

# The Aesthetic Experiences of Kitsch and Bullshit

## Thorsten Botz-Bornstein

### Introduction

In an earlier article,<sup>1</sup> I established parallels between kitsch and bullshit. Both traffic in snaring the unsophisticated, be it in the form of ‘collectible’ enamelware or self-help books written by pseudo-experts. Both distort the truth through exaggeration, a willful lack of critical activity, or by simply not being serious. My question in the earlier article was whether kitsch can overlap with bullshit in a sort of ‘aesthetic bullshit’? If we understand ‘aesthetic’ as a quality related to beauty or ugliness most broadly construed, it could seem that kitsch is working much more with aesthetic categories such as pleasure and indulgence while bullshit is predominantly an ethical instance. However, in both kitsch and bullshit the limit between ethics and aesthetics becomes blurred. The production of bullshit is related to aesthetics, which is why kitsch and bullshit often appear together, for example in the art of Jeff Koons, who not only employs kitsch in an ironical way, but also attaches typical statements of bullshit to those statements.

The above reflections are based on Harry Frankfurt’s influential definition of bullshit as the deceptive misrepresentation of reality that remains different from lying because, contrary to the liar, the “bullshitter” does not try to deceive.<sup>2</sup> What matters for Frankfurt is not the facts’ truth value but the bullshitter’s “state of mind.” The bullshitter is bluffing but not lying. While the liar covers the truth under a non-truth that he wants to be as substantial and dense as possible, bullshit makes non-substantial claims

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<sup>1</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, ‘Kitsch and Bullshit’, *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2015), pp. 305-321.

<sup>2</sup> Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 6-7. First published as ‘On Bullshit’, in *Raritan Quarterly Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1986).

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in order to create new, less substantial realities that will probably not be able to perfectly conceal the more substantial true reality. I suggested that kitsch works along similar lines. The bullshitter's free interpretation of reality does not follow the rules of a perfect crime but rather those of playful manipulation, which is similar to kitsch. Like bullshit, kitsch does not consistently transgress the limits that distinguish the authentic from the false but plays with them. Both kitsch and bullshit exaggerate and they are often simultaneously too superficial and too explicit. They do not simply hide the truth. Bullshit is not a lie and kitsch is not forgery. This means that both kitsch and bullshit are not false, but merely fake and phony attempts to establish a new reality, which is an *alternative* reality "not inferior to the real thing."<sup>3</sup> Most typically, people are not *forced* to believe in this misrepresented reality but the 'real' reality is not entirely dissimulated.

In the present article I want to drive the comparison further and examine whether it is possible to be fascinated or attracted by bullshit in the same way in which one can be fascinated by kitsch. Kitsch is boastful, exaggerated and 'not quite true'; still it can be attractive when it is aesthetically pleasing. Is the same true for bullshit? In order to answer this question, I analyze the relationships that both kitsch and bullshit maintain with pretentiousness, self-deception, cheating, and seduction. The latter will be clarified by using Jean Baudrillard's scheme of seduction as a play with 'weak' signifiers. All processes show that ethical and aesthetical perceptions of kitsch and bullshit do often overlap.

### **Sympathizing with Kitsch and Bullshit**

Kitsch is difficult to define but there definitely is a common understanding of kitsch at least among those people who know what kitsch is. Normally, kitsch is perceived as an aesthetic product depending on exaggerated sentimentality, banality, superficiality, and triteness. It has also been defined as "artistic deficiency,"<sup>4</sup> as an overly formulaic aesthetic expression,<sup>5</sup> or as an aesthetic phenomenon contradicting the "law of adequacy."<sup>6</sup> While there is apparently no classical definition of kitsch, most

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<sup>3</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Bell, 1975), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avantgarde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 257.

authors would agree that kitsch can be: 1) a tasteless copy of an existing style; or 2) the systematic display of an artistic (though not necessarily technical) deficiency.

In spite of its predominantly negative connotations, kitsch and bullshit are able to evoke a considerable amount of sympathy among the public. Most bullshit is blunt, but in particular cases we might like the bluntness, be it only because its production obviously required a considerable amount of intelligence. In commercial slogans, for example, bluntness can almost become an art. Above that, very often bullshit expresses secondary claims (which Frankfurt observes with interest) with which we can sympathize; and sometimes those secondary claims could hardly be expressed otherwise than through bullshit.

In principle there are three ways of dealing with kitsch and bullshit: a) to reject them because one has recognized them *as* kitsch/bullshit and one does not want to deal with them; b) to accept them because one does *not* realize that one is confronted with kitsch/bullshit but believes them to be true claims or true art; c) to accept them though one has recognized them as kitsch/bullshit but one finds the illusion they purport pleasant and enjoyable as long they remain confined to certain quantitative limits.<sup>7</sup>

The engineering department of a minor college in the United States has lost its accreditation and when it finally gets it back after three years of tense struggle, the college's president announces in his speech that the accrediting body "simply *had* to give the accreditation back, because how can they not accredit the best engineering department in the whole country?" Everybody in the room knows that what the president is saying is false, even ridiculously false, but he is not lying. It is even possible to sympathize with him because he wants to encourage the department and perhaps make them feel less embarrassed about having lost the accreditation in the first place. A pragmatic analysis will also state that

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<sup>7</sup> Kitsch is not an empirically established and measurable entity. I am working here with kitsch as a concept used in language by certain people who agree on certain characteristics. Kitsch 'exists' only in this sense: as an extensional and intensional term referring to certain things and having certain qualities. The claim that such a common understanding exists within certain social groups does not need to be substantiated any further. There is, of course also a group of people who understand perfectly well what kitsch is, but believe that the entire concept of kitsch is irrelevant because they recognize it as a merely subjective construction produced by an elite and which should be abandoned. Still it remains a fact that kitsch 'exists' *for others*.

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people who sympathize with the speaker's political position in general, will forgive the bullshit more easily. But they will not believe it. The pragmatic goals of the bullshit will be recognized and the speaker will not be held to account for the accuracy.

In its hopeless exaggeration, in its naïve simplicity, but also because of its vibrating self-indulgence, the president's claim is not only classic bullshit, but comes close to kitsch. His statement has the effect of moral reassurance that is a common feature of kitsch as will be shown below. And, of course, like kitsch, we can appreciate or bear his words only as long as they are used sparingly; if he repeated his claim on a weekly basis, we might accuse him of brainwashing and manipulation of the students' sense of reality. Unfortunately, both bullshit and kitsch tend to follow certain repetitive patterns that provide novelty value only on rare occasions.

Apart from that, the ethical evaluation depends on the audience that has been addressed. Those students are educated people and the president knows that most probably they will not take his words for granted. The same action could become morally abject when carried out in front of an entirely uneducated audience. Scott Kimbrough notes that "we sympathize with the liar's victim but not with the bullshitter's" and judge that the victims of bullshit "allow themselves to be mentally lazy and blinded by desire."<sup>8</sup> In the above case, anybody who takes the college president's words for granted is more naïve than even the president expected; the bullshitting technique was too obvious and nobody was *forced* to believe in his 'reality.'

The example works in parallel with the perception of kitsch. Some people find the sporadic presence of kitsch acceptable as long as it does not interfere with their critical distance towards kitsch. They want to know *that* it is kitsch and remain able to draw the limit between kitsch and real art. In other words, they want to keep a 'cool' distance towards what they identify as kitsch. Then they might decide to enjoy a sentimental song, a funny but tacky commercial, an eccentric armchair in their living room that is 'normally' too colorful but still interesting. Only when they appreciate kitsch *as kitsch* are they able to play with certain kitsch motives in a 'cool'

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<sup>8</sup> Scott Kimbrough, 'On Letting it Slide', in *Bullshit and Philosophy: Guaranteed to Get Perfect Results Every Time*, eds Gary Hardcastle and George Reisch (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2006), p. 6.

fashion and appreciate them in the form of “self-conscious subversions [or] as part of irony.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, paradoxically, just because they see kitsch *as* kitsch, kitsch no longer functions as kitsch. The enjoyment is now controlled by an aesthetic sensibility that is not merely dependent on kitsch. Camp is very much based on this ironical attitude towards kitsch, as are ‘postmodern’ ways of using kitsch motives in order to challenge official aesthetic standards. The above consumers of kitsch do not want to be overwhelmed by kitsch. The pattern corresponds to Milan Kundera’s concept of self-conscious kitsch, that is, the fact of “knowing that kitsch is kitsch” – which makes that here kitsch is not kitsch at all. Kundera writes: “As soon as kitsch is recognized for the lie it is, it moves into the context of non-kitsch... becoming as touching as any other human weakness.”<sup>10</sup>

The latter option is unique to bullshit and kitsch, and it is based on the assumption that both kitsch and bullshit are not entirely immoral or, more precisely, that their existence is linked to the sort of playful (though not complete) relativism that is proper to judgments in the realm of aesthetics. Kundera is even more radical because for him, the fact of “knowing that kitsch is kitsch” is a reason to exempt kitsch from ethical requirements altogether.

### **Narcissism and Self-Enjoyment**

Frankfurt bases a great deal of his concept of bullshit on the analysis of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s reaction to his friend Fania Pascal who claimed, after having undergone throat surgery, that she now feels like a “dog who has just been run over.” Wittgenstein dismisses her words as ‘nonsense’ because she cannot really know what “a dog who has just been run over” feels like. Frankfurt believes that Wittgenstein interprets Pascal’s statement as bullshit. The term *Unsinn* (nonsense) used by Wittgenstein, just like the stronger term *Schwachsinn*, is indeed the most likely word that any German speaker would use to designate bullshit in German. True, Pascal is not simply talking nonsense. However, what disgusts Wittgenstein is that she “is not even concerned whether her statement is correct”<sup>11</sup> and this permits

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<sup>9</sup> Tomáš Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), p. 256.

<sup>11</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 31.

its classification as bullshit. We might also say that her statement is kitsch because, as Frankfurt suggests, “her characterization of her feeling is too specific; it is excessively particular.”<sup>12</sup> What Pascal’s statement shares with kitsch is indeed that it is *overly particular*. Kitsch makes the shoes *only* red until we see only their redness, or it over-emphasizes a few sentimental details in a film until we no longer care about the film’s other cinematographic aspects. Dorfles’ analysis of kitsch as an aesthetics that has “isolated one single aspect of the artistic phenomenon”<sup>13</sup> and which it will subsequently exaggerate provides one of the most pertinent definitions of kitsch. The description of her state like that of “dog who has just been run over” is too concrete, which dramatizes the situation in a strange way.

Frankfurt says that Wittgenstein probably found the particular character that Pascal attributes to her feeling *inappropriate*, which is another characteristics of kitsch: “Hers is not just any bad feeling but the distinctive bad feeling that a dog has when it is run over.”<sup>14</sup> The fact of providing inadequate words, feelings, or images is also a feature of kitsch. On the other hand, not everything inadequate is automatically kitsch. Kitsch, just like what happens in Pascal’s statement, often places wrong metaphors into wrong context; still not every badly placed metaphor is kitsch. What is important for kitsch is *how* things are placed. When the aesthetics works apparently carelessly, by boldly disregarding reality though it is there right in front of our eyes, then the result is likely to be kitsch. Or it will be kitsch when it disregards the minimum requirements generally believed to be necessary in order to qualify as art. It is clear that all this also concerns bullshit, and Frankfurt’s explanations make this clear.

In spite of the ‘mistakes’ that Pascal might have committed, neither Pascal nor producers of kitsch are lying. Wittgenstein seems to hold her accountable for making a false statement but the ‘fussiness’ of this attitude is inappropriate because he confuses an aesthetic mistake with an ethical mistake. Though Pascal might indeed have made a kitsch or a bullshit statement, most people would find that Wittgenstein has been unusually harsh in criticizing her for this (and Frankfurt believes this, too). Pascal is not pretending to give an accurate account of her situation. She simply feels like she has a full body blow, like an encounter with a large object, and so

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<sup>12</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Dorfles, ‘Introduction’ to *Kitsch*, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 29.

she gives an analogy. It is more or less appropriate to the situation and Wittgenstein seems to be grasping at straws. Pascal's only mistake is that she puts 'too much' into her statement and that she places it into an inadequate context. Therefore she or any kitsch producer will normally be judged in terms of aesthetics rather than of ethics. Even Wittgenstein says that Pascal's statement is neither false nor unethical but simply that it is 'nonsense.' On the other hand, he does not criticize her in terms of aesthetics either. What is he actually criticizing? His bullshit reproach offers a peculiar ethico-aesthetical criticism.

Imagine a poet who has written a line that goes "I felt like a dog who has just been run over." Can we call this bullshit? No, because here it does not matter that the poet cannot really know what that dog feels like. As a matter of fact, a poet does not have to be overly concerned with reality. Would it then be kitsch? No, because the poet has the right to describe feelings in a particular fashion and the phrase is not hackneyed or overused.

The bullshitter acts like a poet but within a situation where she is not supposed to act like a poet, and this is a particular ethico-aesthetical mistake. Pascal is doing exactly this. Like a poet, she does not care about the contextual reality, but *still* she pretends to give Wittgenstein a more or less accurate account of her situation. This is also the reason why those same words can be understood as kitsch: their poetical content is inappropriate in this particular context. The situation can be compared to somebody reciting Stéphane Mallarmé's "Dame sans trop d'ardeur" in a business meeting and who will subsequently be accused of producing a kitsch-like setting. Mallarmé's poem is not kitsch, but the way in which it is used is kitsch. It is like hanging an authentic Rembrandt in an elevator.

More importantly, we might find a trace of self-indulgence or perhaps even self-enjoyment in Pascal's statement, and this might have disturbed Wittgenstein in the first place. For Giesz, kitsch is the "self-enjoyment" in which the "enjoyer enjoys himself"<sup>15</sup> and Frankfurt sees the same kind of self-sufficiency and narcissism (the fact that she is concerned only about her own nature and not that of the context) as essential for bullshit.<sup>16</sup> Denis Dutton pointed out that kitsch is very much about narcissism because we do not merely "find it in the area of religious or

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<sup>15</sup> Ludwig Giesz, 'Phenomenology of Kitsch', in Dorflès, *Kitsch*, pp. 156-174.

<sup>16</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 65.

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sentimental art... but in philosophy and intellectual discourse as well. It is plain that a strong sense of self-congratulation and attempted self-justification.”<sup>17</sup> The self-enjoyment of the kitsch consumer becomes also clear in Kundera’s scheme of the ‘two tears’ constituting this particular aesthetic experience: “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.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, also Max Black perceives in humbug (which is, according to Frankfurt, closely related to bullshit) a “whiff of self-satisfaction and self-complacency.”<sup>19</sup> The bullshitter enjoys his bullshit in the same way in which the kitsch lover enjoys kitsch. The conclusion is that kitsch and bullshit are most likely to happen *not* when ethics is bluntly abandoned but *when aesthetics is misused* in order to make inappropriate statements in a real world context.

### **Pretentiousness**

The pretentiousness of bullshit has recently received academic attention in a study of ‘pseudo-profound’ bullshit in management. The authors state that vagueness of meaning typical for pseudo-profound bullshit has been propelled by the twitter limitation of messages to 140 characters.<sup>20</sup> Pretentious bullshit is also the target of the online software called the New Age Bullshit Generator (<http://sebpearce.com/bullshit/>), which detects pretentious religious (or pseudo-religious) bullshit. Pretentiousness was already the topic of Kundera’s kitsch examinations. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera advances the concept of kitsch as the “denial of shit,” which corresponds to the idea of pretentious bullshit: saying that we are the best though obviously we are the worst (thus denying the shit around us) is pretentious. At first sight, Kundera’s understanding of kitsch might appear as unusual because kitsch has often been called trash or “artistic rubbish.” This was most famously explained by Dorfles when insisting on the German linguistic connection with “collecting rubbish from

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<sup>17</sup> Denis Dutton, ‘Delusions of Postmodernism’, *Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1992), pp. 23-35.

<sup>18</sup> Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 251.

<sup>19</sup> Max Black, ‘The Prevalence of Humbug’, in *The Prevalence of Humbug and Other Essays* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 115-146.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Pennycook et al., ‘On the Reception and Detection of Pseudo-Profound Bullshit’, *Judgment and Decision Making*, vol. 10, no. 6 (2015), pp. 549-563.



the street.”<sup>21</sup> Also Greenberg emphasized that kitsch uses “for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture.”<sup>22</sup> Further, given the parallelism with bullshit, how can Kundera characterize as “shitless” the very element that carries shit in its name?

Kundera’s focus is on the perfectionism of kitsch. The shiny productions of kitsch are often the elaborations of minds that leave nothing to chance. For Kundera, kitsch negates reality by excluding “everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence.”<sup>23</sup> This is how the ‘denial of shit’ needs to be understood. The example of the college president also presents ‘shitless bullshit’ because: is there anything more ‘shitless’ than a world in which the country’s worst department still remains the country’s best?

The problem is that Kundera does not make any effort to review his ‘kitsch as a lie’ pattern in a more complex context provided by the particular ethico-aesthetic status of bullshit. Kundera belongs to the group of people who equate kitsch (which is for him mainly a propaganda phenomenon) with brainwashing. Like Hermann Broch before him, Kundera thinks that kitsch is inalterably evil.<sup>24</sup> An ironic production or consumption of kitsch (or bullshit) is unthinkable for him because the communist kitsch world that Kundera experienced was presented as a utopian world from which all irony had been banished.<sup>25</sup> In communism kitsch and bullshit became as serious as religion, and this tradition has even been perpetuated until today. When Korean leader Kim Jong Il died in 2011, North Korean papers reported that a Manchurian crane was observed flying three times around the Kim family monument. The unusually cold weather was also ascribed to the leader’s death. This is pretentious bullshit (working with images of kitsch), but it becomes fraud should the population really be brainwashed enough to believe in it. The government was addressing a public that had perhaps no choice but really believing in

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<sup>21</sup> Dorfles, ‘Introduction’ to *Kitsch*, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Greenberg, ‘Avantgarde and Kitsch’, p. 10

<sup>23</sup> Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 243.

<sup>24</sup> In one of the most classical text on kitsch ever written, Broch insists on seeing kitsch in purely ethical terms: “The producer of kitsch does not produce ‘bad’ art ... 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.” Hermann Broch, ‘Notes on the Problem of Kitsch’, in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, pp. 49-76.

<sup>25</sup> Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 245.

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it. In other countries political bullshit might be taken with humor and will not follow the strict rules of brainwashing. All this also shows that the question whether something should be identified as bullshit/kitsch or not depends on the consumer as much as on the producer as well as on the relationship between them.

In the cases of the college president as well as the North Korean propaganda, we can detect a solid amount of pretentiousness. The Wittgenstein-Pascal case is different. True, Pascal *pretended* to give a more or less accurate account of her situation though in the end she was not. However, this is not pretentious. We also detected a certain amount of self-indulgence and self-enjoyment in Pascal's statement, which is precisely what Wittgenstein found appalling. He found it appalling in the same way in which many people find kitsch and bullshit appalling. But it was not pretentious.

To make the point about the pretentiousness clearer it is necessary to spell out more precisely *what* people can find appalling in pretentious bullshit and kitsch. The main problem with kitsch and bullshit is that often they do not enrich our (social, aesthetic, and so on) experiences in a meaningful way. Often we dismiss them by saying that this is 'simply' kitsch or 'simply' bullshit. However, this alone should merely make us *indifferent* towards kitsch and bullshit. Still, some people get really annoyed. Why? If they find kitsch and bullshit appalling it is not necessarily because they feel that kitsch and bullshit are at the root of an unfair treatment or that they have been cheated. Most typically they feel 'bullshitted' when somebody is trying to talk them into something by using obviously false conclusions whilst hiding the premises. What they dislike in those cases is the pretentiousness that is often linked to kitsch and bullshit. In this sense, we can say that Wittgenstein was overly sensitive because the slightest trace of self-indulgence reminded him of pretentiousness. Pretentiousness occurs when the bullshitter herself seems to believe and at the same time not to believe in her own bullshit; and this state of mind manifests itself very often as self-indulgence and self-enjoyment. Kundera's 'shitless word' as well as Pascal's case (though to a lesser degree) are examples of the latter two. On the other hand, Pascal is not *really* pretentious because her self-indulgence and self-enjoyment are not very strong (though still strong enough to annoy Wittgenstein).

Let me give a better example. The college's email address is excellence@tfu.edu.com. There was really no reason to put the word

‘excellence’ into that place. Throwing around the word ‘excellence’ like this makes it meaningless and trite. The value of real excellence has been debased, which is a typical feature of kitsch. Excellence must be worked for and not merely mentioned in the most inappropriate places. The college might defend itself by saying that for them excellence is so important and primordial that they decided to use it in their email address. We cannot refute this but it seems unlikely. A typical reaction would be to ask them: “Do you really believe in what you are saying?” The problem is that they do believe in it and at the same time they do not believe in it – and this is pretentious. It comes close to what German dictionaries occasionally suggest as a translation of bullshit: ‘Quatsch mit Sosse,’ which means ‘nonsense served with a sauce’ in order to make it aesthetically more appealing. What the college is doing is not merely boastful. If they were boasting we could hold them morally accountable for not saying the truth. Here we are put into a much more complicated situation that comes closer to the task of explaining why a certain work of art is bad and not good. This shows how pretentiousness can shift bullshit from ethics to aesthetics. The college is not lying nor does it affirm something in which it does *absolutely* not believe. It simply invented what it can consider as an aesthetic embellishment and it seems to believe in this embellishment alone; it does not necessarily believe in the reality itself. Through this confusion of aesthetics and reality, things got out of control. In the end, the college has put itself in a situation where it is no longer able to control the use of an important word such as ‘excellence’.

Frankfurt attaches much importance to pretentiousness as a *motivation* of bullshit.<sup>26</sup> It is what distinguishes, in his opinion, bullshit from humbug (as defined by Max Black) though Frankfurt also recognizes that “it must not be assumed that bullshit always and necessarily has pretentiousness as its motive.”<sup>27</sup> First, not everybody who pretends is pretentious. The real estate agent who cheats me into signing up for a hyperreal loan scheme *pretends* that the loan system is entirely safe though it is not; he is not pretentious. He is simply lying.

In some instances of pretentious bullshit, the bullshitter is *really* lying (consciously or unconsciously) but without taking care to dissimulate the truth properly. This is unintentional pretentious bullshit, which is

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<sup>26</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 12.

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different from unconscious bullshit where the bullshitter believes she is telling the truth. In unintentional pretentious bullshit the bullshitter is *trying to lie* but her lies remain on the level of bullshit.

Unconscious bullshit obviously happens relatively often because bullshit has an intrinsic illusionist component and is often close to self-hypnotization. Should the bullshitter really not be aware *at all* of her bullshit, she strikes us as naïve but not as pretentious because there is no motivation (either good or bad) behind her act.

Then there is the liar who desperately tries to become a bullshitter by saying, “But I thought that this would not matter.” She is not pretentious but simply defending herself. In any case, ‘pretentious bullshit’ (which Frankfurt identifies as a stock phrase, p. 11) is worse than regular bullshit because it annoys us, but in moral terms, it is not as bad as regular lying.

Kitsch works along similar lines. When bullshitters and kitsch-people boast about their (non-existing) capacities or about the (imaginary) artistic value of their latest ‘art’ purchase from the tourist souvenir stand we can either see them as victims of a reality scheme that has kept them in the dark for whatever reason; or we can find them annoying because they are trying to talk us into something. In the latter case, kitsch and bullshit lose their playful input and become pretentious because they start becoming serious strategies. What is annoying is the believe/not-believe state of mind of the person who talks about kitsch. When she is pretentious, she ‘somehow’ knows very well that it is kitsch but she does not want to admit it, possibly not even in front of herself.

Kitsch and bullshit are often guided by monetary or political motives, but they become particularly pretentious and annoying when those motives move to the foreground. Of course, this concerns the kitsch *producer* and not the kitsch consumer who will be a victim of those strategies. In the end, the college president was guided by monetary motives because he did not want engineering students to leave the department. But those motives were not too obvious, he did not appear greedy and, as explained above, he did not insist too much on his false claim. This is why here pretentiousness remains secondary.

We are annoyed that the real estate promoter presents the gorily decorated apartment that is obviously tuned to the taste of his *nouveau riche* clientele, as tasteful and up to high-class standards. We are also annoyed when looking at the apartment’s price because the tons of marble and fake gold have made it unnecessarily expensive. However, the kitsch

items themselves are not annoying but might even evoke our pity; what is annoying is the fact that here, kitsch is sold as non-kitsch or, in other words, that bullshit has moved closer to a lie (without really being one). We find the promoter pretentious because she takes kitsch for the real thing (or pretends to do so) and imposes her false judgments upon us in the name of profit. Still we remain in the realm of taste and aesthetics and a remnant of the matter's playfulness prevents us from calling this fraud.

The following example, on the other hand, is not pretentious because here we are dealing with false facts. The politician's declarations about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq might merely strike us as a typical bullshitting discourse aiming to gain the sympathy of certain voters; everyday politics abounds with such declarations. However, when the bullshit is taken seriously enough to serve as a reason for invading a country, then bullshit has become a lie incurring a crime against humanity. To some people such cases might appear as bullshit because of their 'virtual' character, meaning that those 'facts' have assumed a reality status without anybody having made an explicit effort to declare them to be real: "I am only *asking* to see President Obama's birth certificate, I am not *saying* that he was not born in the US," said Donald Trump. However, in spite of their indirect strategy and the attempt to make them look less serious than they actually are, those statements are lies and not bullshit. Correspondingly, in those cases we are not dealing with kitsch either. There is nothing kitschy in those statements apart from the indirect link with overly patriotic expressions of the love of the country.

### **Self-Deception**

As soon as the bullshitter believes in her own bullshit she is not pretentious but simply naïve. As mentioned, in the ideal cases of kitsch and bullshit (and these are the only cases where we *can* sympathize with them), the 'real' reality should never be entirely dissimulated. This is also important for Frankfurt. Some people decide to believe in bullshit *to some degree*, that is, they do not 'really' believe in it but temporarily enjoy it like a fiction or a computer game. They are not engaging in this half-believe because they are pretentious. Commercials are typical producers of bullshit as well as of kitsch, but normally their images enter our minds not in the form of an accepted reality, but rather as pleasant illusions that we like to entertain within certain limits.

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I might choose to ‘believe’ in the authentically German craftsmanship of my dearly paid car though I *know* perfectly well that most of the car’s parts were made in Turkey. However, nobody would classify this as a serious act of self-deception. The point is that I do not *exactly* know what percent of my car should be considered German and what percent Turkish and it is this blurred state of reality that invites a playful acceptance of bullshit. In those cases we join the bullshitter or producer of kitsch at least temporarily in their “indifference to how things really are,” to put it in Frankfurt’s terms.<sup>28</sup> It is important to express this as an *indifference*, not as a fanatical *adherence* to another reality. We must be ready to give up our illusions without difficulty and at any moment. Otherwise we are *victims* of bullshit or, technically speaking, of fraud.

Max Black has attempted to prove self-deception impossible because if humbug (or fraud) requires concealment of a deceptive intent, the speaker and the audience cannot be identical: “The following argument for the impossibility of self-deception seems to be conclusive: Humbug requires concealment of a deceptive intent; but if the speaker and the audience are identical, as in soliloquy, there can be no such concealment; so there can be no such thing as self-deception.”<sup>29</sup> However, Black admits that all this is only true for straightforward situations in which real concealment took place, that is, for “first-degree humbug”: “For second-degree humbug, produced by a self-deluded speaker or thinker, the unsatisfactory reference to thoughts and so on would need to be replaced by something like ‘thoughts... that might be revealed by candid and rational self-examination.’”<sup>30</sup> Black would probably call the case of the German-Turkish car ‘second degree humbug.’<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, the limits that separate self-deception from the mere play with partial deception are flimsy. In general – if at all – bullshit and kitsch are able to blur the distinction between reality and non-reality or between art and non-art, only slightly; but just because the limits are only *slightly* altered, the alteration can be rather consistent and durable. This is why Frankfurt says that, “bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies

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<sup>28</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Black, ‘The Prevalence of Humbug’, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> Black, ‘The Prevalence of Humbug’, p. 143.

<sup>31</sup> Black, ‘The Prevalence of Humbug’, p. 143.

are.”<sup>32</sup> The point is that the bullshitter “does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and opposes himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all.”<sup>33</sup> In this situation it is less likely that proofs will be searched for and that falsehood will be detected. Bullshit can last longer simply because it has declared that truth is not ‘otherwise’ but merely ‘unimportant.’ It is also through this device that bullshit can even engage our participation or enjoyment. And this ‘enjoyment’ factor is, of course, also very important for kitsch. It can be concluded, in parallel with Frankfurt’s statement, that kitsch is a greater enemy of art than fake art.

### **Cheating**

‘Cheating’ sounds less severe than ‘deceiving’. Cheating takes advantage of the fact that the limits between bullshit and lying (or kitsch and fraud) are often difficult to establish, that they are fluid and manifest various degrees. The junior high school student who has cheated on the math exam might really believe that she is ‘cool’ because she managed to delude an authoritarian system and got away with it. Moral concerns do not affect her. The German and French languages use special words for cheating on exams (*pfuschen*, *tricher*) in order to distinguish this act from that of normal deceiving. *Pfuschen* or *tricher* is a lighter form of deceiving/cheating. Contrary to the latter, *pfuschen* and *tricher* are intransitive verbs, which seemingly cancels a part of their ethical implications. One cannot *pfuschen/tricher somebody*, but one does it on one’s own, which sounds very much as if there is no victim.

Some people think that religion is bullshit but they would not hold the ‘bullshitting’ priest accountable for fraud. The leader of a sect, on the other hand, will more commonly be accused of deceiving and lying. The same goes for religious fundamentalists who insist on the absolute character of some absurd dogmas and turn religion into a sort of science-based ideology. Creationism for example, turns from bullshit into fraud when it is no longer presented as a culturally determined worldview but as a scientific theory. George Reisch has doubts whether creationism fits

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<sup>32</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 61.

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Frankfurt's definition of bullshit because advocates of creationism "are plainly not indifferent to truth."<sup>34</sup>

The bullshitter can or cannot be indifferent towards the truth but in any case she *invites* us to be indifferent towards truth though she knows that, at least theoretically, the truth is present and accessible to everyone. She invites us to ignore the elephant in the room. Because, in most cases, this strategy cannot be carried out along the lines of a perfect brainwashing: bullshit will remain bullshit. If, however, serious attempts are made to negate reality throughout, then creationism turns into fraud. Fraud happens when creationists attempt to publish their Intelligent Design theories in serious scientific journals or create their own journals for that purpose and advertise them as academically sanctioned (the reality of creationism promotion is obviously more complicated than can be dealt with in this short space, but it has been well analyzed by Reisch).

How does this work with regard to kitsch? There are examples where kitsch has been advertised as science. Ugo Volli mentions the case of a piece of pornography (which he sees as an example of kitsch because it is too explicit) that has been declared to be merely a scientific study of sexuality.<sup>35</sup> If people really believe this, kitsch becomes fraud. There are numerous other cases where kitsch is advertised as non-kitsch though the strategy is less obvious. The quasi kitsch-religion that invades contemporary brains in the form of a mind-numbing television culture is acceptable as long as people are left the choice to watch other programs and see other realities. Television as a media is different from cinema because through its permanency, it pervades peoples' minds in a more 'brainwashing' fashion. Through television, kitsch (and bullshit) is often forced upon people in such a consistent manner that they simply cannot escape. Here kitsch becomes fraud. The kitsch painting sold in the gallery of the local mall, on the other hand, remains kitsch because the seller is merely bullshitting. Kitsch as fraud can also happen when kitsch is systematically employed in architecture. Wherever kitsch takes over too much of reality (the media or the built environment) it turns into the exclusive kind of reality that is similar to the reality offered by sects.

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<sup>34</sup> George Reisch, 'The Pragmatics of Bullshit, Intelligently Designed', in *Bullshit and Philosophy*, pp. 33-48, p. 37.

<sup>35</sup> Ugo Volli, 'Pornography and Pornokitsch', in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, p. 226.



## **Seduction**

This pattern is in perfect agreement with Jean Baudrillard's scheme of seduction as a play with 'weak' signifiers. For Baudrillard, seduction always "lies with the annulment of the signs, of their meaning, with their pure appearance."<sup>36</sup> Strong kitsch and bullshit are not seductive but annoying. Normally kitsch and bullshit are strategies of exaggeration relying on the 'completeness' of signification. In this sense, they do not seduce but violate. However, *if* bullshit and kitsch seduce, this must always happen through weakness: "To seduce is to appear weak. To seduce is to render weak. We seduce with our weakness, never with strong signs or powers. In seduction we enact this weakness and this is what gives seduction its strength."<sup>37</sup> In general, we can be seduced by kitsch or bullshit when it is 'weak' but are repelled when it is 'strong.' Baudrillard classifies seduction as a ludic activity because of "the capacity immanent to seduction to deny things their truth and turn it into a game, the pure play of appearances, and thereby [to] foil all systems of power and meaning with a mere turn of the hand."<sup>38</sup> What rules in seduction is a "principle of uncertainty,"<sup>39</sup> which means that kitsch and bullshit can exercise a "power of attraction and distraction, of absorption and fascination"<sup>40</sup> that should never be too strong. The persuasion should always remain incomplete and the process should be playful, mobile, and diffuse. When kitsch and bullshit can be constructed as an "exhausted meaning" or as the annulment of signs, they can have "the beauty of an artifice."<sup>41</sup>

## **Coolness**

Bullshit is seductive when it provides a 'weak' type of information. Long before Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan has called this type of information not weak but 'cool.' His idea of coolness helps to further clarify the functions of kitsch and bullshit. For McLuhan, 'hot' is any kind of

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<sup>36</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. B. Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990), p. 76.

<sup>37</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 83.

<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 76.

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information that is highly defined or that “leaves not much to be filled in.”<sup>42</sup> Hot media favor analytical precision, quantitative analysis, and sequential ordering while ‘cool’ media leave the transmitted information open to interpretation or even partly unexplained. Speech is thus ‘cooler’ than highly defined images.

### **Bullshit is Uncool**

McLuhan’s concept of coolness will most probably be viewed today through another idea of coolness, which has been developed in the form of a behavioral attitude practiced by black men in the United States at the time of slavery and residential segregation. Here ‘to be cool’ means mainly to remain calm even when being under stress. While blacks were not allowed to enter certain areas of the city at certain times, a cool attitude made it possible for them to walk streets at night or at least to deal with their oppressors in a dignified fashion. This coolness depended to a large extent on pretending. But whenever it appeared as pretentious, the behavior would not be seen as cool. If we accept this idea of bullshit as a lack of ‘coolness,’ Fania Pascal’s problem might turn out to be a simple ‘coolness’ problem. She did not stay cool, lost control and started talking ‘bullshit.’ Her behavior was ‘uncool’ just like that of somebody who recites Mallarmé’s “*Dame sans trop d’ardeur*” in a business meeting, or somebody who hangs an authentic Rembrandt in an elevator. Those are not seriously ethical errors but ethico-aesthetical mistakes.

### **Bullshit Can be Cool**

Some facts concerning the cool *perception* or *consumption* of kitsch have been pointed out above. However, the *production* of bullshit can also be cool. The student who has cheated on the exam might believe that she is cool because she managed to delude an authoritarian system and got away with it. The ‘doing away’ with moral concerns brings this action close to bullshit. Yes, bullshit *can* be cool, but in that case, its existence will depend very much on its aesthetic arrangement. Most probably, bullshit will then come closer to cool kitsch. The bullshitter might get away with her distortion of reality because the *style* with which she commits the distortion aestheticizes the ethical default. This can be cool because ‘to be cool’

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<sup>42</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York and Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 37.

means to remain calm even when taking considerable risks. The easiness, nonchalance, and feigned innocence with which bullshit often passes over premises that *should* be obvious to everybody, makes the bullshitter a risk taker. And anybody who takes risks without losing control is cool. Even more, we can say that the higher the risk the cooler the bullshit (provided that she can get away with it). This does not mean that the bullshit is *entirely* hidden under the aesthetic and that nobody recognizes the bullshit as such. But the aesthetic arrangement urges us to pass over the bullshit occurrence because the person is ‘bullshitting with style.’

This is closely linked to another point: the cool bullshitter does *not care* whether people believe in her claims or not. No caring about what other might say is actually cool by definition. Even more than in other cases, coolness has here nothing to do with ethics but only with *how* things are done. A bank robber can be cool while the most ethical person might be uncool. What matters is not the content of the speech or action but the bullshitter’s style or what Max Black has called the ‘stance’ of the one who produces humbug. Black means by stance “the speaker’s beliefs, attitudes, and evaluations”<sup>43</sup> and we have identified the stance of the bullshitter not only as the intention to not lie or to bluntly conceal the truth, but also as a complex mixture of negligence, boldness, and nonchalance. The weighting of all those qualities is decisive for the fact whether bullshit is perceived as cool or not. Here we see the contrast with the aforementioned negative qualities: pretentiousness, self-deception and cheating make any attempted bullshit immediately uncool.

Of course, bullshit becomes also uncool when it moves too close to blunt lying. The liar cannot be cool because she clearly *hides* the truth and is not ready to take any risk. Compared to lying, bullshitting appears more like a game (even as a game of hazard) and games are cool by definition. Bullshit is coolest when it stimulates a playful attitude towards itself, and this attitude is normally excluded from lying. Cool kitsch (which is arguably rarer than cool bullshit) is inscribed in this logic. Normally, kitsch is conservative and hostile towards risk taking. Normally the kitsch producer takes no risk but is eager to please. However, should he nevertheless get away with impressing an art-educated public with kitsch because there is “something” in it that is cool – then that artist would

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<sup>43</sup> Black, ‘The Prevalence of Humbug’, p. 118.

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indeed be cool. Strictly speaking, this would then no longer be kitsch but kitsch-art. It is cool because she was taking a maximum risk but she kept the situation under control.

### **Cool and Cute**

In the above sections, kitsch and bullshit have been considered from both the receiver's and the producer's points of view. The difference between both needs to be made clearer in order to point out a paradox. While kitsch can certainly *appear* as cool to some people (the receivers), it needs to be clarified whether can kitsch really *be* cool (that is, be *produced* as cool). As a matter of fact, the kitsch-cool relationship is paradoxical. Primarily, kitsch has a preference for all that is sentimental, round, warm, soft, and fluffy and everything that is associated with slightly warmer temperatures. This is why *normally* kitsch cannot be cool. However, when kitsch manifests the same innocence (and perhaps even nonchalance) as bullshit, one might indeed detect traces of coolness in kitsch. Most of the time one would not call this 'cool' but rather 'cute'. Often kitsch has been said to have a natural affinity with cuteness. Rosenberg points out that "when kitsch first began to spread in European cities, the liveliest poets found it cute."<sup>44</sup> Cuteness is not only the helplessness sparking exuberant emotion. "This is cute" can also signify recognition in terms of coolness similar to the world 'charming'.

Can bullshit be cute? It is difficult to think of examples but the possibility exists. Since the production of kitsch is not a serious ethical mistake, the producer of kitsch or the kitsch lover might get away with their kitsch for the same reason we pardon bullshit when it is committed by children. "But I only wanted to..." is a child's excuse for having transformed the kitchen into a wetland and it comes across in the form of bullshit (the case where the liar desperately tries to become a bullshitter has been discussed above). Bullshit is cute when the bullshitter is trying to lie but she simply can't. In general, kitsch belongs very much to the universe of children and bullshit must have some affinities with the childishness of kitsch expressions. It can be no coincidence that the Oxford English Dictionary equates the meaning of 'bull' to the word 'trivial' (though Frankfurt does not agree with this definition).<sup>45</sup> In conclusion, we can say

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<sup>44</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), p. 264.

<sup>45</sup> See Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 34.

that bullshit and kitsch can be cool when they take risks without losing control of the situation; and they can be charming and cute when they appear to be innocent. In all other cases they are most probably neither cool nor cute.

### **Cool Self-Conscious Kitsch**

The last possibility for kitsch being cool is when it is produced in the form of ‘self-conscious kitsch’ (though Kundera would not recognize this as kitsch at all). Lebensztein and Cooper affirm that by “appreciating kitsch and collecting its objects, the supercool amateur assures for himself a certificate of good taste and distinction.”<sup>46</sup> Here kitsch can be freely combined with bullshit. A good example is the work of Jeff Koons, who is one of the most virtuous artists employing kitsch for the purpose of art; and he is also a master of bullshit, as is demonstrated by his declaration that Cicciolina (an Italian-Hungarian porn star and politician formerly married to Koons and featured in some of his work) “is the eternal virgin [because] she’s been able to remove guilt and shame from her life, and because of this she is a great liberator.”<sup>47</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Baudrillard confirms that belief or make-believe “employ signs without credibility and gestures without referents; their logic is not one of mediation, but of immediacy, whatever the sign.”<sup>48</sup> Kitsch and bullshit are among the most obvious examples of such techniques of make-believe. Both try to outwit the critical mind. When this act of outwitting is playful it might be cool, and it becomes annoying when it is pretentious, which is the contrary of cool. One reason is that the pretentious person is no longer in control of the situation but believes (at least partly) in her own kitsch/bullshit. Then there is the case of the consumer who insists on the real value of kitsch and bullshit; she might also be classified as pretentious and not merely be pitied as a victim.

It has become more important than ever to distinguish those patterns. At times of neoliberalism and social media, kitsch and bullshit

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<sup>46</sup> Jean-Claude Lebensztein and Kate Cooper, ‘Photorealism, Kitsch and Venturi’, *SubStance*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1989), pp. 75-104.

<sup>47</sup> Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), n.p.

<sup>48</sup> Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 75.

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are on the increase (remember that Pennycook *et al.* classified Twitter's 140 characters formula as a recipe for "pseudo-profound bullshit"). Already Horkheimer and Adorno had pointed out that liberalism could be reproached for its lack of style.<sup>49</sup> Today things are more complicated. Kitsch is not only determined by politics but politics can be determined by kitsch. This means that kitsch is more than a spontaneous neoliberal whim but the occurrence of kitsch is linked to comprehensive cultural systems fostering certain political behaviors. A renewed approach towards kitsch inspired by Frankfurt's elaborations on bullshit as the deceptive misrepresentation of reality can help to reveal an 'integral kitsch behavior' in both private and public matters.

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<sup>49</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 131.