiarity as something that “reproduces itself in a fatal circle: the most familiar is the most successful and is therefore played again and again and made still more familiar.” Adorno states:

“It is not only that the ears of the public are so flooded with light music that any other form of musical expression strikes them as ‘classical’ – an arbitrary category existing only as a contrast to the other. And it is not only that the perceptive faculty has been so dulled by the omnipresent hit tune that the concentration necessary for responsible listening has become permeated by traces of recollection of this musical rubbish, and thereby impossible. Rather, sacrosanct traditional music has come to resemble commercial mass production in the character of its performances and in its role in the life of the listener and its substance has not escaped this influence.”<sup>245</sup>

Other theoreticians, such as Sydney Grew have commented on the dialectics between originality and familiarity in relation to kitsch. In an essay titled “Clichés”, Grew suggests that a platitude might originate as “the ‘spell-word’ of genius” that has become overexposed and familiarized through quotation

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<sup>243</sup> I refer to my discussion of Greenberg.

<sup>244</sup> For this comment I am indebted to A. Duttman's inaugural lecture “Selfdeception and Recognition”, 10<sup>th</sup> January 2006, Goldsmiths College, University of London.

<sup>245</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. A. G. Mitchell and W. V. Blomster (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973), p. 10. First published in 1948.



“until at the thousandth remove it has lost all allusive power and passed into a pointless, mechanical piece of abstraction.”<sup>246</sup>

Within this systemic<sup>247</sup> understanding kitsch becomes a major constituent of Modernism’s narrative and the contradictions arising from its core values centred on innovation, novelty and linear progress. Kitsch can no longer be segregated as a unified category within Modernism’s ‘Other’, but has to be recognized as a cipher of what Modernism structurally represses. This recognition is most prominently expressed in a shift of Adorno’s position towards Surrealism<sup>248</sup>. Adorno’s analysis of Surrealism in his later writing<sup>249</sup> expounds the idea of Surrealism as the repressed ‘Other’ of Modernism. Emphasizing the recovery of repressed historical, cultural, as well as psychic materials as the centre of its concerns, Adorno’s initial scepticism gives way to an acknowledgment that Surrealism forms

“the complement to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or New Objectivity, which came into being at the same time. The *Neue Sachlichkeit*’s horror of the crime of ornamentation, as Adolf Loos called it, is mobilized by Surrealist shocks. The house has a tumor: an excrescence of flesh grows from the house. Childhood images of the modern era are the quintessence of what the

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<sup>246</sup> S. Grew, “Clichés”, in *Music & Letters*, Vol. 1, no. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), pp. 247-55, p. 248.

<sup>247</sup> I am borrowing this term from the pragmatics of systemic family therapy; see also my remarks in Chapter 1.

<sup>248</sup> R. Krauss comments in *The Optical Unconscious* on this shift as she ponders on how Adorno is “Looking back on Surrealism” in 1954. Krauss states: “He can’t quite share Walter Benjamin’s old enthusiasm for those ‘energies of intoxication’ that Benjamin saw surrealism placing in the service of freedom. [...] And yet. A dialectical image begins to form for him. Its ground is a series of white, geometrical planes, the stark, streamlined architecture of Bauhaus rationalism. *Sachlichkeit*. The new objectivity. Technology as form. ‘Ornament,’ Adorno remembers Loos having said, ‘is a crime.’ And gleaming and new, this architecture will admit of no crime, no deviation. It will be a machine stripped down for work, a machine to live in. But there, suddenly, on the stretch of one of its concrete flanks, a protuberance begins to sprout. Something bulges outward, pushing against the house’s skin. Out it pops in all its nineteenth-century ugliness and absurdity, a bay window with its scrollwork cornices, its latticed windows. It is the house’s tumor, Adorno thinks. It is the underbelly of the prewar technorationalism, the unconscious of the modernist *Sachlichkeit*. It is surrealism, connecting us, through the irrational, with the other side of progress, with its flotsam, its discards, its rejects. Progress as obsolescence” (R. E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*. [Cambridge, Massachusetts: London: MIT Press, 1993], pp. 33-34).

<sup>249</sup> I refer to T. W. Adorno, “Looking back on Surrealism”, in *Notes to Literature*, trans. S. Weber-Nicholsen, vol. 1., pp. 86-90 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Essay first published in 1954.

*Neue Sachlichkeit* makes taboo because it reminds it of its own object-like nature and its inability to cope with the fact that its rationality remains irrational. Surrealism gathers up the things the *Neue Sachlichkeit* denies to human beings; the distortions attest to the violence that prohibition has done to the objects of desire.<sup>250 251</sup>

According to Adorno, it is not Kitsch that erases “the border between the values found in art and the ones found elsewhere” (Greenberg). It is rather “[T]he commercial character of culture [that] causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear.”<sup>252</sup> From the perspective of the economic forces of late Capitalism “[C]ultural entities [...] are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through.”<sup>253</sup> Reformulating Marx’s theory that the mode of production does not only manufacture the commodity but also the demand for it in the cultural context, Adorno does not follow Greenberg’s example in arguing that the entertainment industry simply provides the masses<sup>254</sup> with the sort of culture they demand and deserve. He conceives the need of the masses for amusement and distraction in capitalist society dialectically: It is both, a product and a result of the capitalist mode of production, as he realizes that “[T]he argument that the public wants Kitsch is dishonest; the argument that it needs relaxation, at least incomplete.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Looking back on Surrealism”, pp. 89-90.

<sup>251</sup> The influence of Benjamin’s writing on the later position of Adorno towards Surrealism is particularly evident in Benjamin’s concept of the ‘psychoanalysis of things’ which he elaborates in “Dream Kitsch”, his essay on Surrealism. Benjamin refers to the Surrealists as the Psychoanalysts not of human souls but of things and to Kitsch as the feature that most characterizes the modern age. Kitsch is for him “the last mask of the banal, with which we clothe ourselves in dreams and in conversations, in order to take up into ourselves the power of the extinct thing-world” (W. Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch”, in *Selected Writings 1927 – 1934*, eds. M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, trans. R. Livingstone, vol. 2, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 3-5, p.4. Essay first published in 1927.

<sup>252</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 61.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>254</sup> Adorno explains the mechanisms of mass formation with reference to Freud’s theories as complex primary instincts of identification and ego formation common to *all* human beings regardless of class (Chapter 5, “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda”, in *The Culture Industry*, pp. 132-157).

<sup>255</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Why Is the New Art So Hard to Understand?”, in *Essays on Music*, ed. R. Leppert, trans. S. H. Gillespie, pp. 127-34 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 133. Essay first published in 1931.

Whilst Greenberg tries to resolve the tension between high and low culture within a re-coding of art as a binary opposite to kitsch/popular culture which consolidates traditional class distinctions with regard to cultural consumption and production, Adorno recognizes that this tension can only be resolved within the dynamics of the social sphere, the very same sphere within which it is enunciated. As a consequence, Adorno argues that modernist art cannot be conceived as autonomous category but has to be understood as a result of this conjuncture between culture and commodification, namely that it is its very autonomy which relates art dialectically to commodification. Modernist art does not, for Adorno, entail the possibility for a radically new departure from the corruption of culture within materialist society. Art's autonomy ultimately even protects the economic status quo as the culture industry will inevitably appropriate any avant-garde movement to something profitable by turning it into an aestheticised commodity. Being part of a culture within which advertising and commodification conflate in the economic sphere, the work of art becomes just an image, a representation and a spectacle. The aesthetic experience is replaced by an act of recognition of what has already officially been recognized.

<sup>256</sup>All genuine experience of art is devalued into a matter of evaluation. The consumer is encouraged to recognize what is offered to him: the cultural object in question is represented as the finished product it has become which now asks to be identified.<sup>256</sup>

An aesthetic encounter becomes an act that is "dependent on information"<sup>257</sup> as "[T]he consumer must only know how to deal with them [cultural goods] in order to justify his claim to be a cultivated person."<sup>258</sup>

Recognition, familiarity and conformist identification with what has already officially been identified as art have replaced the subjective experience of art. The notion of taste can no longer be supported by what is (according to Kant) the precondition for aesthetic judgement, "the faculty of estimating an object

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<sup>256</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 81.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest* [my italics]."<sup>259</sup> Within the conditions of the culture industry the aesthetic judgment can no longer be based on and triggered by the inherent nature of a work of art. In Adorno and Horkheimer's words:

"Kant's formalism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but industry robs the individual from this function."<sup>260</sup>

Having 'taste' equates to being equipped with the 'right' vocabulary and the code of 'cultural conduct'. These are made public through the means of advertising and the apparatus of cultural administration<sup>261</sup>, which - as a social regulative rather than a source of knowledge - render "the use value of art, its mode of being"<sup>262</sup> (which is precisely its non-utility) into a commodity fetish. The aesthetic judgment of a work of art is replaced by its being recognized by the public, its social rating the ultimate measure for its value. The Kantian 'ought to', implying universality of the subjective aesthetic judgment as some kind of sign of communal belonging to humankind that is grounded in aesthetics, has now to be taken literally. "In contrast to the Kantian, the categorical imperative of the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom"<sup>263</sup> as "[N]ot to conform means to be rendered powerless, economically and therefore spiritually"<sup>264</sup>. The culture industry's proclamation that "you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence"<sup>265</sup> has rendered taste into a categorical imperative, where people are told what they 'ought to' like and dislike. Adorno outlines taste here as a kind of inversion of Kant's notion of universality. It is

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<sup>259</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 50.

<sup>260</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 124.

<sup>261</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer's theorization of 'taste' as 'appropriate knowledge' made public through advertising formulates some sort of inversion to Greenberg's understanding of 'appropriate knowledge' as a defining marker for the cultural elite.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>263</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 104.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

no longer the subjective judgment that implies a kind of general agreement among humankind of what constitutes good art. Within the conditions of the culture industry this agreement has been replaced by “an enforced solidarity with what has already been judged.”<sup>266</sup> Within this context ‘belonging’, as in being part of communality, is rendered problematic to the extent that it has become a moral impossibility.<sup>267</sup> It is this demand for an unquestioned “complete identification with the generality”<sup>268</sup>, characteristic of both the conditions of the culture industry and a totalitarian regime, which forms for Adorno “part of morality not to be at home in one’s home.”<sup>269</sup> This impossibility of belonging is not only a moral but also an aesthetic irrevocability as Adorno can no longer suggest any alternative dwelling place for art. Adorno’s theorization of cultural production within the conditions of the culture industry neither allows for Benjamin’s optimism<sup>270</sup> in modern technologies as a means to ‘politicize aesthetics’ nor for Greenberg’s concept of avant-garde art as resistance. Adorno does not envisage the possibility for resistance within a unified notion of autonomy that seeks to rebuild some utopian mythical ‘Home’ for art in a rupture with the past. For him the question is rather how autonomy of art can be reconciled with its heteronomy, a question which ultimately forces art to remain nomadic as it cannot have an *a priori* *topos*. As a consequence, he conceives the imaginary place for art as ongoing negative dialectics between estrangement and the familiar, within which the place of art is constantly anticipated but eternally deferred as true art accepts its state of permanent exile. In other words Adorno suggests that, within the conditions of the culture industry, which pretends to be a ‘Home’,

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>267</sup> Adorno discusses this moral impossibility in “Refuge for the homeless” in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951) in connection with both the horrors of World War II and capitalist consumer society.

<sup>268</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 154.

<sup>269</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Refuge for the homeless”, in *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB; New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 39. Essay first published in 1951.

<sup>270</sup> I refer to Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, first published in 1936.

true art can only evolve dialectically into negativity that spirals towards an unknowable future.

Whilst Greenberg's binary opposition of kitsch and avant-garde art enunciates, as suggested, Boym's<sup>271</sup> utopian, totalizing nostalgia, Adorno's conceptualization of autonomous art remains "inconclusive" and "fragmentary" – to use her terminology for the way in which she characterizes ironic nostalgia. The only future that Adorno can envisage for autonomous art has to adopt the stance of Boym's ironic nostalgia: a longing for the home that can never be reached and a desire for the familiar that can never be obtained. According to Boym, ironic nostalgia stresses the sentiment of longing itself. It is a longing that accepts or even enjoys the paradoxes of permanent exile and the impossibility of an ultimate homecoming, epitomised in *Odysseus'* endlessly deferred but nevertheless constantly anticipated homecoming.<sup>272</sup> The alternative dwelling to the 'Home' that is imposed by the culture industry can only be a home that does not exist.

How is this state of permanent exile to be envisaged? I interpret Adorno's position as a rejection of both futuristic utopia and utopian nostalgia as they both bear the false promise of an imaginary home. But what are the possibilities for an art to resist the culture industry without either projecting itself into a utopian future or regressing into a nostalgic recuperation of a lost past? Commenting on Adorno's position Calinescu suggests that due to the

"proliferation of falsehood and the ideologically successful (mis)use of practically all known art forms the genuine modern artist is compelled to look for new means of expression, whose

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<sup>271</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>272</sup> Throughout my thesis I refer to *The Odyssey* as a story of a 'Homecoming' (an overcoming of the dualism inherent in all dichotic oppositions) that has to remain a quest. Even upon his successful return to *Ithaca*, *Odysseus* tells us that his homecoming is not complete. According to *Teiresias'* prophecy he has to continue his quest and "take a well-cut oar and wander on from city to city, till I come to a people who know nothing of the sea, and never use salt with their food, so that our crimson-painted ships and the long oars that serve those ships as wings are quite beyond their ken. Of this, he said that I should find conclusive proof, [...] when I met some other traveller who spoke of the 'winnowing-fan' I was carrying on my shoulder. Then he said, the time would have come for me to plant my oar in the earth" (Homer, 1946, p. 359).

novelty, according to Adorno, is measured exclusively by their negativity, by the ever more complex rejections that their choice involves.<sup>273</sup>

However, Adorno's statement regarding the "exclusion of worn-out and superseded procedures"<sup>274</sup> would only lead us back to Greenberg's reductionism, a drastic shrinking of the means for artistic expression toward an implosion of stylistic negativity. Adorno is aware that once the potential for innovation is exhausted, its effects are sought after in a direction that mechanically repeats them as modernist clichés, resulting in a "progressive eclipse"<sup>275</sup>, in the 'Other' becoming the same. Recognizing the problems of Greenberg's dichotomization between advanced art and a backward popular culture, Adorno conceives of innovation not simply as anti-traditionalist rupture and an immanent process of reduction<sup>276</sup> but as a new direction.<sup>277</sup> It is this idea of *Richtungstendenz*, Richard Leppert observes in his introductory remarks to *Essays on Music*, which is at the core of Adorno's understanding of innovation as a creative act in which old forms are "transferred to a new plane".<sup>278</sup> The conditions of the culture industry have rendered the decisive act of innovation, understood as a kind of "self-negation"<sup>279</sup> to the predominant style of earlier periods, an impossibility. As a consequence, the 'new plane' cannot be explained solely within a concept of resistance and as a striving toward art's essence<sup>280</sup>. It rather has to be conceived as a spiralling movement that retains "a mistrust of style" that, "at crucial points", even subordinates style "to the logic of the matter"<sup>281</sup>, takes recourse to traditions

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<sup>273</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 210.

<sup>274</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 1970-86*, vol. 7, p. 58.

<sup>275</sup> H. Foster, *Recodings*, p. 202.

<sup>276</sup> Adorno's statement that the "anti-traditionalist energy turns into an all-devouring maelstrom" (T. W. Adorno, 1971, p. 41) invokes both the final annihilation of *Captain Nemo* in the *Maelstrom* off the Norwegian coast and its antidote, *Odysseus'* surviving of *Carybdis*, as he is clinging to a tree watching his ship and crew being sucked into the depths of the ocean.

<sup>277</sup> Adorno refers to Schönberg's atonality.

<sup>278</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 1970-86*, vol. 7, p. 41.

<sup>279</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 131.

<sup>280</sup> The discussion of Greenberg has made it clear that this would imply a notion of style "as mere aesthetic regularity" (T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, 1997, p. 130).

<sup>281</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 130.

and recycles “what has already been tried and tested.”<sup>282</sup> Adorno’s concept of innovation allocates to kitsch a potential transgressive value. It not only unites the confinement of high art’s dialectics but simultaneously opens the possibilities “to lend kitsch a tongue”<sup>283</sup> and, — I use here Benjamin’s terminology — to ‘brush history against the grain’. Theorized within these dynamics of past and present forms kitsch can neither be explained sufficiently as a category of aesthetic inadequacy nor as the appropriate culture for the populace. It rather has to be understood as a cipher that is dialectically related to Modernism’s notion of progress as a concept that is coupled with an idea of rupture with tradition. In Adorno’s words: “Kitsch cannot be unambiguously traced to the individual inadequacy of the artist, but, instead, has its own objective origin in the downfall of forms and material into history.”<sup>284</sup> Instead of a critique of kitsch, Adorno critiques the structural dynamics that have determined the concept since its emergence, namely the modern capitalist change of the meaning of tradition itself, a change which forms the core of modernist kitsch debates. Adorno views the disruption of tradition, from the onset of the modern era, as closely related to a transformation of kitsch from its emergence in 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism to a fully matured industrial revolution. “In the more spacious and secure *Lebensraum* of that time [he refers to Romanticism], all kitsch resonated with a metaphysics of death.”<sup>285</sup> “Today”<sup>286</sup>, Adorno continues

“when the moderate security of the bourgeoisie is a thing of the past, the function of kitsch has changed. It leaves no longer any room for death. Now it has merely to conceal and transfigure, and it must satisfy with an altogether different alacrity the concrete wishes of tormented individuals.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> I am paraphrasing Broch’s pre-conditions for kitsch in “Notes on the Problem of Kitsch”.

<sup>283</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften 1970-86*, ed. R. Tiedemann, vol. 13 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), p. 189.

<sup>284</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 501.

<sup>285</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 502. Adorno refers to Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*.

<sup>286</sup> Today refers to 1932, when Adorno wrote his essay on kitsch.

<sup>287</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, pp. 502-503.



Adorno's statement here exemplifies that kitsch is not only a concept which is in itself historical, but in fact that it is intimately linked to repression within different historical contexts. As these contexts change, kitsch fulfills different social functions: "Impossible to grasp the concept 'kitsch' in a free-floating aesthetic way. The social moment is essentially constitutive of it."<sup>288</sup>

In his introductory remarks to *Essays on Music* Richard Leppert comments on Adorno's notion of tradition, a notion that invokes the pre-industrial within conditions of a pre-capitalist society. Adorno states: "[T]radition is opposed to rationality, [...]. Its medium is not consciousness but the pre-given, unreflected and binding existence of social forms."<sup>289</sup> According to Adorno this original meaning of tradition, namely 'to hand down'<sup>290</sup> - suggesting continuity, familial relation and communal experience - has been re-invoked by the political right as a kind of reassurance in the face of fundamental social changes that characterize Modernism. Within these political movements tradition has become an aesthetically reproduced, advertised, commodified<sup>291</sup> simulacrum of its former self. It no longer constitutes a lived experience but has been made into a pre-fabricated artificial sentiment that – I use here Greenberg's terminology for kitsch - "changes according to style"<sup>292</sup> or according to the ideological purpose for which it is employed. As a result, Adorno insists, our society has no longer a tradition<sup>293</sup> and as tradition has been eviscerated of its social meaning, it becomes hallmarked by kitsch as it is served up as an artificial version of its repressed former self.<sup>294</sup> This tradition tries to erase otherness to establish a totalizing and unified notion of national identity, which absorbs its own cultural traditions, turning them into relics. A concept that

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., p. 502.

<sup>289</sup> T. W. Adorno, "On Tradition", in *Telos* 94 (Winter 1993 – 94), pp. 75 - 82, p. 75, quoted by R. Leppert in his introduction to *Essays on Music*, pp. 77-78. Essay first published in 1966.

<sup>290</sup> Adorno derives this meaning from *tradere*, the etymological source of tradition.

<sup>291</sup> The materialist defined collection of terms is chosen deliberately to emphasize its manufactured nature.

<sup>292</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1986, p. 12.

<sup>293</sup> In its original meaning

<sup>294</sup> Kitsch can be seen as a sign of repression and instrument, either as tradition controlled by repression (the Fascist ersatz-tradition) or (as this control by repression can never be complete) as the residues of this tradition that re-surface from its state of repression.

explains Kitsch as structurally enunciated through the repression of fundamental human needs (such as tradition) evokes what Friedländer<sup>295</sup> charted in his book-length essay on the development of popular culture as essentially a memory of National Socialism. He claims that the 'baroque energy' which the new discourses on Nazism display "lay less in an explicit ideology than in the power of emotions, images, phantasms"<sup>296</sup> that are conjured up. A power which reveals the "psychological hold Nazism had in its day,"<sup>297</sup> and its ultimate fusion of kitsch and death as

"a deep structure based on the co-existence of the adoration of power with a dream of final explosion – the annulment of all power [...] a particular kind of bondage nourished by the simultaneous desires for absolute submission and total freedom."<sup>298</sup>

For Friedländer certain traumas (like the Holocaust) are 'unspeakable' and can only be met with 'silence' as any re-presentations of it unfailingly end up in kitsch as a substitution of death.

Foster suggests that the fascination provoked by images of Fascism, cannot simply be explained as "a dandyish taste for the scandalous or as a return, not of the repressed, but of the desire for repression."<sup>299</sup> Referring to Baudrillard's explanation of the attraction with representations of Fascism as a 'loss of the real', Foster argues that this loss is compensated for by making "a fetish of the period prior to this loss."<sup>300</sup> Foster understands the fetish within the context of Freud's theory, namely as "the last thing experienced before the [traumatic] event" which subsequently serves as a "substitute which blocks or displaces a traumatic discovery of loss."<sup>301</sup> "[I]f the trauma of postwar consumer society is the loss of the real", Foster continues, "fascism

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<sup>295</sup> S. Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. T. Weyr (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>299</sup> H. Foster, *Recordings*, p. 79.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

might well be our fetish period”<sup>302</sup> as “it is in fascism that one sees a culture struggle with the loss of the real.”<sup>303</sup> Foster suggests that it is precisely the fascist investment in symbolic and atavistic paraphernalia that points towards the possibility to recoup the real as “an extraordinary investment in the real and an extraordinary manipulation of its loss.”<sup>304</sup>

In *Compulsive Beauty*<sup>305</sup> Foster comments that a ruin can simultaneously expose the “capitalist dynamic of innovation as a process of ruination”<sup>306</sup> or “crack open its historicist continuum.”<sup>307</sup> Foster continues to explain these two modes of dealing with the past by juxtaposing the doctrines of totalitarian regimes with the Surrealist concept of history. Totalitarian regimes propagate an admiration of the ruin’s form that ignores what it stands for, enforcing thereby, what Foster calls, a “remembering that represses” in order to “dominate history continuously.”<sup>308</sup> Surrealism, in contrast, focuses on the ruin’s state of ruination, and emphasizing defamiliarization and the outmoded, it embraces an “active return of the repressed.”<sup>309</sup>

Following these comments and my discussion of Adorno’s scepticism towards a Modernism that severs itself from the traditions of the past, I suggest that Adorno’s concept of Kitsch is informed by two different notions: kitsch as ersatz, a means to erase difference and unify the past, and ‘kitsch’ that relates to the outmoded, familiar and habitual which enables us to re-negotiate and transmit the past. Used both as rhetoric and as a means of remembering, kitsch can enact its potential. If, however, it is repressed, it surfaces as an ideological sentiment for human desires of belonging and

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., pp. 79-80.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>305</sup> H. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 1993).

<sup>306</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

lends itself to be used as a means of control and manipulation.<sup>310</sup> In other words, kitsch constitutes a powerful tool for group identity in the mobilization of cultural otherness in the service of national and trans-national politics, either as a personal feeling of belonging or as a prescribed 'sentiment' of national and cultural identity. Adorno's stance, however, does not offer any trajectories for a possible homecoming: be it the lure of belonging promoted by fascist propaganda or the promised 'home' of the culture industry, the sentiment represents the height of inauthenticity, a surrogate for true belonging, manufactured by capitalist/totalitarian societies where even emotion can be commodified into kitsch as an embodied sentiment.

Adorno's concept does not suggest that it is kitsch that operates as a means of control but that, in fact, this control is enacted through kitsch's very cultural prohibition. It is "[T]he omnipresence of technology [that] imprints itself upon objects and everything historical, the race of past suffering in men and things it taboos as kitsch."<sup>311</sup> <sup>312</sup> This prohibition renders kitsch impotent to act as some sort of antidote to technology, rationality and the reification of people and simultaneously allows the culture industry to exploit kitsch as a means by which even greater domination may be achieved.

In his analysis of "The Uncanny" Royle<sup>313</sup> establishes a relationship between social/cultural repressions and the uncanny, as "a critical disturbance of what is proper."<sup>314</sup> For Adorno kitsch is a historical trace that has the potential to reveal hidden mechanisms and repressed memories and as such it has to be understood simultaneously as a product of the culture industry and its very own '*pièce de résistance*'.

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<sup>310</sup> This principle forms the core of Celeste Olalquiaga's concept of kitsch. For further discussion see Chapter 3.

<sup>311</sup> T. W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 78.

<sup>312</sup> Adorno's statement suggests that the category of the outmoded constitutes the repository for kitsch as the notions of kitsch and tradition have become synonymous.

<sup>313</sup> N. Royle, *The uncanny*.

The uncanny constitutes for Freud the category of things which have become repressed in time and ought to remain hidden but are suddenly revealed and brought to light. Freud's concept of the uncanny is elaborated further in Chapter 3.

<sup>314</sup> N. Royle, *The uncanny*, p. 1.

Although Adorno's discussion has opened the scope for a contextual and bifurcated notion of kitsch his concepts of mass culture and autonomous art ultimately remain homogenized. The reasons for this, I argue, lie in Adorno's concept of the culture industry as a totalizing force which unifies all cultural production. As both high art and popular culture are *in unison* subjugated under its all-encompassing mechanisms all culture inevitably becomes mass culture turned into monolithic kitsch. The only notion of progress that can be retained within this pessimistic stance is within a progressive negativity which, like *Captain Nemo*, spirals ever inwards as any differentiations between 'Home' and 'Away' have imploded.

### CHAPTER 3: BELONGING AND BELONGINGS

*“What intellect restores to us under the name of the past is not the past. In reality, as soon as each hour of one’s life has died, it embodies itself in some material object, as do the souls of the dead in certain folk stories, and hides there. There it remains captive, captive forever, unless we should happen on the object, recognize what lies within, call it by its name, and set it free.”*<sup>315</sup>

#### OLALQUIAGA

For my discussion of Celeste Olalquiaga’s position I refer to her theorizations in *The Artificial Kingdom*<sup>316</sup> and *Megalopolis*<sup>317</sup> which, in spite of their different approaches, are both dedicated to her aim to redeem kitsch and explain it as a major constituent of a contemporary cultural sensibility. Her discourse stages kitsch within the context of early Modernization, the urbanization of the masses and its surrounding discourses such as the loss of authenticity and the fetishization of the commodity. As Olalquiaga contextualizes her inquiry in *The Artificial Kingdom* with Benjamin’s writing on early modernization and also in the register of Surrealism as Modernism’s ‘Other’, I set out my arguments with Freud and Benjamin as key authors. John Frow, Svetlana Boym, Susan Stewart and Jean Baudrillard’s theorizations on collecting, nostalgia and the souvenir are employed to develop my argument further.

Olalquiaga’s approach in *Megalopolis* opens the scope to reformulate Marx’s use-value, exchange-value and commodity fetishism in terms of Freud’s writing on the fetish and Bataille’s ‘Notion of Expenditure’. Together with my discussion of *The Artificial Kingdom* I conclude with Denis Hollier’s writing on

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<sup>315</sup> M. Proust, Prologue to “Conte Sainte-Beuve”, in *Marcel Proust on Art and Literature, 1896-1919*, trans. S. Townsend Warner (Greenwich, CT: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 17.

<sup>316</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom – a Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 118.

<sup>317</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis – Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

Bataille, proposing an understanding of kitsch that explains it alongside Surrealism as evoked by Georges Bataille rather than André Breton.

In *The Artificial Kingdom*, Olalquiaga challenges the anti-kitsch positions fundamental to early modernist texts. Her approach marks a shift from kitsch as an *a priori* fixed category that encompasses designated entities of low culture to the 'kitsch experience' that re-contextualizes it within the encounter of a subject with an object and opens a vista into different interpretations of kitsch. Conceived as a cultural sensibility marked by loss and as a concept located in desire, kitsch can be explained in psychoanalytical terms and linked to personal narrative. Olalquiaga's understanding allows for a diversion from a discussion of the external qualities of the kitsch object to internal factors of the onlooker, in terms of Hume's dictum that is translated here in kitsch as being 'in the eye of the beholder'<sup>318</sup>. Olalquiaga's treatment of the topic invites questions such as whether kitsch is a judgment, which is historical itself and such as an investigation into the dynamics of social formations of taste in regard to institutions (art schools, galleries, museums, collectors or business corporations).

Grounding her arguments in the theoretical framework of Benjamin and in particular his writing on the *Arcades Project*<sup>319</sup>, Olalquiaga's inquiry situates kitsch as poised between industrialization and alienation with the aim to endow "industrialization with transcendental attributes"<sup>320</sup> via kitsch. Benjamin theorizes the Arcades as dialectically poised between distraction and revolution by demonstrating both the technical, material abundance which industrial production made possible and the ideological superstructure which

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<sup>318</sup> I refer to D. Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste", in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, eds. Green and Grose (London, 1898) Hume states: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them, and each mind perceives a different beauty" (D. Hume, 1898, p. 268).

<sup>319</sup> Olalquiaga refers to Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927 – 1940). W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. R. Tiedemann, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) and to S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

<sup>320</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 118.

continually dis-invests the masses of any desire other than to consume commodities. Olalquiaga's melancholic and nostalgic kitsch correspond to what Buck-Morss identifies in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as the "ephemeral quality of the material world [that] is charged with meaning"<sup>321</sup>, constituting a representation of "history that demystifies the present"<sup>322</sup> as opposed to the "[R]ecapturing of the past in a pseudo-historical sense, as myth."<sup>323</sup>

Stressing the aspect of kitsch's emotional appeal with melancholia and nostalgia as key terminologies, Olalquiaga contextualizes the subject in a wider context of longing. Within this context she conceives the 'kitsch experience' as a potential critical tool against loss and alienation that aligns it with contemporary concepts of nostalgia. Describing nostalgia in general terms as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed", "a sentiment of loss and displacement" and "a romance with one's own fantasy"<sup>324</sup>, Boym, for example, stresses a notion of nostalgia which she conceives similarly to Olalquiaga as

"an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world [...] as a defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals."<sup>325</sup>

Relating the 'kitsch experience' to memory, Benjamin's dialectical image and the outmoded, Olalquiaga's inquiry widens the scope to interpret kitsch in relation to Freud's "The Uncanny" as a compulsion to repeat which, uncoupled from individual trauma, explains compulsive repetition as a historic mode embedded in the modern condition. Surrealism and Fascism both addressed the outmoded, as it is employed by Olalquiaga and described by Marx, as a result of the tension between the development of productive modes and social formation, resulting in class frictions. Whilst the Surrealists saw in this tension a means to disrupt the present social order, Fascism

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<sup>321</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 43.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIV.



exploited the prevailing class frictions in order to mobilise them into a mythology of participation and belonging. This employment of the outmoded by Surrealism and Fascism alike is epitomized in the bifurcated notion of kitsch Olalquiaga establishes for her inquiry, where she develops 'good' melancholic kitsch within the register of Breton's Surrealism in a binary opposition to 'bad' nostalgic kitsch as its fascist counterpart.

*The Artificial Kingdom*, filled with visual wonders and literary marvels, strangely epitomizes the very phenomenon Olalquiaga is writing about. It touches on subjects such as the souvenir, ruins, Atlantis, allegory, shipwrecks, mermaids, fossils and the topography of the ocean-floor as a projection screen for the unconscious. With its manifold illustrations and inserts the book presents itself as a curious mixture between a world of marvels – such as in the '*Wunderkammer*' - and a theoretical inquiry into kitsch that is simultaneously seductive and serious. Her eclectic inquiry and defence of kitsch - or at least parts of it - takes the reader on journeys through the Parisian Arcades as "places of transit where, nonetheless, time got stuck"<sup>326</sup> and the World Exhibitions in Paris and London around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Following Benjamin's analysis of commodity culture as the ideological superstructure of Capitalism, Olalquiaga attempts to write from the object itself and chooses for her inquiry into kitsch the material waste products of capital. Referring to the outmoded as a reservoir of "abandoned objects found in flea markets, thrift shops, antiquarian houses and discount stores"<sup>327</sup>, she evokes the vocabulary of Surrealism, in particular Breton's love for flea markets as a site for chance encounters, which aligns her inquiry to Breton's project in the context of Benjamin's writing on Surrealism.

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<sup>326</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 27.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

In "Dream Kitsch" Benjamin states:

"The Surrealists, [...] are less on the trail of the psyche than on the track of things. They seek the totemic tree of objects within the thicket of primal history. The very last, the topmost face on the totem pole is that of kitsch. It is the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things."<sup>328</sup>

Olalquiaga understands the outmoded as a "stoic refusal of things to depart once their usefulness is exhausted"<sup>329</sup>. Along with Benjamin she interprets these objects as signs of Capitalism that reveal the ideology of Modernity's fetishization of novelty. With both authors the outmoded is perceived as constituting a 'phantasmagoria', an ideological dreamscape in which people invest desire and anxieties. Like Benjamin, Olalquiaga sees in the 'phantasmagoria', composed of everything from architecture to children's toys, a mystification, a veil of false consciousness and simultaneously a site where the desiring potential of the masses produces unrealised utopian traces. The 'phantasmagoria' is less discussed in Marx's terms as the deceptive appearance of the commodity and as a 'fetish' in the marketplace, where exchange-value obfuscates the source of the value of the commodity in productive labour. For Olalquiaga and for Benjamin it is more, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, "the commodity-on-display where exchange value no less than use value lost practical meaning, and purely representational value come to the fore."<sup>330</sup>

Following Benjamin's hermeneutic materialism, Olalquiaga focuses on issues that are central to his writing such as the aura, the copy, loss, memory and redemption. By transferring the materialistic source of Benjamin's writing into a contemporary discourse on kitsch and longing, her objects of inquiry

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<sup>328</sup> W. Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch" in *Selected Writings 1927 – 1934*, eds. M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, trans. R. Livingstone, vol. 2. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 4. Essay first published in 1927.

<sup>329</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 5.

<sup>330</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, pp. 81 – 82.

constitute neither Benjamin's concept of the outmoded, nor what we generally understand today by the term 'kitsch'. This suggests that her inquiry into kitsch, as she insists that it is kitsch she is writing about, is in some way grounded in a nostalgic sentiment for the past. The fact that for Benjamin each historical period creates its own 'detritus' that manifests itself as outmoded phenomena and that he employs the outmoded as a tool of critical thinking precisely within this register is neglected by Olalquiaga. Employing Benjamin's outmoded as a generalized projection screen for loss and longing her examples of kitsch rather belong to the category of collector's items that no longer testify as the waste of industrialization as it did for Benjamin. This correlation between Olalquiaga's examples of kitsch, Benjamin's 'detritus' and costly antiquities suggests historical relativity, not only in regard to kitsch, also in the way in which we interpret the world around us in general.

In contrast to modernist concepts of high and low culture, Olalquiaga's notion of kitsch is subjectively charged and, relating it to general notions of remembering, it affects all social strata.<sup>331</sup> The close proximity she establishes between kitsch and collectibles points to further potential functions for kitsch. It leaves possibilities for its investigation into a broader context, such as contemporary discourses on longing, nostalgia, the souvenir and collecting that surpasses modernist explanations in aesthetic, economic and political terms.

Conceiving her 'kitsch experience' within these registers Olalquiaga develops a dual concept, melancholic and nostalgic kitsch, which she explains as two distinct modes of remembering. Both modes are grounded and theorized in Freud's writing about nostalgia and longing<sup>332</sup>, in which Freud explains unconscious and conscious memory as two different modes of remembering that are triggered by an object. Conceptualized in this context Olalquiaga's

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<sup>331</sup> Within these discourses kitsch was conceived precisely within both social differences and as a demarcation of these inequalities, namely as 'ersatz culture' and as a commercial substitute that denotes the gap between a cultural elite and the uneducated masses.

<sup>332</sup> I refer to S. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia", in *Collected Papers*, trans. J. Rivière, Vol. 4 (New York: Basic Books, 1959), pp. 152-70. Essay first published in 1917.

melancholic and nostalgic kitsch, generally speaking can be understood as a 'constructive' as opposed to a 'destructive' dealing with loss. Olalquiaga extrapolates this distinction from Benjamin's conception of the Parisian Arcades as 'dream-houses of early consumer Capitalism' and his writing on reminiscence and remembrance<sup>333</sup>. Explaining remembrance and reminiscence as mental processes set in play by either nostalgic or melancholic kitsch, Olalquiaga's concepts rely on an affirmation, that kitsch belongs to that class of objects that invite mental processes to be projected onto the outside world. A projection, which according to Freud always implies the recognition of two states, namely

"one in which something is directly given to the senses and to consciousness (that is, is *present* [his italics] to them), and alongside it another, in which the same thing is *latent* [his italics] but capable of re-appearing. In short, we are recognizing the co-existence of perception and memory...the existence of *unconscious* [his italics] mental processes alongside the *conscious* [his italics] ones."<sup>334</sup>

Applying Benjamin and Freud's theoretical models to her inquiry Olalquiaga conceives melancholic kitsch as remembrance, originating in the unconscious memory of an experience and nostalgic kitsch as reminiscence being brought forth by the conscious memory. Melancholic kitsch is 'good' kitsch as, she explains, it precipitates unconscious perception that is anachronistic and focuses on the distressing experience as a transitory moment. By becoming a remembrance, a fragmentary recollection, it is able to direct our perception to

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<sup>333</sup> I refer to W. Benjamin, "On some Motifs in Baudelaire", in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, H. Zohn, trans. H. Zohn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999), pp. 152-196 and W. Benjamin, "The Image of Proust", in *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (London: Pimlico, Random House, 1999), pp. 197-210. Benjamin distinguishes between a conscious and an unconscious mode of experiencing events in modern times which are both linked to memory. Reminiscence (*Erläbnis*) stores experiences - distorted and censored. They can be recalled at will, but the memory is constructed and consolidated into a flawless version of itself. Lacking transitory vehemence, reminiscence does not acknowledge death, decay and the passage of time, placing the event in the past. Remembrance (*Erfahrung*) is atemporal and memorises events through an allegorical process that favours the intensity of the experience over its abstraction. Remembrance seeks to maintain the event alive in time, placing it in the present.

<sup>334</sup> S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. J. Strachey (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 109. First published in 1913.

hidden, atemporal and mythic archives of our memory. Melancholic kitsch/remembrance, Olalquiaga continues, is obsessed by loss and death, “the transitoriness of lived moments and constituted by what ceases to be.”<sup>335</sup> In contrast ‘bad’ nostalgic kitsch is explained as a trigger for reminiscence and as being trapped in a temporality of an endless repetition of a reconstructed event. It lacks “transitory vehemence”<sup>336</sup>, rendering the loss static, replacing it with a symbol, an ersatz object for what is being lost<sup>337</sup>. Olalquiaga concludes that unconscious remembrance, by being able to leap beyond the event into the associated dimension behind it, supersedes the conscious reminiscence’s evocative ability of the mind.

For Olalquiaga, both unconscious and conscious modes of perceiving experience are mutilated, in that they either ignore intensity (remembrance) or continuity (reminiscence) and as such both melancholic and nostalgic kitsch, have their shared roots in the feeling of longing, a longing, which is experienced differently (epitomized in the two modes of kitsch). Extrapolating on Benjamin’s notion of allegory Olalquiaga contrasts nostalgic longing (reminiscence, essential cognitive processes, symbolic memory), which she situates in the past, with melancholic longing (remembrance, experimental cognitive processes, allegoric memory) as anchored in the present.<sup>338</sup>

For Benjamin the object is plucked out of the historicist narrative of history by the destructive gaze of the critic. It is then juxtaposed against the present in a dialectical image wherein past and present come together in a ‘constellation’ producing a historical materialist understanding as to the nature of commodity

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<sup>335</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 74.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>337</sup> Olalquiaga does not explicitly draw a parallel between nostalgic kitsch and Fascism. The temporal motionlessness she evokes with nostalgic kitsch, however, corresponds to the systematic attempt of totalitarian regimes to render uniform and collective the time in which they operate, to control it and replace the versatility of its individual experience with the fantasy of a central narrative where a collective meaning of society may be acquired. I refer also to Boym and Stewart’s concepts of utopian nostalgia, discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>338</sup> Benjamin formulates allegory as defined by desire and lack, a failed and therefore melancholic attempt to overcome the signifying gap between representation and referent that constantly has to re-enact its own failure. Allegory is conceived here in opposition to the symbol, which represents a condensation between the two.

capitalism and history. Benjamin theorises that the 'truth content' of an object is revealed and allegorically presented in the ruination of its appearance. An object, so to speak, the design of which can appear to be kitsch through being outmoded when brought into conjunction with the present reveals the rhetoric of technological futurity to be predicated upon the cyclical, repetitive time of capital and the commodity. These objects also reveal certain utopian aspirations, which are intertwined into the 'phantasmagoria' of capital, leaving other possibilities. 'Now time', according to Benjamin, constitutes an awakening from the dream of capital, but an awakening, which paradoxically requires a deeper immersion into the dream<sup>339</sup>. As with Benjamin, Olalquiaga grasps the outmoded as an allegory of decay, rather than being a symbol of the success of mid-twentieth century consumer Capitalism and technological progress. Her attempt to charge melancholic kitsch as a positive trigger for remembrance follows Benjamin's task as a historical materialist critic to execute an act of memory and to redeem the objects, events and people, which have been left upon the scrap heap of 'progress'. As such Olalquiaga's notion of melancholic kitsch reveals itself as indistinguishable from Benjamin's dialectical image. Both are conceived as a cipher for a suspension of time in which the past erupts into the present in that they act as a vehicle of redemption that disrupts the empty continuum of time as progress. Interpreting Benjamin's dialectical image as a concept that inverts past and present as it speaks "of the transitoriness of all circumstances"<sup>340</sup> and demonstrates that the 'life' of an object may not be as revealing as its 'death', Olalquiaga establishes a relationship between melancholic kitsch's

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<sup>339</sup> Benjamin initially conceived the *Arcades Project* as a pre-modern fairy tale, a Marxist retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*. According to Buck-Morss the theoretical armature of the *Arcades Project* is a "secular, sociopsychological theory of modernity as a dreamworld, and a conception of collective 'awakening' from it as synonymous with revolutionary class consciousness" (S. Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 253). Buck-Morss' comment marks an important difference between Benjamin and Breton's understanding of Surrealism. Whilst Benjamin's notion of the dream is politicized through it being penetrated by the dialectic of a collective awakening, with Breton, deriving his understanding of 'dream' from Freud, it is grounded in subjectivity and the unconscious.

<sup>340</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 27.

atemporality and the dialectical image as a critical tool to intersect history.  
Within this understanding she claims that

“kitsch gains the potential of being a dialectical image: an object whose decayed state exposes and deflects its utopian possibilities, a remnant constantly reliving its own death, a ruin.”<sup>341</sup>

For Benjamin, dialectical images are similar to his concepts of the ‘idea’ and the ‘monad’. In his investigation of allegory in the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*/he exposes them as constituting *Jetzt-Zeit* (now-time). According to Buck-Morss they testify to “what is historically new about the ‘nature’ of commodities.”<sup>342</sup> Benjamin’s image of ‘Modernity as Hell’, Buck-Morss continues, “deals not with the fact that always the same thing happens [...] but the fact that [...] what is newest doesn’t change; that this ‘newest’ in all its pieces keeps remaining the same.”<sup>343</sup> As novelty becomes fetishized it inevitably has to succumb to the universal commodification under Capitalism, resulting in an endless recurrence of the same. Contextualizing her inquiry within this theoretical framework, Olalquiaga aligns it with how Benjamin conceives ‘dream’ as a collective revelation of the traumatic loss brought on by Modernity and industrialization. Benjamin theorizes this ‘dream’ dialectically, providing a cross-contamination between traditional opposites such as sleep/awakening, past/present, near/far and rationality/irrationality that reveals the instinctual compulsion to repeat as the collective predominant temporal mode of Modernism and its illusion of progress.

Mundane objects of the everyday have the potential to interrupt history as associated with a notion of “chrono-‘logical’”<sup>344</sup> progress, transforming thereby

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., p. 291.

<sup>342</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 67.

<sup>343</sup> W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project* (AP, v, p. 1011), quoted in S. Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 100.

<sup>344</sup> M. Calderbank, “Surreal Dreamscapes: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades” [Online]. Papers on Surrealism, winter 2003, Issue 1, p. 6. Available from <[http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk./papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat\\_files/calderbank.pdf](http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk./papersofsurrealism/journal1/acrobat_files/calderbank.pdf)> [Accessed May 11th, 2008].

the present into “a radical displacement of the past”<sup>345</sup>. For the purpose of her inquiry Olalquiaga links this condition of ultimate stasis in a somehow over generalized manner to Benjamin’s notion of ‘dust’, exposed in “Dream Kitsch”<sup>346</sup>, where he establishes dust in relation to kitsch as an indexical trace of time. With Benjamin’s explanations Olalquiaga interprets dust as a metaphor for the debris of the aura and kitsch as its embodied marker as she emphasizes that “[T]his condition [the new as the ‘ever-always-the-same’] is exposed by dust, which can slowly accumulate on things given their ultimate immobility”<sup>347</sup>. Paraphrasing Benjamin’s essay she concludes that kitsch is a manifestation of “the disintegration which befalls dreams when they cease being imaginary and enter the polluted atmosphere of everyday life”<sup>348</sup> resulting from “the shift from a mode of experience based on a sacred distance to a mode based on perceptual proximity.”<sup>349</sup>

As with Greenberg and Adorno I draw a parallel between Olalquiaga’s conceptual framework for nostalgic and melancholic kitsch and Boym’s notions of ‘restorative’ and ‘reflective nostalgia’.<sup>350</sup> Boym’s ‘restorative nostalgia’, explained as a longing that stresses on *nostos* (the home, origin) and thereby “proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps”<sup>351</sup> corresponds with the ‘symbolic memory’ of Olalquiaga’s nostalgic kitsch experience. She characterizes this experience as a “nostalgic re-creation” that chooses “to eliminate the present in order to retain an untouchable past”<sup>352</sup> and in doing so lends itself to “be commodified in infinite replicas whose repetition will only serve to reiterate its unidimensional meaning.”<sup>353</sup> Boym’s reflective nostalgia, in contrast, dwells in *algia*, “in

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>346</sup> I refer to W. Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch”. Benjamin states: “[N]o longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown grey. The grey coating of dust on things is its best part. Dreams are now a shortcut to banality” (W. Benjamin, 1999, p. 4).

<sup>347</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 89.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>350</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>352</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 296.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., p. 296.



longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance<sup>354</sup> and correlates to the allegoric memory of Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch experience that seeks "the intensity of experience over its abstraction."<sup>355</sup> 'Reflective nostalgia' dwells "in the dreams of another place and another time"<sup>356</sup> and, like Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch which is "focusing on the feeling of loss"<sup>357</sup>, it lays stress on the passage of time, the patina of history and ruins. Following the correlation I have established in the second chapter between Boym's 'restorative nostalgia' and Greenberg's notion of modernist art, I expand on the similarities between Boym's 'reflective nostalgia' and melancholic kitsch established here, by suggesting that Olalquiaga's 'good' kitsch invokes Surrealism as Modernism's 'Other'. This is an important point to which I will return later in this chapter.

Olalquiaga's choice of kitsch objects such as paperweights, aquariums, shells, fake mermaids and stuffed animals do not exactly evoke a 21<sup>st</sup> century understanding of kitsch and neither do the locations she chooses for her inquiry. Designating antiques and the outmoded in general, her kitsch invites introspection and projection that aligns her approach to contemporary discourses on collecting. Elsner and Cardinal<sup>358</sup> point out, for example, that the themes of collecting are intimately linked to "desire and nostalgia, saving and loss, the urge to erect a permanent and complete system against the destructiveness of time."<sup>359</sup> Linking collecting to issues of "control over existence itself"<sup>360</sup>, Elsner and Cardinal argue that a collection potentially constitutes identity in that it is a means for "projecting one's being onto the objects one chooses to live with."<sup>361</sup> They relate collecting to "the triumph of

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<sup>354</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 41.

<sup>355</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 296.

<sup>356</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 41.

<sup>357</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 74.

<sup>358</sup> J. Elsner & R. Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting* (London: Reaction Books, 1994).

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

remembrance over oblivion<sup>362</sup>, “the permanence of Being over Nothingness<sup>363</sup> and generally to a “nostalgia for previous worlds.”<sup>364</sup>

In the context of these discourses Olalquiaga’s kitsch embodies what Baudrillard<sup>365</sup> observes as the marker of the spiritual self-reflexivity of Modernity, namely the quest for the authentic domain of being which is sought in the pre-industrial, natural and outmoded. In situating ‘her kitsch’ precisely within this context, Olalquiaga suggests that kitsch has the potential to recoup the authentic and the real which, in Baudrillard’s terms, are within Modernism postulated as historically and nostalgically lost domains of experience or referentiality. Baudrillard distinguishes between two functions any object can potentially have. It can be an object of use or a possession<sup>366</sup>, though only “once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject* [his italics].”<sup>367</sup> Once an object is “abstracted from any practical context”<sup>368</sup> it can become a personalized ‘object’, imbued with a narrative and a subjectively charged meaning. Through this act of being ‘possessed’, Baudrillard continues, even a mass produced object can acquire the status of uniqueness. As a result, the objects in our lives, distinct from the way we make use of them, represent something else that is related to subjectivity, namely “a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. It is all my own, the object of my passion.”<sup>369</sup>

Olalquiaga’s examples of kitsch nostalgically evoke the memory of a lost past and the promise of a short lived redemption as they are constituted by “the attempt to repossess the experience of intensity and immediacy through an object.”<sup>370</sup> This relationship between experience and object is explained with

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<sup>362</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>365</sup> J. Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting”, in *The Cultures of Collecting*, eds. J. Eisner, &

R. Cardinal (London: Reaction Books, 1994), pp. 7-24.

<sup>366</sup> Baudrillard’s example is a refrigerator.

<sup>367</sup> J. Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting”, p. 7.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>370</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 74.

Benjamin's notion of the aura<sup>371</sup>. Benjamin<sup>372</sup> theorizes the aura as a 'unique phenomenon of distance' which evokes 'a forgotten human dimension'. According to Benjamin it is characteristic of the 'aura', that 'the gaze is returned' as its experience

"rests on the transportation of a response common in human relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man [...]. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return."<sup>373</sup>

Writing on Benjamin, Foster observes that the aura by "[i]ts definition as an empathic 'transposition' of a human rapport to a relationship with an object *inverts* [his italics] the definition of commodity fetishism as a perverse confusion of the human and the thing". The aura, Foster continues, is portrayed "as if aura were the magical antidote to such fetishism."<sup>374</sup> This concept of aura, characterized as 'consciousness forms matter', is poised against Marx's materialistic premises that 'matter forms consciousness'.<sup>375</sup> It inverts Marx's commodity fetishism by aligning itself to Freud's concept of the fetish explained as a desire transferred onto an object. According to Foster it is this "forgotten human dimension" which retains the human trace, that renders any outmoded image auratic and if returned to the present it does so in the uncanny reminder of a time before alienation. This involuntary memory, Foster continues, encompasses three registers: the natural (representing the human relation to found natural objects), the cultural historical (artisan objects and the outmoded) and the subjective (the invisible object, the lost object). For Foster the subjective invests the first two registers with psychic energy as it relates to the memory of a primal relationship to the body, a state before alienation. For Benjamin the aura is an experience which is historically lost.

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<sup>371</sup> Benjamin's writing on the aura is not consistent. I refer here to his theorizations of the aura relevant for my discussion.

<sup>372</sup> I refer to "Central Park," in *New German Critique* 34 (Winter 1985), pp. 32-58. Essay first published in 1940.

<sup>373</sup> Benjamin, W., "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", p.188.

<sup>374</sup> H. Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, pp. 196-7.

<sup>375</sup> In Marx's terminology humans become objectified as they are subjugated to the object world as social relations assume the form of "material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things" (K. Marx, *Capital*, trans. B. Fowkes, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1976, p. 166).

The experience of this loss is epitomized in Olalquiaga's two modes of melancholic and nostalgic kitsch<sup>376</sup>, as she explains kitsch in terms of "a failed commodity that continually speaks of all it has ceased to be"<sup>377</sup>. In contrast to Benjamin, however, Olalquiaga maintains that with kitsch the aura can be recouped - if only for a short time and as an illusion – as it allows "for a second or even a few minutes"<sup>378</sup> to experience once again the "primal, archaic pleasure of total connection."<sup>379</sup> The kitsch experience, she continues, enables us to re-establish a state before alienation as it allows for "an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future"<sup>380</sup> and "assures that this lost time is momentarily found."<sup>381</sup>

Olalquiaga expands on her argument with the souvenir as an object that embodies the loss of the aura, explaining it as a "fragmentary remembrance"<sup>382</sup> that has become commodified and is subjected to further distancing if "multiplied by massive reproduction."<sup>383</sup>

Similar to Olalquiaga, Boym<sup>384</sup> and Stewart<sup>385</sup> approach kitsch in the context of its intimate connection with nostalgia and melancholia and their possible contemporary meanings by focusing on issues of migration and displacement. Both Boym and Stewart analyse the concept of nostalgia and melancholia in contemporary conditions, by elaborating on notions of an 'objectified' experience that is manifested in an object. They do this through an analysis of kitsch in the context of vicarious experience, in which experience is turned into an object or lived out through an object. Kitsch becomes the ersatz object and is turned into a commodified emotion, in

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<sup>376</sup> Her prime example to explain these modes of remembering is Rodney the crab. For further illustration see later in this chapter.

<sup>377</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 28.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>380</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>383</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>384</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*.

<sup>385</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*.

modernist terms, a sentiment. Stewart, like Olalquiaga, links the souvenir to the category of objects, which invite an anthropocentric viewpoint in their serving as screens for personal projections. According to Stewart they thereby represent a world of things that opens itself up to reveal a secret life: a daydream of life inside life. These objects present “a diminutive, and thereby manipulatable, version of experience, a version which is domesticated and protected from contamination.”<sup>386</sup> Stewart’s notions of the souvenir and Olalquiaga’s melancholic kitsch, the ‘souvenir proper’, have correlations to Freud’s theorization of magic<sup>387</sup>, explained as a telepathic disregard for spatial and temporal distance as it “treats past situations as though they were present.”<sup>388</sup> As a consequence, Freud states that “the ‘spirit’ of persons or things comes down to their capacity to be *remembered* and *imagined* [his italics] after perception of them has ceased.”<sup>389</sup> Being remembered means to become psychically charged with fantasy, daydreaming, repressed history. It means that these objects come ‘alive’ through the human gaze and narrative that imbues them with personal meaning.<sup>390</sup>

Like Boym and Stewart, Frow’s analysis establishes the souvenir in connection to Freud’s writing on magic, as an object that is charged with narrative. Frow<sup>391</sup> argues that the souvenir “translates distance into proximity”<sup>392</sup> and “has as its vocation the continual re-establishment of a bridge between origin and trace.”<sup>393</sup> The souvenir operates “by principles of

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>387</sup> I refer to Freud’s ideas of magic and animism in *Totem and Taboo* which were an important precursor to his development of *The Uncanny*.

<sup>388</sup> S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 99.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>390</sup> Olalquiaga’s ‘magical’ approach to the object world evokes Benjamin. I am thinking, for example, of a comment such as “[S]tories come with things that stay a long time with us” (W. Benjamin, “The Handkerchief”, in *Walter Benjamin – Selected Writings*, eds. M. W. Jennings, trans. R. Livingstone, Vol. 2, 1927-1934 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 659.

<sup>391</sup> J. Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

sympathetic and contagious magic”<sup>394</sup>. It is a part object, like the fetish, as Frow continues, citing Stewart “it will not function without the supplementary narrative discourse that both attaches it to its origins and creates a myth with regard to those origins.”<sup>395</sup> This supplementary narrative is “a narrative of interiority and authenticity”<sup>396</sup>, “a story not of the object but of the subject who possesses it and who thus, through the souvenir, possesses the lost and recovered moment of the past.”<sup>397</sup> This re-investment of subjective narrative into an object re-instates some ‘singularity’ and ‘originality’ into mass produced objects (as kitsch), offering the possibility that they can maintain some status of uniqueness versus mass production. In relation to Olalquiaga’s inquiry the object becomes a trace, an embodied sediment of authentic experience, which is always incomplete without the narrative/memory of its possessor. It becomes kitsch to anyone without knowledge of its reference to origin and context.

Following a conceptual framework of dialectic opposites that supports her argument for ‘good’ and ‘bad’ kitsch, Olalquiaga aligns melancholic kitsch to what she calls the ‘souvenir proper’<sup>398</sup> and nostalgic kitsch to the souvenir as a “a cultural fossil”<sup>399</sup>. Following Benjamin’s theorization of dialectical images as ‘allegories of Modernity’ that are dialectically poised against the fascist symbolic recuperation of the past, Olalquiaga elaborates her distinction of the ‘souvenir proper’<sup>400</sup> and the ‘cultural fossil’<sup>401</sup> through the two different modes of memory they evoke. The ‘souvenir proper’ is characterized as a ‘wish’ or ‘dream image’, a projection screen for allegoric memory. The ‘cultural fossil’, in contrast, constitutes symbolic memory as it is deputizing for the loss, a loss

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<sup>394</sup> V. & E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 197, quoted in J. Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, p. 94.

<sup>395</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 136, quoted in J. Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, p. 94.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>397</sup> J. Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, p. 94.

<sup>398</sup> Her prime example is Rodney the crab.

<sup>399</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 292.

<sup>400</sup> Her prime example is Rodney the crab.

<sup>401</sup> Her example is Disneyland.

that is not acknowledged. Melancholic kitsch recognizes the disappearance of the aura, whilst nostalgic kitsch tries to reconstruct it as “as an emblem of itself.”<sup>402</sup> <sup>403</sup> Although Olalquiaga’s distinction, explained in these terms of experience, suggests at first that to distinguish between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch becomes a question of faculty: the ability to recognize the passage of time and to acknowledge that everything is transitory, her insistence on specific examples contradicts this initial impression. Her descriptions of ‘Rodney’ the crab and *Atlantis* an American holiday resort, as prototypes for melancholic and nostalgic kitsch are rather problematic and demonstrate that the difference between ‘good’, melancholic kitsch and ‘bad’ nostalgic kitsch she seeks to establish is not clear.<sup>404</sup> Her distinction begs the question of whether she is implicitly ushering in some kind of modernist evaluation that associates *Atlantis* with commerce and shallow mass entertainment poised against some individualist and elitist quest for authenticity embodied in the ‘souvenir proper’. Her specific examples suggest further, that it is ultimately not, as she initially claims, the onlooker who determines whether the experience is melancholic or nostalgic. As she confuses the object as a trigger with its effect, her explanations rather imply that there is a hidden agenda of distinct properties within an object which determine whether it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ kitsch. Besides, and as she appears to extrapolate from individual, perhaps even inexplicable experiences with objects two types of collective memory within the category of kitsch, her focus diverts from narrative as a subjectively remembered experience to a distinction based on an over-simplistic polarization of generalized modes of memory. Although her approach stresses subjectivity, both modes of memory

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<sup>402</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 292.

<sup>403</sup> Olalquiaga does not explain what exactly she means by ‘emblem of itself’ and ‘cultural fossil’. It seems that she uses these expressions as synonyms for nostalgic kitsch. A prime example of nostalgic kitsch is the *Ermine tea party*, exhibited in the World Exhibition at *Crystal Palace*. The illustration in Olalquiaga’s book shows stuffed and anthropomorphized ermine taking tea in a miniature Victorian interior.

<sup>404</sup> I follow Peter Wollen’s arguments against Olalquiaga’s lack of clarity in the boundaries between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch. For further reading see P. Wollen, *Paris Manhattan – Writings on Art* (London, New York: Verso, 2004).

are ultimately objectified as they become classified as collective notions of remembrance or reminiscence.

Consolidating her dual theory through further binary oppositions, the souvenir 'proper' and the 'cultural fossil'; allegoric, unconscious remembrance and symbolic, conscious reminiscence or the denial of loss versus its acknowledgment, Olalquiaga does not separate kitsch from dialectics. Her inquiry remains within the modernist framework of dichotomies. Greenberg's unified notion of kitsch that he segregates in the 'Home'<sup>405</sup> becomes with Olalquiaga a bifurcated but nonetheless unified 'kitsch experience'. Explained either as 'bad' kitsch unified in the 'Home' (as it stresses *nostos*) or as a 'good' kitsch experience that (dwelling on *algia*) is fetishized in the 'Away', her approach does not supersede modernist concepts. Like Greenberg, who argues against kitsch, regardless of its many facets and simplifies it within the categories of 'mass culture' and an uneducated populace, Olalquiaga redeems (parts of) kitsch retaining its many facets, but abstracting from these two unified experiences which she hinges on her notions of 'good' and 'bad' kitsch as foundations for their distinction.<sup>406</sup> As she illustrates her theory with specific examples serving as their triggers, her argument becomes circular. It is no longer clear whether melancholic or nostalgic kitsch are either 'good' or 'bad' kitsch objects in themselves or whether it is our experience with them that determines their value.

Olalquiaga illustrates her inquiry with the description of her "first encounter with Rodney"<sup>407</sup>, a hermit crab encased in a glass globe, "at a bed-and-breakfast, an old Victorian mansion"<sup>408</sup> in San Francisco. In contradiction of her comments that seek to establish distinct categories between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch, she insists here that our perception of 'Rodney' can be

<sup>405</sup> I refer to Chapter 2.

<sup>406</sup> As her concept is derivative of Benjamin I draw here a parallel to his idea of a 'collective awakening', a concept which was received with scepticism by Adorno, as he detected in the 'collective' not the revolutionary potential Benjamin supposed it to have, but rather a recourse to Jungian archetypes.

<sup>407</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 3.

<sup>408</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



either determined by reminiscence or remembrance. For Olalquiaga 'Rodney' is definitively melancholic kitsch as she recounts her encounter in terms of the discourses within which she wants melancholic kitsch to be understood. Referring to 'Rodney' as a 'he', Olalquiaga explains that we can either ignore his demise, rendering him into nostalgic kitsch or focus on the feeling of loss, his death, itself and perceive him as melancholic kitsch. 'Rodney' is characterized as an animated object. Returning her gaze he is leaving her 'spellbound' as he beckons her with the "vaguely familiar memories"<sup>409</sup> of a long lost object that erupts into the present and prompts memories "beyond the memory"<sup>410</sup>. Anthropomorphized in her presence, Olalquiaga refers to the crab in his glass sphere as him being enshrined "in a deep slumber until [...] discovered anew."<sup>411</sup> Further described as being 'suspended in time' and 'detached from the continuum of its natural habitat', her exemplar of melancholic kitsch seems to offer all the required terminology to convolute Breton's notion of the chance encounter with the *objet trouvé*, Benjamin's writing on Surrealism<sup>412</sup>, his concepts of the aura and the dialectical image.<sup>413</sup> Based on this observation her distinction between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch can be re-formulated into a binary opposition between a 'private' object that evokes Surrealism and its surrounding discourses as Modernism's 'Other' and an object that is tied to commercialism, ideologies and shallow entertainment.

"Meet Rodney, king of the hermit crabs. From the distant proximity of his glass-globe prison, Rodney stares back at me with silent intensity. [...] Looking into Rodney's minuscule pupils (my friends claim that they can't be real eyes, yet they shine like silver pins) I enter a faraway world: vaguely familiar memories beckon me with the magic appeal of those ocean waves which people often hear resonate in the huge open whorl of imperial Purpura shells.

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>411</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>412</sup> I refer to Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch".

<sup>413</sup> Benjamin links the dialectical image to the methodology of montage used by the Surrealists accrediting them with perceiving "the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded'" thereby revealing the contradictions in the commodity (W. Benjamin, 1999, p. 4).

Spellbound, I travel to a time beyond memory, a place that stands still, vast and gleaming, in a remote corner of my mind."<sup>414</sup>

Olalquiaga's opening paragraph to her inquiry does not resonate with kitsch itself but rather alludes to a personal experience of fantasy and magic Realism along Freud's theorizations of the omnipotence of thoughts and the animistic mode of thinking.<sup>415</sup> Both the reciprocal gaze she exchanges with 'Rodney' and the reminder of a unitary body (Olalquiaga travels to a 'time beyond memory'), evoke Benjamin's notion of the aura portrayed here as a potential antidote to alienation and reification. But alienation can only be temporarily suspended and cannot be undone.

"Squinting I stretch out my arm to grab Rodney. Unwilling to let go of the reverie [...] But I have returned from my musing and the spell is broken [...] I am on a rented bed in an unfamiliar city, thousands of miles away."<sup>416</sup>

Olalquiaga's exchange of gaze with 'Rodney' can only be sustained temporarily. Her account of her encounter reveals the simultaneous potential and failure to create a sense of identity and to have an authentic experience of belonging through an object. Alienation and reification via the ersatz object can only be overcome momentarily, by bringing the world via the thing-world into one's private space. Belonging as a fundamental human need remains lost and repressed only to return to the present via 'Rodney' as an uncanny reminder of the estrangement.

"Buried alive, Rodney will never again know the gradual unfolding of events, the sequential expectation generated when one is accustomed to watching one thing follow another. Time for this hermit crab is a static dimension from which there is no possible escape or change – only a resigned abeyance, a complete surrender to a single, infinite moment that he occupies entirely alone."<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 3.

<sup>415</sup> I refer to S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, p. 100.

<sup>416</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 9.

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

Alluding to Freud's statement that "the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all"<sup>418</sup>, Olalquiaga sets with 'Rodney' the stage for melancholic kitsch as a cipher of Freud's uncanny in the register of the aura, as a lost/repressed dimension and for the promise of its temporary return.

The eternal recurrence and compulsion to repeat testify, for Benjamin, to the archaic nature of Modernism. Theorizing the return of the repressed dialectically as Modernism's collective 'trauma', Benjamin unites the compulsion to repeat from individual trauma<sup>419</sup>. Formulating it instead as a cipher of Modernism's mode of being, Benjamin is transposing Freud's notion of the long-established and familiar "which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression"<sup>420</sup> via the dialectical image into the outmoded. A cipher for the material world of objects that have lost their usefulness, the world that has been repressed and discarded by Modernism's pursuit of novelty, the dialectical image brings to light "something which ought to have remained hidden"<sup>421</sup> as it un.masks Modernism's binary opposition of 'Home' and 'Away' as a fake.

According to Freud the significance of the uncanny lies in the combination of two semantic strands, in that it uncovers the hidden and reveals the disguised. Freud derives the uncanny from this two-fold meaning for the German term, *das Unheimliche*, whose un-negated form is *das Heimliche*, a word with ambivalent meaning, which points to the disturbing connotation of the uncanny. *Das Heimliche*, signifying both the homely and the secretive, can simultaneously designate the familiar and the hidden, and its negation may therefore stand for the uncovered and un-covert. From this twofold meaning Freud develops *The Uncanny* as an experience which is evoked by that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known, long

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<sup>418</sup> S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.366.

<sup>419</sup> As it has been described by Freud in his writings on *The Uncanny* (1919).

<sup>420</sup> S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 363-364.

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, p.364.

established and familiar but “which has become alienated from [itself] only through the process of repression.”<sup>422</sup>

Alongside Freud's *Uncanny*, Olalquiaga's notion of kitsch can be explained as an experience initiated by familiar objects that have become outmoded and are rendered strange by historical repression. These objects are *heimisch* (familiar, homely) things of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that return as *unheimlich* (strange, uncanny) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Stripped of their original meaning by the modern condition and turned into kitsch, these objects become symbols of our repressed wishes and desires<sup>423</sup>, creating a perpetual shift between homeliness and unhomeliness; an atmosphere between dread and desire. Interpreted in this context Olalquiaga's kitsch experience speaks of a notion of atavistic belonging – a belonging that supersedes spatial boundaries and transfers them into time as a continuum of collective human experience.

In 'Rodney' Olalquiaga has found

“[A] décor where my feelings could manifest themselves outwardly in the most palpable ways as if having walked into a long-forgotten attic. It is this miraculous palingenesis, this apparent return from the death, that the casual encounter with stray objects can trigger in our hearts.”<sup>424</sup>

“Doomed to be mine for as long as I desire, perhaps he finds within the brittle limits of his crustacean body some forgiveness towards the human longing that drives me to love his death, a permanent state of suspension that sparks in my heart the boundless joy of recognition.”<sup>425</sup>

In Olalquiaga's presence 'Rodney' comes alive as she has found in him her double. With her emphasis on 'recognition' that describes 'Rodney' as a lost object regained, Olalquiaga contextualizes her encounter within the register of Breton's *objet trouvé*. Breton conceptualized the *objet trouvé* with Freud's

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., pp. 363-364.

<sup>423</sup> There is no agreement amongst theoreticians as to whether or not kitsch as a phenomenon has always existed. It is however established, that the word 'kitsch' only came into use at the dawn of Modernization.

<sup>424</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 7.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

explanations of the lost as a substitute for the great primal loss, namely the physical unity of the body before alienation. It is this traumatic loss evoked through the object which, according to Breton, renders the lost object into the *objet trouvé* and its encounter into an uncanny *rendez-vous*, whereby, Krauss notes in her writing on Breton, the world is considered as a great reserve “against which to trace the workings of the unconscious.”<sup>426</sup> Conceived as a ‘hysterical’ confusion between an internal impulse and an external sign where the traumatic experience cannot be recalled, Breton theorizes the *objective chance* as a compulsion to repeat from which the *objet trouvé* offers temporary relief as “the finding of an object strictly serves the same function as that of a dream, in that it frees the individual from paralyzing emotional scruples.”<sup>427</sup>

For Breton, however, the found object always constitutes a substitute, a displacement as the real object of desire is ‘fantasmatic’. As with Breton’s *objet trouvé*, ‘Rodney’ cannot satisfy her desire, a desire which ultimately must be defined as a lack. Based on these observations ‘Rodney’ could be interpreted as the kind of kitsch that serves as a projection screen or substitute for what Santner<sup>428</sup>, following Freud, calls “the act of mourning” (*Trauerarbeit*) and which he conceives as opposed to “narrative fetishism”<sup>429</sup>. ‘Narrative fetishism’, Santner states, constitutes “the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge

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<sup>426</sup> R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 1987), p. 45.

<sup>427</sup> A. Breton, “What is Surrealism”, in *Documents* 34, p. 20. Transcript of a lecture given by Breton, Brussels, 1 June 1934.

<sup>428</sup> E. Santner, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma”, in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. S. Friedländer (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 143-154.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144. Olalquiaga refers to Friedländer’s book in a footnote: “For a study of what I call nostalgic kitsch, see Saul Friedländer, *Reflections on Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*” (C. Olalquiaga, 1999, p. 74). Besides this remark she offers no further elaboration on nostalgic kitsch in regard to Friedländer’s writing, or to the essay by Santner to which I make special reference in this context.

the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place.”<sup>430</sup>

Freud<sup>431</sup> explains ‘the act of mourning’ with the *fort/da* game of his young grandson, describing how the child, with the help of an ersatz object<sup>432</sup>, repetitively re-enacted the traumatic separation from his mother within the controlled space of a primitive ritual. According to Freud such objects serve the purpose of controlling a sense of loss. As they enable us to “repeat unpleasurable experiences” at will they allow us to “master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively.”<sup>433</sup>

Although Santner theorizes both ‘narrative fetishism’ and ‘the act of mourning’ in the contexts of loss and trauma, “a past that refuses to go away due to its traumatic impact”<sup>434</sup>, he draws out a distinction with regard to their different responses. Whilst mourning, as Freud’s example of the *fort/da* game demonstrates, attempts to integrate “the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and mediated doses”<sup>435</sup>, narrative fetishism indefinitely defers the “post of posttraumatic”<sup>436</sup> conditions. It is “a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site of origin and loss elsewhere”<sup>437</sup>.

In the light of Santner’s distinction Olajquiaga’s nostalgic kitsch can be described as a device to reinstate the *Pleasure Principle* as a kind of short cut without working through the task, which, as Freud insists, “must be

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<sup>430</sup> E. Santner, *Probing the limits of Representation*, p. 144.

<sup>431</sup> I refer to S. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, in *On Metapsychology, the Theory of Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, Vol. 11 (England: Penguin Books, 1985) Essay first published in 1919.

<sup>432</sup> The child psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called such ersatz objects ‘transitional objects’.

<sup>433</sup> S. Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, p. 307.

<sup>434</sup> E. Santner, *Probing the limits of Representation*, p. 144.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin."<sup>438</sup> Melancholic kitsch, in contrast, has the potential to alleviate trauma temporarily as it lends itself to, in Benjamin's terms, 'a temporary suspension of alienation' and assists us to live with the fact that the lost object can actually never be re-gained. Olalquiaga's kitsch experience is either constituted by a kind of temporary re-finding of the lost object, an unconscious failure (melancholic kitsch) or *ersatz* and conscious pretence (nostalgic kitsch) that denies the trauma operating instead as a form of escapism. Together with Boym's concept of utopian nostalgia, nostalgic kitsch points towards Santner's 'narrative fetishism', whilst melancholic kitsch and Boym's ironic or reflective nostalgia evoke Freud's *Trauerarbeit*.

It transpires that Olalquiaga's 'kitsch experience' which she seeks to theorize as individual and subjective encounters with the material world are in fact two fixed categories of abstracted modes of experience. Conceived as binary opposites, these experiences are triggered by or manifested in various objects, which become congealed ciphers of repressed moments.

Olalquiaga's melancholic kitsch can be interpreted as some kind of inversion to Greenberg's concept of kitsch. Due to its conceptual affinity with Benjamin's dialectical image, Freud's concept of *The Uncanny* and Breton's *objet trouvé*, melancholic kitsch is contextualized as the repressed material of Modernism that returns and disrupts Modernism's unitary identity, aesthetic norms and social order. As this cipher of Modernism's 'Other' it is situated in the register of objects which have lost their usefulness and testify of the compulsion to repeat. Although this suggests at first an emphasis on dynamics, the close affinity Olalquiaga establishes between melancholic kitsch and Breton's *objet trouvé*, contradicts this initial impression as kitsch remains a category of objects evoking distinct experiences due to certain properties they possess. Instead of seeking the possibility for kitsch's

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<sup>438</sup> S. Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle", quoted in E. Santner, *Probing the limits of Representation*, p. 147.

redemption in its potential for disruption her approach is developing into a seeking of categorizations that relate good and bad kitsch back to commodification. In order to allow evaluation they are established as two sufficiently distinct categories that remain tied to dialectics.

In his review of Olalquiaga's inquiry Peter Wollen<sup>439</sup> argues that her notions of melancholic and nostalgic kitsch are not as distinct from each other as she wishes them to be. He thus rightly asks "[I]s a hermit crab immured in a glass globe as a 'Nature Gem' really all that different from an 'Atlantis' reconstructed on a Bahaman beach?"<sup>440</sup> Although I agree with Wollen in rejecting her distinctive categories, I am not primarily sceptical of her distinction between 'melancholia' and 'nostalgia' due to their lack of contrast, but mainly due to their collectivization of individual experience into two modes of cultural memory evoked by particular objects/contexts. Olalquiaga is confusing experience with its trigger. In order to affirm kitsch in some way, it seems that she has to consider kitsch in its symbolic critical, political value enabling her to differentiate it from the commodity. And in order to categorize and 'objectify' 'kitsch experience', Olalquiaga is taking recourse to what Adorno calls "the [false] assumption of an equivalence between the content of experience, put crudely the emotional expression of works – and the subjective experience of the recipient."<sup>441</sup> Although she is stressing the close proximity between kitsch and human experience, Olalquiaga does not disentangle the confusion at the core of modernist discourses, namely between object/subject relations and between pleasure and aesthetic appreciation. Operating within the same conceptual framework of binary opposites she simply re-formulates it into good versus bad kitsch. In my discussion of Greenberg I argued that the binary opposition of avant-garde art and kitsch operates dialectically. It not only reduces kitsch to a unified notion but in turn simultaneously freezes the avant-garde into a fixed category. In

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<sup>439</sup> P. Wollen, *Paris Manhattan: Writings on Art*.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>441</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 2002, p. 244.



the context of Olalquiaga, Greenberg's binary opposition becomes a polarization which can be expressed in terms of authentic versus commodified experience, where both modes of experience become fixed entities. The binary opposition between 'Home and Away' is left in place and simply recharged. Designating the site of a congealed sentiment of longing manifested in melancholic kitsch, the 'Away' remains dialectically poised against the 'Home'; Greenberg's kitsch and Olalquiaga's nostalgic kitsch.<sup>442</sup>

Olalquiaga's attempt to establish melancholic kitsch as a redeeming category for kitsch ultimately aims at a redemption of specific kitsch objects. In her analysis these become 'good kitsch objects', as they assist in their quality as objects of redemption for a re-enchantment of the world. As her focus remains on the object as an embodied subjective experience her two categories of good and bad kitsch become in the end indiscriminate.

In *Dialectics of Seeing*, Buck-Morss comments:

"How are we to understand the 'dialectical image' as a form of philosophical representation? Was 'dust' such an image? fashion? the prostitute? expositions? commodities? the arcades themselves? Yes, surely – not, however, as these referents are empirically given, not even as they are critically interpreted as emblematic of commodity society, but as they are dialectically 'constructed' as 'historical objects', politically charged monads, 'blasted' out of history's continuum and made 'actual' in the present."<sup>443</sup>

Although Olalquiaga follows closely Benjamin's hermeneutic materialism, the correlation she establishes does not employ the dialectical image as an unfixed constellation of past and present. Conceiving it instead rather in the "empirically given" and as "emblematic of commodity society", her melancholic kitsch leaves not much scope for a philosophical-historical construct that is relative and contextual.

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<sup>442</sup> L. Giesz follows a similar approach. Although Giesz stresses on the experience of kitsch rather than the kitsch object he objectifies in his subsequent argument this 'kitsch experience' in the figure of 'kitsch-man'. Giesz characterizes 'kitsch-man' as a person who "transforms himself and his world of experience by means of specific illusions which are nourished by the objective enjoyment of kitsch" (L. Giesz, 1969, p. 165).

<sup>443</sup> S. Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing*, p. 221.

A more useful approach would be an inquiry that does not focus on kitsch as objects with certain properties but rather on how kitsch is constituted within specific structures and circumstances that relate to particular encounters. I suggest that only within a context of inquiry where its meaning is constantly deferred as it becomes a concept that has its use in language can kitsch be disentangled from the dialectics of metaphysics.

To summarize my discussion it can be stated that only at first does it appear as if Olalquiaga radically deviates from previous positions. Staged within the conditions of early modernization and grounded in its discourses, her inquiry focuses on subject/object relations in the context of alienation and authenticity as lost domains in modern conditions. Her bifurcated notion of kitsch takes this experience of loss as a benchmark and explains them within a psychological model as two distinct modes of dealing with trauma. Nostalgic kitsch is outlined in the light of totalitarian attempts to recoup the past symbolically. Melancholic kitsch is developed in contrast as a means to alleviate trauma. Designating the repressed 'Other' of Modernism, it is theorized as an uncanny cipher in the register of Breton's Surrealism. Conceived as two categories evoked through individual experiences, melancholic and nostalgic kitsch are explained as two notions of memory (collective and cultural) triggered by specific objects. Grounded in metaphysics her concept of kitsch does not reach beyond the dialectics of commodification. Remaining conceptually close to modernist discourses, her approach simply reverses previous arguments against kitsch and ultimately leaves the binary opposition of 'Home' and 'Away' in place. In contrast to Olalquiaga I follow an inquiry embedded in structuralism with kitsch as an unstable category that dispenses with oppositional thinking and its dialectics and propose instead a dualistic language form of detritus that explains kitsch along Bataille's notions of the 'formless' and 'non-productive expenditure'. What I mean by this *vis-à-vis* my next chapter is explained further at the end of this one.

In *Megalopolis*<sup>444</sup> published before *The Artificial Kingdom* Olalquiaga's approach allows for an interpretation of kitsch as a convoluted of Freud's notion of the fetish and Marx's commodity fetish. Focusing exclusively on religious imagery Olalquiaga develops a model of graduation within capitalist market conditions. She opens up the scope to interpret kitsch in the context of Marx's use-value, exchange-value and commodity fetishism and the means to re-constitute Marx's notion of commodity fetishism in Postmodernism. Central to Olalquiaga's inquiry in *Megalopolis* is the emptying out of a univocal and monological use-value under Capitalism and consequently the breaking down of conventional ways of meaning formation. Together with Holler's discussion of use-, exchange-value and commodity fetishism in the light of Benjamin and Bataille<sup>445</sup>, I argue for kitsch as a concept that along Bataille's dualistic model of use-value conflates Marx's use-value and Freud's fetish within what Bataille calls 'use plus use'.

Olalquiaga positions her investigation in *Megalopolis* within the 'tradition' of Postmodernism, for her

"the only possible contemporary answer to a century worn out by the rise and fall of modern ideologies, the pervasion of Capitalism, and an unprecedented sense of personal responsibility and individual impotence."<sup>446</sup>

According to her, capitalist market conditions, characterized by the breaking down of traditional referentiality, deflate uniqueness in favour of their own conventions by neutralizing the established relationship between an object and its means of production. As a consequence

"[s]uch a distanced reception, indifferent to notions of belonging or loyalty to origins (that is no longer bound by use-value), is best described as a vicarious sensibility (understanding by sensibility a collective disposition toward certain cultural practices): one where experience is

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<sup>444</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*.

<sup>445</sup> I refer to D. Holler, "The use-value of the impossible".

<sup>446</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. xi.

lived indirectly, through the intercession of a third party, so to speak, that acts as both its catalyst and its buffer.”<sup>447</sup>

Taking these conditions as a starting point for her argument Olalquiaga establishes a correlation between the structural features of Postmodernism and kitsch. Their similarities are explained through their mutual sharing of some main characteristics, such as irreverent recycling, a taste for iconography, the artificial, melodrama, eclecticism, over-determination and the tendency to decontextualize signs to the extent that according to her “either postmodernism is kitsch, kitsch is postmodern *avant la lettre*, or both.”<sup>448 449</sup> In her understanding Postmodernism has to be conceived as a period that is radically distinct from Modernity. This difference is explained with regard to its specific contemporary sensibility, where mediated experience has become the new norm of dealing with the world, replacing previous beliefs in authenticity, originality and symbolic depth as the prevailing modes to experience reality. In Olalquiaga’s words it is a reality where “feelings, emotions and sensations are more effectively called upon by media imagery or high-tech simulacra than through direct exposure” creating the conditions of “a permanent state of existential displacement supported by a technology that has become second nature to us.”<sup>450</sup> As boundaries between fantasy and reality have become diffused or even suspended, Olalquiaga claims that artifice, rather than the search for ‘truth’, has become the most accessible experience. According to Olalquiaga this vicarious experience is realised in the very act of consumption, where consumption becomes use-value, an activity with an end in itself. It

“allows reinfusing semiotic value onto the commodity (activating it as a sign susceptible to multiple uses [that] does not deny the dramatic effects of commodity fetishism (i.e. the

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<sup>447</sup> Ibid., p. xviii-xix.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>449</sup> Olalquiaga refers to M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) to draw a parallel between Postmodernism as an ill-defined term and the concept of popular culture within Modernism and suggests that “postmodernism, as popular culture before it, becomes what each interpretation needs it to be, with the theory comfortably sitting in for its object of inquiry” (C. Olalquiaga, 1992, p. xiv).

<sup>450</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. xix.

fragmentation and alienation of subjectivity), but acknowledges how a dynamic, creative consumption is made possible at many levels.<sup>451</sup>

By declaring commodity fetishism the explicit object of its discursive practice, Olalquiaga concludes that “postmodernism sponsors consumption as an autonomous practice that does in fact enable the articulation of novel and often contradictory experiences.”<sup>452</sup> Following that she outlines a concept of kitsch, which “diffuses the boundaries of cultural identity and difference, producing a new and unsettling cultural persona.”<sup>453</sup> Olalquiaga’s statement reads as supporting a notion of kitsch that embodies the postmodern *Zeitgeist* and as such has unofficially become the ‘new’ true and ‘authentic’. Besides and due to its emotional appeal she conceives kitsch as a potential outlet and reaction against the sensual censorship of modernist ‘official’ culture. Based on this emotional appeal Olalquiaga draws a parallel between kitsch and religious imagery which suggests that in a time of spiritual decline, kitsch could serve a similar function to that of religion but also that kitsch is, as in *The Artificial Kingdom*, implicitly presented as a designated category.

According to Olalquiaga, kitsch and religious imagery are both characterized by a dramatic emphasis on effect and converge in their attempt to visualize ultimately ungraspable concepts and impalpable qualities such as transcendence, love, compassion and evil.<sup>454</sup> As these concepts are ultimately un-representable Olalquiaga follows that both religious imagery and kitsch are prone to result in “a visual glossolalia” and “mise-en-scène”<sup>455</sup> which render them prone to being wrongly accused of religious and artistic

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>454</sup> She reverses modernist arguments against kitsch with regard to its appeal to sentiments of impalpable human concepts, such as love, death and religion, which, according to Dorfler, are “particularly liable to house such sentimental attitudes” (G. Dorfler, 1969, p. 129). T. Kulka rejects kitsch on the grounds that it “depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions” (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 28) and Broch dismisses kitsch as it “wishes to make the Platonic idea of art – beauty – the immediate and tangible goal for any work of art” (H. Broch, 1969, p. 62).

<sup>455</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 41.

profanation.<sup>456</sup> Whereas, Olalquiaga continues, religious imagery is tied to a certain thematic context, kitsch as its 'secular' double permits the articulation of these concepts in a broader sphere.

The model of graduation she proposes in *Megalopolis* distinguishes between first, second and third degree kitsch. This model opens the scope for an interpretation of kitsch within a triple conjunction between Marx's use-value, exchange-value and commodity fetishism, Freud's writing on magic, ritual and the fetish and Benjamin's concept of the 'aura' as formulated within the customary historical role played by works of art in their 'ritual function' in relation to the uniqueness of cultic place. An interpretation of her three grades of kitsch within this conjunction relates her proposition to the question of whether Marxism is 'theological' in regard to some relations in the production of commodities and if so, whether Olalquiaga implicitly formulates a 'value' for commodification that supersedes Marx's concept of the commodity fetish.

There is an obvious correlation between her first degree kitsch as objects with "straightforward iconic value", Freud's first step of magic as mimetic behaviour with a cult object<sup>457</sup> and Marx's use-value as discussed in *The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret*. Like the wooden table, Marx's exemplar of use-value, where "[T]he form of wood [...] is altered if a table is made out of it"<sup>458</sup>, first degree religious kitsch objects exhibit according to Olalquiaga a "certain rawness" and appear to be "handmade".<sup>459</sup> They have cult value due to the traditional relationship between the user and an object, which is infused with a sacred quality characteristic of cultures with a magic or theocentric view of the world. Cult and use value are related in that the value of a thing is directly derived from its relationship to human activity, instead of being mediated or subordinated to secondary laws. For both, first degree kitsch objects and Marx's table, the labour involved appears non-mediated

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<sup>456</sup> Her comment dismisses modernist arguments against kitsch as a "crowd-pleasing art" (Galinescu, 1987, p. 262).

<sup>457</sup> I refer to S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

<sup>458</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, 1976, p. 163.

<sup>459</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, pp. 42-3.

and un-alienated. With first degree kitsch “the relationship between object and user is immediate”<sup>460</sup>, just as for Marx’s man, who “changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him”, resulting in a table that “continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing.”<sup>461</sup> As for Olalquiaga who characterises first degree kitsch as religious imagery where “only what is perceived as reality matters”<sup>462</sup>, for Marx there is nothing mysterious in use-value “whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour.”<sup>463</sup> It is ‘the usefulness of a thing’ Marx writes that ‘makes of this thing a use-value’. Translated into first degree kitsch, the ‘usefulness’ of these objects is according to Olalquiaga based on “genuine belief”. As they embody “the spirits they represent, making them palpable”<sup>464</sup>, they are familiarizing ‘the ungraspable’ in an unmediated and straightforward relationship between user/believer and the religious imagery. In his essay “The Use Value of the Impossible”<sup>465</sup>, Hollier outlines use-value within this context as “inseparable from its material support. It has no autonomous, independent existence.”<sup>466</sup> It is “a property of the thing that is only realized in the consumption, that is, the destruction, of the thing: use-value cannot outlast use; it vanishes at the moment it is realized.”<sup>467</sup> Writing about ethnographic museology he continues:

“By looking only at the form of objects (that is, by looking at the objects), they<sup>468</sup> no longer see how they were used, they no longer even see that they were used. Taking use-value into

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<sup>460</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 42.

<sup>461</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, 1976, p. 163.

<sup>462</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 42.

<sup>463</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, 1976, p. 163.

<sup>464</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 42.

<sup>465</sup> D. Hollier, “The Use Value of the Impossible”, pp.136-7. Hollier is referring to *Use-Value* in relation to ‘*Documents*’.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>467</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 136.

<sup>468</sup> Other critics have expanded on Marx’s use-value as a property of a thing and its use, to reveal Marx’s notion of use-value as man-made fiction. In *Melancholy Science*, Gillian Rose, for example, points out that within Capitalist conditions, exchange-value is the only form in which the value of a commodity can manifest or express itself.

<sup>469</sup> Hollier writes about museographical thought and use-value with regard to “Pottery” an article by M. Giraule and the ‘they’ refers to ‘archaeologists and aesthetes’.

account implies, in other words, an equal footing with the object. Instead of being the man who looks at a vase, the spectator must enter into its space and place himself in the position of the man who drinks [sic].<sup>470</sup>

This intimate connection between use value and consumption/location, established here by Hollier, corresponds with Olalquiaga's insistence that first degree religious kitsch "consequently belongs in sacred places"<sup>471</sup>. It is only really perceived as kitsch or becomes "marginalized as folklore"<sup>472</sup> when it is looked at with what Olalquiaga calls "a distant look"<sup>473</sup>, when it is de-contextualized and removed from its original purpose/location through time or intent. As a consequence first degree kitsch "is not, however, inherently kitsch"<sup>474</sup> and can only be understood as such "from a more distanced look, one that does not enjoy the same emotional attachment that believers have to this objects."<sup>475</sup> It is only turned into kitsch, when it loses its use-value and becomes an object on display, where the viewer is no longer "on equal footing with the object."<sup>476</sup> Bois<sup>477</sup> also outlines kitsch as a concept that requires a 'distanced look' as "nothing is kitsch in itself: for an object to be perceived as kitsch a distanced mediated gaze must be directed toward it."<sup>478</sup> An object becomes kitsch when it loses its ties to its inherent narrative and cultic value by being taken out of its original context of veneration. Understanding kitsch in the context of de-contextualized art/craft within the dynamics of culture formation Bois characterizes it as "a commercial substitute produced by capitalism in order to fill the void left by the marginalization of aristocratic culture and the destruction pure and simple of artisanal local traditions"<sup>479</sup>. The connection between use-value and location/consumption is, as Hollier observes, intimately linked to Benjamin's

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<sup>470</sup> D. Hollier, "The use-value of the impossible", p. 136.

<sup>471</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 42.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>476</sup> D. Hollier, "The use-value of the impossible", p. 136.

<sup>477</sup> Y.-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.



notion of the aura as a central condition to the possibility of use-value. Hollier points out that Benjamin<sup>480</sup> refers to use-value to explain that “the origin of the value that the original of a work of art is assigned by the mere fact of its uniqueness.”<sup>481</sup> This unique value, defined in conjunction with the location of its original use-value, has, as Hollier remarks citing Benjamin, “its basis in ritual”. As such the “uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition.”<sup>482</sup> For Benjamin it is within this customary historical role, its ‘ritual function’, where the work of art acquires a ‘halo’ of uniqueness and authenticity through its singularity in space and time. This reference to the fabric of tradition, which correlates to Olalquiaga’s first degree kitsch as being “part of a given cultural heritage”<sup>483</sup>, indicates, as Hollier comments, “the ritual, cultic (rather than economic or instrumental) nature of the use-value” being invoked here.<sup>484</sup> The work of art, like Olalquiaga’s first degree kitsch, is unique, i.e. not kitsch, only as long as it is “consumed on the spot”<sup>485</sup> and not subjugated to the market conditions of exchange-value. In regard to Benjamin Hollier continues that the “aura is linked less to the original object as such than to its cultic articulation at a given place and time.”<sup>486</sup> It is within this conjunction between art’s original cultic value and location, Hollier comments, that Benjamin frees Marx’s notion

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<sup>480</sup> Hollier refers to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936).

<sup>481</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 138.

<sup>482</sup> W. Benjamin, “The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction” in *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 223-24, quoted in D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 138.

<sup>483</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 52.

<sup>484</sup> Hollier’s comment ties in with Dorflès’ explanation as to why “in every age before our own, there was no such thing as ‘really bad taste’ i.e. kitsch” as “[I]n ages other than our own, particularly in antiquity, art had a completely different function compared to modern times” (G. Dorflès, 1969, pp. 9-10).

<sup>485</sup> In the light of Adorno’s writing on kitsch as it pertains to jazz, it is of interest that Hollier, citing Sartre, comments “[I]t is not entirely by accident that it was with respect to jazz that Sartre returning from New York, formulated his aesthetic imperative: like bananas, cultural products should be consumed on the spot. The primitive arts (to which jazz belongs) are indeed subject (or rather they subject themselves) to what Proust called the tyranny of the particular. They do not obey the laws of the market, recognizing only use-value; but that is also what allows them their particularity. It is inseparable from the fact that they cannot be displaced” (D. Hollier, 1995, p. 138).

<sup>486</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 139.

of use-value from “any utilitarian connotation”<sup>487</sup> such as usefulness, function and instrumentality. Use-value becomes rooted “not in factories but in churches”<sup>488</sup> and refers not to a thing but rather to a ritual that “take[s] place on the spot.”<sup>489</sup> It “can be neither transposed nor transported”<sup>490</sup> and as it “lies beyond the useful it refers not to a profit, but to an expenditure.”<sup>491</sup> Having established use-value as an ‘expenditure’ that lies beyond the useful, Hollier refers to Bataille’s dual meaning of use-value expressed in his two notions of ‘classical utility’ and ‘non-productive expenditure’. This connection will be discussed further at the end of this chapter.<sup>492</sup>

As for first degree kitsch, Hollier’s remarks on displacement in regard to use-value provide a framework for an interpretation of Olalquiaga’s second degree religious kitsch, which she situates within this notion of de-contextualization. Linked to the loss of first degree kitsch’s authenticity, second degree kitsch is characterized as resulting from a “shift from manufactured or low-technology production to a more sophisticated industrial one, with its consequent displacement of a referent for a copy.”<sup>493</sup> The shift from use- to exchange-value is described by her as analogous to Benjamin’s notion of kitsch as expressed in “Dream Kitsch” where he states that “[W]hat makes dreams and things kitsch, [...] is their tangibility – the fact that they [...] have become familiar and accessible.”<sup>494</sup> For Olalquiaga, then, second degree religious kitsch is first degree religious kitsch that has been made tangible and as such has been “stripped of its signifying value.”<sup>495</sup> It is de-contextualized first degree kitsch that is self-consciously designed as a

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<sup>487</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>492</sup> I refer also to my comments on Kulka’s postmodern reformulation of Greenberg’s binary opposition between avant-garde and kitsch, which imply an evaluation of functionality/usefulness that associates art with ‘classical utility’ and kitsch with ‘non-productive expenditure’.

<sup>493</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 46.

<sup>494</sup> W. Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch”, p. 4.

<sup>495</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 46.

commodity for exchange, made suitable for “random consumption.”<sup>496</sup> 497  
Second degree religious imagery is mass-produced kitsch and contains a self-referentiality which breaks down the hierarchical distinction between reality and representation, turning the representation into the only possible referent.

“Sold as kitsch, it lacks the devotional relation present in first-degree kitsch. Its absence of feeling leaves us with an empty icon, or rather an icon whose value lies precisely in its iconicity, its quality as a sign rather than as an object.”<sup>498</sup>

As its only referent is in the market place, second degree kitsch is described as pure exchange-value that “exists only for transaction.”<sup>499</sup> It is intentional, capitalizing on the popularization of ‘camp sensibility’<sup>500</sup> and depends on fashion and market-conditions. This framework theorizing kitsch as exchange-value, that is as de-contextualized use value, as use-value on display in the market-place, re-frames the context of modernist discourses on kitsch. The question of kitsch becomes less one of inherent properties of a thing but rather one of general displacement of use-value within capitalist market conditions.

Olalquiaga’s proposition for third degree religious kitsch iconography makes this issue of displacement its central concern together with the re-contextualization of its de-contextualization. In that third degree kitsch seeks a new sensibility, which “carries out an active transformation of kitsch”<sup>501</sup> that invests religious imagery “with either a new or a foreign set of meanings, generating a hybrid product.”<sup>502</sup> This transformation is pursued through a conflation of first and second degree kitsch, respectively of use- and

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<sup>496</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>497</sup> I see here a connection to earlier remarks made in Chapter 1, where I established links between a recognizable style in art, commercial success and kitsch.

<sup>498</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 45.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>500</sup> I refer to S. Sontag, “Notes on Camp”, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Octagon, 1982), pp. 275-92.

<sup>501</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 54.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

exchange-value, by “[T]aking religious imagery both for its kitsch value [second degree] and its signifying and iconic strength [first degree]”<sup>503</sup> so that it becomes “changed once again from referents to signs.”<sup>504</sup> As a result, third degree kitsch conflates the modernist binary opposition between avant-garde art and kitsch and by extension between high art and popular culture: within third degree kitsch both notions are realised as a new potential ‘use-value’ for art. Interpreting Olalquiaga’s third degree kitsch within this context I return to Hollier’s comments on use-value, to what he calls the “sacred axis”<sup>505</sup> of “the nostalgia for use-value.”<sup>506</sup> Citing Bataille’s “I challenge any art lover to love a canvas as much as a fetishist loves a shoe”<sup>507</sup>, Hollier remarks that Bataille’s quotation suggests less of an opposition “between the expert and the collector, but rather [...] between the distance of the collector and the obsession of the fetishist.”<sup>508</sup> <sup>509</sup>According to Hollier, Bataille does not, and in contrast to Marx, oppose use-value and commodity fetishism but rather opens up the possibility for an interpretation of “two versions of use-value.”<sup>510</sup> One which follows what Hollier calls the “profane axis”, which “refers to the technical, social and economic use of the object”<sup>511</sup>, to Bataille’s ‘classical utility’, and the “sacred axis” which relates “to the category that Bataille was to explore under the name of non-productive use”<sup>512</sup>, a use-value which is no longer coupled to the useful. These two notions of use-value correlate to the difference Baudrillard<sup>513</sup> establishes between an object of use and a

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>505</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 140.

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>507</sup> G. Bataille, “L’esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions”, in *Documents* 8 (1930), pp. 490-1, quoted in D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 140.

<sup>508</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 140.

<sup>509</sup> The same tension is observed by Bois in Benjamin’s writing on Baudelaire. Interpreting the fetishistic nature of the commodity-form as the threat posed by capitalism to the very existence of art, Bois, citing Benjamin, states: “[W]hen things are freed from the bondage of being useful’, as in the typically fetishistic transubstantiation accomplished by the art collector, then the distinction between art and artefact becomes extremely tenuous” (Y-A.

Bois, 1995, p.234).

<sup>510</sup> D. Hollier, “The use-value of the impossible”, p. 140.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>513</sup> J. Baudrillard, “The System of Collecting”. I refer to my discussion on p. 89.

possession. This distinction, along Hollier's profane and sacred axis, allows for an expansion and refinement of the binary oppositions that have been decisive for the discussions on kitsch so far. The following juxtapositions reveal that it is less art and kitsch that have been at stake in these discourses, but rather these two notions of use-value, as they are reflected in them.

<u>Sacred axis of use-value</u>	<u>Profane axis of use-value</u>
<p><b>Modernity:</b> adversary aesthetic culture, non-linear, subjective.</p> <p><b>Use-value:</b> linked to place and ritual, non-productive expenditure.</p> <p><b>Aura:</b> linked to unmediated consumption.</p> <p><b>Freud's notion of the fetish</b></p> <p><b>Kitsch:</b> appeals to sentiment, distraction of the masses, no material or emancipatory value, non-productive expenditure, materiality, manipulation, emotional excess, waste, detritus, displaced and exhausted usefulness, superseded art.</p>	<p><b>Modernization:</b> economic process, linear progress, technology, science, objectivity, positivist science.</p> <p><b>Use-value</b> linked to utility, instrumentality, function, technique.</p> <p><b>Aura:</b> linked to authenticity, originality in an object.</p> <p><b>Commodity fetish</b></p> <p><b>Art:</b> appeals to intellect, contemplation by an individual, emancipatory and monetary value, classical utility, productive, sensory restraint, rational, functional.</p>

The comparisons above indicate that there is a tenuous circular relationship between art, artefact (of culture) and kitsch which corresponds with art,

culture and commodity<sup>514</sup> that suggests that kitsch is art 'of which the usefulness is exhausted'. This is an important point to which I will return in the next chapter.

Bataille's two notions of use-value are implicitly present in Olalquiaga's proposition of third degree kitsch, which conflates "the immediate use between object and user" and the 'distant look' in a hybrid product. With Heidegger, it is "[T]he equipmental quality of equipment"<sup>515</sup> of the 'peasant shoes', their functional usefulness that is equated here with use-value within the displaced usefulness of the shoe for the fetishist,<sup>516</sup> a shoe that becomes an object without reality as it is identical with itself. Displaced usefulness, then, is a usefulness of the shoe which starts for the fetishist (paradoxically<sup>517</sup>) exactly when the shoe "stops working, when it no longer serves locomotion", when it becomes "the use-value of a shoe out of service."<sup>518</sup> In the words of Frow, discussing Heidegger's passage on the peasant shoes: "The example of the shoes – [...] – is loaded with the full force of shoeness: use value, fetish value, a 'world' that opens out from the shoe's deep interiority."<sup>519</sup>

With Hollier's expansion along the 'profane' and 'sacred' axis I propose to interpret Bataille's two aspects of use-value as a conflation of Marx's Materialism (matter forms consciousness) and Freud's concept of the fetish, the practice of associating an object with the sexual act, whereby desire is

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<sup>514</sup> I also refer to my discussion on Kulka.

<sup>515</sup> M. Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Martin Heidegger – Basic Writings – from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, ed. D. Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1977), pp. 143-187, p. 162.

<sup>516</sup> Heidegger theorizes use-value as the usefulness of a 'thing', as "the basic feature" that "flashes at us and thereby is present" (M. Heidegger, 1977, p. 158). We perceive the 'peasant shoes' as a thing in which the peasant woman "stands and walks". We recognize "the use of equipment" (M. Heidegger, 1977, p. 162), but simultaneously "the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes [from which] the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth." (M. Heidegger, 1977, p. 163) According to Heidegger, inside and outside are uncannily entwined: what is present acquires a latent component through being used. The uncanny *Doppelgänger* of the peasant shoes does not arise from the commodification of the shoes, but rather from their being used.

<sup>517</sup> Hollier refers here to Bataille's 'paradox of absolute usefulness'.

<sup>518</sup> D. Hollier, "The use-value of the impossible", p. 140.

<sup>519</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 82.

transferred and projected onto the material world. Based on these observations I argue that Olalquiaga's third degree kitsch supersedes Marx's concept of the commodity fetish as it represents a form of cultural production that creates new meaning by actively and self-consciously fusing use-value and fetishism in Bataille's terms. This conflation is achieved in that third degree kitsch intersects the cultural given (first degree kitsch) and its commodified form (second degree kitsch), the given that has become displaced under capitalist market conditions, and reconnects them to the cultic. This suggests an interpretation of kitsch as displaced usefulness. Second degree kitsch is revealed as what Hollier calls the "transposed fetish", a "fetish that no longer works as a fetish" that "has been discarded and framed to be put on the market" and as such "has been degraded to become a commodity."<sup>520</sup> Third degree kitsch constitutes a conflation of the familiar with the estranged that has become unfamiliar due to today's economic, social and cultural conditions. It is the displaced familiar that has become the unfamiliar familiar; it is the conventional made suspect.

My discussion of Olalquiaga's two texts has opened up a scale to read kitsch within the vocabulary of Surrealism and in particular in the register of the uncanny. This relationship is established on various levels through the dialectical relationship between the commodified and the outmoded. The mechanically commodified produces the outmoded through displacement. The familiar images and objects that have been made strange by historical repression, as *heimisch* things of the past return as *unheimlich* in the present, exposing the compulsion to repeat as a recurrence that is structurally embedded in Modernism. The shortcomings of Olalquiaga's concept of kitsch are, paradoxically, that she wants to redeem it. In doing so her conceptualization remains tied to certain categories, such as religious imagery or other distinct properties of an object, which allow her to conceive kitsch as a congealed sentiment of alienation and 'embodied' nostalgia for

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<sup>520</sup> D. Hollier, "The use-value of the impossible", p. 147.

authenticity as a lost domain of experience. As she establishes a system for evaluation within a dialectical framework that supports her bifurcated notion of kitsch, she diverts from the 'kitsch experience' as a subjective response and unifies individual experiences into a homological theory – a theory of the 'Other' that does "not break the space of theory but just com[e]s] down to the same thing once more."<sup>521</sup>

In contrast to Olalquiaga I do not conceive the outmoded nostalgically but in the context of Bataille's notion of detritus. This allows me to propose a concept of 'kitsch without an object', namely as disembodied notion in the process of de-contextualization that is produced through language. This proposition implies that kitsch has a use other than an aesthetic value within the relation between aesthetic theory and its politics. The relation between displacement and kitsch places the latter into an intimate proximity to issues of belonging, identity and authenticity as a term that no longer designates the uniqueness of an object but rather relates to its use. Kitsch becomes synonymous to a general notion of 'displaced usefulness' and the displaced experience of an essence of a particular place, revealing simultaneously the 'real' place and the displaced experience of it as a fake. As this 'thing' or 'sentiment' that is only turned into kitsch if fixed either in the 'Home' or the 'Away', kitsch is conceived as the very force that suspends the modernist binary opposition of 'Home' and 'Away'. Rather than pursuing kitsch in either the 'Home' or the 'Away', I argue that kitsch is the mood/mode which enables Modernism's suspension of time without the Greenbergian purity.

I understand suspension here along *Odysseus' Odyssey*, which I employ in the following chapter as a metaphor for an endlessly deferred homecoming that constitutes a vacillation between 'Home' and 'Away'. With this proposition I argue that the meaning of either the 'Home' or the 'Away' can only be grasped structurally, both poles mutually reinforcing and critiquing each other.

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<sup>521</sup> D. Holler, *Against Architecture - The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. B. Wing (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: MIT Press, 1989), p. 87.



I suggest that this tension is evoked by the German word *Heimat*, a word which evokes, as Frow puts it, both “the place of safety to which we return” and “that lost origin that is thought in the alien world.”<sup>522</sup>

In order to explore this tension further I propose an expansion of Olalquiaga’s concept of the kitsch experience alongside Surrealism, as it is evoked by Bataille’s concept of the heterogeneous. This approach, I argue, opens the possibility for its understanding in the context of material waste and conceptual ‘excess’ which cannot be assimilated within a metaphysical whole. There are two main reasons to be investigated further in the next chapter which justify this association. Firstly, it dispenses with the postulation of kitsch as a unified ‘Other’, which previous discourses derive from the particular in spite of the fact that with kitsch the reverse seems impossible, namely that we cannot deduce the particular from the abstract. Kitsch is a concept that cannot be defined and remains elusive.<sup>523</sup> It designates a category of ‘things’ with arbitrary forms (that are sometimes not even objects), which can take on different meanings and can be employed for a number of ‘jobs’, fit for various discourses.<sup>524</sup> Kitsch as a ‘dirty’ word, not unlike Bataille’s ‘formless’, refers “to a productivity in which the word is not defined by what it means (its ‘senses’) but by what it does, by the effects it induces (its ‘job’).”<sup>525</sup> It relates to what Krauss detects at the core of the ‘formless’, namely that it is bound “not only to a visual field in which the word refuses to take on the unity of a set of *Gestalts* [...] but [it is] located at the same time within the cognitive categories through which meaning is built.”<sup>526</sup> In establishing this connection I am particularly interested that the ‘formless’, as Bataille insists, does not

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<sup>522</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 80.

<sup>523</sup> Most authors agree on this point but nevertheless develop their argument with an understanding of kitsch implying a fixed concept. An exception is Kulka who criticizes former discussions precisely for their lack of commitment toward establishing a necessary and adequate definition of kitsch.

<sup>524</sup> This is also evident in the everyday use of ‘kitsch’ as a word not grammatically changing however it is used.

<sup>525</sup> D. Holler, *Against Architecture*, p. 29.

<sup>526</sup> Y.-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, p. 92.

delineate the category of objects that have no form, but rather points toward de-categorization of all form.

The second reason to employ Bataille's writing is the relationship between kitsch and expenditure. The evaluation of kitsch is intimately linked to extravagant, excessive and non-productive expenditure that goes against the Protestant work ethic of Modernism. Botting and Wilson interpret Bataille's 'non-productive expenditure' as "something in excess of regulative and homogenous forms"<sup>527</sup>. I understand the relationship of kitsch and expenditure as two-way in that kitsch simultaneously testifies to both Modernism's waste and its excess, its cultural discharge and the *too much*. As this unification of waste and excess it reveals Modernism's pursuit of progress as illusion. The connection between kitsch and waste is manifested in previous discourses either as excess of capitalist mass-production and the 'trashy by-product of culture' (Greenberg, Adorno), in kitsch as the detritus (Benjamin and Olalquiaga's outmoded), as aesthetic excess and ornament (Greenberg, Kulka), as sentimentality in the form of emotional excess (Broch, Dorfler, Kulka) and in kitsch as unproductive expenditure (Kulka). My main critique of Olalquiaga is that her challenge of modernist anti-kitsch positions is ultimately nostalgic. As a means to 'working out' (Breton) rather than 'acting out' (Bataille), she seeks to redeem kitsch with the help of Benjamin via an aestheticization of trash. Her focus on the commodity in capitalist conditions and kitsch as its embodied cast-off frames kitsch as some sort of anaesthetic against the trauma of alienation.

Her endeavour to establish a notion of 'good' kitsch seems to me paradoxical; not only as (and in this point I agree with Kulka) the term denotes *by definition* inadequacy, but more so because it cripples its possibilities for the dynamics it can potentially unleash. Kitsch has this potential precisely *because* it is culturally inscribed in our society as the absurd, the ridiculous, the culturally

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<sup>527</sup> F. Botting & S. Wilson, *Bataille* (Palgrave, Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire & New York, 2001), p. 3.

low, its waste and excess. I am not interested in a notion of good kitsch but rather want to emphasize its baseness in the hope that this dramatizes residual elements of recuperation. Good kitsch is sanitized shit and as such it enslaves itself to the ideology of traditional philosophical discourse – but as dirt, in Freud's sense, namely as "matter in the wrong place"<sup>528</sup> kitsch becomes an obstacle to any homologous theory of forms.

So if

"Rodney's is the tempo of things that remain in a deep slumber until they are brought back to life in the glorious intensity of amazement, an experience where objects and events are able to flourish again, sleeping Beauties whose radiant youth has only been enhanced by the long period during which they remained latent [...] As if suspension in limbo [...] carried the imprint of a peculiar duration [...] the stoic refusal of things to depart once their usefulness is exhausted."<sup>529</sup>

I will not disturb 'Rodney's' "deep slumber" in order to bring him "back to life in the glorious intensity of amazement"<sup>530</sup>, as Breton might have done, critiqued by Bataille for seeking the dissolution of the contradictions between "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low" not in "empty abstraction" but in "an interior and blind radiance."<sup>531</sup> 'Rodney' should remain among crustaceans "the crab known as the 'sleeper', the image of eternal sleep, [is] the most mysterious, the most deceitful, the shiftest."<sup>532</sup> 'Rodney', Olalquiaga's exemplar of melancholic kitsch and trophy of "Sleeping Beauties"<sup>533</sup> should not be woken up by Breton's kiss to seal the final encounter with the long lost object in his

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<sup>528</sup> I refer to S. Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism" in *On Sexuality* (London: Pelican Books, 1977), p. 213.

<sup>529</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 5.

<sup>530</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>531</sup> A. Breton, "The Second Surrealist Manifesto" in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. R. Seaver and H.R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 125, quoted in G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. A. Stoekl, Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 14 (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1985), p. 41.

<sup>532</sup> G. Bataille, "CRUSTACEANS" in *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. G. Bataille, assembled and introduced by A. Brotchie and D. Lecocq, trans. I. White, D. Faccini [et al.] (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 40.

<sup>533</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 5.

search for “the totemic tree of objects within the [rose] thicket of primal history.”<sup>534</sup> If ‘my Rodney’ should wake up, all by himself or perhaps with the help of an alarm clock, he would not be one of these “‘Sleeping Beauties’ whose radiant youth has only [been] enhanced by the long period during which they remained latent”<sup>535</sup>. He would rather be a “Sleeping Beauty [that] would have awoken covered in a thick layer of dust.”<sup>536</sup> Dust, that

“[O]ne day or another, given its persistence will probably begin to gain the upper hand over the servants, pouring immense amounts of rubbish into abandoned buildings and deserted stockyards: and, at that distant epoch, nothing will remain to ward off night terrors in the absence of which we have become such ‘good bookkeepers.’”<sup>537</sup>

In the next chapter I will expand on these ideas and attempt to outline their trajectories with my concept of kitsch.

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<sup>534</sup> W. Benjamin, “Dream Kitsch”, p. 4.

<sup>535</sup> C. Olajuiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 5.

<sup>536</sup> G. Bataille, “DUST” in *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 42.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

## KULKA

Kulka's attempt to conceptualize kitsch exclusively within the tradition of analytic aesthetics<sup>538</sup> bridges earlier discussions with contemporary literature: he endorses the anti-kitsch positions of modernist theoretical writers but allows for a certain contextual understanding of kitsch. Kulka's approach unfolds within the tension of aiming at a definition for kitsch in postmodern conditions that explains it solely "as an aesthetic category"<sup>539</sup> <sup>540</sup> and seeks to establish intrinsic qualities and the acknowledgment of its function as a cultural regulative. Because his position poses various problems, it opens possibilities to widen the discussion of kitsch in terms of its functionality, on which I want to expand in my interpretation of Kulka's text with Bataille's notions of 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure'.<sup>541</sup>

Kulka aims to reach a definition of kitsch to develop a theory which grants some sort of positivist and objectifiable criteria for artistic production and judgment. Following the central question of: "How can one hope to characterize art by some inherent features when the same object can be both art and non-art, depending on where it is encountered"<sup>542</sup>, Kulka aims to 'extract' and recover the essence and intrinsic values of 'real' art through an investigation of its aesthetic and artistic properties to provide for a concept/tool that serves as an 'objective' measure for the degree of kitsch within any certain object.

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<sup>538</sup> T. Kulka makes a clear distinction between the 'artworld' and the 'kitschworld' [he refers to A. Danto, "The Artworld", in *Journal of Philosophy* (1964): 517-34]. Although he insists that his investigation of kitsch is limited to questions of aesthetics exploring the relationship between kitsch and art, he states in his introductory remarks that "this book is not so much concerned with possible exploitations of kitsch elements for artistic purposes; that is, with how kitsch may work in *the artworld* [his italics]. It is rather concerned with kitsch in its *natural* [my italics] surroundings; that is, with how kitsch works in *the kitschworld* [his italics]" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 9). As a result Kulka exemplifies his arguments by mixing the two. I will discuss this point further.

<sup>539</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), p. 119. Book first published in 1996.

<sup>540</sup> Kulka addresses kitsch exclusively within art but not kitsch as mass-produced objects.

<sup>541</sup> I refer to Bataille's dual notion of utility: 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure' as described in the chapter "The Notion of Expenditure", in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 116-29.

<sup>542</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, pp. 4-5.

He aims to establish “an aesthetic theory of kitsch”<sup>543</sup> as anathema or antithesis to art that provides ‘objective’ proof of kitsch’s artistic and aesthetic inadequacy *in spite* of its mass appeal and explains what the badness of kitsch consists of within this tension.<sup>544</sup> Kitsch is conceived as a fixed category that is “artistically deficient”<sup>545</sup> and which, due to some intrinsic characteristics, can be set apart from art. Following these premises Kulka’s methodological approach is “to specify what its aesthetic deficiencies are”<sup>546</sup> and to determine the “structural features that characterize kitsch”<sup>547</sup> which allow him “to provide an answer to the question of what kind of objects are correctly classified as kitsch”<sup>548</sup> and to establish “what inherent qualities distinguish art from non-art.”<sup>549</sup> He aims at re-establishing the modernist notion of autonomous art within postmodern conditions, characterized by him as an era of crisis to the extent that “even a common urinal can become a treasured work of art”<sup>550</sup>.

Fundamental to Kulka’s approach are his beliefs in the possibilities of defining aesthetic concepts and of establishing a theoretical framework for its evaluation that grounds aesthetic judgment in reasoning. Kulka’s arguments against kitsch are thus informed by a stance that rejects positions such as Weitz’s<sup>551</sup> notion of art as ‘open concept’, for which neither necessary nor

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>544</sup> Kulka’s position, formed under Stalinist and post-Stalinist East European regimes, leaves scope for speculation as to what extent kitsch is a culturally biased concept (this point will be further commented on in Chapter 4).

<sup>545</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 2.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid., p. 2..

<sup>548</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., p. 4. Kulka refers to Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917).

<sup>551</sup> Kulka refers to M. Weitz, “The Role of Theory in Aesthetics”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Criticism*, 15 (1956), pp. 27-35. Reprinted in *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*, ed. J. Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978).

sufficient conditions can be stated, and Sibley's<sup>552</sup> distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms as a basis for aesthetic judgment in art.<sup>553</sup> Kulka's *Kitsch and Art*, first published in the US in 1996, begins with an evaluation of what he calls the transitory state of general aesthetic confusion, which he seeks to clarify through his discussion of kitsch. He pursues this through a definition of kitsch that reinstates a scission between art and non-art and allows for a reintroduction of a modernist notion of art within postmodern conditions that exempts art from the economic and social strata of exchange value. The collapse of the boundary between art and non-art and the modernist myth proclaiming 'the end of art'<sup>554</sup> are, according to Kulka, indicators of an art that "has entered the era of gestures and gimmicks"<sup>555</sup>, under which he subsumes artistic strategies used since the 50's and 60's. For Kulka these strategies are not really art proper but rather a "comment on art as such"<sup>556</sup>. His discussion is conceptually close to Greenberg's model of binary oppositions but in contrast to Greenberg, is informed by a stance that

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<sup>552</sup> Kulka refers to F. Sibley, "Aesthetic Concepts", in *Philosophical Review* 18 (1959): 64-87.

<sup>553</sup> Kulka's critique on Sibley aims not primarily at Sibley's distinction but at his claim that "there are no non-aesthetic features that serve in any circumstances as logically *sufficient conditions* for applying aesthetic terms" and that therefore "[a]esthetic or taste concepts are not in *this* respect condition-governed at all" (F. Sibley, 1959, p. 66, quoted in T. Kulka, 2002, p. 24). Whilst this claim applies indiscriminatively to positive and negative aesthetic judgments for Sibley, Kulka maintains that "we may not be able to state sufficient conditions for the application of positive aesthetic judgments, [but] we may be able to find such conditions for the application of negative ones" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 127). Referring to aesthetic judgment with regard to people and theatre plays as 'beautiful'/'ugly' and 'dynamic'/'boring' Kulka states: "We may indeed be unable to list general characteristics that would give sufficient ground for applying 'beautiful' or 'dynamic' in the above mentioned contexts. However, if we were told that a certain woman has a nose more than six inches long, that her left eye is grey and the right one pink, her face is covered with large red spots, her mouth is twisted, and her smile reveals seven brownish teeth, wouldn't this information be sufficient to allow us to judge that the poor woman is ugly? Wouldn't we be entitled to conclude that a play is boring if we were told that what happens on stage during the first five minutes is repeated without any change for an hour and a half?" (T. Kulka, 2002, pp. 126-27). Kulka's explanation illuminates some problems inherent in his argument: his insistence on addressing art exclusively and simultaneously taking recourse to examples that are extraneous to art. Kulka's illustrations seem to simplify the debate by rooting it in a colloquial usage of beauty and ugliness, that, in its grotesque exaggeration, does not convince as to whether the same criteria could not be employed to characterize 'beauty' (as indeed many fairy tales do by portraying the ugly witch in opposition to the beautiful princess).

<sup>554</sup> Kulka refers to B. Lang (ed.), *The Death of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984).

<sup>555</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 8.

<sup>556</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

is post-Duchamp<sup>557</sup> and Pop Art. In making use of Greenberg's strategy of segregation, he subsumes strategies that "comment on art" under the concept of gimmick, a category quite separate from art. This is exemplified by his comment on Jeff Koons' work "that basketballs and vacuum cleaners do not strike us as negations of kitsch. But they don't really strike us as works of art either."<sup>558</sup>

With the state of the arts in postmodern conditions in mind, Kulka aims to re-contextualize Greenberg's position against kitsch, (informed by the socio-political context of the 1930's) into the contemporary field within the philosophical framework of aesthetics. This move from politics to aesthetics indicates not only a shift in the political climate but also that sixty years after Greenberg's "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" it has become problematic to conceptualize kitsch as the 'Other' outside the realm of high art. Referring to Hermann Broch<sup>559</sup>, Greenberg's contemporary, Kulka states that Broch "regarded kitsch as the enemy of art, threatening it from the *outside* [his italics]" and continues asking whether we are not "in danger today of kitsch infiltrating the artworld, wrecking it from the *inside*? [his italics]"<sup>560</sup>

Kulka, in contrast to Greenberg, seems to be no longer in the position to ignore the state of entropy that characterizes the relationship between kitsch and art, a relationship that has already been acknowledged by Adorno stating that it is "the most difficult task art faces at the present time", as kitsch has become "like a poisonous substance that is mixed in with art"<sup>561</sup>. In the contemporary context, art's condition no longer offers the possibility to proclaim one's disgust with the exclamation "this is not art!"<sup>562</sup> As bad art has

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<sup>557</sup> Although Duchamp's *Fountain* was firstly exhibited in 1917 its impact was not felt until a later generation, that of Kosuth, in the 50s and 60s. See my discussion on Greenberg.

<sup>558</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 117.

<sup>559</sup> Kulka refers to H. Broch, "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch".

<sup>560</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 116.

<sup>561</sup> T. W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1984, p. 340.

<sup>562</sup> I refer to T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.



become the new good art, Kulka aims to re-assert kitsch as the dirty word that allows for the expression of impropriety in the field of art.<sup>563</sup>

Greenberg's binary opposition of avant-garde art and popular art/mass culture becomes with Kulka an opposition of "art as such" and "comment on art"/non-art.<sup>564</sup> With both theoreticians the fundamental distinction between art and life, implicit in their antinomies, remains thereby intact and is linked to the irreconcilable nature of kitsch and art. Kulka's distinction between "art" and "comment on art" closely follows Greenberg's notion of purity within modernist art, which understands its criticality as a self-reflexivity that is directed inward within one given medium towards its own material conditions.<sup>565</sup> It excludes *a priori* a self-reflexivity that reaches beyond a specific medium or indeed, beyond the field of art itself. As Kulka's approach is informed by his belief in art's potential to maintain a separate position within society, his analysis of kitsch comprises at its core a critique of the blurring of the boundary between life and art and an attack on the contemporary conditions in which art has become institutionalized<sup>566</sup> and

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<sup>563</sup> This indicates that kitsch functions as a cultural regulative.

<sup>564</sup> Kulka states: "Duchamp's *Fountain* wasn't just accommodated as a problematic borderline case but rather as a paradigmatic example of what art is (and should be) all about. But if Duchamp's *Fountain* can become a paradigm of artistic success, it follows that anything can. Some contemporary 'artists' soon realized the potential of this implication and the benefits that could follow. As a result of this you can get (if you are wealthy enough) a tin with the excrement of the artist (signed and with the certificate of authenticity), and contemporary critics will explain to you that a white canvas exemplifies the essence of painting." (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 117).

<sup>565</sup> I will return to this point.

<sup>566</sup> Kulka refers to Danto's theory of art in A. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), to Dickie's institutional theory in G. Dickie, *Art and Aesthetics: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974) and G. Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven Publications, 1984), to Thomas Kuhn's sociopsychological account of scientific rationality in T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970), to Paul Feyerabend's defence of "epistemological anarchism" in P. Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of the Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso, 1978) and to Michel Foucault's sociohistorical critique of ideologies and social institutions in M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976) and M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (London: Tavistock, 1976).

contextual to the extent that “[A]t is what has been (by the agents of the artworld) baptized as art.”<sup>567</sup>

Kulka’s aim is to reinvigorate Greenberg’s formalist position by postulating a “normative idea of artistic rightness”<sup>568</sup> within postmodern conditions that annihilates the contextual condition art has since the ready-made. *Vis-à-vis* Greenberg’s remarks that kitsch has in practice erased the “general agreement among the cultivated of mankind [...] between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere”<sup>569</sup>, Kulka maintains that there is still a general understanding among the public about paradigmatic examples of kitsch and good or bad art. He insists that value judgments are rationally accountable and continue to form the basis of “any comprehensive description of social practices”<sup>570</sup> and that artistic practice still operates within a framework regulated by an “achievement concept”<sup>571</sup>. Kulka’s approach can thus be related back to the Kantian notion of aesthetic judgment. The implications of Kant’s philosophy on Modernism’s preference of ‘ratio’ over ‘emotions’, what Susan Sontag charts as Modernism’s mistrust towards everything that “has not been brought under the sovereignty of reason”<sup>572</sup>, is not questioned by Kulka but rather confirmed stating that “serious artists typically refrain from depicting objects that are generally considered to be beautiful or emotionally charged.”<sup>573</sup> <sup>574</sup> Kulka’s inquiry then comprises a defence of the traditional values in art against the postmodern credo of ‘do whatever’ which, in its lack of normative criteria for artistic

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<sup>567</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 5.

<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>569</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 536.

<sup>570</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 11.

<sup>571</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7

<sup>572</sup> S. Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”, in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, ed. E. Hardwick (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 106. Essay first published in 1964.

<sup>573</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 42.

<sup>574</sup> Kulka is referring to artists also favoured by Greenberg such as Picasso, Manet, Rothko, Kandinsky or Pollock. Following Greenberg’s line of argument, Kulka’s defining of serious art is that the work “takes some time and effort to figure out what is represented” (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 29). ‘Unserious artists’ fall into two categories: those remaining anonymous (Kulka’s description suggests the kind of artists who sell their work as souvenirs in popular tourist spots) or those working in conceptual or postmodern art, such as Manzoni or Koons.

practice and judgment, runs the danger of accepting kitsch as the paradigmatic in-art by the art-establishment elite.<sup>575</sup> As a consequence he accuses the 'relativist' discussions of kitsch of hiding behind an anti-elitist mask, whilst he insists that "kitsch simply *is* an elitist concept<sup>576</sup> and, unless its meaning changes, it will remain one."<sup>577</sup> This is an important point at which his contribution departs from other contemporary discussions on kitsch discussed in this thesis which, in order to redeem parts of it, reject notions of kitsch with *a priori* negative connotations. Kulka deems such redemption inconceivable as the term kitsch is for him, by definition, derogatory, denoting the gap between an uneducated populace and an elite educated in art. "[T]he term has its established use; it denotes objects that have a widely popular appeal, yet despite this are considered bad by the art-educated elite."<sup>578</sup> Kulka criticizes former theoreticians on kitsch<sup>579</sup> for hiding behind "[S]ocioeconomic factors"<sup>580</sup>, for not explaining sufficiently what the "badness [of kitsch] consists of"<sup>581</sup> and for avoiding an investigation into "the nature of the objects this term denotes and what explanations one can offer to account for its negative connotations."<sup>582</sup> In conclusion, Kulka conceives kitsch as an anti-aesthetic category of particular (art) objects which are called kitsch due to specific intrinsic non-contextual characteristics: "[Kitsch] is both a normative and a classificatory concept, and as such presupposes a certain constancy of use."<sup>583</sup> Kulka investigates these characteristics in the tradition of formalist aesthetics by recourse to unity, complexity and intensity, as the normative

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<sup>575</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 116.

<sup>576</sup> Kulka's position entails a strong critique against institutional theories and its representatives (what he calls 'the art establishment elite') such as art critics, collectors, curators and museum directors. As he otherwise insists that kitsch is an elitist concept and still a marker between an uneducated populace and an art-educated elite, I interpret Kulka's approach as being informed by a bifurcated concept of elitism: the 'art establishment elite' (representing the value of art in the market place) and the 'private' 'connoisseur' who enjoys art for its own sake.

<sup>577</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 12.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>579</sup> Kulka is referring to contributors in Dorfler's anthology on kitsch such as Broch, Giesz and

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<sup>580</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 17.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

criteria within analytic aesthetics to evaluate aesthetic value.<sup>584</sup> Kulka refers to unity in regard to “how the constitutive features of the work are balanced or harmonized”<sup>585</sup> and citing Beardsley<sup>586</sup> and Dickie,<sup>587</sup> to the work having “an inner logic of structure and style”<sup>588</sup>. A work then is perfectly unified when it “cannot be improved by alterations of its constitutive features”<sup>589</sup>, whereby an ‘alteration’ constitutes “a change in a work of art [that] does not shatter its *basic perceptual gestalt* [his italics].”<sup>590</sup> Based on the amount of possible alterations Kulka proposes the formula (a-b) as a means to evaluate unity within a work of art. Citing Beardsley, Kulka refers to complexity in terms of “heterogeneity and multidimensionality”<sup>591</sup> and defines the degree of complexity of a work of art as proportional to the number of its possible alterations as expressed in (a+b+c). The relationship between unity and complexity, that takes into account that it is artistically more challenging to produce a work of art that is high in unity *and* complexity is expressed by Kulka as (a – b) x (a+b+c). Intensity, Kulka explains, constitutes the category of aesthetic evaluation in regard to a work’s economic organization, its specificity and its commitment to its particularity and is thus expressed as (a+b) : c. From these premises, Kulka concludes that the overall aesthetic value of a work of art is expressed in an interplay of unity, complexity and intensity which he schematically represents in (a-b)x(a+b+c)x(a+b):c, as a

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<sup>584</sup> In order to do so, he establishes three categories of how an alteration might have an effect on a work of art:

- A causes some aesthetic damage to the work.
- B aesthetically improves the work.
- C does not aesthetically affect the work.

a, b, and c stand for the number of alterations which fall into the categories A, B, and C.<sup>585</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 47.

<sup>586</sup> M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1958).

<sup>587</sup> G. Dickie, *Evaluating Art* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

<sup>588</sup> M. C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems*, p. 462, quoted in T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 47.

<sup>589</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 65.

<sup>590</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

model of aesthetic evaluation of art based on a “*rational reconstruction* [his italics] of our aesthetic value judgments and aesthetic preferences.”<sup>592</sup>

These ‘calculations’ are tested in regard to what Kulka establishes as the prototypical kitsch painting<sup>593</sup>, in which he, however, detects no deficiencies in its formal features regarding unity, complexity or intensity. The conclusion he draws is that we neither have to reject “unity, complexity and intensity as aesthetic properties of good art” that form our intuitions and contentions “through the history of aesthetics from Plato and Aristotle to the present”<sup>594</sup>, nor do we have to accept that kitsch could be aesthetically on a par with a masterpiece. Kulka solves this apparent contradiction by leaving analytic aesthetics and expanding on unity, complexity and intensity as sole measures for ‘good’ art introducing a “distinction between artistic and aesthetic value”<sup>595</sup>, which allows him to usher in extraneous criteria.<sup>596</sup> ‘Aesthetic value’ then refers to formal essentialist properties in a work of art in the tradition of analytic aesthetics, such as style, composition and ‘artistic value’ refers to

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<sup>592</sup> Ibid., p. 72

<sup>593</sup> Analogous to how he explains ‘unserious’ artists, kitsch paintings are described in general terms, applicable to paintings displayed in places frequented by tourists without reference to any particular artists. The only reproduction of a kitsch painting in Kulka’s book is lifted from the cover of Dorfles’ kitsch anthology, *Lady playing the violin* by an unknown artist. Kulka describes the ‘prototypical’ kitsch painting as follows (I am paraphrasing his enumeration): It is executed in a conventional and easily recognizable style and portrays comforting and reassuring subject matter that exploits universal motifs, which are highly charged “with stock emotions that spontaneously trigger an unreflective emotional response” without substantially enriching or transforming the viewer’s associations. Its predominant depictions are of puppies, kittens, cute children, mothers with babies, long-legged women, beaches with palms, sunsets, pastoral Swiss villages, pasturing deer, couples embracing against the full moon, wild horses galloping along the waves of a stormy sea, cheerful beggars, sad clowns, faithful doleful dogs (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 56). Kulka does not consider the possibility that these images could be considered as signs or that they could be used paradoxically. His examples demonstrate that for his critique of kitsch he is looking outside of high art aesthetics, at something extraneous to its field. However, as kitsch cannot *a priori* be high art, Kulka’s argument becomes circular.

<sup>594</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 51.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid., p. 55. His example is Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907), which according to Kulka, has a low aesthetic value (it looks stylistically incoherent and ‘unfinished’) but simultaneously (because of its art historical significance) a high artistic value.

<sup>596</sup> According to Kulka the standards for artistic values are set by “the critics [who] praise the work [by referring] to its originality, its importance in the history of art, its being a ‘turning point’” (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 54). Partly in contradiction to his earlier comments Kulka does not critique here ‘the art establishment elite’ as this regulative force for artistic value (see fn. 576).

innovation, originality, creativity, novelty and social relevance. To have artistic value means for Kulka “[To] be of public significance” and to present “solutions to topical artistic problems.”<sup>597</sup>

Based on his investigations of aesthetic and artistic value Kulka formulates three conditions that constitute his definition of kitsch, which he wants to be classificatory, meaning universal and detached from subjective judgment:

- Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with *stock* [my italics] emotions.
- The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
- Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

Kulka’s conditions align themselves to modernist anti-kitsch positions. The first condition ties in with Dorfles’ notion that “kitsch exploits irrational, fantastic and even sub- or pre-conscious elements”<sup>598</sup>, what he calls the ‘kitsch attitude’ and ‘sentimentality’. According to Kulka, for whom kitsch “breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone”<sup>599</sup>, the prototypical kitsch painting exploits “universal subjects such as birth, family, love, nostalgia”<sup>600</sup>, translating them into instantaneously recognizable motifs that elicit spontaneous emotional responses. Sentimental images epitomize for Kulka, quoting Kundera, a “categorical agreement with being”<sup>601</sup>. Due to their evocation of “stock emotions” that “spontaneously [his

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<sup>597</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 56.

<sup>598</sup> G. Dorfles, *Kitsch – an anthology of bad taste*, p. 48.

<sup>599</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 27.

<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>601</sup> M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. M. H. Heim (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 256-57. Throughout Kulka’s analysis Milan Kundera, whose anti-kitsch position is more politically than aesthetically informed, is cited as a positive example to reinforce Kulka’s arguments against kitsch. Like Kulka, Kundera’s writing is formed under Stalinist and post-Stalinist East European regimes. Kundera came into prominence in the West in the early 80’s with his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and remains

italics] trigger an unreflective emotional response<sup>602</sup> they have universal validity in that they “play on basic human impulses”<sup>603</sup> as opposed to emotionally neutral objects of the everyday such as “an ordinary chair, or a washing machine.”<sup>604</sup> <sup>605</sup> This distinction between ‘emotionally charged’ and ‘emotionally neutral objects’, as a marker for Kulka’s differentiation between kitsch and high art, seems problematic. His notion of ‘stock emotions’ is simplistic as he doesn’t acknowledge that ‘stock emotions’ are a highly sophisticated concept equally employed by high art such as in the *Commedia dell’arte*. Neither does his differentiation provide for the possibility that, depending on context and personal narrative, even a chair or a washing machine can become emotionally charged objects.

The second and third conditions of Kulka’s classification relate to contextual qualities, in that they pertain to stylistic properties, learned perception and habituation. They suggest that a certain stylistic device, once registered and recognized as artistic, is prone to be appropriated and reproduced as kitsch<sup>606</sup>. This dialectic relationship between style and kitsch, already discussed in chapter two, is made evident in Kulka’s comment on Impressionism. According to Kulka there is “no problem to produce impressionistically styled kitsch today, since Impressionism has by now become [sic] a ‘realistic’ mode of representation.”<sup>607</sup> His comment indicates that Kulka refers to kitsch as a historically relative and self-reflexive concept together with Adorno’s statement that kitsch is “[T]hings that were part of the art of a former time and are undertaken today.”<sup>608</sup> To conceive kitsch along the ‘no longer useful’ and the outmoded as related to history and tradition,

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influential, especially for theoreticians on kitsch from Eastern Europe. The core of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* forms a love story interlaced with a philosophical inquiry into issues of personal freedom and responsibility within totalitarian regimes in relation to kitsch.

<sup>602</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 26.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>605</sup> Here again he leaves the field of art.

<sup>606</sup> See my discussion of Greenberg.

<sup>607</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 39.

<sup>608</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 501.

provides possible explanations for the fact that we have more difficulty in relating kitsch to new artistic mediums. Kulka's explanation that Impressionism as a style can be appropriated by kitsch *because* it has become "a '*realistic*' [my italics] mode of representation" together with his remark that "we find it difficult to label abstract works kitsch"<sup>609</sup> indicate, however, that his investigation of the relationship between an established style and kitsch stops short before abstraction and is not further examined. Closely following Greenberg's footsteps, abstraction is according to him 'safe' from kitsch as it is an unsuitable mode of expression to prompt an emotional response.<sup>610</sup> Consolidating Greenberg's dichotomies between the 'interested' contemplation and the distracted gaze and between 'difficult' art and instantly gratifying kitsch, Kulka's conditions align themselves with Greenberg's comments that

"Repin can paint so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator [...]. The peasant is also pleased by the wealth of self-evident meanings which he finds in the picture [...]. Repin heightens reality and makes it dramatic: sunset, exploding shells, running and falling men."<sup>611</sup>

Kulka does not address the complexities of postmodern conditions with parody, irony, pastiche as recognized styles. 'Identifiability' in relation to kitsch is thus mainly limited to 'representation' and discussed within the field of figuration and the recognisability of subject matter. Kulka follows here the modernist formalist tradition (Greenberg), which establishes two distinct use-values for art and kitsch. 'Serious' art is put on par with abstraction, difficulty and the learned vocabulary of an educated elite as opposed to figuration linked to entertainment, emotions, dramatic effects, pathos, sentimentality and equated with an unserious and easy relaxation for the uneducated masses.

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<sup>609</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 102.

<sup>610</sup> I refer to my discussion of Greenberg's concept of avant-garde art as an 'objective' artistic practice that is grounded in rationality, contrasted to a notion of kitsch that connotes to the irrational and the 'subjective'.

<sup>611</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, pp. 536-37.



Following this tradition, Kulka subsumes painting, sculpture, literature and architecture - due to their representational character - under art categories that are most prone to be "kitschified". Referring to Scruton's differences between photographs and paintings<sup>612</sup>, Kulka concludes that there are "crucial differences between photographic and painted images"<sup>613</sup> in that the photograph conveys "closeness to nature" due to "the 'mechanical' origins of photographic images."<sup>614</sup> Kulka does not address the conditions and technological means of contemporary photography which overrule Scruton's conservative stance. With Scruton he relates photography to a mechanical process of recording.<sup>615</sup> For Kulka the "kitschiness [of a photograph] is related to how much the photographic image was *manipulated* [his italics]" (the kitschiness) "begins exactly where it departs from 'straight photography'."<sup>616</sup>

<sup>617</sup> Kulka gives no examples but his proposition suggests that all art photography is kitsch. He establishes the same arguments for music, which he explains as more resistant to kitsch in comparison to painting and sculpture, providing it is not parasitic on well-established musical styles or popular tunes from classical compositions.<sup>618</sup> As a conclusion Kulka establishes that photography and music, together with abstract art are less

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<sup>612</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 92. Kulka refers to Scruton's essay "Photography and Representation" (No further references are given). Summarizing Scruton's argument, Kulka states the following differences:

- 1) Whatever a photograph depicts has to exist.
- 2) The object in the photograph is seen (more or less) as it actually is.
- 3) The connection between the photographic image and its object is *causal* [his italics] rather than intentional.

<sup>613</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 93.  
<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93

<sup>615</sup> Kulka compares the camera to a mirror endowed with memory that simply records nature and concludes that photography is a medium that is relatively resistant to kitsch as "[N]ature itself cannot be kitsch" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 90) and by looking at a photograph "[W]e feel as if we are looking at the things themselves" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 91).

<sup>616</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 93.  
<sup>617</sup> Along with Greenberg's concept of 'purity' Kulka explains all departures from 'straight photography' as effects that interfere with the unmediated process of taking a picture such as 'staging', photomontage and any interference with the photographic process (retouching, using different development techniques, coloured filters or special lighting).

<sup>618</sup> Kulka overlooks that it is inherent to classical music to quote. His statement suggests that he is implicitly referring to Adorno's writing on the use of classical tunes/themes in popular music (see Chapter 2).

prone to be 'kitschified' providing they do not employ techniques extraneous to the medium.

This relationship between the 'impurity' of a medium and kitsch, which is not sustainable for a contemporary artistic practice, applies in Kulka's view to all cultural production. Kulka defines this impurity as having recourse to expressive means that are not inherent in the medium (this would be Greenberg's viewpoint); as appropriation of well established and culturally absorbed stylistic devices (this would be Greenberg, Adorno and Broch's viewpoint); as being 'untrue' to reality regarding subject matter and content (this would be Kundera's viewpoint).

Kulka's third condition, stating that "kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes", suggests that high art should have a specific functionality that differs from kitsch, namely that art ought to be educational, enriching the viewer's experience.<sup>619</sup> This notion of high art, whose use has its roots in a reinforcement of high mindedness, formulated as a binary opposition to kitsch, operates on premises according to which the operation of kitsch's pragmatism is *a priori* devalued. This foreclosure has been pointed out by Denis Dutton<sup>620</sup> who detects in Kulka's intent for his definition being classificatory a certain circularity. Dutton states: "Kulka's necessary and sufficient conditions are already logically connected with evaluation of an object as kitsch, and do not precede evaluation in the way he wants."<sup>621</sup> As Dutton continues, Kulka does not provide us with "necessary and sufficient conditions for the identification of any disputed class of objects"<sup>622</sup> as they require "that you can already identify objects of that kind

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<sup>619</sup> With regard to Impressionism Kulka claims that the Impressionists have "not only enriched our associations, they actually helped us look at our environment in a more perceptive manner" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 36) in making us aware of something that has not hitherto been perceived.

<sup>620</sup> D. Dutton, "Tomas Kulka on Kitsch" [Online], *Philosophy and Literature*, issue 21, 1997, pp. 208-11. Available from <http://www.denisdutton.com> [Accessed May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008].

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

in order to apply the conditions.<sup>623</sup> Within the narrow scope of analytic aesthetics his conditions do not assist in providing a framework for aesthetic judgment apart from being a measure to establish the degree of 'kitschiness' an object has, as indicated by Kulka's statement: "[T]he more saliently and unambiguously the picture complies with our three conditions, the more pragmatic an example of kitsch it is."<sup>624</sup> Any discussion of 'more or less' kitsch, however, seems beside the point, especially as for Kulka "[T]he aesthetic worthlessness of kitsch is semantically built into the very meaning of the concept."<sup>625</sup> Besides, there is a tension between intrinsic and extraneous characteristics for a measure of good art: formal properties that are based in essentialism (analytic values) and the extraneity of art's reference (synthetic values) are both values of 'good' art. Kulka's concept of art, with its implicit notion of becoming more refined associating its use with sophistication and improvement of the mind, is highly problematic in contemporary practice. By re-introducing this functional aspect in high art, Kulka re-attaches artistic practice to what he condemns in kitsch.

As I understand Kulka's first two conditions, the imperatives for any response are located in kitsch objects/paintings, which, due to their specific emotionally charged characteristics<sup>626</sup> and easily recognizable features, "elicit a sympathetic response"<sup>627</sup>. The third condition, in contrast, points to the possibility of relating kitsch to pre-understood 'abstractions', stories, histories and stock characters. Kulka's 'more perceptive indexicality' for a measure of good art that is based in a purely formal evaluation is a position of transcendence that wants to leave the everyday behind. As he dismisses anti-essentialist positions which foreground the social functions of kitsch, he does not acknowledge that 'stock imagery' are an essential prerequisite for

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<sup>623</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>624</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 38.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>626</sup> Kulka once again has recourse to an example that is outside the field of art, referring to the *Kindchenschema*, an anthropological concept according to which 'cuteness' is considered a feature that evolved in mammals to trigger 'nurturing stimuli'.

<sup>627</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 27.

the ability to enrich associations and can allow for sharing communally - shared responses, yet individually based. And by outlining a concept of art that divides between a less sophisticated Pop culture and a high culture aspiring to high-mindedness, he relates the very notions of high art and Pop art to two distinct sociological experiences, perpetuating Greenberg's distinction of avant-garde art and kitsch in terms of an opposition between the art educated elite and the masses.

As Kulka develops his argument over time, realizing that he cannot prove the aesthetic worthlessness of kitsch solely within formal aesthetics,<sup>628</sup> he introduces via his three conditions a different functionality/use for high art from kitsch as a measure for good art extraneous to formal aesthetics. This reference to functionality allows him to differentiate between aesthetic and artistic value. Following Greenberg's move "that the cultivated spectator derives the same values from Picasso that the peasant gets from Repin"<sup>629</sup> Kulka reiterates Greenberg's strategy of the detour. What really distinguishes kitsch from art is not formal properties as a question of degree, but the function/use of high art that is perceived as different from kitsch: "Kitsch has all the properties of paintings, that it indeed looks like any other painting; it just does not *function* [his italics] the same way"<sup>630</sup>. In the words of

Greenberg:

"the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove, as the result of reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values. [...] Where Picasso paints *cause*, Repin paints *effect*. Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art."<sup>631</sup>

I expand on this function/use of art with Bataille's<sup>632</sup> notions of 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure'; what Hollier calls "excess without issue"<sup>633</sup>.

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<sup>628</sup> See pp. 131-133.

<sup>629</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 537.

<sup>630</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 80.

<sup>631</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 537.

<sup>632</sup> I refer to G. Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure", in *Visions of Excess*.

Hollier expands on Bataille's distinction stating that it implies in fact two notions of consumption, 'productive' consumption constituted by the "detour as the very structure of general economy"<sup>634</sup> and 'unproductive' consumption which is "an end in itself"<sup>635</sup>, representing the "principle of loss which is excluded by modern society."<sup>636</sup> Within a reading of Bataille's notions, kitsch can be explained as something, that is neither profitable nor productive but simultaneously extravagant or even exorbitant, to the extent where its "sense of pointlessness is, in part, the point."<sup>637</sup> In Kulka's investigation the principle of 'classical utility' is discussed as a superior term as his remarks on Pop Art demonstrate. Whilst he suggests that "we don't consider Pop Art a breathtaking artistic or aesthetic achievement"<sup>638</sup>, he admits to it a certain value as Pop Art employs kitsch to prove its uselessness, namely "to comment on the impact of mass culture"<sup>639</sup>. Kulka follows that "to make use [his italics] of kitsch is not the same as to produce kitsch."<sup>640</sup> As long as kitsch is tied to meaningful productive utility, namely to unmask its own uselessness, it is useful. If kitsch, as Kulka states, "does not *function* the same way"<sup>641</sup> (as art does), he frames his discussion of kitsch and art implicitly within what Bataille characterizes as 'classical utility', namely that "humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally, but it excludes in principle non-productive expenditure."<sup>642</sup> Kulka's opposition between art and kitsch becomes an enterprise to establish meaning in art that guards itself against the non-useful. His position can be rephrased as an objection against kitsch, a 'thing' that disturbs the symbolic value of art and constantly threatens it with the possibility of becoming kitsch once its usefulness is

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<sup>633</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 61.

<sup>634</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>636</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>637</sup> F. Botting & S. Wilson, *Bataille*, p. 18. Botting and Wilson write here about Bataille's notion of 'non-productive expenditure'.

<sup>638</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 109.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>642</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 118.

exhausted. This interdependent relationship demonstrates, as Hollier has pointed out, that Bataille's theorization of 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure' implies a mutual cross-contamination of the two in order not to repeat the unifying and segregating dialectics it defies. To conceive 'productive' and 'non-productive' expenditure as entwined, however, implies that "the productive is haunted to become non-productive."<sup>643</sup> As art that has become banal/trivial, kitsch reveals the underlying agenda that is implicitly contained in the modernist left-wing concept of art, namely its utility/function to enlighten its audience critically. Designating art's waste and cultural cast-off, 'excess' in relation to kitsch has to be understood in its double meaning: as visual and emotional excess kitsch represents the 'too much' and as excess of production it becomes the 'too little', the waste of high culture. In this constant slippage between its different meanings and tasks kitsch alludes to Bataille's 'formless'<sup>644</sup>, the "spider or earthworm" that must be crushed as they undermine the "mathematical frock coat"<sup>645</sup> of art. Kitsch, the very thing that ought to render art proper and further render its homogenization in lending its use as a demarcator by standing in for all that is supposedly opposed to art, testifies at the same time that the low has always been and will always be part of the high. Kitsch, as art's waste and cultural cast-off, is the very thing that interrupts *any* (not just modernists') attempt at homogenization as it reveals that homogenization is always "a process of appropriation and excretion"<sup>646</sup>, unmasking as its by-product homogenization as a process where "one assimilates what can be used or put to work and one expels the rest as mad, mystical, useless or amoral."<sup>647</sup>

I have mentioned before that there is a certain confusion between analytic and synthetic values as a measure of 'good' art in Kulka's approach. This results in his definition of kitsch being surprisingly contextual in spite of the

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<sup>643</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 115.

<sup>644</sup> I refer to G. Bataille, "The Notion of Expenditure", in *Visions of Excess*.

<sup>645</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 31.

<sup>646</sup> F. Botting & S. Wilson, *The Bataille Reader* (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 3.

<sup>647</sup> G. Bataille, quoted in F. Botting & S. Wilson, *Bataille*, p. 3.

anti-relativist position he tries to assert. I have argued that this confusion is grounded in the fact that his three conditions, rather than only explaining kitsch within analytic aesthetics, refer to its effects, to what it does, to what kitsch induces in the viewer. Taking into account emotional appeal, aspects of socialization, learning and habituation, through Kulka's three conditions kitsch is redefined as what Bataille would call its 'job'. Kulka wants to situate kitsch within its 'constitutive features', as his comment on its resistance to improvement or damage demonstrates, but speaks of its effects as he states that "the impact and the appeal of kitsch is not so much effected by its specific aesthetic properties but rather by its referent, that is, the *idea* [his italics] of a crying child"<sup>648</sup>, evaluating kitsch here on the grounds of its function. Kulka conceives the 'idea' of a kitsch painting in the register of a "pictogram"<sup>649</sup>, a simplified and emotionally charged projection screen that unifies human emotions<sup>650</sup> and "functions as a *transparent* (or quasi-transparent) *symbol* [his italics]"<sup>651</sup>. The masterpiece<sup>652</sup>, in contrast, displays emotional intensity as well as a high degree of aesthetic intensity and artistic value. As Kulka continues "[K]itsch thus combines low aesthetic intensity with high emotional intensity"<sup>653</sup> and that "[I]t is the sentimental force of the basic perceptual gestalt rather than the aesthetic properties of kitsch that accounts for its mass appeal"<sup>654</sup>, he asserts here kitsch's deficiency in intensity (which he could not establish within his analysis of formal aesthetics) with regard to its functionality. Explaining this functionality with regard to its effects to comment on kitsch as a 'thing' I argue with Solomon that he "confuses the cause of an emotion with its *object* [his italics]" as, Solomon continues, "what

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<sup>648</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 78.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78

<sup>650</sup> Kulka seems to be referring to Kundera's concept of kitsch as a unifying sentiment. Kundera states: "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" (M. Kundera, 1984, p. 251).

<sup>651</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 78.

<sup>652</sup> Kulka refers to Michelangelo's *Pieta* and El Greco's *Espolio*.

<sup>653</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 78.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

a genuine emotion is 'about' need not be the object that stimulates it"<sup>655</sup>. As Kulka argues that "[T]he reason why kitsch should be considered seriously deficient with respect to intensity is that its *appeal and impact* would remain *unaffected by a great many alterations* and transformations of its *constitutive features* [all my italics]<sup>656</sup>, and simultaneously characterizes kitsch through its formal resistance to improvement or damage<sup>657</sup>, he confuses analytic and synthetic values in the evaluation of kitsch.

We can conclude that implicit to Kulka's approach is the assumption that art has a specific usefulness which (in contrast to Greenberg) is not immanent to the field itself. This usefulness comprises both the work's formal and synthetic values expressed through its formal properties such as unity, complexity, intensity in regard to style and composition (aesthetic value) or synthetically through its artistic value that denotes the work's impact on the world. The standards that distinguish between usefulness and uselessness are set by normative values. Kulka's concept of kitsch that excludes it from good and bad art, indeed from the field of art entirely because its impact "is not an *aesthetic intensity*, but a kind of *emotional intensity*, or *sentimentality* [all his italics]"<sup>658</sup>, evokes an understanding of usefulness for art in the register of Bataille's 'classical utility', namely to be "of productive social activity"<sup>659</sup>. 'Aesthetic intensity' and 'artistic intensity' as measures for art that is useful is conceived within a binary opposition to 'aesthetic deficiency' and 'emotional intensity' as a measure for kitsch. Kulka's binary opposition simultaneously divides the viewer's response into 'reason' and 'emotion'. 'Aesthetic intensity' becomes a synonym for 'rational, productive consumption' (of the cultivated elite) as opposed to 'emotional intensity', as 'irrational, unproductive consumption' (of the masses). Used as a measure to distinguish art from

<sup>655</sup> R. C. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 249. I also refer to R. C. Solomon, "On Kitsch and Sentimentality", in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Winter 1991), pp. 1-14.

<sup>656</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 73.

<sup>657</sup> I refer to Kulka's statement: "[T]he more resistant the painting is to improvement or damage, the more paradigmatic or pure an example of kitsch it is" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 77).

<sup>658</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 78.

<sup>659</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 117.



kitsch, Kulka's binary opposition of these two modes of consumption confuses cause and effect in order to reinstate Greenberg's two distinct audiences.

If 'real'/'serious'/'high' art is useful and socially valuable then kitsch as its opposite is its waste. This brings me back to Kulka's second condition that kitsch must be "instantly and effortlessly identifiable" and my previous discussion of this condition in relation to style. Due to the imperative connection between kitsch and a notion of art that submits itself to the idea of linear progress, the former constantly confronts the latter with the demise of its own 'avant-gardness', the futility of its innovations. Kulka's second condition, explaining kitsch as a *priori* parasitic on certain referents and well established styles, relates kitsch to 'learned perception'. It is this notion of 'learned perception', which informs Kulka's distinction between a 'realistic' and 'unrealistic' mode of representation. Kitsch cannot be of any productive use. It can neither be innovative nor original and belongs to the category of things that are synonymous with the general, the already known as expressed in Benjamin's concept of the 'detritus'. The interdependence between kitsch and its potential of 'borrowing' from artistic tradition was also stressed by Greenberg:

"[T]he 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 its devices, tricks, strategies, rules of thumb, themes, converts them into a system, and discards the rest [...] when enough time has elapsed the new is looted for new 'twists', which are then watered down and served up as kitsch."<sup>660</sup>

In contrast to Greenberg, Kulka acknowledges that the binary opposition between "a fully matured cultural tradition" and avant-garde art, as an ongoing self-reflexive process not (yet) established, is no longer possible. Kitsch has become art's own waste and excess and - as indicated with

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<sup>660</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 534.

Greenberg's quotation above - a 'thing' that has its own ends. The modernist critique that Kirsch is parasitic has come full circle. As this assimilative 'machine' Kirsch recycles art producing a system of commodities. It is a self-generating simulacrum and simultaneously its own by-product, its waste, in Greenberg's terms, the remainder that it discards<sup>661</sup>.

Such an interpretation expands on Benjamin's concept of kitsch as the 'detritus'. Kirsch is no longer simply a cultural cast-off perceived (nostalgically) in the outmoded. It becomes an agent, characterized through its potential to disrupt cultural heritage, as its use starts when the use-value of art (its classical utility) is exhausted. Bataille's 'use plus use' is evoked, a notion he employs to describe the 'paradox of absolute usefulness', a conflation of waste and fetish<sup>662</sup>. Through Bataille's notion of 'waste', here contrasted with Benjamin's 'detritus', Kirsch no longer testifies to loss and repetition as the collective mode of Modernism. It becomes a generative force in artistic production and its commodity value, the very principle without which Modernism cannot exist. For Bataille, as Botting & Scott<sup>663</sup> point out, "the principle of 'classical utility' is insufficient precisely because it fails to account for the principle of loss."<sup>664</sup> Following Botting & Scott's comment I argue for a concept of Kirsch as the *situ* in which converges the cultural residue which cannot be absorbed by the system. Structurally necessitated by the homological discourse of Western culture and simultaneously its own waste product; Kirsch becomes the very dividing line between 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure' as it constitutes "[T]he blind spot of rationalist utilitarian economy"<sup>665</sup> that "exceeds the possibilities of logic and breaks its chains."<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>661</sup> This argument is further discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>662</sup> I refer to my discussion of Kirsch using Bataille's example of the shoe fetishist for whom the use-value of the shoe starts exactly when the shoe is out of service (C. Olatiquaga, *Megalopolis*).

<sup>663</sup> F. Botting, & W. Scott, *Bataille*.

<sup>664</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>665</sup> D. Holler, *Against Architecture*, p. 93.

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

My interpretation of Kulka's approach explains how his classificatory definition inadvertently uncouples kitsch from designating a category of particular objects, favouring instead a concept that renders it relative to cultural and historical contexts. His conditions, rather than explaining the meaning of kitsch, point toward kitsch's 'performativity' and ultimately characterize it as a work machine; an agent. Through my interpretation Kulka's conditions evoke what Bataille defines as the ultimate task of a dictionary, namely to distinguish between a word's 'meaning' and its 'job'<sup>667</sup>. A distinction on which Hollier comments as making "language into a place of specific productivity"<sup>668</sup> because "the word is not defined by what it means (its 'sense') but by what it does, by the effect it induces (its 'job')."<sup>669</sup> As Kulka tries to relate this 'performativity' of kitsch back into an aesthetic category via an implicit notion of 'good' versus 'bad' utility, he denies the operational existence of kitsch: that kitsch is simultaneously the agent and the product of a theoretical approach to art that has submitted itself to a regime of innovation and an idea of a monilinear progression of style. In contrast to Greenberg, Kulka does however acknowledge that the interdependence between style and kitsch is two-way and that Modernism cannot deny its own historicity:

"Moral and social ideals change just as ideals of beauty do. Stylistic features that might once have been considered radical innovations may later become clichés [...] The temporal element is thus often crucial for judging whether or not a work should be considered kitsch."<sup>670</sup>

As a result Kulka recognizes that "it is not enough to have the capacity for aesthetic discrimination and sensibility"<sup>671</sup> to assess artistic value, but one also "has to be equipped with relevant art-historical knowledge"<sup>672</sup> as artistic value "can be reliably assessed only with appropriate hindsight."<sup>673</sup> In spite of

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<sup>667</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 31.

<sup>668</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 30.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>670</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 100.

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

acknowledging Modernism's own historicity, Kulka does, however, not employ Modernism's own temporality to expand on Greenberg's arguments<sup>674</sup>, but tries to re-assert them in postmodern conditions. Within the ideology of a Modernism which severs itself from the past and therefore fears its own historicity, Greenberg's categorical claim that "all kitsch is academic; and conversely, all that's academic is kitsch"<sup>675</sup> is re-formulated by Kulka into "[W]orks in the *academic style* [my italics] could be considered kitsch only if they were produced after academic art has been superseded and rendered irrelevant for the contemporary artworld."<sup>676</sup>

Kulka's comments on the 'historical verdict' place another question mark on his own investigation. If Kulka's premises for his analysis of kitsch are that "art (at least visual art) is going through a period of crisis"<sup>677</sup> and if he denotes postmodern artistic strategies as "temporary aberrations"<sup>678</sup>, he puts his own verdict at risk of untrustworthiness as he himself lacks the *appropriate* historical hindsight regarding contemporary art. Kulka's statements of "relevant art-historical knowledge" and "appropriate hindsight" seem to reverse de Duve's<sup>679</sup> analysis of the relationship between Duchamp's ready-made and aesthetic judgement. De Duve argues that since the time of Duchamp there is no more "theoretical foundation to aesthetic judgement; in other words, there is no basis in theory for the sentimental sentence by which you call art what you call art"<sup>680</sup>. This means that art is a proper name and an elusive concept. Art is everything humans call art and this entails that the 'we' is no longer a given but based on an aesthetic judgment, which is neither generalizable nor verifiable, but socially, historically and culturally constructed. Kulka's comments on the 'historical hindsight' can be interpreted as an argument for a difference between art and culture, which conceives

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<sup>674</sup> In my discussion of Greenberg I argue that Modernism's notion of kitsch is the very means that enabled it to deny its own historicity.

<sup>675</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 534.

<sup>676</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 63.

<sup>677</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>679</sup> I refer to T. de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

<sup>680</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50

kitsch as replicated culture and art as its disruptor, whereby kitsch serves as a tool of demarcation. With culture we generally associate a conglomerate of things which comprise the sentiment of our traditional heritage, such as a particular language, rhythm, taste, smell and visual sensibility that inform our feeling of belonging and national identity. The way we look at things and interpret the world around us is affected by how and where we have been acculturated; in Kulka's words by our "learned perceptions", and the way we appreciate things is influenced by what is around us culturally. Appadurai<sup>681</sup> has suggested that "culture is a pervasive dimension of human discourse that exploits difference to generate diverse conceptions of group identity."<sup>682</sup> If we accept that art enriches associations that reach beyond habitus and that therefore art and culture do different 'jobs', it could be seen to follow that such a system is dependent on an art and its 'Other'. The statement that kitsch (be it good or bad) is replicated culture, its waste, outmoded or 'detritus' - as all the authors on the relationship between art and kitsch have suggested - seems to bear the Romantic connotations of the alienated artist. The artist as a creative genius whose originality is measured against learned perceptions and who cannot make himself understood in his own time. If we assume that kitsch, as this waste, is the defining moment of the divide between art and its 'Other', we must also accept that the argument is circular as it is culture that defines art. Hubert Damisch<sup>683</sup> states:

"Without remembering that this question [how the passage from painting to the discourse that takes it over is supposed to operate] which one would like to see preceding any commentary has already been decided by culture, which is at all times responsible for organizing the game, distributing the roles, and regulating the exchanges between the two registers of the

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<sup>681</sup> I refer to A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large, Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>682</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>683</sup> I refer to H. Damisch, "*Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*". See also Chapter 1 in which I discuss Damisch's question of whether one can think in painting without annexing practice to discourse.

visible and the readable, between the painted and the written (or the spoken), the seeing and the hearing, the seen and the heard."<sup>684</sup>

With Damisch there is still a kind of communal local identity, whereas with Appadurai locality is no longer a given but socially produced and identity becomes a question of individual life choice. Appadurai states:

"What is new is that this is a world in which both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult."<sup>685</sup>

According to Appadurai, the invention of tradition, ethnicity, kinship and other identity markers has become slippery. Culture has become less a habitus<sup>686</sup> but more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation. Kulka's position maintains a difference between art and a notion of culture that is still capable of "organizing the game" (Damisch), offering "steady points of reference" (Appadurai). Insisting on these possibilities, Kulka's stance differs from other contemporary discourses characterized by nostalgia for kitsch to sustain an idea of culture as still containing some essential ideals. Contextualized within the loss of grand narratives, these inquiries conceive kitsch/popular culture as symbols or manifestations of localness, expressing both identity and difference. By expanding the concept of kitsch beyond it being simply perceived as replicated culture, there is now scope to conceive it as an agent that has the potential to establish local identity beyond its nostalgic recuperation by these discourses.

To summarize the discussion of Kulka's text: with the aim to re-establish art as a defined category after the ready-made, Kulka tries to reach a classificatory definition of kitsch that detaches art from commodification. For this definition he proposes three conditions which set the imperative for kitsch within the work of art. These conditions are conceived as a rational basis for

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<sup>684</sup> H. Damisch, "*Fenêtre jaune cadmium, ou les dessous de la peinture*", quoted in Y-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, p. 252.

<sup>685</sup> A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, p. 44.

<sup>686</sup> He borrows this term from Bourdieu.

evaluation that precedes aesthetic judgment. The first condition refers to subject matter and explains kitsch as parasitic on emotionally charged iconography as it exploits human predispositions. The second condition explains kitsch as having conservative stylistic properties that are parasitic on art. The third condition explains kitsch as parasitic on society in general through its 'uselessness'. Kulka's distinction between art and kitsch is implicitly embedded in a concept of two distinct notions of function. Based on this dual notion of utility Kulka establishes art within the context of 'classical utility', namely as something that has ends beyond itself and kitsch as 'non-productive expenditure', which has an end in itself and as such is excluded from social activity.

In order to separate art from commodification and to reassert the boundary between art and life, Kulka seeks to explain kitsch within the philosophical tradition of analytic aesthetics, with kitsch as a tool to demarcate art from non-art. In order to provide for a theoretical measure in art for evaluation that is grounded in reason, Kulka introduces aesthetic value and artistic value, whereby aesthetic value pertains to the formal properties of a work of art and artistic value to its meaning and social/cultural relevance. This theoretical apparatus, delivering an "explication of the logical structure of aesthetic value judgements"<sup>687</sup>, enables Kulka to distinguish between aesthetic value as use-value that is immanent to the work of art (explaining art as separate from life) and artistic value that relates to use-value in terms of art's function (as being meaningful and socially relevant). Following this distinction Kulka concludes that kitsch is in qualitative and quantitative terms apart from good and bad art, because "it doesn't function as art."<sup>688</sup> Implicit within this categorization of utility and functionality is a confusion between the imperatives for evaluation set by the work of art itself and the interpretative imperatives of viewing, whereby the viewers' responses are further divided between 'reason' and 'emotion'. Kulka's argument suffers from a certain circularity: a response is

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<sup>687</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 114.

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

based in 'reason' if it is triggered by the 'aesthetic intensity' of the work measured by its aesthetic (intrinsic) and artistic (extraneous) value as opposed to the emotional response that kitsch elicits due to its 'emotional intensity', which lacks both aesthetic and artistic value.

As Kulka's conditions do not really relate to kitsch's meaning, but rather to its 'performativity' questions in regard to art and culture are raised. Kitsch becomes useful as a self-generating recycling machine. An investigation of kitsch as a cipher reveals that within capitalist market conditions, art's utility is always linked to the threat of its usefulness becoming exhausted. The embodiment of kitsch's ultimate use value is inscribed in its uselessness. Kulka, however, does not acknowledge such a value to kitsch. At some point in his analysis he states: "[A] messy drawing could still be assessed for its complexity and intensity, but once we switch to the category of mess or scribble, further considerations become pointless."<sup>689</sup>

To start with kitsch as 'mess', means to conceive it as a heterological element that is inscribed in the homological discourse of art.<sup>690</sup> Bataille himself has never referred to kitsch and has drawn his notion of the 'formless' from scatology and eroticism. Kitsch, commonly associated with visual, emotional excess and embellishment, appears as the opposite of shit.<sup>691</sup> When I refer to Bataille's 'formless' in regard to kitsch, I do it in regard to his 'definition' of 'formless'<sup>692</sup> – a definition which undoes itself and denounces any attempt to categorize 'formless' as futile. As such the 'formless' consequently foregrounds its own 'job', so to speak by undoing its own categorization. Many authors on kitsch have commented on the term as

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<sup>689</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>690</sup> I refer to G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*. I expand on Bataille's 'formless' in Chapter 4.

<sup>691</sup> Kundera's definition of kitsch as a "categorical agreement of being" entails for him "a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch [...] kitsch is the absolute denial of shit in both the literal and figurative sense of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence" (M. Kundera, 1984, p. 248). Kundera's quotation strikes me as being circular: as he excludes kitsch as 'unacceptable' because it excludes what is 'essentially unacceptable', Kundera's own anti-kitsch position can in turn be denounced as kitsch itself.

<sup>692</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 31.



ultimately indefinable, as something that slips through categories. Denis Dutton<sup>693</sup>, for example, starts his essay by stating:

"[I]n a review of the new *Macmillan Dictionary of Art*, the art historian Christopher Green says of 'kitsch' that 'it is a term whose application has never been consistent enough for there to be any consensus'. He is therefore surprised that the *Dictionary* could present something 'so definite' as its entry on the subject."<sup>694</sup>

Dutton continues: "[A] definition of 'kitsch' [...] that tried to acknowledge every disparate application of the term would end up useless."<sup>695</sup> To speak of kitsch in the context of Bataille's 'formless' and in the light of Dutton's remarks does not mean that kitsch has no form but rather that it has an arbitrariness of form. Although we apply the name kitsch to different objects, it does not follow that they share common properties, but rather that we name them kitsch in an act of judgment, referring to what these objects do in relation to us. The abstract notion we call kitsch does not enable us to conclude with any particularities a single object called 'kitsch' might have regarding its formal properties, but it does allow us to draw conclusive ideas regarding its 'job'.

If Kulka then states that kitsch "refuses, so to speak, to commit itself to the specific particularity of its features"<sup>696</sup> concluding that "[T]his is the hard core of the deceptive nature of kitsch"<sup>697</sup>, he stops short before the 'mess' with the result that his discussion forecloses on an exploration of the subject of kitsch rather than opening it up to wider understanding.

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<sup>693</sup> D. Dutton, "Tomas Kulka on Kitsch" [Online], in *Philosophy and Literature*, 21, 1997, pp. 208-11. Available from <[http://www.denisdutton.com/kulka\\_review.htm](http://www.denisdutton.com/kulka_review.htm)> [Accessed May 10th 2008].

<sup>694</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>695</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>696</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 114.

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

## CHAPTER 4: KITSCH AFTER KITSCH

*"My name is Nobody. That is what I am called by my mother and father and by all my friends."*<sup>698</sup>

*"What name am I to call you by, sir?" "Captain Nemo," answered the commander. "That is all I am to you, and you and your companions are nothing to me but the passengers of the Nautilus."*<sup>699</sup>

Drawing on my previous discussions which revealed kitsch as a structural necessity for unification of heterogeneous processes within the concepts of the modern and postmodern, I aim to develop in this chapter through Bataille's writing an understanding of kitsch as a relational modality that surpasses the previous binary oppositions of 'Home' and 'Away'. Following Bataille's entry for his project of a critical dictionary I aim to establish kitsch as a concept that cannot be classified through its meaning and instead I stress the functions and tasks kitsch fulfills within the mechanisms of cultural politics as it testifies to excess, waste and displaced usefulness within the rapid change of fashion. Arguing that the significance the high/low art debate has generally lost today still remains intact in the art market, I aim to explain kitsch as an energizing agent straddling a 'fault line' of high/low art within the dynamics of capitalist market conditions. Emphasizing the negative connotations kitsch enjoys and stressing its potential to disrupt habitual forms of thinking about art, my approach by definition differs from previous discussions in that I neither develop an argument for a rejection of kitsch nor its nostalgic recuperation. Conceiving kitsch's 'job' as closely related to Bataille's notion of 'non-productive expenditure' I aim to explore kitsch in relation to art in the context of utility that no longer explains it as an anti-system or a postmodern device for appropriation, but rather as a principle of loss.

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<sup>698</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 151.

<sup>699</sup> J. Verne, *Twenty thousand leagues under the sea*, p. 71.

Bataille writes:

"A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or split."<sup>700</sup>

My methodological approach to Bataille's 'formless' is through a succession of close paths that illuminate it in the context of my discussion of kitsch from various angles. This caution stems from my awareness that Bataille's 'formless', in a similar way to how I understand kitsch, cannot be appropriated for an *a priori* discourse without violating its author's intentions. Besides, there is a tension that has to be maintained between the 'formless' as idea, as matter that is always "active"<sup>701</sup> in the derangement of form and kitsch as practical reality within artistic practice; kitsch that does not allow to "abstract an idea from its materiality"<sup>702</sup> but remains as form on every occasion.

Thinking of *Simplicius'* encounter with the allegorical figure *Baldanders'*<sup>703</sup>, I ask how such a discourse about something that is constantly elusive and cannot properly be named could be written? How can one write a discourse on kitsch after kitsch that conceives it as interplay between contextual conditions, form, content, style and aesthetic judgment? Considering Bataille's writing I argue that such a discourse has to focus on what kitsch does in order to draw some conclusions on what it is. There is, however, a danger in simply drawing these parallels. Even when we apply the 'formless'

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<sup>700</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.31. The 'formless' is an entry in Bataille's critical dictionary (December 1929).

<sup>701</sup> Ibid., p. 47

<sup>702</sup> D. Holler, *Against Architecture*, p. 92.

<sup>703</sup> I refer to my remarks in the introduction where I compared kitsch to *Baldanders* in Grimmelshausen's Baroque novel *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, a mythological figure with no definite shape.

and its 'jobs' to the infiniteness of kitsch, which leaves it relatively undetermined, any comparison gives rise to a certain specificity and although this specificity, in being aligned with kitsch, remains relational it has to be approached with caution. Hollier exposes this problem in coming to terms with Bataille's 'formless' stating that "to speak on something imposes form", whereas, Hollier continues, Bataille's writing commands a "refusal of the temptation of form."<sup>704</sup> As a result for Hollier, 'writing on Bataille' is not the same as 'to write on Bataille' the latter of which he understands as to write *in relation to* but not *as a relation between* subject and object. To write on Bataille, Hollier continues, means to write about the 'affects of a word' rather than its meaning. It means to write about

"objects, elements that make it impossible to distinguish the difference between cause and effect in that they establish a violent continuity with the subject and object, abolishing the limits that hold them apart."<sup>705</sup>

Hollier points out that "[T]he *job* [of a word, his italics] is not the usage" as usage "introduces a certain historicity of language" and "only functions in a space still dominated by the category of meaning."<sup>706</sup> What Bataille understands by the 'job' or 'task' of a word, Hollier continues, "is of a different order" as "[I]t indicates all those processes of repulsion and seduction aroused by the word independent of its meaning."<sup>707</sup> It is "a locus of an event, an explosion of affective potential."<sup>708</sup> In Bataille's words:

"Depending on the person *heterogeneous* [his italics] elements will provoke affective reactions of varying intensity [...]. There is sometimes attraction, sometimes repulsion, and in certain *circumstances* [his italics], any object of repulsion can become an object of attraction and vice versa."<sup>709</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 24-25.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>706</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>707</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>708</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>709</sup> F. Botting & S. Wilson, *Bataille*, p. 127.

This emphasis on subjectivity and context opens the possibilities to conceive of kitsch as something beyond a designated set of representations within a given field of cultural production and constitutes a further move from the object (modernist discourses) or subject (postmodern discourses) centred viewpoints. It shifts the focus from a philosophical framework of metaphysics to the dynamics of cultural politics and raises thoughts about concepts of taste and cultural values and how they are socially constructed. As kitsch becomes marked by what Hollier calls a “heterological practice” which can only be “defined by a certain virulence making them [the words] constantly overflow their definition”<sup>710</sup>, the discussion of kitsch turns into a discourse of ‘in-betweenness’ that escapes the possibility of becoming theory and re-attaches kitsch to artistic practice. With Hollier’s comments on the ‘formless’ I maintain thereby that kitsch constantly retains its critical position regarding its own structural conditions but where “its criticism is by definition nonviable, its opportunities remain the *critical* [his italics] thing.”<sup>711</sup> Such an approach has to focus on intertextuality of structural conditions and effects of kitsch (and art), which frames an art encounter within what Simon O’Sullivan<sup>712</sup> observes in Deleuze and Guattari’s writing as a ‘thought beyond representation’, as they argue for a return to aesthetics – an aesthetics of affect – and as a consequence for the theorisation of art as an expanded and complex practice.

Bataille’s ‘definition’ of the ‘formless’ as something that does not simply describe a quality but is an active ‘term that serves to bring things down’ not only invites a shift in perspective from ‘meaning’ to ‘task’ but also blurs any *a priori* boundaries between high and low. Kitsch is released from being the signified as it can no longer be fixed as a noun or descriptive adjective. Bois and Krauss<sup>713</sup> interpret the ‘formless’ as something that “has only an

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<sup>710</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 88.

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>712</sup> S. O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>713</sup> Y.-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*.

operational existence, it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery"; it "is an operation."<sup>714</sup> In my discussion of previous positions I have demonstrated that this 'performativity' is in fact inscribed in the very way the concept of kitsch has been employed to suit various discourses and how it is structurally reflected in the conditions that have seen it be enunciated.<sup>715</sup> As an ill-defined term, Calinescu has pointed out that kitsch "lends itself to the widest range of subjective uses."<sup>716</sup> This operational condition of kitsch is also reflected in various explanations of its etymological origins with suggestions ranging from "sketch"<sup>717</sup>, the German verbs "kitschen" and "verkitschen"<sup>718</sup>, meaning to buy something without much thought or necessity, to consume for the sake of consumption and to 'flog' cheap, worthless stuff and "keetchcheetsyä"<sup>719</sup>, the Russian expression for 'to be haughty or puffed up'. Koelwel's<sup>720</sup> interpretation draws a poignant correlation to kitsch as the low, as formless waste. Koewel rejects sketch<sup>721</sup> as a plausible explanation for the origin of the word kitsch and establishes instead a connection between kitsch and 'kitsche', a South West German expression for a tool used for cleaning streets from waste, mud and excrement. Relating 'kitscher', the act of

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<sup>714</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>715</sup> Various authors have commented on the impossibility of defining kitsch. Calinescu for example states "[Like] art itself, of which it is both an imitation and a 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 has no single compelling, distinct counterconcept" (M. Calinescu, 1987, p.232). The consequence that kitsch and art cannot be truly oppositional has, however, gone unremarked upon by modernist theoreticians.

<sup>716</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 235.

<sup>717</sup> According to Calinescu, this position mainly held by Anglo-American writers, links kitsch via a mispronunciation to 'sketch', a term applied by artists in Munich to cheap images bought by (English and American) tourists as souvenirs.

<sup>718</sup> I refer to L. Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches* (Heidelberg: Rothe, 1960). Giesz links *kitschen* to a southern German expression used to describe new furniture treated to appear distressed and authentic.

<sup>719</sup> Calinescu mentions Gilbert Highet as a representative of this position.

<sup>720</sup> E. Koewel, "Kitsch und Schäbs", in *Muttersprache, Zeitschrift des Deutschen Sprachvereins* [mother tongue, magazine for the German language community] 52 (1937): 58-60.

<sup>721</sup> His arguments are that a sketch often appears less kitsch than does a painting. He mentions, besides, that sketches were not fashionable at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and would not have attracted the attention of American and English tourists wealthy enough to travel.

gathering the mud from the streets to the act of scraping remaining paint off the palette, Koewels points out that in Germany, till the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, brown paint was often referred to as 'saucy brown kitsch'. Regardless of their differences all these suggestions refer to certain functions Kirsch might have which link it to competitive capitalist market conditions and its strategies to attract a potential consumer audience, to a hedonistic lifestyle (Giesz) and to notions of waste and excess, either conceived as the surplus of overproduction, excreta or as some sort of emotional and visual excess. Based on these observations I argue that kitsch must have an *a priori* supplement in relation to the object and, as this supplement or surplus, it aligns itself with 'non-productive expenditure' as it testifies to something beyond 'classical utility'. Explained in "The Notion of Expenditure" and "The Accursed Share" as the remainder, an excess of productivity by the system that cannot be assimilated, 'non-productive expenditure' is according to Bataille a "[H]uman activity [that] is not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, and consumption."<sup>722</sup> Although Bataille establishes no immediate reference to kitsch, his enumeration of what he assigns to 'non-productive expenditure', such as "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity"<sup>723</sup> evokes the fields of kitsch Dorflès detects for his "classified catalogue of the bad taste which prevails today."<sup>724</sup> <sup>725</sup>

Bataille characterises 'non-productive expenditure' as "activities which, [...], have no end beyond themselves."<sup>726</sup> By that he implicitly establishes a link to Kant's postulation of art's fundamental disinterestedness, to art as 'purposiveness without a purpose'<sup>727</sup> which suggests that Kantian aesthetics

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<sup>722</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 118.

<sup>723</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>724</sup> G. Dorflès, *Kitsch – an anthology of bad taste*, p. 11.

<sup>725</sup> Dorflès' anthology, a cult classic on kitsch since its publication, enlists reproductions and forgeries of masterpieces, exoticism, myth, cult, symbols, political/historical monuments, various forms of mass entertainment and the leisure industry, paraphernalia surrounding birth, death and marriage, religious kitsch, advertising and pornography.

<sup>726</sup> F. Botting & S. Wilson, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 169.

<sup>727</sup> I refer to the *Critique of Judgement* (1790).

seems to presuppose some idea of 'classical utility' which, as a hidden agenda implicitly informs or even arises out of a notion of Western art. With Bataille's 'principle of loss' which he explains as an expenditure of wealth rather than a consumption of production, we can now expand on Greenberg's use of the 'detour' together with his opposition of avant-garde art's purity and kitsch's impurity as his binary implies a secondary antinomy, namely an opposition between the useful/necessary and kitsch as the site of what is not necessary and excluded from capitalist economy. This exclusion of the "principle of non-productive expenditure"<sup>728</sup> informs Greenberg's idea of progress for modernist painting, conceived as the progressive squeezing out of all that is considered not to be necessary (e.g. the mimetic, ornament, narrative), all that does not belong inherently to art/painting. This concept not only structurally depends on its 'Other' as the site of the surplus, but is equally dependent on some definition of what is necessary or useful. In modernist terms both 'detour' and 'purity' are conceptually rooted in 'classical utility'. They designate the useful, either in relation to consumption or production. Whilst the relationship between utility and the modernist mode of production towards purification and functionality seems to be self-explanatory, this relationship is less evident with regard to consumption. In order to understand this relationship it is important to stress, as Noys does, that Bataille's 'principle of loss' cannot primarily be explained through a straightforward distinction between consumption and production but in fact designates "two forms of consumption"<sup>729</sup>: productive consumption (Greenberg's detour) and non-productive consumption (Greenberg's non-reflective consumption by the masses). As Greenberg's notion of autonomy is rooted in Kantian aesthetics where aesthetic judgments have to be represented as involuntary and disinterested, Greenberg's opposition of avant-garde art and kitsch becomes a paradox in which, as Harrison & Orton point out

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<sup>728</sup> G. Bataille, *Vision of Excess*, p. 117.

<sup>729</sup> B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction* (London, Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 107.



“The accelerating tendency of the former is to ‘uncover’ the interests at work in visual representation. The tendency of the latter is to uphold the value of aesthetic experience and aesthetic production precisely because they are seen as disinterested.”<sup>730</sup>

In the context of Bataille’s writing I argue that this paradox results from the irreconcilable opposition of productive and non-productive expenditure Greenberg’s binary opposition implies. “Real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures”, however, “knows nothing of purely productive expenditure; in actuality, it knows nothing of purely non-productive expenditure either.”<sup>731</sup> As “if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.”<sup>732</sup> Productive and non-productive expenditure cannot be conceived as separate economic entities but rather have to be understood as interdependent forces constituting the dynamics of what we could call the ‘system’ of economics. It is a ‘play of forces’ marked by, as Noys points out, a “contamination [that] cuts both ways”<sup>733</sup> within which “the productive is haunted by becoming non-productive and the non-productive by becoming productive.”<sup>734</sup> A play which “is always subject to further alteration through the play of excess which it traces”<sup>735</sup> and which is neither universal nor can be abstracted. This play which Bataille calls ‘nonlogical difference’ opens up the possibility to conceive of the relationship between art and kitsch as an irreducible movement, a “rhythmic pulsation or turbulence, which is neither absorbed within a particular context nor floating above all contexts”<sup>736</sup> and as such dispenses with contradictions the concept of binary opposites implies.

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<sup>730</sup> C. Harrison & F. Oton (ed.), *Modernism/Criticism/Realism – Alternative Contexts for Art*, (London: Harper & Row, 1984), p. xiii.

<sup>731</sup> G. Bataille, “The Accused Share”, Vol. 1, p. 12, quoted in B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 115.

<sup>732</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21, quoted in B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 13.

<sup>733</sup> B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 115.

<sup>734</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>735</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

There is however a further twist to Greenberg's opposition of avant-garde art and Kitsch. Following Bataille who conceives art *a priori* as excess as he aligns it with 'non-productive expenditure', the energy of a system that is neither required for its maintenance nor its reproduction and therefore has to be lost, consumed, destroyed, either "gloriously or catastrophically", and following Greenberg, where kitsch becomes the site of art's excess, we end up with kitsch as excess of the excess. As this "expenditure that cannot be formalized"<sup>737</sup> kitsch correlates to what Baudrillard theorizes as the "remainder"<sup>738</sup>. Baudrillard states:

"What is strange is precisely that there is no opposing term in a binary opposition: one can say the right/the left, the same/the other, the majority/the minority, the crazy/the normal, etc. – but the remainder/ ? Nothing on the other side of the slash. [...] And yet, what is on the other side of the remainder exists, it is even the marked term, the powerful moment, the privileged element in this strangely asymmetrical opposition, in this structure that is not one. But this marked term has no name. It is anonymous, it is unstable and without definition. Positive, but only the negative gives it the force of reality. In a strict sense, it cannot be defined except as the remainder of the remainder. Thus the remainder refers to much more than a clear division in two localized terms, to a turning and reversible structure, an always imminent structure of reversion, in which *one never knows which is the remainder of the other* [his italics]."<sup>739</sup>

Following Bataille's subversion of dialectics, Baudrillard aligns the 'remainder' with "the great themes recognized for unleashing ambivalence and laughter". It marks the "[E]nd of a certain logic of distinctive oppositions, in which the weak term played the role of the residual term" and testifies instead that we live "no longer [in] a political economy of production that directs us, but an economic politics of reproduction, of recycling – ecology and pollution – a political economy of the remainder."<sup>740</sup>

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<sup>737</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>738</sup> J. Baudrillard, "The Remainder", in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S. F. Glaser (USA: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 143-148.

<sup>739</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 143.

<sup>740</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

Arguing that neither the modernist rejection of kitsch nor its contemporary nostalgic recuperation can be complete, I argue that kitsch always resurfaces as a 'remainder' that operates as a subversive negativity. This negativity, it has to be stressed, cannot be understood in terms of kitsch as an anti-system as this would relate it back to dialectic theorizations within traditional hierarchies. I argue instead to conceptualize this negativity by drawing a parallel to the way in which Bataille explores the heterogeneous by testing "the limits of the gestures of rejection and appropriation" in the context of his writings on Sade as a "foreign body"<sup>741</sup>, a metaphor for what "cannot be dealt with" and "still remains despite being expelled" as it "cannot be safely contained within or held outside."<sup>742</sup> Noys argues that in Bataille's terms both rejection and assimilation, "despite the fact that they *appear* as opposites [italics]<sup>743</sup>, they are aiming at the same, namely a control of the "foreign body". Employed as means to "come to terms with the most extreme works and actually exploit the scandal they provoke"<sup>744</sup>, with both gestures rejection and assimilation "the result is the same"<sup>745</sup>, namely that they put to use what is alien to the system.<sup>746</sup>

In correlation with Bataille and Baudrillard's 'remainder' I propose an understanding of kitsch as the "foreign body" that *cannot* be controlled. Bataille speaks of science as imposing "a mathematical frock coat"<sup>747</sup> on the world, which philosophy attempts to control within a metaphysical whole. In the context of kitsch as it has so far been discussed, I have interpreted the sharing moment of this 'mathematical frock coat' as a common feature implicit

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<sup>741</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 92, quoted in B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 4.

<sup>742</sup> B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 4.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>744</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>745</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>746</sup> In his writing on de Sade, Bataille insists that rejection and appropriation, although antithetical in appearance, have the same result: Sade is the 'foreign body' which must be expelled to maintain purity; either rejected outright or rendered impotent by excretion through reconciliation. Bataille's argument correlates with Adorno's scepticism towards the reconciliation of low and high art, as it renders the former powerless to address the conditions which instigated this gap in the first place.

<sup>747</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

in both the concepts of modernist and contemporary discourses on kitsch as a structural cipher on which they depend and which they aim to control. Remaining grounded in dialectics both discussions ultimately fail to address it within the human condition of general 'disembeddedness'.

Focusing on kitsch in the context of 'the remainder', alongside Bataille's 'non-productive expenditure' and my interpretation of Olalquiaga's third degree kitsch as a convulsion of use-value and the fetish, kitsch can be formulated as "practical heterology [that] puts the surplus back in use."<sup>748</sup> Within such an understanding kitsch becomes the waste recycling mechanism which is structurally necessitated within production and marketing conditions which emphasize aesthetic innovation and the fetishization of novelty. Kitsch is not only waste and surplus but ultimately enables the machine to function as it not only *institutes*<sup>749</sup> art but also some notion of the new in general. As the motor driving this culture machine that perpetuates the new as eternal recurrence of always the same as a circular movement between art/artefact – style/fashion – kitsch/retro, kitsch constitutes 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu) within a relation between taste and value. It is this quality of excess which distinguishes kitsch from mere bad taste and bad art and makes it simultaneously attractive and repulsive. Excess and impropriety are innate properties of kitsch. Without the wasteful aspects of our economic and cultural systems there would be no kitsch. Most authors on the subject have agreed that kitsch can never be novelty or innovation; it separates the 'new' from the 'no-longer-new'. And it is in this context that I understand kitsch as something that testifies to the split between 'classical utility' and 'non-productive expenditure', a split that Bataille detects at the heart of modern civilisation and capitalist economy. This distinction is, I argue, inexorably linked to the idea of Western culture from its origins, from Homer's *Cyclopes* which are barbaric precisely because they do not follow the principle of

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<sup>748</sup> D. Holler, *Against Architecture*, p. 127.

<sup>749</sup> I borrow this term from Lyotard's writings on Postmodernism in J-F. Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", in *The Postmodern Condition*, wherein he establishes Postmodernism as a recurring moment of rupture which institutes the 'modern'.

'classical utility' as they have no concept of cultivating their fertile land to make it even more profitable<sup>750</sup>, to *Fürst Saurau*<sup>751</sup> who personifies the pinnacle of madness and inhumanity as he prohibits his farm labourers from harvesting his crops, revelling instead in the thought of decay and waste.

To situate kitsch at the very heart of the distinction between utility and non-utility means to acknowledge that it has a bifurcated function. It represents what I called cultural or economic waste in the sense of excess or surplus of modern industrialized mass production but simultaneously as 'displaced usefulness'; as what I called 'art/culture of which the usefulness has been exhausted'; it operates on the level of suggesting a succession of novelties by periodizing time into segments of fashion/styles. As this marker it creates the simulacra of periods that constitute the flow of time and the illusion of progress within conditions which can no longer make recourse to values (in the shape of traditions) in order to do so. Translated into the context of cultural production such a concept suggests that kitsch, platitude, cliché or stereotype can virtually be conceived as 'originality that has been quoted too often' and that has gone out of fashion<sup>752</sup>. This relationship between originality and kitsch is in itself rooted in stereotypical premises, namely the imperative of the artist as producer of invention and originality.

In *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* Poggioli examines the ugly as the only single negative category explained within classical art as "the imperfect, the exaggerated, the disproportioned, the grotesque, the monstrous" that can be

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<sup>750</sup> "So we left that country and sailed on sick at heart. And we came to the land of the Cyclopes, a fierce, uncivilized people, who never lift a hand to plant or plough but put their trust in Providence" (Homer, 1946, p. 144).

<sup>751</sup> T. Bernhard, *Verstörung*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977).

<sup>752</sup> I refer to "Clichés" by Sydney Grew in which the author establishes a relationship between "a very happy invention" that hardens into a cliché by quotation "until at a thousandth remove it has lost all allusive power and passed into a pointless, mechanical piece of abstraction" (S. Grew, 1920, p. 248). See also Chapter 2.

“reduced to the criterion of a formal error” to “excess or deficiency.”<sup>753</sup> Based on that<sup>754</sup> he concludes that

“the classical aesthetic, contrary to the modern, was in no position to admit into the category of the ugly those forms that might be said to have a not-new beauty, a familiar or well-known beauty, a beauty grown old, an over-repeated or common beauty: all synonyms that could serve to define kitsch or stereotype.”<sup>755</sup>

Because Modernism “expresses the avant-garde as its own extreme or supreme moment”<sup>756</sup> and because it is rooted in the “romantic aesthetic of originality and novelty”<sup>757</sup>, Poggioli continues, only modern art can define its “absolute aesthetic error” in “an art that imitates and repeats itself.”<sup>758</sup> As a consequence, Poggioli draws a close connection between the avant-garde and fashion that explains fashion as something that “passes through the phase of novelty and strangeness, surprise and scandal, before abandoning the new forms when they become cliché, kitsch, stereotype.”<sup>759</sup>

Notwithstanding certain reservations regarding Poggioli's approach, which suggests an alignment of the ugly in pre-modern style with kitsch that is too simplistic, his analysis sheds light on the emergence of kitsch as a typically modern phenomenon that is necessitated through the acceleration of change in fashion and style under capitalist market conditions. Benjamin's observation of the new as re-occurrence of ‘always-the-same’, a circular model that explains the interdependent relationship between novelty and kitsch not as linear progression but as an endless repetition, is relevant here. This repetition is also observed by Sydney Grew in “Clichés” as he states that “[T]he once dead cliché may be made to flower again.”<sup>760</sup> As a present example the lava-lamp, a novelty in the seventies, can be resuscitated as

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<sup>753</sup> R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 81.

<sup>754</sup> Poggioli provides no examples of what he understands by “the imperfect, the exaggerated, the disproportioned, the grotesque and the monstrous.”

<sup>755</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>756</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>757</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>758</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>759</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>760</sup> S. Grew, “Clichés”, p. 255.

retro through personal narrative and cultural analysis, but only after it has passed through a phase of being regarded as kitsch. Historical distance reveals the kitsch of an epoch: here again in order to see kitsch we need the “distant look”.<sup>761</sup> In the register of economic surplus and material overproduction kitsch is no longer conceived in the outmoded as a receptacle for nostalgia, but as an operational agent in close proximity to decontextualization in capitalist market conditions. These dynamics are expressed by Stewart with her exposition of kitsch and camp

“as forms of metaconsumption, [that] have arisen from the contradictions implicit in the operation of the exchange economy; they mark an antsubject whose emergence ironically has been necessitated by the narratives of significance under that economy.”<sup>762</sup>

As objects that “serve to subjectify all of consumer culture”<sup>763</sup>, Stewart argues that kitsch artefacts “are apprehended on the level of collective identity.”<sup>764</sup> As this agent within the struggle for social control and meaning, kitsch testifies to “the speed of fashion” and “the expendability of all consumer goods, their dependence upon novelty as the replacement of use value and craftsmanship.”<sup>765</sup> Simultaneously kitsch maintains the illusion<sup>766</sup> of the difference between art and popular culture, where items are singled out and labelled as art, assigning to them a certain position within a value system. Depending on art and its ‘Other’, this system is maintained through kitsch which, as replicated and recycled culture, serves as a marker between the contemporaneous and the ‘expired’. This interdependent connection between art and culture is examined by Thomas Crow<sup>767</sup> establishing the “ultimate logic” of the culture industry as a “strictly rational and utilitarian one of profit

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<sup>761</sup> I refer to Chapter 3 where I discuss Olalquiaga’s third-degree kitsch together with Hollier and Bataille.

<sup>762</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 169.

<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>764</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>765</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>766</sup> Kitsch as the defining moment between art and culture is an artificial concept and presents a circular argument. It is always culture that defines art, however, as art is separated from artefact, it is turned into a commodity and therefore becomes kitsch.

<sup>767</sup> T. Crow, “Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts” in *Pollock and After*, ed. F. Frascina, pp. 233-266.

maximization.”<sup>768</sup> Due to its utilitarian profile, Crow continues, the culture industry “is not able to invent the desires and sensibilities it exploits”<sup>769</sup> and is dependent on a process in which

“modernism is re-packaged in turn for consumption as chic and kitsch commodities. The work of the avant-garde is returned to the sphere of culture where much of its substantial material originated. In the process, outmoded or under-utilized products of the capitalist economy – or even just the disorder and brutality thrown up in its wake – are refurbished and glamourized to be sold as new.”<sup>770</sup>

An art practice as resistance is rendered illusory, even contra productive as, Crow observes, it constitutes “an important mechanism in an administered cultural economy”<sup>771</sup> in serving as some “kind of research and development arm of the culture industry”<sup>772</sup> that consolidates “the cycle of exchange which modernism sets in motion [...]: appropriation of oppositional practices upward, the return of evacuated cultural goods downward.”<sup>773</sup>

Another author who analyses these dynamics is Peter Wollen.<sup>774</sup> His essay starts with a discussion about the role of museums in the “struggles over the social control of value and meaning”<sup>775</sup> manifested in the concept of culture as heritage, which “is both the internal construction of a community ‘for itself’, and the construction of an external image ‘for others’, for visitors or tourists.”<sup>776</sup> For the purpose of his discussion Wollen refers to Michael Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory: The Construction and Destruction of Value*, published in 1979, in which Thompson develops a model to explain cultural value shifts. Thompson distinguishes between ‘durable objects’, described by Wollen as objects with “infinite life-spans”;<sup>777</sup> “transcendent status in relation

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<sup>768</sup> Ibid., p.256.

<sup>769</sup> Ibid., p.256.

<sup>770</sup> Ibid., p.257.

<sup>771</sup> Ibid., p.258.

<sup>772</sup> Ibid., p.257.

<sup>773</sup> Ibid., p.258.

<sup>774</sup> P. Wollen, “Museums and Rubbish Theory”, in *Paris Manhattan*, pp. 61-74.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>776</sup> Ibid., p. 62.



both to time and use” and “ceremonial value”<sup>777</sup>. These are contrasted to ‘transient objects’ “which decrease in value over time and have finite life-spans”<sup>778</sup> until they are eventually “discarded as worthless”<sup>779</sup>. Between these two poles, Wollen continues, lies what Thompson calls the “‘flexible’ region”<sup>780</sup> in which “[T]he principal battles over the social control of value take place.”<sup>781</sup> Analogous to my example of the lava lamp, Wollen cites Thompson stating that “[W]e are all familiar with the way despised Victorian objects have become sought-after antiques; with Bakelite ashtrays that have become collectors’ items; with old bangers transformed into vintage motor-cars”<sup>782</sup>. But how does such a transformation work? Wollen emphasizes the roles collectors, museums, curators, critics, historical circumstances and the development of a critical literature play in this process of paradigm shifts in taste and value. He points out that the changes of value are complex dynamics and only with the benefit of historical hindsight can we speculate on what, for example, caused the rapid increase in value in the nineteenth century of work by Vermeer or El Greco. As an example of value decrease, Wollen mentions eighteenth-century British painters (Reynolds, Romney, Gainsborough). Referring to Reitlinger’s book *The Economics of Taste*, Wollen states that these highly valued British painters lost their blue-chip status with American museums and collectors to nineteenth-century French impressionist and post-impressionist painters. These negotiations about value shifts not only take place in the ‘flexible region’: Thompson charts the possibility of “surprising and rapid promotion upwards of artefacts from the very bottom end of the scale and even from rubbish.”<sup>783</sup> <sup>784</sup> According to

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<sup>777</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>778</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>779</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>780</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>781</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>782</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>783</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

<sup>784</sup> Wollen describes in detail Thompson’s evaluation of the *Stevengraph*, a “Victorian invention, a woven silk picture manufactured mechanically on Jacquard loom” (P. Wollen, 2004, p. 67). *Stevengraphs* were first exhibited by their inventor Thomas Stevens at the York Exhibition in 1879. After a period of being considered commercially worthless, Wollen recounting Thompson explains how certain events led to the steady increase of their value in

Thompson, then, 'things may drift into obscurity, but they leap into prominence', a process that Wollen interprets as a dynamic in which "[I]n a flash of reevaluation, yesterday's kitsch was today's heritage, even today's masterpiece."<sup>785</sup> Wollen does not simply explain these processes within the modernist high/low antinomy where "[Rubbish] is only permitted entry [into the realm of *durable* objects] when it is validated by or as high art"<sup>786</sup> but, referring to Bataille states that

"[G]iven the right conditions, some artefacts may leap miraculously from being abject rubbish to being regarded as transcendent, quasi-sacred objects, without having to re-traverse the 'flexible region' of everyday currency. In Bataille's terms, there is a short-circuit in the 'general economy', whereby artefacts are transferred from the extremes of ignominy, of waste, the excremental, the lowest of the low, to the peaks of the sacred, the highest of the high, without re-entering the 'restricted economy' of use-value and commercial circulation."<sup>787</sup>

If we, however, agree with this statement we have also to accept that kitsch cannot denote a fixed category of objects. This brings me to the third reason which, I believe, makes an interpretation of kitsch through Bataille's writing, as a challenging new departure, namely an understanding of what I call kitsch as arbitrariness of form. Although kitsch represents materiality, an aesthetic choice and something that has form, it simultaneously does not allow conclusive statements about its materiality, shape or appearance to be drawn from a generalized idea of kitsch. In "Review: Formal Insistence"<sup>788</sup> Paul Hegarty insists that Bataille's 'formless' has to be first and foremost understood as arbitrariness of form. As a consequence Hegarty critiques

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the 1960s: In 1940 the factory producing them was destroyed by German bombs, prompting the interest of private collectors and the development of a critical literature. At the end of the 1950s the only surviving pattern book of the *Stevengraph* factory was offered to the Coventry City Museum thus affording it the status of 'durable object'.

<sup>785</sup> P. Wollen, *Paris Manhattan*, p. 69.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-1.

<sup>787</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>788</sup> P. Hegarty, "Review: Formal Insistence", SRB Archives, 2002, pp. 1-13 [online] available from <<http://www.univie.ac.at/Wissenschaftstheorie/srb/srb/formalinsistence.pdf>> [accessed, 4. August, 2007]. Hegarty reviews Y.-A. Bois and R. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*. Article first published as "Formal Insistence", in *The Semiotic Review of Books*, 13.2 (2003), pp. 6-9.

previous theoreticians of the 'formless'<sup>789</sup> for solidifying Bataille's 'earthworm', 'spider' and 'spit' into certain aesthetic categories of 'low', 'waste' and 'excess' that put the 'formless' back to work and by doing so make it ultimately useful again. This functionalization of the 'formless' for particular discourses goes, according to Hegarty, against Bataille's intention as it neglects what was central to Bataille's text, namely that Bataille in fact "refers to two forms, but undermines their solidity in the 'something like'<sup>790</sup>, indicating transformation. In contrast to the theoreticians he critiques, Hegarty focuses on the formal transformations of the 'spider' and 'earthworm' as they become squashed and "lose their form, and their menace at the level of meaning, to become even stranger, even more excluded."<sup>791</sup> This transformation is according to Hegarty exposed through Bataille's emphasis on the 'something like' which for Hegarty "signals the arbitrariness of forms, and that informe/formless is the way in which formlessness is present (or better still, absent) in all form."<sup>792</sup> Discussing Bois and Krauss'<sup>793</sup> employment of Bataille's notion of the subversive image for a theory of abject art, Noys'<sup>794</sup> formulates a critique similar to Hegarty's. Interpreting Bois and Krauss' emphasis on complete formlessness as another "gesture of reduction" that "supplies it paradoxically with a form"<sup>795</sup>, Noys suggests that the formless can never be "formless as *such*, which would mean to produce and form the formless" and concludes that "[T]he formless is always *in-form*, but it is never absorbed by that form [his italics]."<sup>796</sup>

As a formless that "is always in-form" I argue that kitsch remains a non-fixed, relational and contextual concept. This is precisely because kitsch as "the

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<sup>789</sup> He refers to Y-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss' *Formless: A User's Guide* and to Didl-Huberman's *Resemblance* (1995).

<sup>790</sup> P. Hegarty, "Review: Formal Insistence", p. 2.

<sup>791</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>792</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>793</sup> He refers to Y-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*.

<sup>794</sup> B. Noys, *Georges Bataille – A Critical Introduction*.

<sup>795</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>796</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

return of the remainder as surplus of meaning, as excess”<sup>797</sup> does not simply constitute an inversion - in Baudrillard’s words a “favouring of the term on the other side of the slash”<sup>798</sup> - but evokes “the instability in every structure and opposition.”<sup>799</sup> It can thus be interpreted as “the formless matter that base materialism claims for itself”, namely as something that is “refusing to let itself be assimilated to any concept whatever, to any abstraction whatever”<sup>800</sup>. In Hollier’s terms it is a thing that “produces matter as something eluding the idea.”<sup>801</sup>

This notion of kitsch as no-thing, which I want to pursue here, conceives kitsch as a cipher that leaves the *a priori* negative connotations it has by definition in place, and rather seeks to redeem (parts of) itself by focusing on its dynamics as a derogatory *word*. As a consequence an inquiry into kitsch has to focus on the act of ‘denoting’ itself rather than on an identification of aesthetic inadequacy within kitsch as an objectified notion. What this implies for a further discussion will be the topic of this chapter, from which I draw conclusions in relation to a contemporary artistic practice – discussed in my final chapter.

I have argued that the various positions on kitsch, from Greenberg’s seminal essay to Olalquiaga’s inquiry into the kitsch experience, have discussed kitsch as a cipher within the binary opposition of ‘Home’ and ‘Away’, by which I mean the ideological superstructure of dichotomies between which Modernism and Postmodernism unfold. I have argued that the contemporary discussions<sup>802</sup> ultimately remain faithful to the authoritative arguments of

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<sup>797</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 145.

<sup>798</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>799</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>800</sup> Y.-A. Bois & R. E. Krauss, *Formless: A User’s Guide*, p. 53.

<sup>801</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 114.

<sup>802</sup> I refer to Olalquiaga and Boym’s contemporary discussions. I also want to give mention to Lidia Santos’ *Tropical Kitsch*. [L. Santos, *Tropical Kitsch – Mass media in Latin American Art and Literature*, trans. E. Enebach (Princeton USA: Markus Wiener Publishers and Iberoamericana, 2006)]. In a similar way to Olalquiaga, Santos sets out to redeem aspects of kitsch, beginning her analysis at its etymological sources and the negative connotations implicit in its use of European discourses. Santos opposes the Western usage of kitsch to

modernist theoreticians. Their conceptual frameworks remain tied to dialectics that presuppose some sort of unified and abstracted notion of 'high' and 'low', respectively 'good' and 'bad'. Within these dialectics they are either inverting (but never really subverting) the binary opposition in order to redeem parts of Kisch (Olalquiaga, Santos and Boym) or trying to accommodate modernist formalism within postmodern conditions (Kulka). In the case of Bataille I argue that any such antinomy, which endows Kisch "with a mechanical and abstract character"<sup>803</sup> becomes devoid of interest as it does not reach beyond the a *priori* framework of a homological theory, but seeks to consolidate the *status quo*. The shift from Greenberg's notion of Kisch as an artefact of low culture, to Kisch as a subjective experience that mourns the loss of unmediated experience, is only an apparent one, as both Greenberg's modernist stance and more recent discourses are ultimately grounded in the complex relationship between nature and culture, between sign and signifier, between use and exchange value.

If we accept the commonplace that nature makes no two things alike, any gap between nature and a notion of culture that is reproducible is haunted by the

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*cursi*, the Spanish/Latin American term for Kisch, which, according to her, has two different semantic strands. From these she extrapolates a bifurcated notion of Kisch. *Cursi malo* or *passive Kisch* is outlined with regard to the Western use of Kisch as applied to the aspirations of a rising middle-class seeking to gain socio-cultural status. *Creative Kisch* or *cursi bueno* in contrast, is explained as the process by which "the masses absorb the codes of the Brazilian elite, reinterpret them, and re-create them in conjunction with their own repertoire to produce a particular style of raw architecture." (L. Santos, 2006, p.76) Although she does not refer to Olalquiaga, her notion of *creative Kisch* is very close to Olalquiaga's melancholic Kisch and most especially the notion of third-degree Kisch. Focusing on the emancipatory aspect of *cursi bueno*, Santos makes reference to Abraham Moles, another Latin American theoretician who ascribes to Kisch the potential for spontaneous pleasure and an additional pedagogical function, a concept which culminates in his proposition that Kisch is the 'art of happiness'. It is of interest that the three strongest contemporary voices endowing Kisch with redeeming qualities while challenging modernist anti-Kisch positions, all emerge from a non-European background (from Latin America). It is beyond the scope of this thesis, but might be a profitable area for further study to examine to what extent different positions on Kisch are culturally biased and how far cultural differences and local traditions determine a general attitude towards Kisch. I am thinking, for example, of the predominance of Catholicism in Latin America and the vivid tradition of the carnival and folk tales. Olalquiaga, Santos and Moles' positions also raise questions as to whether Latin American culture defines itself a *priori* on premises that are radically distinct from those prevailing in

Western culture.

<sup>803</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p.35.

very idea of authenticity.<sup>804</sup> As a result I argue that both modernist and contemporary positions are implicitly informed by the same premises, namely the distinction between the authentic and inauthentic. Within the homological discourse of Modernism the structural repression of kitsch works dialectically. Kitsch, the cipher for Modernism's repressed 'inauthentic', not only delineates some notion of the modernist 'authentic' but also reveals that Modernism's autonomy between innovation and kitsch is only apparent. Greenberg seeks to establish the authentic in an avant-garde art that defines itself in resistance to mass culture through a mode of painting in which gestures result in marks on the canvas as unmediated expressions of the body. The postmodern positions formulate the recuperation of the authentic as an impossible quest that commodifies the loss itself as a stand-in for the real thing. As a consequence I have argued that both approaches, although antithetically formulated, conceptualize kitsch ultimately as a unified and fixed category. In modernist discourses it is conceived as a set of distinct objects within the category of the inauthentic. Segregated within the 'Home', antithetical to the modernist striving for objectivity, rationality and abstraction, kitsch becomes within these discourses the signified marker that maintains the illusion of a division between the authentic and inauthentic and by extension between use and exchange value. In more recent discussions kitsch is reinvigorated as a discourse of congealed nostalgia, a generalized mode of collective memory, and is revalued and fetishized in the 'Away' as a possible means to live in a world where the authentic is acknowledged as a historically lost domain. In these inquiries kitsch resurfaces in language and projected into the 'Away' as a locus of a cultural 'Other', a discourse of the subject in the context of longing and nostalgia for a pre-industrial and pre-commodified state of existence<sup>805</sup>. Kitsch is grasped in use and exchange value as a marker of relativity between the signifier and the signified. However, be it melancholic

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<sup>804</sup> I refer to Broch's "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" in which he defends a position that equates art with truth, nature and the ethically good and kitsch with immorality and inauthenticity.

<sup>805</sup> Breton's Surrealism, as employed by Olalquiaga, is relevant here.

and nostalgic kitsch (Olalquiaga), creative and passive kitsch (Santos) or reflective and restorative nostalgia (Boym), by making recourse to antinomies conceived as dialectic opposites, kitsch is rendered static. Conceived as concomitant to nostalgia, kitsch remains here an ‘embodied’ notion, a symbol for a collective mode of cultural memory. These approaches cultivate a certain nostalgia that, according to Andrew Brighton<sup>806</sup>, “hankers for a state of society in which people know by experience” where “they make their world directly”<sup>807</sup> and by doing so – not unlike the modernist approaches – “establish certain people, ways of life and culture as pleasing, honest, sincere, normal, natural and the opposition as offensive, dishonest, insincere, abnormal and unnatural.”<sup>808</sup> Following the modernist dialectics these contemporary discourses implicitly accept the modernist implications and by operating within these premises, cannot offer a true alternative concept for kitsch that does not structurally depend on opposites. Framed by questions that surround the authentic kitsch remains with both modernist and contemporary inquiries an affirmation of objectivity in the Nothing, linked to a philosophical inquiry that grounds itself in metaphysics and seeks to conceptualize kitsch through a category of stable universal ‘things’.

In order to develop an understanding for kitsch that frees it from dialectics I expand on contemporary concepts<sup>809</sup> and attempt to establish kitsch through what Bataille outlines as base materialism<sup>810</sup> asking for the possibilities to conceive perversion as a heterogeneous practice, a perversion without ‘symbolic transposition’, a ‘true’ as opposed to transposed fetishism. Such an understanding of kitsch, I argue, confronts us with the task of finding our own *Eigentlichkeit* (authenticity), as we try to orientate ourselves between ‘Home’ and ‘Away’. The notion of kitsch I have in mind virtually suspends the

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<sup>806</sup> A. Brighton, “AvantGarde and Kitsch Revisited”, in *Contemporary Art and the Home*, ed. C. Painter (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002), pp. 239-256.

<sup>807</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>808</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>809</sup> As argued in the Chapter 3.

<sup>810</sup> I refer to G. Bataille “L’esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions”, in *Documents 8* (1930): 490-1.

opposition between authenticity and inauthenticity: I ask how *Heimat*, by which I understand both a sense of history and belonging, can still be conceived of, without falling into the kitsch trap and how it could be experienced, not nostalgically but rather as a discarded fetish. Translated into the context of Freud's *fort/da* game, which I have discussed in chapter three, I ask how we could conceive of this game as a *fort/fort*, where the object would become irretrievably lost as well as a *da/da* where it would never have gone. In analysing kitsch within the tension between 'Home' and 'Away', these variations on Freud's game become particularly poignant as the German word *for da(heim)* means 'Home' and *fort* signifies 'Away'. To think of Freud's game as a *fort/fort* and *da/da* thus implies that 'Home' and 'Away' are no longer conceived as opposites between which mastery over trauma can be played out. They rather become two points of reference between which separation and reconnection are acted out as a perpetual rhythmic calibration. The question is then no longer one of 'good' or 'bad' kitsch, neither is it one of finding common characteristics by which we can categorize what we commonly understand as kitsch, since kitsch has entered the arena of contextuality through denotation.

"A garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome"<sup>81</sup> remarks Peter Bürger. His statement could be interpreted as a comment on the disappearance of kitsch – and in fact of the disappearance of art, for, as Bürger continues, "a border has disappeared that as late as Adorno had the unquestionable status of a metaphysical principle guaranteeing the possibility of art."<sup>82</sup> As Thierry de Duve examines in *Kant after Duchamp*, the separation between art and aesthetics was not only a gradual movement initiated by historical and political events. De Duve analyses how Duchamp's inclusion of *Fountain* in 1917 at the *Society of Independent Artists Inc.*, New York transformed the traditional paradigm of aesthetic judgment from 'this is beautiful' to 'this is art',

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<sup>81</sup> P. Bürger, "Aporias of Modern Aesthetics" in *Thinking art: beyond traditional aesthetics*, eds. A. Benjamin & P. Osborne (London: ICA, 1991), pp. 3-15, p. 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



thereby replacing the critique of art based on aesthetic judgment with a critique immanent to art itself. Bürger's comment on the garden gnome, I argue, points less toward Duchamp's *succès de scandale* (namely that potentially any object liberated from its usefulness can become art), but rather toward the transition of value judgments that manifests itself in the relation to kitsch and art. This shift from kitsch being reified within the object, the epitome of petit-bourgeois taste rooted in metaphysics that is segregated by art's 'Other', to kitsch as a contextual judgment indicates that kitsch has been untethered from the object. We intuit kitsch without having the terminology to describe it. It marks a shift from sign as material to the signifying process itself. Toward what Stewart calls the "world making capacity of language, a capacity which points to the arbitrariness of the sign at the same time that it points to the world as a transient creation of language."<sup>813</sup> Stewart compares this 'arbitrariness' of sign/form to the 'arbitrariness of exchange value', namely that exchange value is not based on an intrinsic quality/materiality of a commodity or the amount of labour that has been put into it. The end of certainty in language implies that *a priori* questions have become problematic. Duchamp's proposition, which transfigured the paradigm of art from 'is it beautiful' to 'is it art', does not necessarily call for a separation of art from aesthetics but rather expands the aesthetics/art debate beyond the scopes of skill, craftsmanship and aesthetic conventions. In Danto's words:

"The readymades served to disconnect the concept of art from the whole tradition of philosophical aesthetics, which – through its greatest exemplar, Immanuel Kant's Critique of Judgement (1790) – made taste the central factor in the analysis of beauty. In making art out of objects in neither good nor bad taste, Duchamp was no more interested in injuring aesthetic sensibility than he was in gratifying it."<sup>814</sup>

Whilst Duchamp's *Fountain* can be seen as instigating a paradigmatic shift, this shift, I argue, refers mainly to the object and is confined by the questions of authorship and contextualization which it raises. Bürger's garden gnome as

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<sup>813</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 5.

<sup>814</sup> A. Danto, "Beauty for Ashes" in *Regarding Beauty*, eds. N. Benezra & O. Viso (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1999), pp. 183-96, p. 185.

a generic epitome of bad taste testifies to a more fundamental mutation, namely the impossibility of judgment itself. Bürger's comment on the garden gnome exposes that the subject who utters 'this is kitsch' or 'this is art' not only unties the relationship between art and kitsch from being dialectical opposites bringing them into a constellation, but also reveals that the modernist use of kitsch as a term of critique and tool of demarcation for art from non-art has become obsolete. Bürger's comment no longer refers to the question that denounces the enslaving of the object through its use-value, and whether mass-produced objects can potentially be art in certain contexts. Rather it testifies to the impossibility of aesthetic judgment as a structural paradox immanent to art since Duchamp: an art which understands itself as an open concept and simultaneously wants to retain its specificity. To conceive of the epiphany of bad taste and the very marker of the border between art and non-art as art (as in Bürger's text), means to accept that kitsch can no longer support some sort of metaphysical principle maintaining an artificial border for art. The garden gnome as art has become a cipher for the inability to judge, since it no longer functions as "an object [used] to advertize one's petty-bourgeois taste."<sup>815</sup> Popular and 'educated' tastes conflate in the same object: "one and the same garden gnome, as a piece of kitsch, signifies the total aesthetic incompetence of its owner, but as a quotation testifies to an artistic sensibility so sophisticated as to be perverse."<sup>816</sup> Duchamp's use of a mass-produced object, due to its industrial design but also *because* it instigated the paradigmatic shift from 'this is beautiful' to 'this is art', still allowed for a certain kind of re-aestheticification.<sup>817</sup> In contrast to Baudrillard, who argues that Duchamp's act signifies "the end of art and aesthetics"<sup>818</sup>, I argue that Duchamp's act still left the possibilities for

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<sup>815</sup> P. Bürger, *Thinking art*, p. 4.

<sup>816</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>817</sup> In *Kant after Duchamp* de Duve remarks that Duchamp himself apparently once exclaimed: "In Neo-Dada they have taken my readymades and found aesthetic beauty in them. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal in their faces as a challenge and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty" (T. de Duve, 1999, p.295).

<sup>818</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. S. Lotinger, trans. A. Hodges (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London England: MIT Press, 2005), p. 52.

a new paradigm of aesthetic judgment, one that is maintained through a notion of kitsch. If Bürger then comments on the absent border with the help of the garden gnome and specifies it within this context as “the border between art and the culture industry and simultaneously, between art and non-art”<sup>819</sup> he testifies to an *a priori* assumption that conceives the culture industry and non-art as synonyms. This implies that the post-Duchampian question of ‘is it art’ is always tested against popular taste and culture, as the site of the inauthentic.

The difference between Duchamp’s *Fountain* and a ‘garden gnome’ can be seen as: a urinal can never be a statement of popular taste but a garden gnome can be both, it can either embody the essence of popular taste or as a “garden gnome in quotation marks” (Bürger), it is a statement of sophistication in art. If we follow the premises that ‘art is not kitsch’ and a ‘garden gnome’ is kitsch, the garden gnome in quotation marks leaves us in a state of indeterminacy. The question of ‘is it art’ becomes a question of what criteria we are left with by which to judge. As the garden gnome has been brought inside (intellectually, emotionally and physically) it becomes a cipher for an undecidable proposition (Derrida), an aesthetic stупefaction, a double-bind, a paradox, resulting from a consistent deduction of the uncontradicting premises that art is not kitsch and a garden gnome is kitsch. Bürger’s comment points not so much toward the conflation of art and life but rather toward the disappearance of the border between the authentic and the inauthentic. Kitsch can no longer support the principle of aesthetic judgment that is maintained by the idea of kitsch as the site of the inauthentic, a site against which art can define itself as kitsch’s authentic ‘Other’ to uphold its claim for specificity in spite of its conditions. The “garden gnome in quotation marks” has become the uncanny *Doppelgänger* of kitsch as it is “pretty much indistinguishable from what one might call the real thing.”<sup>820</sup> *Vice versa*, kitsch has become the uncanny *Doppelgänger* of art, as the garden gnome without

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<sup>819</sup> P. Bürger, *Thinking art*, p. 4.

<sup>820</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

quotation marks applies to - I am recalling Calinescu's statements on kitsch - "virtually anything subject to judgements of taste"<sup>821</sup> as a synonym for "a way of rejecting it outright as distasteful, repugnant, or even disgusting."<sup>822</sup> As kitsch and art converge and any possible distinction between popular and educated taste is undermined, binary oppositions between authentic art and inauthentic kitsch can no longer be maintained. Authenticity is always proved by the copy<sup>823</sup> and we can only recognize it in relation to an idea of a copy from which we approximate some notion of the authentic. The garden gnome as kitsch and its *Doppelgänger* as art, function ultimately simultaneously as substitutes and uncanny figures for each other in the sense of Nicholas Royle's observation that "[E]very uncanny figure or event is inevitably a substitute: the inexact double or surrogate of what we cannot know and cannot represent directly."<sup>824</sup>

My earlier remarks on kitsch and belonging can now be expanded. Modernist and contemporary discussions on kitsch conceptualize this relationship based on an implicit notion of the authentic, formulated either as some utopian aspiration within the concept of autonomous art, or as historically and nostalgically lost domains of experience. Be it kitsch in modernist terms or bad kitsch/restorative nostalgia, the questions remain centred around issues such as "imitation, forgery, counterfeit, and what we might call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception."<sup>825</sup> Outlined as morally and ethically improper, these discourses are touching on issues as diverse as mimicry, imitation, guilt-free home-coming, fossilization of loss, evil, criminal acts including counterfeiting and forgery and all manner of emotional 'crutches', such as self-deception and 'parody of catharsis'. Kitsch becomes a cipher against which an authentic notion of belonging is conceptually constructed. Both modernist and postmodern concepts of kitsch in regard to authenticity

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<sup>821</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 235.

<sup>822</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>823</sup> I return to this point later in this chapter.

<sup>824</sup> N. Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 226. Royle refers to D. B. Morris, "Gothic Subliminity", in *New Literary History*, vol. 16 (1985), p. 311.

<sup>825</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 229.

and belonging have correlations to contemporary conceptualizations of the tourist and the traveller such as John Frow's analysis in *Time & Commodity Culture*. According to Frow's investigation early travels were travels of discourse and only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century did travel become an activity to broaden cultural knowledge and a status symbol for being culturally informed. The latter is centred on a cultivation and display of 'taste' in form of authentic 'proofs' such as the photograph, the souvenir, the specimen or the trophy. The exotic 'Other' is thereby objectified and consumed in search for its authenticity.

In order to explain his argument Frow outlines three moves that inform the discourse on tourism. The first move evokes the modernist discourse on kitsch as it characterizes "tourism as inauthentic activity". The tourist "is contrasted with the heroic figure of the traveller and accused of a lack of interest in the culturally authentic – a category constructed both by analogy and by direct reference to high aesthetic culture."<sup>826</sup> Frow refers to Daniel Boorstin's essay "From Traveller to Tourist: The lost Art of Travel" with its key adjectives such as plastic, contrived, pre-fabricated, cheap, jerry-built, ersatz, imitation, sanitized, synthetic, artificial, antiseptic, homogenous, factitious and pseudo which "enunciate a characteristic post-war fantasy about the masses and mass production"<sup>827</sup> parallel to the modernist discourses on kitsch. In his analysis Frow detects in "the constant recurrence of the opposition"<sup>828</sup> a structural dependency of tourist and traveller in that the traveller is "functional" to tourism by acting both as its "precursor" and as "exemplar"<sup>829</sup>. This structural dependency evokes Modernism's binary opposition of avant-garde and kitsch in that the modernist project draws on the *Odyssean* trope "that defines heroic mission against Penelope's domestic stasis"<sup>830</sup>. Presenting the avant-garde "as transgressive, exciting, virile, and new, by contrast of an idea

<sup>826</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 69.

<sup>827</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>828</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>829</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>830</sup> C. Reed, "Domestic Disturbances: Challenging the Anti-domestic Modern", in *Contemporary Art and the Home*, ed. C. Painter (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2002), p. 3.

of 'home', which is framed by default as conventional, dull, feminine and old-fashioned"<sup>831</sup>, it aligns the avant-garde to *Odysseus* the traveller, the warrior, the canny (cunning) adventurer, conceived against a passive *Penelope* who awaits his return occupying herself with minor art (weaving) and domestic affairs. This antithetical construction portrays *Odysseus* as the prototypical 'lonesome' Hollywood hero who gets his reward (the kiss of his beloved as the sun sets) upon completion of his mission. Being un-domestic, in public and 'on the road', embodies a guarantor for the avant-garde for being art, as opposed to the domestic as the marker of distinct social and aesthetic negative connotations.<sup>832</sup> The fossilization of 'Home' and 'Away' into two fixed opposed poles constructs an idea of the *Odyssey* as a journey of authentication against a notion of the tourist (the masses) who dis-authenticates himself in his pursuit of superficial distraction. This approach ignores the fact that the *Odyssey* would ultimately become a pointless enterprise without its perpetual reference of home.

The second move of discourse on tourism discussed by Frow epitomizes with its emphasis on experience the postmodern approaches to kitsch, as it constitutes a shift from "locating reification in the image [object world] to locating it in the viewing subject."<sup>833</sup> This approach focuses on "experience and consciousness"<sup>834</sup> rather than the socio-economic factors of differentiation within Modernity and "represents a quest for an authentic domain of being."<sup>835</sup> Citing Dean MacCannell<sup>836</sup>, Frow outlines an approach that "seeks to value tourism positively by characterizing it as a quest for, rather than a turn from, that authentic experience of the world that is available to the pre-industrial traveller."<sup>837</sup> Being on such a quest it mourns the loss of

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<sup>831</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>832</sup> I have chosen not to further pursue the relationship between kitsch and the feminine, the domestic, the private.

<sup>833</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 87.

<sup>834</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>835</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>836</sup> Frow refers to D. MacCannell, "Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings", in *American Journal of Sociology*, 79: 3 (1974), p. 597.

<sup>837</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 70.

authenticity (nostalgically) as an “unproblematic givenness.”<sup>838</sup> It is of particular interest that the authentic is thereby projected into registers which connote to both discourses on kitsch, the modernist emphasis on ‘detour’ and difficulty and the contemporary stressing on the ‘natural’ and pre-industrial. Frow refers to “MacCannell, drawing on Goffman’s distinction between the presentable ‘front’ and the concealed (and *therefore* [his italics] more genuine) ‘back’ regions of a culture or a place”<sup>839</sup> and writes of the paradox of “the construction of a more ‘real’ reality”, within which the distinction between ‘front’ and ‘back’ is reinforced through “categories which associate truth with concealment, secrecy and intimacy, and untruth with surfaces and visibility”<sup>840</sup>.

Similar to the first move of discourse on tourism which grounds itself against the cultural ‘Other’ of the ‘Home’, the second move, as Frow continues, is “closely bound up with the construction of a cultural Other”<sup>841</sup>. Evoking the cultural ‘Other’ of contemporary discourses on kitsch, the ‘Other’ is conceptualized here as a nostalgic quest of the subject in the ‘Away’. Within a longing to recoup authenticity in the exotic it is sought after in the rudimentary display of “use value”, in objects that are “defined by an absence of *design* [his italics]”<sup>842</sup> and “outside the circuit of commodity relations and exchange values”<sup>843</sup>. Frow observes in the shift from “locating reification in the image [object world] to locating it in the viewing subject”<sup>844</sup> the sign of a more fundamental mutation<sup>845</sup>, a “*periodizing* [his italics] shift, in which the opposition of postmodernity to modernity precisely corresponds to the construction of modernity through its nostalgic opposition to the traditional society.”<sup>846</sup> The cultural ‘Other’ of postmodern discourses is the locus of what

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<sup>838</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>839</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>840</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>841</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>842</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>843</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>844</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>845</sup> He refers to F. Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

<sup>846</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

has been conceived as the repressed domain of Modernism. This lost domain is bound up with the myth that exotic cultures have “escaped the contamination of this fallen world”<sup>847</sup> and is based on a mythology which Stewart calls “the primitive”<sup>848</sup> as a potential site that harbours the authentic. It is this cultural ‘Other’ that comprises Olalquiaga’s first degree kisch, an object that is “hand made”, “natural”, “outmoded” or “exotic” and ultimately serves as ‘prop’ to distil a notion of authentic experience.

The third move on theorizing tourism, Frow continues, follows from the paradox imposed by the second, namely the dilemma of experiencing authenticity *per se*. Citing Culler<sup>849</sup>, Frow argues that in order “to be experienced as authentic it must be marked as authentic, but when it is marked as authentic it is mediated, a sign of itself and hence not authentic in the sense of unspoilt.”<sup>850</sup> This “paradox of the sheer impossibility of constructing otherness”, Frow continues, gives raise to others such as “the inseparability of the object from its semiotic status” the fact that “any valued object is, minimally, a sign of itself”, that it “*resembles itself* [his italics].”<sup>851</sup> In order to construct the authentic tourist object it has to be staged “as a plausible simulation of itself.”<sup>852</sup> Frow links this paradox to “a conceptual framework that holds on to the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic.”<sup>853</sup> Discussing MacCannell’s work, he explains it in relation to a conceptualization of the authentic that upholds the distinction between “the tourist sight and the marker that provides information about the sight”<sup>854</sup> as opposed to the possibility “that the marker is constitutive of the sight (which cannot be ‘seen’ without it).”<sup>855</sup> Frow’s comments comply with my earlier

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<sup>847</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>848</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 16.

<sup>849</sup> Frow refers to J. Culler, “Semiotics of Tourism”, in *American Journal of Semiotics*, 1:1 and 2 (1981), pp. 127-40.

<sup>850</sup> J. Culler, “Semiotics of Tourism”, p.137, quoted in J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p.73.

<sup>851</sup> J. Frow, *Time & Commodity Culture*, p. 73.

<sup>852</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>853</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>854</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>855</sup> Ibid., p. 74.



statement that the authentic is always proved by the copy and can, indeed, only be experienced in relation to an idea of a copy. Frow's outline of the third move on tourism presents a similar conflation of use and exchange-value with Kirsch<sup>856</sup>, resulting in the marker (the inauthentic, exchange-value) becoming constitutive of the site/the authentic, as it is the authentic 'Other' as a copy that constitutes the experience of authenticity. As we cannot experience the authentic *per se*, kitsch, which according to Stewart implies in all its uses "the imitation, the inauthentic, the impersonation"<sup>857</sup> becomes the necessary and constitutive marker that instigates the authentic. Following Appadurai's<sup>858</sup> concept of Modernism as a moment of rupture, we can now expand on kitsch as its concomitant feature as an agent that is not only intimately linked with this rupture but is in fact its driving force. As an ill-defined term it accommodates all of modernist binary oppositions and enables the offsetting of the 'authentic' new modern against past traditions as Modernism's inauthentic copy. To define kitsch as this cultural 'Other', not only with respect to aesthetic considerations but as this dynamic agent and defining moment, means that any discussion of kitsch has to be extended into the context of a general condition of estrangement, a state of ontological homelessness as the key metaphor for the condition of Modernity.

Like authenticity, *Heimat* can only be conceived as an idea which is constructed and inscribed through one's own culture<sup>859</sup> and like the authentic, *Heimat* is never a given but always remains a utopian quest. In the light of these remarks we can outline the distinction between traveller and tourist as two trajectories with opposite directions. *Odyseus'* departure from home constitutes the pre-requisite for his delayed but ever-anticipated homecoming. The trajectory of his journey is to go home; a home-coming, however, that has to be endlessly deferred for as soon as the journey comes to an end,

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<sup>856</sup> As discussed in the context of Olalquiaga's third-degree kitsch.

<sup>857</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p. 168.

<sup>858</sup> Appadurai, A., *Modernity at Large*.

<sup>859</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer observe that Robinson Crusoe has already demonstrated that even a perfect beach is not enough to prevent him from mapping out his western values onto it.

the traveller ceases to be. The ultimate homecoming is death. *Captain Nemo*, in contrast, remains a tourist as he projects his home-coming outwards into the exotic of unexplored territories. His is a quest for the authentic essence of the 'Other' that he seeks to reassure himself of his own authenticity. He envisages himself as a traveller in the sense of *Odysseus*. But unlike him, he leaves his home behind in order to 'discover' the authentic in foreign places and by doing so he follows the fate of *Odysseus*' companions, who, bewitched by *Circe*'s "powerful drug [...] lose all memory of their native land"<sup>860</sup> and take on the appearance of "swine".<sup>861</sup>

With Frow's three moves on theorizing tourism I conceive kitsch as a non-objectified Nobody that can no longer support a conceptual framework implying an 'Other'. As both, modern and postmodern discourses equally make use of a cultural 'Other' based on some sort of *a priori* notion of the inauthentic that is embodied within a specific category of kitsch, they do not assist in illuminating the binary opposition of inauthenticity/authenticity. Both positions reveal themselves ultimately as attempts to re-instate some notion of 'use-value' as the site of the authentic, either as an idea of independent autonomous art or, with Baudrillard's<sup>862</sup> postulation of the authentic as a historically and nostalgically lost domain of experience within modern conditions, as a quest<sup>863</sup> which, as an eminently modern value, is sought after in the pre-modern.

How can a discourse be formulated, a discourse where kitsch stays a Nobody and reaches beyond the authentic/inauthentic? A discourse, that retains kitsch as the 'formless', a 'true' Nobody and acknowledges the Nothing as

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<sup>860</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 165.

<sup>861</sup> Homer's passage reads as follows: "For now to all appearance they were swine: they had pigs' heads and bristles, and they grunted like pigs; but their minds were as human as they have been before the change. Indeed, they shed tears in their sides. But Circe flung them some mast, acorns, and cornel-berries, and left them to eat this pigs' fodder and wallow in the mud" (Homer, 1946, p. 165).

<sup>862</sup> I refer to J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

<sup>863</sup> I conceive of it as a quest of eternal deferral.

nothing dispensing with any of the previous objectified notions of kitsch as 'Mr. Nobody'? As he 'writes on Bataille' Hollier states:

"nothing exists outside of a theoretical horizon; nothing escapes examination in the distancing that is the basis of theory; nothing exists that cannot be mentioned, that has no name, that cannot be subsumed into some conceptual abstraction."<sup>864</sup>

Hollier's remarks give scope for two different readings, namely as nothing or Nothing; that 'nothing escapes' or that Nothing does escape. For the purpose of my further discussion I want to explore this distinction with Homer's *Odysseus* as *Nemo*<sup>865</sup>, the 'Nobody' of Antiquity and Verne's *Captain Nemo*, the 'Nobody' of early modernization.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer write about the dual meaning of signifier and signified as they explore *Odysseus*' cunning escape from the Cyclops *Polyphemus* as an awareness of the dualism between a word and a thing. Adorno and Horkheimer write:

"The mythic destiny, *faturn*, was one with the spoken word. The sphere of ideas to which the decrees of fate irrevocably executed by the figures of myth belong, is still innocent of the distinction between word and object. The word must have direct power over fact; expression and intention penetrate one another. Cunning consists in exploiting the distinction. The word is emphasized, in order to change the actuality. In this way, consciousness of intention arises: in his distress, *Odysseus* becomes aware of the dualism, for he learns that the same word can mean different things. Because both the hero and Nobody are possible connotations of the name *Udeis*, the former is able to break the anathema of the name. The immutable words remain formulas for the merciless context of nature. In magic its rigidity had already to face that of fate, which is reflected at the same time. There the antithesis between

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<sup>864</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p. 89.

<sup>865</sup> *Nemo* means in Greek 'give what is due' and in Latin 'no-one' or 'nobody'. In Book IX, "The Cyclopes", Homer recounts *Odysseus*' escape from *Polyphemus*' cave as an exploitation of the dual meaning of 'Nobody/nobody'. *Odysseus* introduces himself to *Polyphemus* as 'Nobody' (Gr: *outis*), a name whose ambiguity the Cyclopes cannot grasp as they do not know the distinction between its use as sign and signifier.

Naming his main protagonist *Captain Nemo* and the submarine *Nautilus*, (Gr for 'sailor' and 'ship'), Verne's character is aligned with *Odysseus* himself. In contrast to *Odysseus*, however, Verne's *Captain Nemo* has renamed himself to erase his former identity for ever and to mark his break with the terrestrial world and its past. 'Nobody' and 'nobody' converge in his persona as the distinction between formalism and meaning dissolves.

the word and that to which it was assimilated was already present. In the Homeric stage it becomes decisive. In words, Odysseus discovers what is called 'formalism' in fully developed bourgeois society: their perennial obligation is paid for by the fact that they distance themselves from every fulfilling content, and at a distance refer to every possible content – to Nobody as to Odysseus. From the formalism of mythic names and ordinances, which would rule men and history as does nature, there emerges nominalism– the prototype of bourgeois thinking. The artifice of self-preservation depends on the process which decreases the relation between word and thing. Odysseus' two contradictory actions in his encounter with Polyphemus, his answering to the name, and his disowning it, are nevertheless one. He acknowledges himself to himself by denying himself under the name Nobody; he saves his life by losing himself."<sup>866</sup>

In Homer's tale *Odysseus* 'of the nimble wits' is contrasted with the uncultivated, barbaric Cyclopes, who do not rush to *Polyphemus*' aid. Like him they cannot grasp the dual meaning of 'Nobody's treachery is doing him to death' and understand his call for help in the mythic unity of word and meaning, namely that "nobody is assaulting"<sup>867</sup>. Adorno and Horkheimer continue:

"The calculation that, once blinded, Polyphemus would answer his tribesmen's question as to the source of his anguish with the word "Nobody!" – thus concealing the deed and helping the guilty man to escape punishment – is only a thin rationalistic covering. In reality, the subject Odysseus denies his own identity, which makes him a subject, and keeps himself alive by imitating the amorphous. He calls himself Nobody because Polyphemus is not a self, and the confusion of name and thing prevents the deceived savage from evading the trap: his call for retribution stays, as such, magically bound to the name of the one on whom he would be avenged, and this name condemns the call to impotence. Since Odysseus inserts the intention in the name, he withdraws it from the realm of magic. But his self-assertion – as in all epics, as in civilization as a whole – is self-denial. Thereby the self enters that coercive circle of the very natural context from which it tries to escape by imitation. He who calls himself Nobody for his own sake and manipulates approximation to the state of nature as a means of mastering nature, falls victim to *hubris*."<sup>868</sup>

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<sup>866</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 60.

<sup>867</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 153.

<sup>868</sup> T. W. Adorno & M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 67-8.

As Adorno and Horkheimer demonstrate, this state of unity, comparable to Olalquiaga's notion of first degree kitsch<sup>869</sup>, is opposed to radical socialization and alienation, where unity can only be temporarily sustained, experienced as lack, the loosening of oneself or regression. The dualism between the desire to return to unity and the simultaneous impossibility to retrieve it other than by a compensatory displacement of this desire is embodied in the persona of *Captain Nemo*.<sup>870</sup> Whilst *Odysseus* exploits the difference between formalism and semantics to outwit the Cyclopes, *Captain Nemo* seeks to overcome this dualism in a radical break to recoup a state before alienation within a retreat into a miniature world in the realm of the aquatic.<sup>871</sup> In *The Artificial Kingdom* Olalquiaga examines *Captain Nemo* as an uprooted person. An exemplar of alienation and reification of modernization she describes him as being simultaneously its product and its adversary. The inability to lead a meaningful life under capitalist conditions is met "with a violent retreat into the recesses of his mind, the bottom of the sea"<sup>872</sup>, an unknown, exotic territory which — like Robinson Crusoe before him - he seeks to cultivate and master

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<sup>869</sup> My discussion of Olalquiaga's *Megalopolis* has established that first-degree kitsch has to be 'consumed on the spot' and I draw a parallel to Homer's description of the Cyclopes as people who do not practise cultivation but rather consume things where they are found. They are, in Homer's words: "a fierce, uncivilized people, who never lift a hand to plant or plough but put their trust in Providence" (Homer, 1946, p.144).

<sup>870</sup> *Captain Nemo's* adventures, set in 1866, are narrated by his cultivated alter-ego Professor *Annorax*, a French national employed at the Natural History Museum in Paris. His faithful servant *Conseil*, a "specialist well up in the classification of Natural History" (J. Verne, 1997, p.22), who, however, neither knows the common name of any creature nor its use (meaning here culinary) and *Ned Land*, a harpooner (who knows only their culinary value), find themselves along with *Annorax* as guests/prisoners on the *Nautilus*. Having travelled on ocean beds for 20'000 leagues, the three manage to escape just before *Captain Nemo* perishes in the *Maelstrom*. As extensions of *Captain Nemo's* persona *Annorax* represents the cultivated spectator, *Conseil* the scientist and *Ned Land* the common man whose only interests are earthly pleasures. In support of her discussion Olalquiaga has dedicated an extensive chapter on *Captain Nemo* in which she portrays him as an exemplar of alienation in order to draw out an argument for authenticity as a lost domain in Modernity. Although in part I follow her description of *Captain Nemo*, my approach differs from hers as I do not focus on the distinction between the authentic and inauthentic, but rather on the scission between formalism and meaning, which precedes any discussion of dichotic oppositions. For further reading of Olalquiaga's arguments see *The Artificial Kingdom*, pp. 175-198.

<sup>871</sup> "[T]he day that my Nautilus plunged for the first time beneath the waters the world was at an end for me. That day I bought my last books, my last pamphlets, and my last newspapers; and since then I wish to believe that men no longer think nor write" (J. Verne, 1997, pp. 75-76).

<sup>872</sup> C. Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 184.

according to his rules, thereby duplicating exactly the conditions he rejects. As he cannot overcome the pragmatic dualisms characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Captain Nemo's* mediating between the terrestrial and the aquatic, the technological, cultural and the natural can only recoup unalienated experience in total regression<sup>873</sup>. Transfixed by the ambiguity between his desire for total reunion and control, *Captain Nemo's* intrauterine existence aboard his submarine, the *Nautilus*, allows him simultaneously to immerse himself in the sea and to consume it voyeuristically in its object status.<sup>874</sup> The ocean as commodity on display, *Captain Nemo's* private aquarium is contrasted to his vast collection of "tokens of Western culture"<sup>875</sup> - souvenirs of the world he abandoned - endowed with extraordinary fetishistic power.<sup>876</sup> In the setting of *Captain Nemo's* world a painting by Leonardo da Vinci or a rare shell become indistinguishable. Decontextualized from the social and cultural realms of exchange they assume an equal value in serving him as props onto which he can project himself as the centre of the universe. There is a correlation between *Captain Nemo* and Baudrillard's description of the collector as a person who "feels himself alienated or lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom."<sup>877</sup> According to Baudrillard this results in the need to construct an

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<sup>873</sup> In several passages Verne describes extended excursions on the ocean floor. In these no verbal communication can take place - only primitive sign language is possible - evoking the pre-linguistic state as an experience of unity before alienation.

<sup>874</sup> The two 'eyes' of the *Nautilus* evoke Benjamin's descriptions of the Parisian Arcades as "aquariums of human life" and "aquariums of primitive sea life" (S. Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 66).

<sup>875</sup> Nemo's library contains 12,000 volumes. "Books on science, ethics, and literature – written in every language... but I did not see a single work on political economy... they seemed to be severely prohibited on board." "I remarked the *chef d'oeuvres* of the ancient and modern masters – that is to say, all the finest things that humanity has produced in history, poetry, romance and science." In an adjacent room "[A] luminous ceiling, decorated with light arabesques, distributed a soft, clear light over all the marvels collected in the museum [...]. The different schools of the old masters were represented by a Madonna by Raphael, a Virgin by Leonardo da Vinci, a nymph by Correggio, an Assumption by Murillo, a portrait by Holbein" (J. Verne, 1997, pp. 77-78). The music collection includes "Weber, Rossini, Mozart, Beethoven, Haydn, Meyerbeer, Hérold, Wagner, Auber, Gounod, and many others, scattered over a large piano organ" (J. Verne, 1997, p. 78). In "elegant glass cases, fastened by copper rivets, [...] were classed and labelled the most precious productions of the sea that had ever been presented to the eye of a naturalist" (J. Verne, 1997, p. 79).

<sup>876</sup> C. Olalquaga, *The Artificial Kingdom*, p. 177.

<sup>877</sup> J. Baudrillard, *The Cultures of Collecting*, p. 24.

“alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the one who dictates its signifiers – the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself. Yet in his endeavour he is condemned to failure: in imagining he can do without the social discourse, he fails to appreciate the simple fact that he is transposing its open, objective discontinuity into a closed, subjective discontinuity, such that the idiom he invents forfeits all value for others.”<sup>878</sup>

With Baudrillard's comments *Captain Nemo's* internal and external worlds collapse evoking the psychastenia described by Caillouis in his critical study of mimicry.<sup>879</sup> Contrary to its common description as an adoptive behaviour, Caillouis expounds on mimicry as “a peculiarly yielding to the call of ‘space’” and “a failure to maintain the boundaries between inside and outside [...]. The body collapses, deliquesces, doubles the space around it in order to be possessed by its own surroundings.”<sup>880</sup> The collection and *Captain Nemo* become one. Comprising the “last gatherings from that world which is now dead”<sup>881</sup>, *Captain Nemo* erases time as “all chronological differences are effaced in the memory of the dead”<sup>882</sup>. Suspended in time and disconnected from any relations, *Captain Nemo's* collection turns into a transfixed maverick anti-system that recaptures the past in a pseudo-historical sense. Unable to transcend himself through his possessions, he becomes possessed by them as he exclaims: “I am dead, as much dead as those of your friends who are resting six feet under the earth!”<sup>883</sup> In contrast to *Odysseus*, *Captain Nemo* does not employ his name to outwit his destiny, but to erase himself as a person. Faced with the impossibility to recover the mythic unity between word and meaning he has become a true Nobody by fate, unable to project himself beyond the paradox of Modernity, its imperative for individuation and its simultaneous impossibility. This dualism is enacted in *Captain Nemo's* mobile home the *Nautilus* which doubles as his protection by being both a futuristic

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<sup>878</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>879</sup> R. Caillouis, “Mimétisme et psychasténie légendaire” in *Minotaure*, 7 (1935).

<sup>880</sup> R. Caillouis, “Mimétisme et psychasténie légendaire”, quoted in R. E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, p. 155.

<sup>881</sup> J. Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, p. 78.

<sup>882</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>883</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

'shell', a "masterpiece of modern industry"<sup>884</sup> and a refuge, harbouring the perfect 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois interior.<sup>885</sup> A world within a world, the *Nautilus* is turned into a Noah's Ark of Modernity, though not to save God's creatures (or for that matter Western culture in the face of the deluge), but to perish together with its creator who has decided to obliterate it.

In his writing on Bataille's 'formless' Hollier points out that dictionaries "exclude the formless as unnameable"<sup>886</sup> and, drawing a parallel between Noah's Ark and the dictionary, continues: "[N]o species was going to survive the flood, hence reproduce, that did not answer to a name."<sup>887</sup> Following Hollier's comment *Captain Nemo's* Ark becomes a metaphor for all that can be named in Western culture, for all that has been given authoritative form. However, with *Captain Nemo* these 'tokens of Western culture' have gone under ground. Displaced from the very culture they belong to and devoid of cultural parameters they are rendered into reified ornaments and objectified substitutes for experience. Preserving the idea of possessing the cultural by de-contextualizing it outside the boundaries of social recognition and civilization, *Captain Nemo's* cultural tokens and natural marvels are detached from the possibility for any transmissibility with the past and reduced to a meaningless accumulation of debris.<sup>888</sup> Mementos of a world now dead, they are turned into artefacts of fetishized use-value that refract the world in Captain Nemo's miniature universe as a spectacle of private luxury.

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<sup>884</sup> Ibid., p.99.

<sup>885</sup> In *Compulsive Beauty* Foster describes the 19<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois interior which is relevant here: "In this private space both the industrial aspects of the work world and the antagonistic aspects of the public realm are repressed – only to return, according to the formula of the uncanny, in displaced fantastic form. For in the bourgeois interior the actual retreat from the social world is compensated by an imaginary embrace of exotic and historical worlds: hence its typical arrangements of different objects in eclectic styles" (H. Foster, 1993, p.178).

<sup>886</sup> D. Hollier, *Against Architecture*, p.30.

<sup>887</sup> Ibid., p.31.

<sup>888</sup> I am thinking of Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* which was owned by Benjamin and to which he referred - I paraphrase his own words here - to describe the angel of history propelled backwards into the future whilst the debris of the past are accumulating at its feet.



*Odysseus* travels the sea but his origin remains firmly rooted in the olive tree of his marital bed, whereas the sea ‘travels’ *Captain Nemo*, whose bed becomes the vast expanse of the sea bed. Both stories begin at a standstill, a suspension of action and time. *Odysseus* has been stranded for seven years on *Ogygia*, the island of “that powerful goddess, the Nymph *Calypso*”<sup>889</sup>, arrested between her promise for immortality and eternal youth and his desire to return home.<sup>890</sup> *Captain Nemo* is in his submarine literally suspended in the sea and arrested within the atmosphere of the *Nautilus* understood here as a continuation of a static interior landscape.

The *Odyssey* is associated with continuation between the natural, human and divine realms and even the Gods are ‘interested’ spectators who meddle with *Odysseus*’ fate following their personal motives. Concerned with reputation, inheritance, youth and ageing *The Odyssey* evokes a temporality of eternal recurrence, where everything is connected through rhythm. *Penelope*’s weaving by day and un-weaving by night and *Odysseus*’ recurring questions of “Who are you? Where you hail from? And what is your native town?” repeated throughout the book like mantras, embed these three fundamental questions of human life within a cyclic mode of temporality that defies linearity. *Captain Nemo*’s temporality, in contrast, is associated with spatial frontiers. In the absence of God(s) the unknown ocean ground remains the only territory for futuristic projections. Combining two forms of exoticism, a meshing of technology and aesthetics, it is a vehicle, however displaced, through which to imagine material security. Within this montage, the exotic ‘Other’ is commodified and appropriated through a – I refer here to characteristics which Dorflès assigns to kitsch – “familiarization of the exotic” and an “exoticization of the familiar”<sup>891</sup> and represented as a simulation of

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<sup>889</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, p. 21.

<sup>890</sup> The name *Calypso* can be traced to *Calypstein* (Gr for ‘to cover up’, ‘to veil’). This correlation could suggest that the Goddess *Calypso* is employed by Homer as a metaphoric counter-concept to Aristotle’s metaphysical principles of the productive faculty which Aristotle, for art and nature alike, conceived as a force that ‘brings something forth into existence’, that ‘unveils’.

<sup>891</sup> G. Dorflès, *Kitsch – an anthology of bad Taste*, p. 171.

Western culture.<sup>892</sup> Between the unknown depths of the ocean floor and its opaque surface as metaphors for more fundamental distinctions, *Captain Nemo's* adventures reiterate the irreconcilable nature inherent to all dichotic oppositions. His quest for *Heimat* remains a search for a home that can never be recovered as he seeks the authentic essence of the 'Other' in the conquest of other planets and temporal dimensions.

With *Odysseus* we have the exploitation and overcoming of the dualism between name and meaning, between Nobody and nobody, and with *Captain Nemo* the petrification and reification that cancel out any trajectory if this dualism collapses and the Nothing becomes fixed in an objectifiable world. The above circuitous discussion in order to formulate a theory of kitsch as Nobody/Nothing as opposed to nobody/nothing contextualizes kitsch as a structural cipher within the dualism of name and meaning. Focusing on kitsch's 'performativity' I want to investigate this dualism further by asking whether kitsch as a trope within art practice (to address an audience including myself) and its conceptualization as a term of critique (to judge a work of art) constitute two separate metaphysical principles with different implications for a discussion of kitsch which have to be taken into consideration.<sup>893</sup> I am thinking here of a notion of kitsch that arises from art practice as some sort of promise for a new discourse that replaces the traditional questions which have arisen from its investigation within philosophy and art criticism and reframes it in a new context. Taking into consideration that categories such as aesthetic inadequacy, inauthenticity or emotional appeal have different meanings for art practice than they have for its reception, I argue that kitsch

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<sup>892</sup> Instead of adapting his existence to the produce of the sea, *Captain Nemo* takes great care in finding ways to produce food and commodities that replicate 'terrestrial' cuisine and culture.

<sup>893</sup> Kulka's comment that "Pop art uses kitsch (it is put to use) and therefore not kitsch" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 111) indicates that it is not the work of art as such which raises the question as to whether it is kitsch or not, but that it is rather an issue of its being publicly sanctioned. Pop Art is no longer labelled as kitsch because it has entered the arena of 'high' art and, as such, is now interpreted as a stylistic device that is *about* kitsch and which comments on kitsch. Kulka's interpretation of postmodern art as "artistic rehabilitation of kitsch" (T. Kulka, 2002, p. 113) implies a notion of 'Kitsch' and kitsch, putting the cart before the horse, so to speak.

as an artistic strategy has the pragmatic potential to undo in practice what it arrests when employed as a term of critique. The critic/theoretician, by definition, writes *about art* from an interpretative (disinterested) vantage point whilst the artist simultaneously maintains a perspective of intimacy and “extimacy”<sup>894</sup> which allows him to address kitsch from a position that is inside as well as outside of the work of art. With the philosophical propositions on kitsch discussed in this thesis I address in the final chapter these issues which are, I argue, implicit in the working strategies of Jeff Koons, John Currin and Damien Hirst. Considering the difference between kitsch’s meaning as an abstract term in theoretical discourses and its contextual task in art practice, the final chapter takes into account that the problems posed by the debates in this thesis cannot be resolved as philosophical questions alone. They have to be traced back to their particularities in the everyday and investigated in the context of art practice. Following the systemic methodology which has been decisive throughout my research, I examine these questions with an understanding of kitsch as a ‘symptom’<sup>895</sup>, establishing a correlation between ‘paradoxical interventions’ employed in systemic therapy as a clinical and epistemological tool to induce structural changes and kitsch as a potential means to unhinge art from its traditionally allocated position.

With the previous discourses presented in this thesis as contexts for my discussion the directive for this examination of art practice will be my own perspective as a practitioner.

## **CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS – DISCOURSES ON KITSCH IN THE REALM OF ART PRACTICE**

When I embarked on my research in 2003 with my own everyday understanding and personal fascination in kitsch as starting points, I imagined

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<sup>894</sup> This term has been coined by Lacan to express the intersubjective workings of the subject and the unconsciousness.

<sup>895</sup> I refer to the parallel I have drawn between the pragmatics of systemic family therapy and my methodological approach to kitsch. See Chapter 1.

that I would write my conclusions at the end of this project as some sort of manifesto for Kirsch. I envisaged my investigation as a progressive accumulation of expertise which would provide me with the necessary arguments to write Kirsch's discourse of redemption. However, these preconceptions had to be revised as the journey of my research has taken me to an altogether different place than previously imagined. My inquiries into the topic and the field that surrounds its discourses have not given me the insights I anticipated but have rather fundamentally challenged my initial intentions. It transpires that the journey my theoretical inquiry has taken me on is quite similar to how I approach my painting practice. Indeed, it even seems, that this similarity in methodology constitutes in my research one of the most important shared moments of practice and theory that has arisen out of my commitment to this practice-led PhD. For me, a painting always starts with an idea, a mental vision which I wish to make visible through painting and represent as faithfully as possible. Similar to how I conceive of a painting and its realization, my theoretical research started with a firm 'vision' of Kirsch in mind and a plan for its defence. However, as in my practice, where each painting always dictates unanticipated adjustments in the process of its making and where my 'inner vision' is constantly subjugated to necessary revisions, my theoretical research too developed its own dynamic, taking my discussion of Kirsch into directions that I have not foreseen. With regard to my practice the finished painting always surprises me as each new painting displays certain properties which I have not previously envisaged and in doing so new ideas are generated that lead to further paintings and discoveries. Although my written project has indeed developed into some kind of discourse of redemption, this redemption is no longer framed by the 'good' Kirsch I had in mind at the outset. My research has evolved through a succession of hypotheses. Following my discussion of modernist debates I have made a statement about the historical and political dimensions of Kirsch. Reified in an object or the public, Kirsch has been conceptualized as a given that defines art and Kirsch in their historical contexts in a binary coupling. With

the uncoupling of this binary opposition, and following contemporary discourses, the modernist dialectic of art and kitsch has been reformulated into the binaries of kitsch and nostalgia and the useless and the useful, making a statement about kitsch's psychological dimensions and use. In order to reach beyond the dialectics conceptualizing kitsch as a generalized term framed by a discourse of essence and intrinsic values, I have elaborated through Bataille a concept for kitsch that redefines the questions surrounding its discourses in the dualism between task and meaning, between its particularity in practice and its abstraction as a term for critical and philosophical investigation. With task and meaning now separated there is no longer a theorization of kitsch but only a theory of its use in practice. This will be the topic of this final chapter. To relate kitsch back to practice, I argue, entails a re-description of kitsch as it provides a platform for its discourse characterized through contingency, historicity of forms, language and an emphasis on kitsch's functions within contemporary conditions of art.<sup>896</sup> A concept that conceives art and kitsch as contingent elements of a self-regulating system can no longer provide for a definition of kitsch with regard to an *a priori* point of reference. Its discourse is one of constant flux, a discourse of a quest with eternal deferral where any points of reference constantly recede to the horizon. Following the systemic approach that has been central throughout my research it would be controversial if this final chapter were to address the theorizations discussed in this thesis by assimilating them to practice in a mono-causal linearity. Taking kitsch seriously as a structural agency implies placing contextuality at the centre of my concerns and seeking a platform for my conclusions that acknowledges and retains the different 'Homes' of kitsch discussed throughout this thesis. As a result I address Jeff Koons, John Currin and Damien Hirst's works within a framework that simultaneously discusses them as reflections of these theoretical 'Homes' and with regard to how their works reflect on them: the modernist 'Home' of Greenberg, Broch's 'Home' of Nazi Germany, Adorno's

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<sup>896</sup> I refer to A. Danto, *Art after the End of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

impossible 'Home', Benjamin's 'Home' of the outmoded, Boym's 'Home' of a nostalgic exile, Kulka's useful 'Home' and the romantic Latin American 'Home' of Olalquiaga.<sup>897</sup>

Greenberg calls kitsch "the first universal culture ever beheld."<sup>898</sup> Although, at least within Western industrialized countries, kitsch seems to be rooted in some common understanding, my thesis has demonstrated that the way we perceive kitsch depends not only on generalized conditions, such as the time and country in which we live, but also on how we have been acculturated as individuals. As a result, the strands of interpretations I am left with from which to draw my conclusion can only be approximations of the concepts of other theoreticians and a conglomerate between their particular contexts, together with the notion of kitsch arising from my own acculturation. Interpreting these concepts with regard to different contexts of acculturation does not however mean reducing them to individual opinions but rather entails acknowledging that our identities are fundamentally embedded in the social and the cultural. As these connections are neither linear nor stable, concepts of kitsch can be assessed as signs for cultural differences that allow, in turn, drawing conclusions about the contexts within which they have been written. I am thinking of Adorno's prophetic judgments on the negative dialectics of kitsch and art together with his inability to overcome his pessimism for what art could still be *vis-à-vis* his view of the culture industry as a totalizing and unifying force. I am thinking too of Greenberg's essay on avant-garde art and kitsch which he has written before he could have anticipated the triumph of Abstract Expressionism. And I am thinking of Kulka's and Olalquiaga's discourses situated at the closure of the modernist era, in a context which transposes the debate of kitsch to other planes for investigation. Acknowledging these concepts in their separate contexts and approaching them with my own historical perspective means that they ultimately remain

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<sup>897</sup> I am portraying these various 'Homes' here in much generalized and simplistic terms with the aim of conveying some of their individual essences. I am aware that there are many cross-references between these 'Homes'.

<sup>898</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 535.

open for further interpretation. Kitsch cannot be conceived as a fixed given and always remains a social construct open for discourse. With this in mind I address the various strands of my discussion in this concluding chapter in my own 'Home': in the context of art practice, by relocating contemporary practice at the interstices between Modernism and mass culture, wherein kitsch is related to 'high' art through strategies of de-contextualization.

However, what kind of 'Home' could project itself beyond the false promise of a new 'Home'? What kind of 'Home' could reach beyond Greenberg's 'anti-Home', Adorno's negative 'Home' of homelessness, Kulka's useful 'Home' and Olalquiaga's lost 'Home', nostalgically mourned and melancholically recuperated in the 'Away'? What kind of 'Home' can we hope for in contemporary conditions?

In previous chapters I have drawn a parallel between my methodological approach to kitsch and the pragmatics of systemic therapy to explain kitsch's meaning as a structural 'symptom', which has been historically produced and modified to allow the system (of art) to maintain its 'homeostasis'<sup>899</sup>. In the context of Bataille's writing on heterological materialism I have further developed an understanding of kitsch through its tasks. For my examination of kitsch in the practice of Koons, Currin and Hirst I ask how these two understandings could be simultaneously conceived. In order to do so I present kitsch as an artistic trope in correlation to the concept of 'paradoxical proposition', a term which I derive from systemic family therapy.<sup>900</sup> In systemic family therapy paradoxical interventions/propositions are used as a

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<sup>899</sup> I borrow this term from the pragmatics of systemic therapy. I refer to my remarks in Chapter 1.

<sup>900</sup> I refer to my remarks in Chapter 1 and to M. Selvini, et al., *Paradox and CounterParadox* (New York: J. Aronson, 1978), P. Watzlawick, ed., *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1967) and to G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972). Systemic thinking marks a shift from social systems defined by role/structure, to an understanding of human beings as linguistic and communicative markers, concerned as it is with socially and culturally constructed 'texts'. Based on this understanding systemic logic focuses on structural conditions and dynamics that change in time and operates contextually, emphasizing the 'becoming' rather than the 'being'.

clinical and epistemological tool to unhinge the homeostasis of a system and to force it to re-organize its internal structures and dynamics. I have already stated in the first chapter that according to systemic therapy a symptom has to be understood pragmatically, namely as something which, however debilitating it might be, ultimately has an important function. As a result the symptom is not treated in isolation but interpreted and treated as both an expression of a structural whole and a major constituent of its dynamic. Based on this understanding the task of the therapist is to find a central 'lever' to unearth and transform the symptom within its structural context. In order to give this complexity justice, systemic therapy acknowledges that certain symptomatic dispositions render a system (family) incapable to follow a logic proposition. As a consequence and rather than acting logically, systemic therapists often intervene employing the symptom as a therapeutic tool. Making use of its own pragmatics, the symptom is redefined and formulated into paradoxical interventions/propositions which are constructed in such a way that the system can only maintain its symptom by sacrificing it. In the context of my evaluation of kitsch this correlation between 'kitsch' and 'paradoxical interventions/propositions' provides me with a platform to explore kitsch as a strategy that actively exploits its own status as symptom in the system of art, affirms it against itself and creatively transforms it into an agency enabling art to address its own structural conditions. Three types of 'paradoxical propositions', commonly used in systemic therapy, are of relevance here: re-labelling of the symptom, symptom escalation, crisis induction and redirection. What I have in mind is kitsch as a means for art to proclaim its status *vis-à-vis* the commodity, craft and ornament - not antagonistically but paradoxically - by embedding itself further within its own condition of commodification.

With kitsch remaining as the critical thing, I argue that the un-decidability induced by 'paradoxical propositions' cannot be resolved with ambiguity, as ambiguity inevitably still presupposes some definite idea of art and its anti-system (kitsch). Conceived as a paradoxical structure of crossing and return,



these propositions cannot be neutralized within a dialectic model of epistemology. As such 'paradoxical propositions' reach beyond the 'organized transgressions' of post-modern devices which ultimately follow the unifying and segregating dialectics they aim to defy and, failing to address the structural conditions which enunciated these antinomies in the first place,<sup>901</sup> only lead to further consolidations of opposites.

Writing about kitsch in the context of art practice, Maharaj<sup>902</sup> discusses Paolozzi's "Kitsch Cabinet" (1970) as art that testifies to

"kitsch at odds with itself, as shot through with the sense of being both no more than itself and something beside itself, something expressed to the second power – the one citing and undercutting the other in an unending, convoluted play between the terms."<sup>903</sup>

The employment of kitsch in art is for Maharaj a question of 'semantic fission', (a term he borrows from Lévi-Strauss), where the "emphasis falls on splitting – on prising open a gap between established orders of meaning, signs, things."<sup>904</sup> To expand on this proposition Maharaj refers to Derrida's theories of the pragmatics of 'undecidability' as a determinate oscillation between possibilities. Maharaj's emphasis on kitsch's potential for inducing intellectual and aesthetic uncertainties when brought into constellation with art does, however, only function if we still accept a concept of art within which kitsch can be "at odds with itself". If, in contrast, we acknowledge that kitsch no longer resides in either the 'Home' or the 'Away' - that it cannot further be framed as an aesthetic anti-system - then kitsch is no longer outside of art; there is only art with kitsch in it.<sup>905</sup> Rather than conceptualizing the relationship between kitsch and art as some sort of constellation that in turn

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<sup>901</sup> This observation has already been made by Adorno in his comments on the false reconciliation of high art and mass culture propagated by the culture industry.

<sup>902</sup> S. Maharaj, "Pop Art's Pharmacies".

<sup>903</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>904</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>905</sup> Following the line of argument that kitsch and Modernity are structurally interdependent, correlated in substance and emerging simultaneously around 1850, and with Modernism as an aesthetic project ending around 1960/70, we can no longer conceive of kitsch in modernist terms. This also pertains to contemporary conditions of art practice characterized through pluralism, liberalism and multiculturalism.

becomes fixed again as a 'stable' 'undecidable', I believe that any 'undecidables' have to be understood by themselves as fugitive, transient and situated within the complex dynamics of the art market and value formations. In its endeavour to stabilize 'undecidable' propositions the (art) market is in constant flux as it absorbs endless new positions into the mainstream. Together with my previous comments on Bataille's theorization of rejection and assimilation and with Maharaj's proposition, kitsch is either redeemed and absorbed into 'high' art aesthetics as it becomes sanctioned by the market and the development of a critical literature (as for example with Koons) or remains a fixed category of aesthetic inadequacy, and as such is expelled from 'high' art contexts and fed back into the system as pure commodity (as with Shepard or Kinkade)<sup>906</sup>. This suggests that only as long as kitsch is neither absorbed by the system as high art nor expelled from it as tasteless trash, can it remain what Maharaj calls the indeterminate sign that "sits on the fence, at once 'related' to and part of both sides of the divide even as it is 'different', apart from either."<sup>907</sup> I argue, however, that an explanation of the relationship between kitsch and art through the term 'undecidability' remains a theoretical concept which cannot be sustained for the practical reality of art in which, I believe, any 'undecidability' between kitsch and art will always immediately, if not even *a priori*, be decided.

Reflecting on these issues in the context of my earlier remarks on kitsch as a 'paradoxical proposition' in art practice, my interpretations of the works of Koons, Currin and Hirst follow a different path. With the possibility of conceiving kitsch as a symptom (its meaning) and of its 'performativity' as an interruptive force simultaneously, I interpret these artists' propositions as works of art that no longer seek the profound answers in art in an antagonistic formulation to commodification, but rather by addressing the celebration of consumption itself. With this proposition the fundamental questions between

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<sup>906</sup> Shepard and Kinkade are two artists who are extremely successful commercially while completely ignored by contemporary art criticism and the 'high art' market.

<sup>907</sup> H. Steinbach, "Joy of Tapping Our Feet" in *ParKett*, no. 14, 1987, pp. 16-17, quoted in S. Maharaj, "Pop Art's Pharmacies", p. 337.

kitsch and art are reframed in an aesthetic encounter that imposes 'interestedness'. Through my analysis I argue for an understanding of Koons, Currin and Hirst's works as art that deliberately produces its own symptoms. By pronouncing art's contemporary condition through the rhetoric of this very condition, these artists' works derange art itself from its allocated definition, namely the tradition of not being associated with commodities. I have chosen these three as their individual approaches in addressing the relationship between art and kitsch are complementary and together they deconstruct all the binaries and normative positions given to kitsch by previous discourses. Each pronounces different characteristics of kitsch and as they illuminate its relationship to art, they emphasize aspects such as commodity fetishism, nostalgia, the outmoded and value formations. Evoking these binaries through their different understandings of what they want their art to be, they provide a platform for elucidating on the binaries, which have been discussed so far in a philosophical context, in their particularities rather than as abstracted and generalized terms. With works touching on aspects of art's capability as diverse as the masterpiece, the work of art as a receptacle for desires and even as fetish, the question is raised as to whether a work of art remains the same in different circumstances or whether it can go between different 'types' of being.<sup>908</sup> Whether it can simultaneously be a 'thing', a combination of object and authenticity (in the sense of Heidegger); a commodity with no intrinsic values and qualities which has neither authenticity nor autonomy (in the sense of Marx); a gift, a commodity with a social, political dimension when entering into a form of exchange (in the sense of Appadurai) or a prop, a support object defined through its 'job' (in the sense of Bataille). If we accept that art pertains to all these qualities and simultaneously acknowledge that there is no definite form it has to assume, it can, I argue, break the 'double-bind' of its contemporary conditions, namely

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<sup>908</sup> For this remark I am indebted to Andrea Phillips' series of lectures in spring 2008 on the 'thing', the commodity, the gift and the prop, given to the MFA and Fine Art Curating course at Goldsmiths.

that only an *illusion* of alternatives is sustained.<sup>909</sup> By refusing to choose whether it wants to be a 'thing', a commodity fetish, a social commodity or a prop, art is negating negation itself and addressing its own crisis instead through 'symptom escalation' and re-evaluation.<sup>910</sup> Marked by excess and instability, it is creating *aporias*<sup>911</sup> for a re-interrogation of its tasks in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>909</sup> I refer to P. Watzlawick, ed., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. Watzlawick's theory of the double-bind and its pragmatic effects on interpersonal communication is grounded in his understanding of it as a communication pattern that induces untenable dilemmas. These are induced through the effects of the double-bind which is constructed in such a way that the illusion of alternatives between different options to choose from is maintained whereas there are in reality none. As a consequence, Watzlawick stresses 'the refusal to choose' as the only possible choice to exit the paradoxical situation imposed through the double-bind. To illuminate his theory Watzlawick recounts Chaucer's "The Wife of Bath's Tale". A knight, accused of having raped a young girl, is sentenced to death by the queen, but given the chance to evade his fate if he finds within the period of a year the solution to the riddle "What is it that women desire most?" Unable to find it until on the last day encountering an ugly old witch who provides him with the answer (that women want sovereignty over men) under condition that he marries her. The knight accepts, but repulsed by her appearance he cannot consummate the marriage upon which she offers him two further alternatives: that she will stay as she is and serve him as a faithful wife or turn into a young attractive woman whose infidelity will plunge him into misery. The knight refuses this time to choose between the two alternatives and the spell is broken as he replies: "I do no fors the whether of the two" (P. Watzlawick, 1967, pp. 213-14).

<sup>910</sup> It is important to stress that such a re-valuation of the symptom is not directed at kitsch as such but towards its tasks as a structural cipher.

<sup>911</sup> Understood as situations where no *a priori* path exists.

## KOONS

The central concerns of Jeff Koons (Born 1955) - capitalist consumer culture, the aesthetic of display and art's claim to eternal values – make him an obvious choice for a discussion of kitsch in relation to art. Breaking with the taboos of modernist art, his work aims at conveying a message to an audience as wide as possible through strategies that blur the boundaries between high and low culture, art and life, sex, religion and consumerism. Adopting the strategies and channels of the marketing and entertainment industries as models for a contemporary art that reclaims its impact on society, Koons places the audience at the centre of his concerns and understands his work as the sign of a new communication that conveys the values of self worth and security to the viewer/owner.

If we judge Koons' work in relation to kitsch with the 'distant look' of the spectator, we can perceive it as popularized aesthetic, or, in Modernist terms, as an aesthetic anti-system<sup>912</sup> that has entered the arena of a new 'high' aesthetic.<sup>913</sup> We can either assimilate it as contemporary 'high' art and recognize it as an expression of his (camp) sensibility that has carried kitsch to a new level, or reject it outright as kitsch. Within the framework of these interpretations Koons' work remains banal insofar as it only reverses the traditional order of aesthetic judgment. Viewing his work as quotations and tied to commoditization, fixes it in an either/or dichotomy that cannot break its chains.

To interpret Koons' work instead through Bataille's notion of de Sade as the inassimilable 'foreign body', I argue, offers a more interesting challenge as it opens the work up to fundamental questions which undermine easy categorizations. Some of Robert Rosenblum's<sup>914</sup> introductory remarks to *The*

<sup>912</sup> In Greenberg's terms Koons' work could be still interpreted as anti-aesthetics. As we are now operating in the contemporary field such an interpretation is no longer viable.

<sup>913</sup> As it is recuperated as 'high art and assimilated by the art market.

<sup>914</sup> R. Rosenblum, "Notes on Jeff Koons", in *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Anthony d'Offay Gallery London, 1992), pp. 11-28. Robert Rosenblum evokes modernist and contemporary discourses on kitsch as his comments

*Jeff Koons Handbook* hint at these complexities as they simultaneously recall both the rhetoric of modernist and post-modern discourses of kitsch. In Rosenblum's essay Koons is both a nostalgic/melancholic creator of "modern relics" who seeks to redeem the outmoded "by petrifying forever, [...] the now useless fossil remains of flashlights, toothbrushes, light-bulbs, and ale cans" and an anti-modernist who is involved in the "[L]eveling of different centuries and different kinds of glory to a populist, Disney World perspective."<sup>915</sup> However, can we state that Koons is flattering the general public? And if so, does he meet the public with its own tastelessness or is he rather provocative? Does his art confront western capitalist society with the very art it deserves or does it aim at transcending it?

It would be an obvious interpretation of Koons' work to state that he embraces kitsch. But such an embrace can only be provocative (or indeed make sense) within an art context in which the dichotic opposition of kitsch and art is still in place and it is dependent on a general agreement of what art is. Koons knows that within the contemporary context of art such an agreement is no longer a given.<sup>916</sup> A less obvious and more suitable approach for a reconsideration of the relation of Koons' work to kitsch is then perhaps hinted at by his own statement in an interview with David Sylvester. Koons states: "I've worked with things that are sometimes labelled as kitsch; but I've never had an interest in kitsch *per se*."<sup>917</sup> Not only does this statement address a schism between aesthetic judgment and artistic production but it simultaneously raises the question of whether these two acts entail a different principle of kitsch that relates to two distinct concepts of aesthetics. An aesthetics which Koons calls an "[A]esthetics' on its own", dismissing it "as a great discriminator among people" as it disparages the

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allude to both the nostalgic overtones of contemporary contextualization of kitsch and the modernist antinomy of 'high' and 'low'.

<sup>915</sup> R. Rosenblum, "Notes on Jeff Koons", p. 20.

<sup>916</sup> I refer to *Kant after Duchamp* where de Duve demonstrates that the consensus of the 'we' is no longer a given, that "[T]here is no theoretical foundation to aesthetic judgement; [...] there is no basis in theory for the sentimental sentence by way of which you call art what you call art" (T. de Duve, 1999, p.50).

<sup>917</sup> D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), p. 332.

populace and “makes people feel unworthy to experience art”<sup>918</sup> and an aesthetics conceived as a possible re-orientating task for art. Koons’ aesthetics is centred on the intention of the artist. He has “no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication.”<sup>919</sup> Koons’ redefinition of the (Kantian) aesthetics of the spectator into an aesthetics of the artist as a mediator of values, points towards a different metaphysical principle at work. From the perspective of the subjective/creative faculty, aesthetics cannot constitute a rhetorical context to talk *about* art - instead it becomes an aesthetics to *talk* art within the context of art, to create possibilities for aesthetic experience. Koons’ comment brings into focus the fact that our ability to perceive kitsch depends on the ‘distant look’<sup>920</sup> and that kitsch is ultimately a term used in ‘disinterested’ judgment. Koons’ statement pronounces a split between kitsch as a phenomenon and kitsch as a term of critique, a concept enunciated through the structural conditions of art. What this means is that above all else, kitsch has a specific function in aesthetic judgment that differs from its task in the context of artistic production which, by its very nature, always implies ‘interestedness’ and a relationship of proximity between the artist and his work. For Koons “aesthetics [is] a tool [...] a psychological tool”<sup>921</sup>. It is a tool to communicate with as many people as possible, to seduce, manipulate, comfort and reassure them. It is a tool to convey the message which forms the core of his art; namely that people should “feel good about themselves and [...] have confidence in themselves”<sup>922</sup>, that they should “have a sense of security in their own past”, “embrace their own past”<sup>923</sup> and ultimately even “embrace who they are.”<sup>924</sup> Understanding his role as a mediator of happiness and his work as having “no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication”<sup>925</sup>, there is

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<sup>918</sup> Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>919</sup> “Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons”, in *The Jeff Koons Handbook*, p. 31.

<sup>920</sup> I refer to my discussion of Olalquiaga.

<sup>921</sup> D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, p. 342.

<sup>922</sup> Ibid., p. 332.

<sup>923</sup> Ibid., p. 341.

<sup>924</sup> “Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons”, p. 32.

<sup>925</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

no scope for a discontinuation between life and art: "My art and my life are totally one"<sup>926</sup>. Koons formulates the conception of himself in opposition to how Greenberg envisages the role of an artist as a vigilant guardian of the "fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere", blaming kitsch for the erasure of "his distinction in practice."<sup>927</sup> As Koons re-invests industrially produced objects with personal narrative and maps his artistic subjectivity onto mass consciousness, Koons' life and the work of art become one. So why can we judge Koons' work as kitsch whilst we cannot place the same verdict on anti-art movements such as *Dada* or *Fluxus*, in spite of them both aiming at a sublation of the art/life dichotomy? The answer I believe is that, in contrast to *Dada* or *Fluxus*, Koons does not seek the dissolution of the border between art and life outside of aesthetics but precisely within it. Kitsch lies less in the dissolution of the border between art and life as such, rather referring to the fact that Koons' art works are objects. The verdict of kitsch is not tied to the artist's intention but to the object itself. With Koons, however, this distinction becomes impossible. He insists: "I have no perception of Jeff Koons, absolutely not [...] because to me I am nonexistent."<sup>928</sup> Although his statement cannot be taken at face value, it suggests that to a certain extent, it is Koons' intent to disappear behind his own brand. This cunning play and doubling back on the dualism between public and artist implicit in art practice evokes *Odysseus*' strategy to escape from *Polyphemus*' deadly cave. Declaring himself as *Nemo* in the face of the public, Koons dispenses with the schism between the artist as creator and the spectator as his work becomes what other people see in it and he becomes what other people see in him. Conflating the work of art, the artist and the spectator in an abstracted notion of public desire Koons reverses the traditional order of artistic practice. An art practice, however, drawing its main incentives from the needs of its consumer audience through his analysis of these needs, also implies that the work of art

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<sup>926</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>927</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 536.

<sup>928</sup> "Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons", p. 8.



gains a new status as a commodity. Dissolving the boundary between the desire for the commodity and the desire for art, Koons is re-instating the reality principle in desire by quite literally following Marx's definition of the commodity<sup>929</sup> as a thing that through its qualities, first of all, satisfies human needs. Instead of pursuing a strategy that seeks to maintain the illusion that art can remain outside the capitalist economy, Koons' artworks, on the contrary, express the very symptoms of this economy: the aestheticization of the commodity (commodity fetishism), a hedonistic consumerism (false consciousness) and the commercial exploitation of sexuality (profit maximization). Paradoxically, however, he does so by confronting capitalist consumer society with the very one commodity the wider public cannot afford.

Looking at Koons' use of aesthetics as a psychological tool of communication in the light of these remarks it transpires that, although he might not be interested in kitsch *per se*, his strategies take recourse to the values commonly attributed to kitsch. Defending these values overtly, not as kitsch, but as artistic devices in the context of art, Koons infuses art with the very 'symptom' art was depending on to maintain its specificity and to regulate itself as a system. Koons' work is indeed not kitsch *per se*, it is perhaps about kitsch but simultaneously it is also about art. Kitsch is evoked through his work in a multiple of registers. Through his work, with regard to its formal aspects and to what it represents, kitsch is reconstructed as it lavishly displays some of its most prominent attributes and multi-faceted features ranging from attraction to repulsion. The sum of these elements, however do not add up to kitsch. Conceived as a work of art, the work itself cannot be kitsch *per se* as there is only the possibility for its approximation on the part of the artist and judgment on the part of the spectator. As works of art they are not kitsch but rather represent kitsch as something that is 'in-between', experienced by a particular subject encountering a particular object executed in a certain manner. Koons' work demonstrates that kitsch does not belong to

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<sup>929</sup> I refer to the first chapter in the *Capital*.

a fixed category of certain things/objects that represent a dead or inadequate aesthetics but rather that it operates through personal narrative and cultural analysis.

What makes Koons' strategies still more complex, even paradoxical, is his play on the impossibility of literalness in modern art.<sup>930</sup> Literalness exaggerated is no longer literal. Tuned into the normality of aesthetic judgment for 'difficult' art, for which we have acquired a vast repertory of rhetoric, Koons' commodities-as-art, whether we love or hate them, pose for the contemporary mind quite a challenge as it turns out that it is in fact the 'disinterested' artwork that can be most readily harnessed into the social process. Used to judge works of art staged in the 'back' regions<sup>931</sup> and along principles that imply a 'detour', suggesting hidden meanings waiting to be discovered, extracted and interpreted, Koons' works leave us quite helpless and even wondering if we 'just don't get it'. As we indeed *don't get it* if we still operate in the register of art as 'high' culture, the question is raised whether Koons marks a shift in Postmodernism towards an understanding of art as the cultural (that includes popular culture and is opening up the personal) where art no longer signifies 'high' culture. And as Koons gives no definite answers to how we are supposed to interpret this literalness, the banality he addresses for example with his series of works aptly titled *Banality* (1988), opens up the banal. The viewer is invited to engage in an associative free play as Koons turns surplus, excess and the waste of commodity culture into signs for truth and immortality; where even an arrangement of vacuum cleaners<sup>932</sup> representing "cleanliness and a form of order"<sup>933</sup> is employed as a symbol for the essential and the eternal. As these every-day objects of a consumer throw-away culture are allocated by him the eternal values of a

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<sup>930</sup> In my discussion of the 'garden gnome' in Chapter 4 I have commented on Duchamp's remark that even a mass-produced object can become an aestheticized object in the context of art.

<sup>931</sup> I refer to Frow's theorization of tourism discussed in Chapter 4.

<sup>932</sup> Koons comments on *New Hoover Convertibles*, *New Shelton Wet/Dry Doubledecker 1981-86* about a work that conveys the psychological state of newness and immortality (Jeff Koons *Handbook*, 1992, p. 48).

<sup>933</sup> I quote Koons' own comment on *New Hoover Deluxe Schampoo Polishers 1981-86*.

work of art, they challenge our relationship to both art and the every-day commodity.

It is, however, not simply through his aesthetics that Koons is testing taboos and reversing traditional values in artistic practice. It is his choice of subject-matter that has mainly been responsible for his reputation as a kitsch artist. Fusing Baroque heritage with the familiar objects of modern kitsch, Koons' works force "the viewer to confront the petrified realities of modern capitalism"<sup>934</sup> as they conjure up a hybrid world of high art and Marx's notion of the commodity fetish. Koons' subject-matter, however, is neither really commensurate with kitsch nor is it ironic. His sculptures do not simply represent objects of bad taste. These objects are very much parts of a collective memory of low culture, such as the knick-knacks that people might have on their mantelpiece, little useless objects charged with memory and personal affection.<sup>935</sup> And although he is tapping with these objects into ready-made stock emotions to use, as he insists, "the public as a ready-made instead of any object"<sup>936</sup>, we cannot relate to them in the same way as we do with the bibelots in our home as Koons transforms them into gigantic monuments<sup>937</sup>. Besides that, Koons' sculptures, as for example in his series *Banality* (1988), are not straightforward reproductions of mass produced kitsch objects but they rather seem to be conglomerates of visual familiarities; strange concoctions of various knick-knacks as he/we remember(s) them and not as they really are.

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<sup>934</sup> D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, p. 378.

<sup>935</sup> I focus in this part of my discussion on *Banality* (1988), a series of works which comprises souvenir-like kitsch objects in porcelain and stainless steel and on *Puppy* (1992).

<sup>936</sup> "Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons", p. 86.

<sup>937</sup> I will elucidate further on this point together with Stewart's theorization of 'the gigantic' in *On Longing*.

On *Kiepenkerl* (1987), an oversized stainless steel sculpture of a happy looking peddler, Koons comments:

"I decided to give the piece radical plastic surgery, somehow to get it together again so I could display it. Through this radical work on it, through having craftsmen work and bend and not maintain the integrity of the original model, I was liberated to go on."<sup>938</sup>

As archetypical kitsch objects of a certain period and culture, they are not about a particular (kitsch) object but rather condense the essence of bric-a-brac of their time and in doing so, they pertain to memory and cultural identity. This essence is conveyed through a montage of their most characteristic traits resulting in an evocation of familiarity without them actually becoming familiar. Sharing the same generation and a similar cultural background with Koons enables us to relate, for example, the cute angels, the 'squeaky clean' pig and the little boy in *Ushering in Banality* (1988) to our own experiences. The memories evoked are individual and collective as Koons' works simultaneously tap into both the personal and the cultural.<sup>939</sup> About *Popples* (1988), a giant porcelain sculpture of a silly looking soft toy, Koons comments ambiguously: "Everybody grew up surrounded by this material. [...] I use it to penetrate mass consciousness"<sup>940</sup>, leaving it open as to whether we personally relate to *Popples*, a mass-produced soft toy of its time, or to porcelain, the material he used for its making. As projection screens for individual and collective memories Koons' gigantic sculptures of these kitsch objects are, however, not simply 'time documents' of capitalist consumer

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<sup>938</sup> "Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons", p. 86.

<sup>939</sup> In *Je me souviens: Les choses communes* (Paris: Hachette, 1978), a study about collective, cultural memory, Georges Perec writes exactly about these mundane objects, the commodities and iconographies from advertisements, which are according to his research the most important and potent means to constitute cultural identity. Frow (*Time & Commodity Culture*) comments on Perec's contribution: "Georges Perec's *Je me souviens* is a random set of 480 entries, each beginning 'Je me souviens' and each attempting to recover a memory which is 'almost forgotten, trivial, banal, and shared, if not by everyone, at least by many people'. They are thus by no means 'personal' memories but rather 'little bits of everyday life, things that in one year or another, everyone of the same age saw, experienced, shared, and then disappeared and were forgotten; they weren't worth being memorized, didn't deserve to be part of History, or to figure in the memories of statesmen'" (Frow, 1997, p. 119).

<sup>940</sup> "Phrases and Philosophies by Jeff Koons", p. 98.

culture. They are not mimicking commodities (that speak for or against themselves depending on how we perceive them) that have assumed a fixed meaning. They are heroic monuments to the 'new' and, as time passes, they become memorials to the outmoded, to the commodity, the 'victims' of waste, surplus and excess 'who' have not survived the latest fashion. Representing mundane commodities otherwise destined to end up on the scrap heap of progress and being condemned to oblivion, they recoup 20<sup>th</sup> century American culture, understood here in its original meaning; not as 'cultural heritage', an accumulation of dead aesthetics, but as a lived experience condensed in a certain visual sensibility. In this context we can interpret Koons' claim to make people 'feel secure' and to enable them to 'embrace their own past' in relation to an understanding of consumer commodities as things with a 'social value', a social 'life' and 'biography'.<sup>941</sup> As such they are affirmed as elements of support for the development of a narrative and act as potent triggers for cultural identity, pointing to a re-orientating task for art to recuperate the familiar from oblivion in the face of novelty and the rapid change of fashion.<sup>942</sup> Like Benjamin before him, it seems that part of the task that Koons has set himself with his art is to act as some sort of material historicist. He addresses the conditions of contemporary consumer society through its cultural fragments and endows them with the values of truth and eternity by re-contextualizing them as art.<sup>943</sup> Through his focus on the ephemeral commodity culture and its material expressivity, Koons' work heightens our awareness of the rapid changes in product-design mirrored in the fluctuation of artistic styles as a means of periodization in the history of art. The dialectic relationship between fashion and the outmoded is not limited to the mundane object but afflicts artistic styles in equal measure.

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<sup>941</sup> I refer to A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: University Press, 1986).

<sup>942</sup> I refer to my discussion of Michael Thompson's model to explain cultural value shifts in *Rubbish Theory: The Construction and Destruction of Value* (1979) in Chapter 4.

<sup>943</sup> This demonstrates that Koons' insistence on the sublation of the life/art dichotomy is not as simple as he claims. He depends on the system of art as he cannot assert the truth for his art without that specific context.

In Koons' work the value of mundane and cheap knick-knacks is crystallized in new forms that relate to expendable luxury. Enacting this tension between 'cultural poverty' and luxury they simultaneously mimic and reject the normalizing circulation of commodities. The mundane commodity is elevated to becoming luxury and luxury is re-defined in consumption as a creative act. Although this strategy recalls the works of Andy Warhol, there is an important difference between Warhol and Koons. Warhol's mechanization of the production of the artwork mimics the modes of reproducibility and industrialization to induce the common object with a notion of abstraction. The production mode of consumer goods is evoked in art and made to look like art. Koons, in contrast, does not place emphasis on the technologies of mass production but on the mass-produced objects themselves. He maps the technologies of mass production onto his works to make them look like serially produced cultural artefacts to which a wide range of people can relate, establishing notions of belonging within the tension of mass production and personal narrative.

I have already established that Koons' works are not straightforward replications of consumer goods. Their gigantic size is incommensurate with how we would normally perceive these objects and acts as a counterweight to their play on stock emotions inviting intimacy. As knick-knacks on a monumental scale, they command distance and become re-infused with the status of being art. *Balloon Dog*, as Koons states in an interview with David Sylvester, is not simply "a balloon that a clown would maybe twist for you at a birthday party [...] it's a Trojan horse."<sup>944</sup> Because of the scale of these works we are no longer able to enter with them into the relationship we might have with the bibelots on our mantelpiece, a relationship of 'individual interiority'<sup>945</sup> which Stewart charts as a major attribute of the souvenir. The scale of Koons' works does not invite an anthropocentric view. Vis-à-vis these hugely

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<sup>944</sup> D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, p. 339.

<sup>945</sup> I refer to S. Stewart's remarks on the miniature and the souvenir in *On Longing* and to my discussion in Chapter 3.

enlarged versions of knick-knacks we are transformed into *Gullivers* in the land of Brobdingnag<sup>946</sup>, the land of the giants.

In 2005 I had an encounter with *Puppy* (1992). Nearly twelve meters tall, it was sitting like a giant watchdog in front of the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao, clearly visible from great distance. As I approached it, it gradually lost its distinct shape. No longer perceivable as a sculpture of a puppy, *Puppy* morphed into a wall of flowering plants, a giant garden of cascading flowers reminiscent of hanging flower baskets, a popular ornamental feature in English culture. From close up it could no longer be interiorized as a whole, as the parts (flowers and plants) it is made of became severed from their referent.



**Jeff Koons: *Puppy* (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, detail)**

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<sup>946</sup> | refer to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

*Puppy* led me to consider what is entailed in judging a work of art aesthetically. Only if viewed from a distance can *Puppy* be recognized as a work of art and only with the 'distant look' it acquires the form that can be an object of aesthetic contemplation and inquiry. On close inspection, however, *Puppy* is a work of art which turns into a piece of nature. Forever changing with the coming and going of the seasons as the flowers of which it is comprised sprout, flower and die – *Puppy* has, I was told, its own gardener.

*Puppy* is a hybrid between nature and a work of art; equally frequented by art lovers and birds, butterflies and other insects which have chosen it as their home. Made of hundreds of flowering plants *Puppy* is reminiscent of giant topiaries and other fantastic garden follies, cultivated by eccentric monarchs for their amusement. The plants it is made of are common ones, such as peonies, petunias, geraniums, begonias and chrysanthemums. Can these flowers be kitsch? Can *Puppy* be kitsch? The first question we would most certainly answer with a 'no'. The second question depends on whether we like Koons' work and in this particular case, whether or not we like *Puppy*. But then again, it is not that simple. As *Puppy* is entirely made of flowers, can we still judge it as kitsch? *Puppy* made me think of Greenberg's statement about the avant-garde artist who must try

"In effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape – not its picture – is aesthetically valid; something given [his italics], increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals."<sup>947</sup>

It is Kant's notion of the beautiful as a determinate for aesthetic judgment that is evoked through Greenberg's comparison of avant-garde art's aspirations with nature which made me think of him in my encounter with *Puppy*. Deriving its foundation and understanding from natural beauty, Kant defines taste as a special faculty to perceive in art the point of perfection - as it exists in nature. With its hybrid nature *Puppy* begs the question of whether we are supposed to judge it for its natural or its artificial beauty. Whilst it makes no sense to ask

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<sup>947</sup> C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", 1992, p. 531.



whether the geraniums *Puppy* is made of are more kitsch than the begonias, petunias or chrysanthemums, as we cannot compare them with their negations or some sort of a *priori* concept, we can relate to this question with regard to *Puppy* as a work of art in comparison to other works of art. In its being art as well as nature, *Puppy* articulates the very border between culture and nature. It leaves us at a loss to whether we should approach it nostalgically and attempt to close the gap between its signifier (material nature) and its signified (abstract nature), or whether we should acknowledge the alienation this gap pronounces. *Puppy*, then, raises general questions regarding our relationship to nature as a whole, to questions whether nature can be kitsch or made into kitsch if cultivated and shaped into ornamental designs. According to Kulka “[N]ature itself cannot be kitsch, only its representation can”<sup>948</sup> and he insists that even when we perceive a particularly dramatic sunset as ‘kitschy’, we only do so because it reminds us of kitschy sunset paintings. But is this really true and have we not become so accustomed to our ‘second nature’<sup>949</sup> that it is now rather nature itself that we perceive as a reproduction of itself?

Considering these fundamental questions that are raised by Koons’ works, it would be wrong to argue that they yield immediate identifications for its audience simply because they look like kitsch and play on stock emotions. These works are not, to paraphrase Greenberg’s definition of kitsch, ‘immediate’ and ‘self-evident’, but they rather present aesthetic experiences that are far more complex and opaque.

As *Puppy* towers over us, like a phantasmagorical fetish of a huge knick-knack, an eccentric display of some flower show or a pagan God<sup>950</sup> of some unidentified cult, it refuses to be appropriated as one or the other, becoming

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<sup>948</sup> T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, p. 90.

<sup>949</sup> Coined by Marcuse, the expression ‘second nature’ has been used by him to comment on consumer economy and the politics of corporate Capitalism.

<sup>950</sup> According to Stewart the gigantic stands for the pagan, the creator and destroyer as she associates grants with the transition from leisure and production into consumption.

itself a monument to our relationship to commodities, both threatening and intriguing with a meaning far stranger than kitsch.

In *On Longing* Stewart theorizes our interactions with the miniature and the gigantic as two distinct modes of relationships. Whilst the miniature, with its dominant motifs of wealth and nostalgia, evokes visual appropriation, subjectivity and privacy, Stewart conceptualizes the gigantic in the aesthetic register of the sublime. As we become “enveloped by the gigantic”<sup>951</sup> Stewart associates the gigantic with experiences of astonishment and surprise. In mythology, Stewart continues, the giant represents the antithesis to the cultivated man.<sup>952</sup> It lacks individual identity and belongs to a ‘world without a world’; a fantasy that exteriorizes and communalizes what might otherwise be considered ‘the subjective’. Following Bakhtin’s writing on the carnival, Stewart expounds on the gigantic as part of the popular image of the grotesque that moves from nature to the world of the spectacle. A figure of surplus, abundance and unlimited consumption, Stewart characterizes the qualities of gigantification as the precedence of quantity over quality, of façade over content and of materiality over mediation, associating it with “the abstract space of mass production.”<sup>953</sup> Following Stewart’s theorizations, Koons’ giant sculptures of kitsch objects and commodities can be interpreted as representing surplus with regard to both form and content. As art they convey the spectacle of over-abundance. As gigantic commodities they are substitutes for obsolescence in the rapid change of fashion and represent excess through spatial over-abundance and an individualization of their references. With regard to form they are over-articulated objects with a heightened awareness of materiality and detail which connote to the emotional and visual excess of a hedonistic consumer culture. They simultaneously function as ciphers for waste, excess and overproduction in the context of capitalist economic management. Koons’ works do not address

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<sup>951</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p.71.

<sup>952</sup> I refer here also to my discussion of *Odysseus’* encounter with the *Cyclopes* in Chapter 4.

<sup>953</sup> S. Stewart, *On Longing*, p.93.

modern consumer culture antagonistically. They nevertheless powerfully question our relation to commodity culture in pronouncing it within the iconography and rhetoric of this culture. As Koons' works indulge in the very 'symptoms' this culture produces, and as he address them overtly and with a playful pleasure in its excesses, Koons' strategy, I argue, is one of symptom escalation and redefinition.<sup>954</sup> Working within a context in which art has become engulfed by the 'culture industry' Koons' strategy of resistance is to outdo its mechanisms via its own workings, and with the very surplus and waste this system produces. In doing so he recognizes that in the contemporary context of art kitsch no longer functions as an inauthentic 'Other' for art but has become a possible expression to enable art to remain 'authentic':

As Koons' gigantic versions of kitsch consumer culture commodities leave the arena of kitsch, they haunt us with their literalness and render us uncertain to what his works really are. And as their familiar and 'homey' design reconfigures the well-known into something we cannot grasp, we try to defend ourselves and continue to either judge them as kitsch or art in spite of our knowledge about the inadequacy of such a verdict.

But we should not worry. Koons' generosity towards the public keeps us safe as he assures us that "the viewer can't judge it, and it can't be wrong."<sup>955</sup>

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<sup>954</sup> I refer to the various types of 'paradoxical propositions' used in systemic therapy.  
<sup>955</sup> D. Sylvester, *Interviews with American Artists*, p. 335.

## CURRIN

“Painting is a doomed enterprise if you are an American.”<sup>956</sup> This statement by the American painter John Currin (born 1962) made in 2003, by which time his work has already gained him an international reputation, seems far remote from Greenberg’s optimism for the future of American painting expressed some forty years earlier in “Modernist Painting” as a manifesto for a modern American cultural identity that asserts itself against European tradition. Contextualizing his work at the intersections between contemporary conditions of painting and its European tradition, Currin defines his own practice antagonistically to Greenberg’s legacy. In Currin’s work it is the European painting tradition that is elevated into the contemporary context to produce a social commentary on American life and a re-examination of Abstract Expressionism as an American cultural tradition. Fusing painting’s tradition and 21<sup>st</sup> century’s mass culture, Currin’s paintings are replete with popular<sup>957</sup> and art historical references<sup>958</sup>, as well as with a rich vocabulary of realistic styles ranging from deliberate bad painting and expressionistic brushstrokes to Old Master techniques. This “fusion of venerable past and vulgar present”, Robert Rosenblum comments, “comes out as a perfect hybrid that lives in both worlds.”<sup>959</sup> There is a constant slipping back and forth, a constant transformation and shifting. Currin’s skilful mix between the traditional formal concerns of painting, its grand narratives with ‘daff’ subject-matter painted in contemporary styles never settles into a category, resulting in paintings which cross and traverse the boundaries between low and high,

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<sup>956</sup> The text I am referring to is an edited transcript based on a conversation between John Currin and William Stover, January 2003, in *John Currin: Selects*, contr. W. Stover, introd. C. Brutvan (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, Massachusetts: MFA Publications, 2003), pp. 23-75, p. 23. The book was published in conjunction with the exhibition “John Currin Selects,” organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, from May 14, 2003 to January 4, 2004.

<sup>957</sup> Currin mentions cartoons from *The New Yorker*, Frank Frazetta, Norman Rockwell, Winslow Homer as well as advertising in general, the women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan*, and photographs/images on the internet.

<sup>958</sup> Currin refers to the Northern and Italian Renaissance, in particular to Cranach the Elder and Annibale Caracci as well as to Parmigianino, El Greco, Fragonard, Ingres and Courbet.

<sup>959</sup> R. Rosenblum, “John Currin and the American Grotesque”, in *John Currin* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago and Serpentine Gallery, London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2003), pp. 11-22, p. 15.

past and present without pronouncing them antagonistically. Situated at the intersection where the vertical and horizontal axes of high/low and past/present collide, the paintings work like superimpositions of art and kitsch. They constitute a historical and cultural montage within which the contemporary concerns of painting are evoked through its tradition and its tradition is re-examined for its potential use and availability in the current context. Brought together in relations of 'as well as' rather than 'either/or', painting's contemporaneity and its tradition and historicity mutually undermine and reinforce each other, resulting in works that comment on both their contemporary conditions and on how we perceive art from the past.

Situating his practice in a contemporary context within which both avant-garde's hostility towards popular culture and its recuperation by Pop Art have lost their critical currency, Currin's strategy appears more post Modernism than postmodern. He aims to move beyond what he calls the exhausted "tried-and-true method of the guilty foray into low culture as a way of breaking open the existing mainstream culture."<sup>960</sup> As a consequence, and paradoxically, Currin is not seeking contemporary forms for painterly expressions in an innovation of the 'new' but in a re-examination of what has already been. Drawing the incentives for his subject-matter and working practice from the beginning of his career from an antagonistic stance towards "the orthodoxy of American art schools and galleries"<sup>961</sup>, Currin states:

"At the time [when I began my training], the feeling was that figurative painting was the equivalent of lying."<sup>962</sup> [...] I was trying to react against these accepted truths in the academy as well as a type of layered, 'postmodern' painting."<sup>963</sup>

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<sup>960</sup> J. Currin, W. Stover, in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 24.

<sup>961</sup> A. M. Gingeras, "John Currin: Pictor Vulgaris", in *John Currin*, ed. K. Vander Weg, R. Dergan (Gagosian Gallery Publication, 2006), pp. 32-45, p. 33.

<sup>962</sup> It is of interest that Currin refers to the anti-figurative stance of American art schools with a term commonly used in modernist anti-kitsch positions with regard to kitsch.

<sup>963</sup> J. Currin in an unpublished interview with A. M. Gingeras, quoted in A. M. Gingeras "John Currin: Pictor Vulgaris" in *John Currin*, 2006, p. 33.

I interpret Currin's aim to move beyond recuperations of the 'tried and tested'<sup>964</sup> in the context of Foster's critical stance against pluralism in contemporary art as he draws attention to a difference between an exploitative, uncritical appropriation of popular and historical iconography and a tactic for art in which "the cliché is used against itself".<sup>965</sup> Whereas, Foster continues, the former renders art historical references as mere tokens that "play upon responses that are already programmed"<sup>966</sup>, turning them into "signs" and "commodities to be consumed"<sup>967</sup>, the latter "exposes clichés plays upon them critically" as "the clichéd response is elicited, only to be confounded."<sup>968</sup> Foster points out that such a tactic is, however, not unproblematic as "the line between the exploitive and the critical is fine indeed"<sup>969</sup> and that it is not always all that clear if art<sup>970</sup> seeks "to renew its form through these references *or* [his italics] to establish its form as traditional by means of them."<sup>971</sup> According to Foster, the dividing line between exploitative and critical appropriation depends on whether historical and mass cultural references are employed to simply evoke visual associations or whether it plays on these associations, reaching beyond them to "expose the contextual contradictions of the styles upon which it draws."<sup>972</sup> Currin's recuperation of the 'tried and tested', I argue, operates in the register of the latter as he employs art historical references and popular iconography not to create the 'new' but to open to renewed questioning the dialectics between past and present, low and high. Motivated by a genuine passion for the sources he is quoting from<sup>973</sup>, Currin situates his strategy in a wider context of

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<sup>964</sup> I am paraphrasing Broch's characterization of kitsch.

<sup>965</sup> H. Foster, "Against Pluralism", in *Recodings*, pp. 13-32, p. 28.

<sup>966</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>967</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>968</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>969</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>970</sup> Although in this particular context Foster is writing about architecture, following the context of his discussion I take his comment as being applicable to art in general.

<sup>971</sup> H. Foster, *Recodings*, p. 29.

<sup>972</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>973</sup> "I realize that my guiltiest pleasure is that I really like high culture. I really like old paintings. [...] I am enthusiastic about them. [...]. Believing in a masterpiece means believing

cultural politics, asking, for example, whether “a democratic culture can actually make a masterpiece”<sup>974</sup> or even whether a masterpiece can still be of any use in contemporary culture.

Again, and as with Koons, we can state that in modernist terms Currin’s work would have to be judged as kitsch. Currin does make use “of a fully matured cultural tradition” as he draws, to paraphrase Greenberg’s description of kitsch, ‘the life blood’ for his work “from this reservoir of accumulated experience.”<sup>975</sup> “The term kitsch”, Alison Gingeras points out “is rarely uttered let alone vindicated by Currin, though he confronts these negative readings by describing his work as an affirmative quest for an authentic cliché.”<sup>976</sup>

Following Foster’s comments, I understand this somehow contradictory term as Currin’s desire to affirm the cliché against itself. The cliché is thereby acknowledged as something inherent to the conditions of art (and life) and simultaneously conceived as a means to expose the contradictions inherent to these very conditions. By feeding the cliché back to the conditions that have brought it into being, Currin exploits it affirmatively as he exposes its conditions with its own rhetoric.<sup>977</sup> To label Currin’s recuperations as kitsch would then imply that kitsch would have to be accepted as an artistic trope that enables art to “expose the contextual contradictions of the styles upon which it draws.” This contextual condition of kitsch has been envisaged by Adorno already some seventy years ago as he insisted that “kitsch cannot be unambiguously traced to the individual inadequacy of the artist, but, instead, has its own objective origin in the downfall of forms and material into history.”<sup>978</sup>

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in a totally transcendent kind of heroic performance” (J. Currin, W. Stover in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 24).

<sup>974</sup> J. Currin, W. Stover, in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 25.

<sup>975</sup> C. Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, 1992, p. 534.

<sup>976</sup> A. M. Gingeras, “John Currin”, in “*Dear painter, paint me...: Painting the figure since late Picabia* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2002), pp. 74-78, p. 74.

<sup>977</sup> I draw a parallel to the workings of systemic therapy with regard to the symptom as a means to induce pragmatic changes.

<sup>978</sup> T. W. Adorno, “Kitsch”, p. 501.

Currin's recourse to tradition is not a means to subvert it nor does he recoup it nostalgically in order to redeem it in postmodern conditions. Currin's innovative approach to tradition is rather driven by his desire to brush painting's history against the grain.<sup>979</sup> Addressing the old in the context of contemporary painting and making it accessible again for this practice, Currin's re-coding of the old, reconfigures it as a recognizable parameter for the new. This interpretation of Currin's approach to tradition evokes Benjamin's dialectical image, which could be re-phrased for this context as Currin making use of art historical references, its iconography and stylistic/formal repertoire, to identify what is historically 'new' about the nature of painting.<sup>980</sup> It can be argued that the familiarity evoked through Currin's references to the tradition of painting, presents the historical moments of painting as ur-forms of the present, which interrupt in art practice the linear model of progress as a trope of art history. Through this process the tradition of painting is transformed. The modern idea of originality in art is presented here not as an innovation of the new but rather as a 'citing' of old forms out of context, as a process of de-contextualization. I align this interpretation of Currin's use of tradition with my discussion of Adorno's notion of innovation as *Richtungstendenz*, which Adorno does not envisage as a rupture with tradition, but as a new plane which is sought in a spiralling movement into an imaginary future into which art projects itself forward by taking refuge in the past.

Similar to Koons' knick-knacks, Currin's does not employ art historical references as straightforward reproductions and pre-fabricated aesthetic forms that nostalgically mimic the past. He rather re-animates them for a contemporary experience that re-infuses them with a meaning for the present.

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<sup>979</sup> I am deliberately paraphrasing Benjamin.

<sup>980</sup> I refer to Buck-Morss' characterization of montage in correlation with Benjamin's dialectical image, namely as "the use of archaic images to identify what is historically new about the 'nature' of commodities" whereby the "image's ideational elements remain unreconciled, rather than fusing into one harmonizing perspective" (S. Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 67).



Currin's task as a painter is comparable here with Benjamin's figure of the collector as he

"holds sway over the disordered mass of dead knowledge [...and...] reaches now here, now there, into the chaotic depths that his knowledge places at his disposal, grabs an item out, holds it next to another, and sees whether they fit: that meaning to this image, or this image to that meaning. The result never lets itself to be predicted; for there is no natural mediation between the two."<sup>981</sup>

Like Benjamin's figure of the collector, Currin gathers aesthetic fragments that are out of art circulation and assembles them with fragments of contemporary iconography into a new historical system. Considering Currin's concern for the history of painting, the question of what it means to be a figurative painter today seems to be a key to an understanding of Currin's affinity to kitsch. Referring to his love for "high culture" and "old paintings"<sup>982</sup> and his aspiration to create a masterpiece<sup>983</sup>, Currin speaks of "guilty pleasures", as the kind of tastes that are "seen as reactionary and boring"<sup>984</sup> and are "frowned upon within an 'elite' art culture."<sup>985</sup> Currin's statements address a tension between the principles of liberalism, tolerance and pluralism as the defining moments of contemporary art from which it derives its understanding and some normative rules that still seem to be in place regulating its practice. From his early 'bad' paintings of 'low' subject matter and conventional clichés, which are testing the limits of good taste, to his skilfully executed canvases replenished with art historical references and the masterly rendered pornographic pictures on show in 2008 at Sadie Coles HQ in London, Currin's

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<sup>981</sup> W. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, v, p. 465.

<sup>982</sup> J. Currin, W. Stover, in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 24.

<sup>983</sup> Currin states: "People would not laugh at the idea of a musical masterpiece or a cinematic masterpiece, but for some reason it is considered retarded and anachronistic and reactionary to wish for a masterpiece in painting." (J. Currin in *John Currin: Selects*, pp.24-25).

<sup>984</sup> J. Currin, W. Stover, in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 24.

<sup>985</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

career is hallmarked by a succession of transgressions that aim at testing art's limits and taboos in the arena of painting. His vast repertoire of artistic styles and low subject-matter, with which he explores these issues of repression within the contemporary canon of painting, make Currin a prime example for any discussion of kitsch. I am thinking here, for example, of Broch's comments on kitsch as a recycler of "what has already been tried and tested"<sup>986</sup>, of Kulka's arguments that kitsch is parasitic and playing on stock emotions as well as of Duchamp and Greenberg's legacies following which figuration, skill and craftsmanship as the defining moments of art have become segregated into the register of a retrograde bourgeois tradition of academia. In the year Currin was born Greenberg wrote in "After Abstract Expressionism":

"Inspiration [Greenberg is using here conception, invention, inspiration and intuition as synonyms] alone belongs altogether to the individual; everything else, including skill, can now be acquired by any one. Inspiration remains the only factor in the creation of a successful work of art that cannot be copied or imitated."<sup>987</sup>

From the very start of his career Currin has set himself the task to work against these legacies and "to channel painting's loss of mainstream currency into a source of freedom from the dogmas of good taste, the tyranny of avant-gardism, and the prescriptive limits of correct representation."<sup>988</sup>

Although the damning condemnations of his paintings<sup>989</sup> following his first solo show at Andrea Rosen gallery in NYC (1992) have, with the onset of Currin's international reputation, given way to more positive receptions, such as Peter Schjeldahl's praise that his work conveys the timeless values of

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<sup>986</sup> I am paraphrasing Broch's pre-conditions for kitsch in "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch" (1933).

<sup>987</sup> C. Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism", in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. C. Harrison & P. Wood (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 768-69. Essay first published in 1962.

<sup>988</sup> A. M. GINGERAS, "John Currin: Pictor Vulgaris", p. 39.

<sup>989</sup> K. Levin wrote in response to Currin's first major solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1992: "They are awful paintings. Boycott this show" (in *Village Voice*, April 21, 1992, p.77).

"mystery, sublimity, transcendence"<sup>990</sup>, Currin's work still manages to divide the critics, eliciting strong emotions. For his depictions of menopausal, divorced women, of women with grotesquely inflated breasts, gay couples and heterosexual lovers that seem ill-suited Currin has either been accused of being misogynistic and debased or they have been praised as "critical reflections on the excess and obsession with vanity that have come to characterize so much of contemporary American culture."<sup>991</sup> The visceral reactions to his works (both positive and negative) testify, I argue, to a fundamental stupor that Currin's paintings induce in the viewer. As we are today over-exposed to precisely the kind of images Currin paints, his subject-matter alone can barely be sufficient reason to call them transgressions of good taste and the socially acceptable. It would be naïve to argue that our taboos are still about adult pornography, plastic surgery and homosexuality. Equally, and in the light of figurative painting having enjoyed a revival and critical acclaim in recent years, the fact that they are figurative paintings cannot explain the strong responses they receive. There is a more fundamental taboo that is broken with Currin's paintings. As they stir up emotions which work against the aesthetic contemplation we normally experience when looking at art, something strange happens to the viewer. Regarding an aesthetic verdict, Currin's work has often been described as inducing suspense. Norman Bryson, for example, analyses them as propositions within which "[T]he codes of ideality and of the grotesque are jammed together, they become interchangeable and undecidable."<sup>992</sup> As the spectator is torn between attraction and repulsion, Currin's work offers according to Bryson "no point of rest or closure to this dialectic, nothing finally redeemed or condemned."<sup>993</sup> Following my discussion of Maharaj's contribution, I believe however that the stupor Currin's work induces does not result from its formal devices alone and that it is not really an intellectual and

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<sup>990</sup> P. Schjeldahl, *The New Yorker*, reviewing Currin's show at the *Whitney* in 2003.

<sup>991</sup> A. M. Gingeras, "John Currin: Pictor Vulgaris", p. 42.

<sup>992</sup> N. Bryson, "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology", in *John Currin*, ed. K. Vander Weg, R. Dergan (Gagosian Gallery Publication, 2006), pp. 14-31, p. 28.

<sup>993</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

aesthetic 'undecidability' the viewer is confronted with, but rather a fundamental interestedness the paintings impose. Their vaguely familiar look cannot simply be reduced to stylistic devices and their making use of established forms, but is mainly evoked through their undercurrent of familiar sensibility which imposes recognition and identification. As social commentaries these images command an engagement of a different kind. They resist 'disinterested' interpretation and aesthetic contemplation as they impose on the viewer partiality. The paintings draw the viewer in and as they offer no scope to be abstracted into an aesthetic experience, they speak of more fundamental prohibitions that are rooted in our innermost anxieties, desires and vanities. And as these clichéd commentaries on contemporary social life and values play tricks with our ingrained patterns of perception, they confront us with our own stereotypes and prejudices. Norman Bryson, writing about Currin's *The Cripple* (1997) states:

"In the reading of the figure's physiognomy there seemed to be something involuntary or automatic at work, something beyond one's powers of revision or resistance. [...] As the painting enlisted me into its misanthropic and misogynistic world, it began to make me feel that I, not the painter, or not only the painter, was the source of its ill will, that somewhere I had it in me to mock as grotesque the very features that carnal appetite required, to chuckle outright at the badge or emblem of the figure's misfortune, her cane."<sup>994</sup>

"The people I paint don't exist."<sup>995</sup> They are made up "not only from the old masters but from the humanoid fantasies of contemporary America."<sup>996</sup> Currin has always emphasized that the people depicted in his paintings are 'virtual'; that they are products of his imagination and assemblages of body parts from various sources. As with Koons' knick-knacks, Currin's portraits of American socialites and ordinary people are composites conveying essences of particular 'types' rather than a specific individual person. Similar to caricatures that tease out a person's character through an exaggeration of particular

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<sup>994</sup> N. Bryson, "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology", p. 17.

<sup>995</sup> R. Steiner, "Interview with John Currin", in *John Currin* (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Serpentine Gallery London, 2003), pp. 77-86, p. 77.

<sup>996</sup> R. Rosenblum, "John Currin and the American Grotesque", p. 13.

features, Currin's stock characters are composed through emotionally charged and generally accessible montages of familiar 'looks', postures and gestures we commonly associate with a person of a certain class, profession and sexual orientation. As these archetypes they are engaged in social activities that are emotionally highly charged and culturally ingrained, which Alison Gingeras interprets as Currin's "saccharine attempts to eternalize clichés in paint."<sup>997</sup> Currin's depictions of these stock characters and clichéd interactions, however, do not yield easy identification or facilitate straightforward interpretation. Telling a story without really telling it, the narratives remain ambivalent, evoking a familiarity that retains its strangeness.

I draw a correlation between Currin's depictions of people as ciphers for social and cultural meaning and Stewart's theorization of kitsch as 'a souvenir of an era' that is apprehended on the 'level of collective identity'.<sup>998</sup> Like Koons' knick-knacks which become testimonies of the culture and fashion of their time, Currin's figures, Rosenblum comments, appear "like antiquated etiquette books" that exemplify with their "body types and social postures [what is] deemed fashionable for our time."<sup>999</sup> Representing these cultural signs for body language and social conduct, Currin's figures function quite differently to the portraits of cultural icons by Warhol and Lichtenstein in which, Bryson comments, "had nothing to do with differentiated or autonomous subjects and everything to do with the consumer as a cipher: nameless, faceless, erased."<sup>1000</sup> Imposing simultaneously recognition and estrangement instead, this "peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar"<sup>1001</sup>, which Royle observes as the core of Freud's 'Uncanny', Currin's explorations of both America's cultural and social landscape testify to a repressed, what Rosenblum calls a 'dark underside' present within the most liberal of

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<sup>997</sup> A. M. Gingeras, "John Currin: Pictor Vulgaris", p. 35.

<sup>998</sup> I refer to S. Stewart, *On Longing* and my discussion in Chapter 3.

<sup>999</sup> R. Rosenblum, "John Currin and the American Grotesque", p. 12.

<sup>1000</sup> N. Bryson, "Maudit: John Currin and Morphology", p. 17.

<sup>1001</sup> N. Royle, *The uncanny*, p. 1.

societies, in which individualism, freedom, happiness and sexual liberation have become categorical imperatives.

Speaking of lonely, sad, physically and emotionally crippled human beings who desperately try to keep up their appearances and 'social values', Currin's paintings invoke Adorno's theorization of the 'culture industry' as a totalizing social regulative in which freedom has become the freedom to choose among sameness and true happiness is replaced by communal laughter. Currin's work does not explicitly take an antagonistic stance towards communal identity and civic pride, but re-contextualizes them in the realm of high art. In doing so, his work critically addresses a fundamental paradox implicit in art's contemporary condition, namely that it is precisely art's claim for pluralism that makes it still dependent on the modernist binary between kitsch and art to regulate the contradictions arising from liberalism as its determining concept and the demand for all-inclusivity this notion automatically entails.<sup>1002</sup>

Although, since Currin's formative years, the status of figurative painting within the contemporary art arena has changed<sup>1003</sup>, Currin's aspiration to explore its limits and taboos remains an ongoing quest. This became particularly evident in his show at Sadie Coles HQ in London. In April 2008 I went to the opening of Currin's exhibition to see his paintings derived from pornographic images on the internet.<sup>1004</sup> The press release states:

"Pornography is functional and almost by definition an unembellished celluloid or digital idiom. Indeed, one of the primary uses of photography is porn, and a painting would struggle to claim to be as immediate or undeniably in the moment as a photograph. Currin's use of

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<sup>1002</sup> Currin talks of his aspiration "to make a masterpiece" (J. Currin in *John Currin: Selects*, p.23) but simultaneously questions whether "a democratic culture can actually make a masterpiece" (J. Currin in *John Currin: Selects*, p. 25).

<sup>1003</sup> This is evidenced, for example, by *The Triumph of Painting* show at the Saatchi Gallery, London (2005).

<sup>1004</sup> It is not without interest that in an interview for his forthcoming show at Sadie Coles HQ Currin makes a point explaining these most recent pornographic paintings as celebrations of Western freedom, a statement for the liberalism of contemporary Western art against Islamic fundamentalism (N. Harris, "The filth and the fury", in *The Independent on Sunday*, 16 March, 2008, London, pp. 22-28).

pornographic subject matter is both a challenge to these conventions and an acknowledgement of the spectral presence of photography for the contemporary painter.”

With the neologism ‘pornokitsch’ Ugo Volli<sup>1005</sup> states “pornography is beyond any aesthetic considerations”<sup>1006</sup>, in contrast ‘pornokitsch’ veils the “non-aesthetic phenomenon for mindless consumption”<sup>1007</sup> through “aesthetic justification.”<sup>1008</sup> ‘Pornokitsch’, Volli continues, is parasitical on established styles and referents from high culture so as to present the viewer with the prospect of enjoying art, playing on some agreement that in “being ‘artistic’, it cannot be pornographic.”<sup>1009</sup> Currin’s paintings, however, seem to do the reverse of what Volli states. Executed in a skilful old-master style, these paintings - although depicting sexual intercourse in the explicit manner common to pornography - don’t do their ‘job’; they don’t have the same effect we gain from looking at pornography. Mediated through the medium of painting, these paintings are not really arousing as they become doubly removed from their referent through their skilful painterly rendition. The multiple references to Old Master paintings do not support a “process of veiling and concealment”<sup>1010</sup> to make pornography look “artistic.”<sup>1011</sup> - the two most prominent qualities of ‘pornokitsch’ according to Volli - they rather refer back to the long tradition of painting and how *this* tradition has sought its “aesthetic justification”<sup>1012</sup> in mythologizing the nude. Currin’s imagery, in contrast “does away with the elevation of the subject through mythical role play and these girls and boys are what they are, 20<sup>th</sup> century porn stars, but they are promoted purely through their rendering in oil paint.”<sup>1013</sup>

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<sup>1005</sup> U. Volli, “Pornography and pornokitsch”, in *Kitsch – An anthology of bad Taste*, pp. 224-250.

<sup>1006</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>1007</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>1008</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>1009</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>1010</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>1011</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>1012</sup> I am using Volli’s explanation for pornokitsch.

<sup>1013</sup> I quote from the Sadie Coles HQ Gallery press release.

I was particularly struck by *Anniversary Nude* (2008), a reincarnation of Manet's courtesan *Olympia* and Goya's *Naked Maja* transposed into a contemporary (American) context of sexual liberalism and prudishness.



**John Currin: *Anniversary Nude***

The reclining female nude looks straight out of the painting, returning the potential observer's gaze directed at her nakedness. Epitomizing the very schism between nudity and nakedness that runs through the tradition of Western figure painting, *Anniversary Nude* is a perfect hybrid between the two. The self-referential reclining pose that lavishly displays the masterly rendering of her skin "knowingly mimics the four-hundred-year-old practice of erotic paintings commissioned for private viewing by wealthy patrons."<sup>1014</sup> *Anniversary Nude*, however, does not retain this status as object for aesthetic contemplation or artistic study. This mode of perception is interrupted by her facial expression and the positioning of her lower body turned provocatively towards the viewer with her legs slightly parted, directing the spectator's gaze

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<sup>1014</sup> Ibid.



towards her sex. The explicitness of this gesture can no longer be interpreted away through aesthetic contemplation of an (aesthetic, anatomical) study of the figure in the nude. But then again, Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*) springs to mind – perhaps as some kind of defence mechanism *vis-à-vis* this inviting body language of *Anniversary Nude* resulting from a feeling of embarrassment it imposes, less induced by the subject-matter than by the growing awareness of one's own voyeuristic desire. And then, as our gaze returns to her face, the spell previously cast through these historical references is again broken. Her awkward smile and naïve facial expression convey unsophistication, undermining the confidence her body language purports to signal. Unlike Manet's *Olympia* and Goya's *Naked Maja*, *Anniversary Nude* seems not quite in control of the reactions she might provoke as her smile and facial expression cannot hide her apprehension as she appears to be watching as her lover undresses. She self-consciously drapes her body on the bed and fidgets with her (definitively fake but beautifully rendered) pearl necklace and strikes a pose that could perhaps be from an illustration to an article - 'how to improve your sex life' - in *Cosmopolitan* magazine<sup>1015</sup>. To the left of the picture her right hand creeps into the painting. Touching slightly her head with a coquettish gesture it evokes the squid-like hand of *Madame Moïessier*, Ingres' masterpiece in the National Gallery in London, of which Michael Levey states:

"[C]onfronted by the prosaic reality of Madame Moïessier, opulent, over-upholstered, a modern example of conspicuous waste – a subject Delacroix would have turned from and Daumier caricatured – Ingres became inspired. He stalked her, plotted her, over the years, and finally evolved the double-headed image where art has fused a masterpiece out of heaviness and banality."<sup>1016</sup>

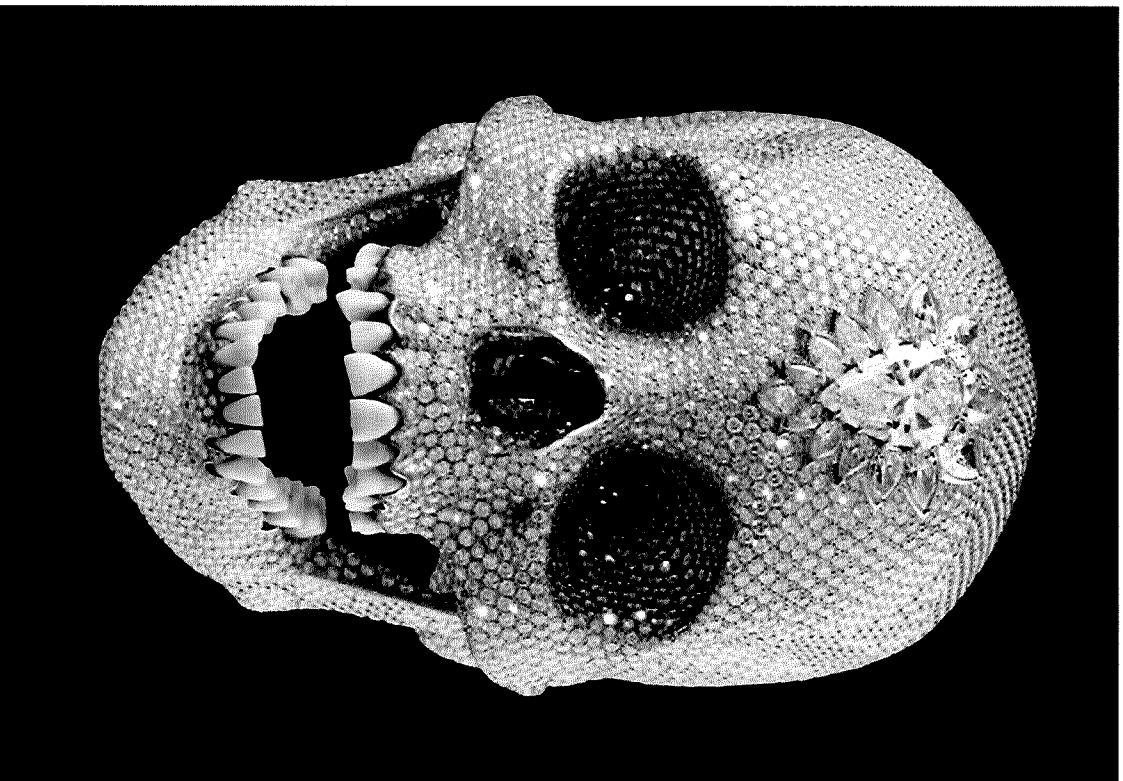
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<sup>1015</sup> I am making this comparison as Currin states: "I like to look at women's magazines like *Cosmo* a lot. I look at them to find images that I like, but I end up reading them – the interviews with now-dead celebrities, everything from losing weight to why it's okay to sleep with your boss. *Cosmo* always has these very weird takes on things [...] I got kind of interested in that whole mindset" (R. Steiner, "Interview with John Currin", in *John Currin*, 2003), p. 81.

<sup>1016</sup> M. Levey, *A History of Western Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p. 286.

## HIRST

"I remember thinking it would be great to do a diamond one – but just prohibitively expensive. Then I started to think – maybe that's why it is a good thing to do."<sup>1017</sup>



**Damien Hirst: *For the Love of God***

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<sup>1017</sup> Hirst quoted in W. Shaw, "The Iceman Cometh" [Online]. *The New York Times Magazine*, June 3, 2007, p. 1. Available from <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/03/magazine/03Style-skull-t.html>>

Damien Hirst's (born 1965) *For the Love of God* (2007), Platinum, diamonds and human teeth, is a life-size<sup>1018</sup> cast of an 18<sup>th</sup> century human skull. Covered with 8,601 pave-set ethically sourced high-quality diamonds weighing 1,106.18 carats *For the Love of God* has been manufactured at a production cost of an estimated £17m. The 50 carat diamond on the forehead of the skull alone has a value of up to £5m and confronted Bond street jewellers Bentley & Skinner with a task comparable to the making of the crown jewels in the challenge it posed. Additionally an edition of 20 luxury prints (using real diamonds), priced at £25,000; 250 diamond dust silkscreen prints, 40x30 inches, for £10,000 each, a screen printed edition of 2,000, 13x10 inches, for £900 and T-shirts for £30 were made to cater for a beta, delta, gamma and epsilon market.

The most expensive contemporary work of art ever made and, so the rumours go, sold for £50m to three investors and Hirst himself, *For the Love of God* granted him an entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*.

As a motive Hirst's diamond-encrusted skull relates to the human sacrifice of the Aztecs and the Mayas and to its use in Baroque symbolism as an allegory for *vanitas*, to represent the futility of human aspirations and earthly acquisitions in the face of death. As a contemporary *memento mori* for the transience of everything, Hirst's *For the Love of God* expands on its Baroque meaning that, whether rich or poor in death we all are the same. Even if in death we are covered in diamonds, they have lost their earthly power and become mere ornament. *For the Love of God* explores the questions that have been at the core of Hirst's artistic practice for some time, addressing both questions inherent to contemporary artistic practice and the grand historical narratives of art - such as death, birth, religion, immortality, vanity, love and illusion.

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<sup>1018</sup> The exact measurements of *For the Love of God* are 17.1x12.7x19.1cm.

Featured in many (tabloid) newspapers and media channels worldwide in the year of its making, *For the Love of God* created a public sensation. As a contemporary work of art it has entered mass consciousness without precedent in the history of modern art. And like any other A-list celebrity, *For the Love of God* has simultaneously remained elusive to the public gaze, acquiring a status of exclusivity not unlike that of a sacred object, of some precious relic protected in its sanctuary and hidden from the view of common mortals. Reaching the masses and simultaneously retaining the elitism of a specialized market *For the Love of God* works against the principles of accessibility and affordability. Over-exposed in the tabloids, its mediated reality has become more real than the 'authentic' object itself. Shrouding it in mystery, this mediated visibility has been re-infusing the work of art with the only aura that counts in capitalist conditions, the aura of scarcity and wealth. *For the Love of God* was briefly on show in *Beyond Belief* to inaugurate Jay Jopling's new gallery in London's West End, *White Cube 3*, in June 2007. Its public display was carefully staged, turning the viewing itself into some kind of ritual, some sacred act even with quasi-religious connotations. Dramatically lit in an otherwise darkened room and under high security, rivaling the precautions taken with public appearances of royalty and VIPs, tickets for a five minute viewing slot had to be purchased in advance. Through this staging of ritualistic viewing *For the Love of God* acquires a cult-value just as Benjamin conceptualizes the aura of a work of art as grounded in its 'ritual or cultic function'. With Hirst's skull this notion of ritual becomes, however, perverted. *For the Love of God* does not reclaim art's traditional status of use-value as an object of aesthetic experience but as pure exchange-value. With *For the Love of God* the commodification of art has come full circle. It epitomizes Adorno's notion of 'commodification', characterized by Wolin as "the organized process whereby the arts are alienated from their primary and traditional status as a use-value, an object of aesthetic experience, and become an exchange value, an object whose character is determined first

and foremost by its relation to the market.<sup>1019</sup> It is of interest that for Wolin art's commodification is always associated with its simultaneous mystification, the creation of celebrity cult.

"Art thereby regresses to *cult* in the full-fledged totemic sense of the word. It becomes nothing more than a *fetish*, part of the logic of commodification or the 'fetishism of commodities' in Marx's sense. It is purchased for its *cult value* – the value it acquires by virtue of its commercial status or popularity, and no longer for its intrinsic merits as an aesthetic object."<sup>1020</sup>

The gaze Hirst's skull returns from its hollow diamond encrusted eye-sockets is a gaze of an uncanny recognition, namely that monetary value has replaced our ability to appreciate art. We can no longer perceive in it the marvellous which constituted for the Greeks an all-embracing concept of realism; a concept of perfection in art that aligns it with the idea of it coming alive, evoking astonishment and wonder. We admire Hirst's work primarily as the monetary marvellous, for it is no longer the work of art as such that enunciates the aura we feel in its presence, but the sheer wealth it represents.

Situated within the tension between art market value, artistic value and monetary value, *For the Love of God*, above all explores the conditions of contemporary art and its (aesthetic/artistic) valuation in relation to the art market. Hirst's work plays on the lack of measurable value available in works of art and on the incapacity to judge their values other than according to their exchange-value and the profit they yield. In an interview during the making of *For the Love of God* Hirst stated: "I was very worried for a while, because if it looked like bling – tacky, garish and over the top – we would have failed. But I'm very pleased with the end result. I think it's ethereal and timeless."<sup>1021</sup> Hirst's references to his initial fear that the work might *look* "like bling" and his subsequent *thinking* that it is "ethereal and timeless" reveal the games *For*

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<sup>1019</sup> R. Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: 'An Aesthetic of Redemption'*, p. 195.

<sup>1020</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>1021</sup> Hirst quoted in W. Shaw, "The Iceman Cometh", p. 1.

*the Love of God* plays with the spectator. The qualities of ethereality and timelessness are, I argue, projected onto the work not because of how it looks, but precisely *because we think* that it is made of real diamonds. As I am not an expert on diamonds, I can imagine that I would find it difficult to perceive a difference between *For the Love of God* made of authentic stones and a good imitation of it by its appearance alone. If, for some reason, we were made to believe that *For the Love of God* is covered in fake diamonds we might indeed feel tempted to judge the work as tacky kitsch. In this instance, however, kitsch would designate a judgment quite independent of the work's appearance. It is then our *knowledge* of the work being authentic and that it is made of real diamonds, which serves as its marker and allows us to judge what we perceive.

The same pattern seems to be in play when Bataille explains the 'principle of loss' referring to jewels which

"must not only be beautiful and dazzling, which would make the substitution of imitations possible: one sacrifices a fortune, preferring a diamond necklace; such a sacrifice is necessary for the constitution of the necklace's fascinating character."<sup>1022</sup>

It is precisely this culturally allocated immense value real diamonds acquire in the context of the exchange economy which constitutes their social meaning and it is this artificially allocated value which "explains the inconsequence of the most beautiful imitations, which are very nearly useless."<sup>1023</sup>

Judging from its production mode which is one of 'high-tech' jewellery design and craftsmanship, *For the Love of God* could be a multiple. It is not the subjective-creative principle of the artist that makes it into a unique piece of art, but it is paradoxically the fact that the natural resources of diamonds, required for its making, are limited. Hirst pre-empt's the mechanisms of the art market which, following the basic economic laws of supply and demand, depend on rarity, authenticity and uniqueness as determining factors to

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<sup>1022</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 118.

<sup>1023</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

allocate values to works of art. *For the Love of God* simultaneously inverts these determinants of economy as rarity, authenticity and uniqueness, as its key categories for the valuation of art, are re-infused with a meaning that is no longer primarily defined through the intrinsic qualities of the work of art but rather through its material quality, the scarcity and uniqueness of its resources. Giving his work a preposterous (material) value from the beginning, Hirst strategically shows that the contemporary context for art's evaluation and validation is not grounded in aesthetic principles but in its monetary value as a commodity. The work of art is valuable because it is valuable and as such it derives its critical power from its status as a commodity. With Hirst's *For the Love of God* the market and material value become so over-articulated that the work of art retains its value independent of aesthetic judgment. As the dazzling lure of the diamonds constantly reminds us of their monetary value, we are no longer able to appreciate the work for its beauty alone but more so for its decadent display of wealth and luxury. For Marx diamonds are exemplary of commodity fetishism. "Nobody", Marx states,

"has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in the direct relation between the thing and man, while, inversely, its value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process."<sup>1024</sup>

Hirst's strategy of conceiving the work *a priori* as a (fetishized) commodity for the market expands on Duchamp's strategy of the ready-made as a work of art that defies all previous notions of value.<sup>1025</sup> The market and the art work become one, as *For the Love of God* testifies not only to art as luxury but equally of luxury as art. And by endowing it with an inherent value of its raw

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<sup>1024</sup> K. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, p. 177.

<sup>1025</sup> As objects of the everyday they have no artistic value and as simple mass-produced objects they have no intrinsic material value.

materials that could potentially surpass its market value, *For the Love of God* imposes a paradox that aims at defeating the mechanisms of the market with its own weapons.<sup>1026</sup>

Despite of all its crassness, *For the Love of God* signals, however, a return to myth that reaches beyond its connotations as a work of art and the human sacrifice it is alluding to. It is a mythologizing process that is not staged by Hirst alone but socially constructed, resulting from the fact that the more we push something to its logical extreme, the more it seems to be accompanied by mythologization. It is rather due to the diamonds that the feelings of human value and loss are evoked and not through the traditional symbolism of the skull. As Hirst is juxtaposing the eternal value of diamonds (both for their monetary value and material qualities) with the skull as a symbol for *vanitas* and human sacrifice, 'death' comes to have a more complex meaning. *For the Love of God* ultimately evokes the tragic, the tragedy of our earthly values and desires, in particular, the desire to want to live forever – or, at least as long as diamonds last. With *For the Love of God* Hirst expands on his fascination with death. Hirst states: "I just want to celebrate life by saying to hell with death, [...] What better way of saying that than by taking the ultimate symbol of death and covering it in the ultimate symbol of luxury, desire and decadence?"<sup>1027</sup> As *For the Love of God* becomes coupled with the general principle of loss 'death' is pushed to its extremes. The skull, its allusion to human sacrifice and the diamonds evoke Bataille's fundamental question of how philosophy deals with 'the heterogeneous moment' of death, both in its celebratory aspects, which Bataille conceived as a gesture of joy before death,<sup>1028</sup> and as it is expressed in the 'principle of loss'. In representing simultaneously both art and luxury, Bataille's examples to

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<sup>1026</sup> I am making this statement based on the rumours that *For the Love of God* was sold for considerably less than its publicly announced selling price of £50m and that *For the Love of God* has been bought by three investors and Hirst himself.

<sup>1027</sup> *The Guardian*, June 2007

[Online]. <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,,1779919,00.html>> (20<sup>th</sup> June 2007). Site no longer available.

<sup>1028</sup> I refer to G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*. Bataille makes a mention of the Mexican Day of Death.



illustrate the 'principle of loss', *For the Love of God* epitomizes the remnants of sumptuous 'non-productive expenditure' that still live on in modern society, explained by Bataille through our continuous fascination with jewels. Benjamin Noys states:

"Bataille gives a number of examples of the survival of processes of sumptuary expenditure, for instance in the continuing fascination we have with jewels. These functionally useless items, except for decoration, lead to massive expenditures both in their recovery from the earth and in their sale. For Bataille they have the profound unconscious meaning of 'cursed matter that flows from a wound'<sup>1029</sup>. Jewels, especially the great diamonds, are often rumoured to be cursed or possessed of a malign power to excite greed and violence."<sup>1030</sup>

*For the Love of God* is ultimately about the impossibility of representing death, to conceive it and to project ourselves beyond our own end. As such *For the Love of God* follows the same themes which Hirst has already explored in works such as *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, Hirst's shark suspended in formaldehyde, which Wollen describes as "both a representation of death and, at the same time, a meditation upon it"<sup>1031</sup> as he draws a parallel between Hirst's "exaggerated 'Nature Gem'<sup>1032</sup> and Olalquiaga's Rodney.

This comparison brings me back to kitsch and as I ponder on how we might understand its complex relation to the diamond skull I am reminded of Hirst's comments prior to its completion: "I want people to see it and be astounded, I want them to gasp. [...] If it's vulgar, I'll put it on a chain and hang it round my neck – or I'll stick it on the mantelpiece."<sup>1033</sup>

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<sup>1029</sup> G. Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 119.

<sup>1030</sup> B. Noys, *Georges Bataille: A Critical Introduction*, p. 107.

<sup>1031</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>1032</sup> P. Wollen, *Paris Manhattan*, p. 98.

<sup>1033</sup> *The Guardian*, June 2007 [Online].

<<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,1779919,00.html>> (20<sup>th</sup> June 2007). Site no longer available.

I have now reached the end of my discussions and, similar to how a finished painting always astonishes me<sup>1034</sup>, I have come to a surprising conclusion: there is now no longer even a theorization of kitsch in art practices but paradoxically only a discourse of its disappearance. In my overall consideration of this journey I have undertaken, kitsch as a term has gradually slipped away. It has lost its pivotal role as its use has been replaced by more suitable expressions that better do justice to describe the complexities in art. Through my analysis of practice in my final chapter I have realized that kitsch is no longer a useful term and it has no contemporary relevance as a concept with which artists may refer to their work or strategies. In the daily practice of art the 'distant look' we need to perceive kitsch is not compatible with the artistic attitude, which by definition, has to be one of interestedness. However, also with regard to the beholder, kitsch is no longer a suitable term of critique to adequately describe the myriad of responses it can elicit in the viewer. As kitsch has entered the arena of contextual subjectivity, these responses are linked to personal sensibilities and narrative and relate to specific encounters between a particular subject and a particular object in a certain moment of time. My statement about kitsch as a contextual and historically relative term that can neither be abstracted nor generalized, further demonstrates that - although we might refer to artistic strategies or works of art as kitsch - it is insufficient and inadequate to do so. As a term of critique which lacks the specificity through which it can be traced back to certain identified characteristics in art, kitsch is irreconcilable with the contemporary claim for art's singularity and particularity. We can still apply the term kitsch in writing and talking about art, but as we do so we inevitably enter a discourse of 'something like kitsch'. However, as we mediate kitsch in relation to art, or even replace it altogether with new terminologies through which we can better explain its tasks, it assumes different meanings which can no longer relate to its original parochial usage and everyday understanding. We can state in consequence that with our contemporary

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<sup>1034</sup> I refer to my earlier comments on p. 195.

understanding of art - with regard to theory and practice - the concept of kitsch has been made redundant and no longer belongs in the context of art. I argue that exactly because kitsch has now departed the artistic arena it can be made available again to establish notions of *Heimat*. However kitsch can only achieve this once it is de-contaminated from art.

I want to return once more to the allegorical figure *Baldanders*, the 'soon different' in Gimmelshausen's novel of the Baroque<sup>1035</sup>, *Simplicius*' 'Other' of whose presence he only becomes aware while contemplating his own mortality. We can indeed now draw a comparison and recognize kitsch as art's life-long companion leaping into prominence at a critical time for art, providing it with a possible narrative on which to project itself beyond its end. And as kitsch - like *Baldanders* - insists that it lives in many 'Homes', we can recognize kitsch in *Baldanders* as he endlessly transforms himself: from a classical statue (looking both intricately real and yet artificial), into a mighty oak tree, a pig, a sausage, the farmer's faeces, a meadow of clover, a cow-pat, a flower, a twig, a mulberry bush and a beautiful silk rug<sup>1036</sup> before he finally re-assumes human shape.

And as with *Simplicius*' fate with *Baldanders* we might now imagine a context for art in which kitsch has finally been transformed into a bird and flown away, leaving us, like *Simplicius*, with no further explanation – at least for the time being.

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<sup>1035</sup> I refer to my comments in Chapters 1 and 4.

<sup>1036</sup> I paraphrase from the German text.

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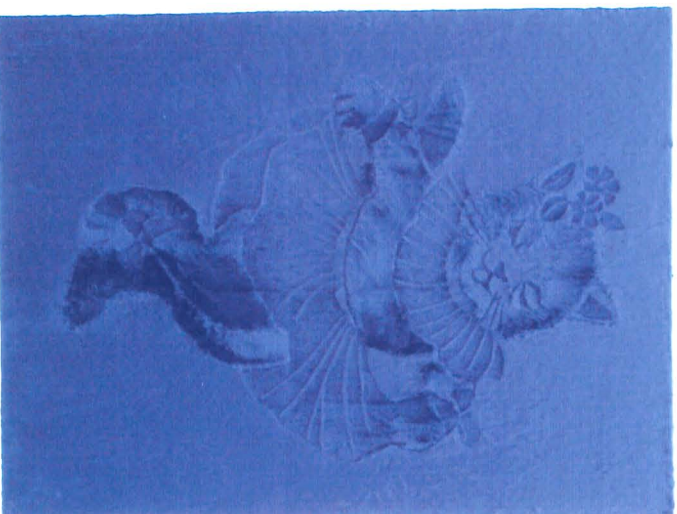


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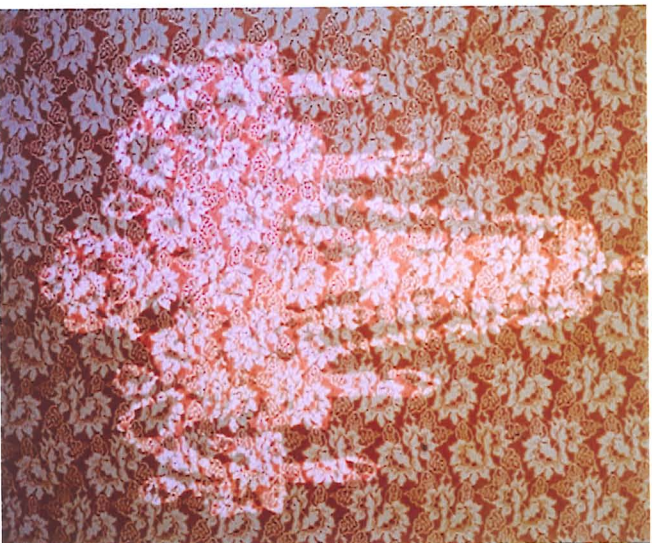
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**APPENDIX**

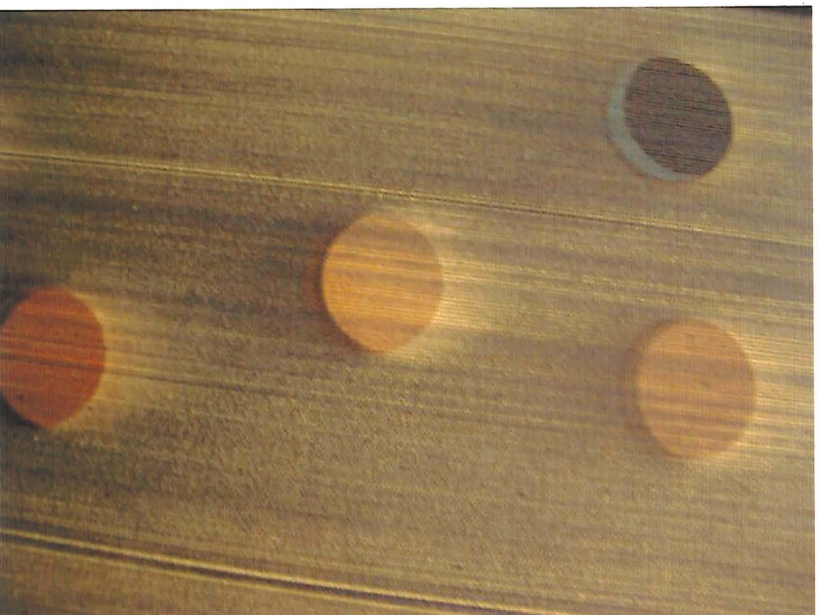
**STUDIO PRACTICE 2003 – 2007 (SELECTION)**



***Pussycat, combed and trimmed fake fur,  
160x120 cm, 2003***



**Trace, spray paint, varnish and light-reflecting glass  
beads on cotton, 88x71 cm, 2004**



*Skin, spray paint and cotton thread, 2005 (detail)*



**Grauzore, oil and spray paint on cotton, 2005  
(detail)**



*Puddle*, oil and spray paint on cotton, 160x210 cm, 2006

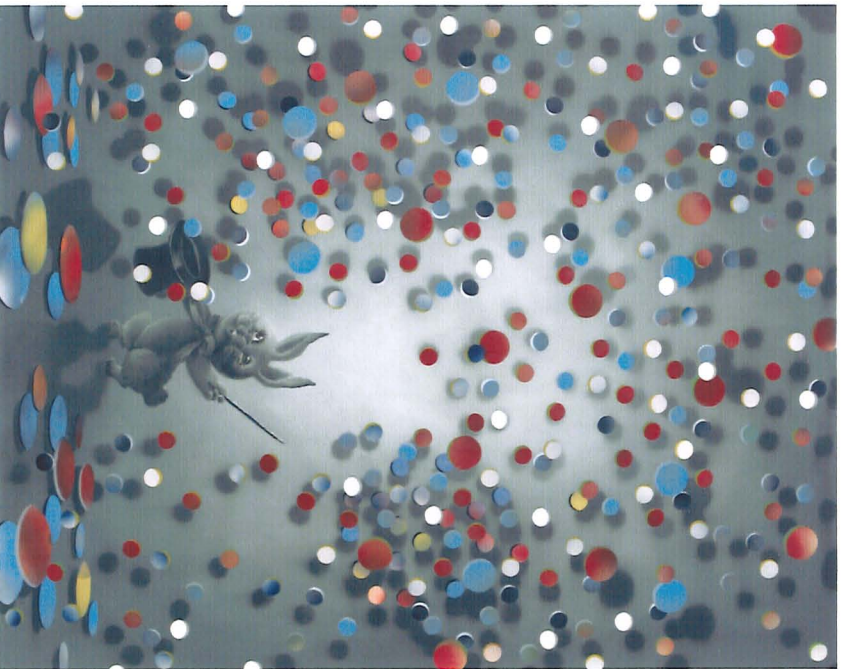


*Pitcher Picture (VII)*, oil and spray paint on cotton,  
125x105 cm, 2006

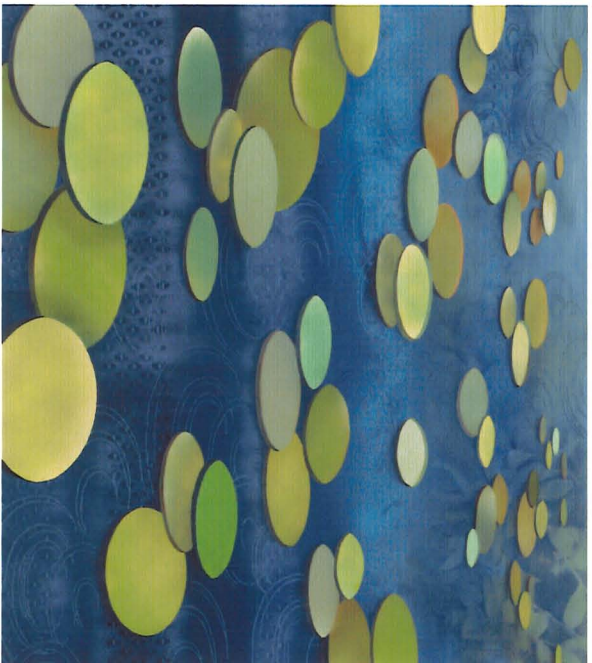




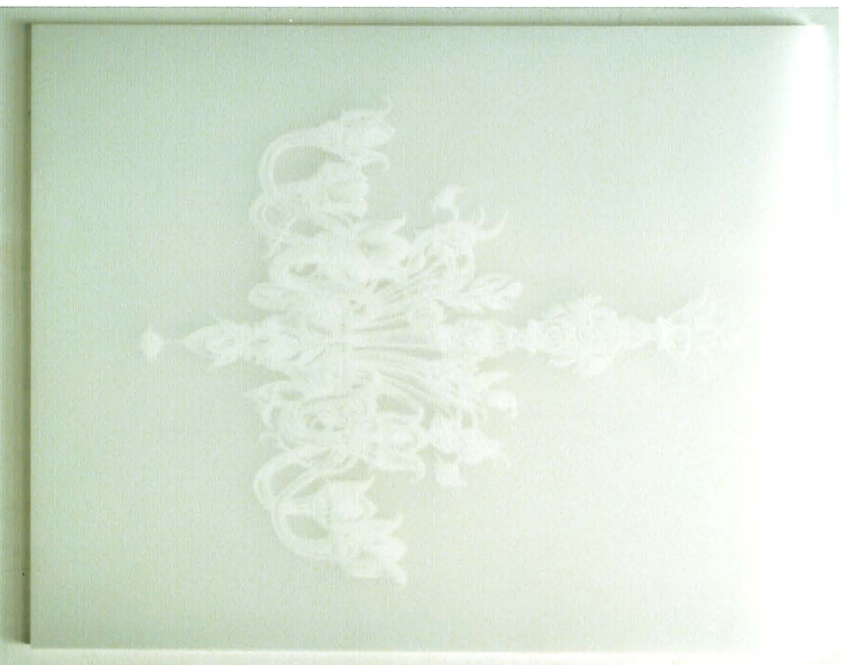
*The Day After*, oil and gloss paint on cotton, 163x122 cm, 2006



*When Platitudes Become Form*, oil and spray paint on cotton,  
174.5x141 cm, 2006



*Reflector, oil and spray paint on cotton, 150x170 cm, 2007*



*Chandelier Verona, oil and varnish on perspex, 150x120 cm, 2007*