

# TRADITIONAL KITSCH AND THE JANUS-HEAD OF COMFORT

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The impression one may easily get from reading Clement Greenberg's 1939 "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" and many of the other selections in Gillo Dorfles's canonical 1969 collection, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*,<sup>1</sup> is that kitsch is a real thing and that it is obvious not merely that kitsch is worthy of serious discussion, but also that it needs to be confronted in some way, at the very least analytically, and perhaps also on a more practical plane. In particular, one encounters again and again, in these and similar texts, a sharp opposition – or at least a valiant attempt to maintain a sharp opposition – between high art and kitsch.

Over the last few decades, however, another view of kitsch has come to the fore: namely, the idea that, on the one hand, particularly since the advent of postmodernism, the sharp divide once upheld between fine art and popular culture can no longer be realistically maintained, and that, on the other hand, both high art and popular culture do no more than reflect the taste preferences of particular subcultures – subcultures which, as was just mentioned, can no longer be so easily kept apart.

Sociologists, for example, argue that a sharp distinction between "high" and "low" culture does not stand up to empirical investigation. David Halle, in his *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* entry on "high" and "low" culture, points out that not only have cultural distinctions been levelled in the United States by the rising percentage of US citizens with a college education, but also that studies of supposedly "low" culture have "challenged, on empirical grounds, the earlier claims that the products of 'popular/lowbrow' culture were of little or no aesthetic value and were experienced by the audience in an uncreative and unimaginative way"

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<sup>1</sup> Dorfles reproduces Greenberg's essay in an abridged form. Greenberg's *Art and Culture* is one source for the complete version. Dorfles is still thinking about kitsch, as evidenced by the exhibition on kitsch he curated for the Milan Triennale in 2012, "Kitsch: oggi il kitsch" [roughly: 'Kitsch Today']. There is an exhibition catalog under the same title.

(2124). He contends that more recent studies sometimes even supported the claim that certain products of presumably “low” culture were *superior* in quality to products of supposedly “high” culture.

Other sociologists have directed our attention to the rise of the cultural “omnivore,” a cultural role which they argue has come to replace the former high-culture “snob.” The omnivore is a person who consumes some culture marked as classical, high art, or avant-garde, but also consumes plenty of popular culture which has no such elevated aspirations. Furthermore, even though the omnivore may still reject some forms of culture as being in bad taste, the person who exclusively consumes “high” culture – that is, the individual who maintains a dependable barrier between high culture and pop culture, and who *also rejects* pop culture – is becoming harder and harder to find (Wilson, 95-98 and 149-150; Peterson and Kern; cf. Eriksson).

Sociologists in particular have also been quick to point out that much of what is claimed about the worldviews, attitudes, and psychology of consumers of ostensibly “kitschy” items is ultimately armchair theorizing, based on nothing more than speculation. In regard to the supposition that people purchase art in order to achieve status, for example, David Halle writes (in his book, *Inside Culture*): “Not one empirical study of the reasons that people select artistic or cultural items (or other, related items) finds respondents offering status as the main reason for their choice” (6). Countering the possible objection that people might not want to admit that their motivation was a pursuit of status, Halle threw down the gauntlet with the following response: “Perhaps. But how do we know? Unsystematic data? Our own longing? For so empirically minded a field as sociology, this weak support for a central thesis is unsatisfactory, and perhaps even scandalous” (6).

In the art world, on the other hand, the advent of pop art, Warhol, and postmodernism, as well as a post-pomo period in which even postmodernism itself appears to be merely one among many options, has arguably complicated not merely Greenberg’s distinction between formalist art objects and kitsch, but even any fixed or stable distinction between fine art in general and popular culture in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, in magazines and newspapers, particularly in fashion, interior design, travel writing, and restaurant reviews, one often sees the term “kitsch” used to indicate merely a particular “flavour” of things to

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<sup>2</sup> For one recent source among many, see the discussion of the art world in Stallabrass. Central to the evacuation of aesthetic considerations from the concept of art is Danto (1981) – though more recently he has revisited the question of beauty (2003).

enjoy. A travel piece on a village in Columbia, for example, remarks that “the colourful, two-tone plus white façades give the square a cheery tone even on a dreary day – though a touch of kitsch as well.” With this, the author does not wish to disparage the village square, but merely to describe its feel (Kay). Marnie Hunter’s recent review of Doug Lanksey’s new kitsch compendium, *Crap Souvenirs*, is less forgiving, but clearly encourages the reader to indulge in purchasing and enjoying “kitschy” items. (It should perhaps not pass unremarked that this forgiving attitude towards kitsch finds its home precisely in consumerist contexts.)

All of these approaches to kitsch – what we might call “deflationary” approaches – conspire to create the impression that, ultimately, either “kitsch” should be abandoned as a concept altogether, or we should simply abandon ourselves to enjoying kitschy objects as kitsch. Kitsch, it might seem, is either a non-entity or, if it does indeed exist, it is something that no one has any reason *not* to indulge in – it is just one more form of culture among many, after all. So one person likes heavy metal and science fiction, another prefers country music and romance novels, a third enjoys classical music and political documentaries, and a fourth likes a little bit of each – so what? If this is the standard response, deflationary approaches to kitsch would seem to have won the day.

## Defending and challenging ambivalent kitsch

I myself am quite sympathetic to questioning any sharp and dependable divide between ostensibly “high” and “low” culture; between high art and popular culture; or between “classics” and mass media. In particular, I believe one should question an attitude which takes kitsch to be a radically evil force, an attitude stated unapologetically by some of the old-school kitschographers of the canonical – if also somewhat dingy-looking – Gillo Dorfles collection on kitsch.<sup>3</sup> The novelist and literary theorist Hermann Broch, excerpted in the Dorfles collection, states outright about the *Kitschmensch* that:

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<sup>3</sup> It is somewhat odd that the Dorfles book – meant to be a declaration of the crucial importance of preserving some pure, space safe from the infection of bad taste – seems overall so visually shoddy. The overwhelming preponderance of kitsch images in the book – admittedly striking images – which in many cases completely upstage the critical essays – seem to infect the book with the very shabbiness the book was meant to hold off. Whether this infection speaks for or against the book’s concern with the infectious power of kitsch is hard to say.

He who produces kitsch is not one who produces low-quality art, he is no figure of little or no ability, he is definitely not to be judged according to the standards of aesthetics, rather he is [. . .], to get to the point, a bad person, he is an ethically depraved person, a criminal who desires the radically evil. (*Schriften*, 95, my translation)

The theologian Richard Egenter, in what claims to be the first book-length treatment of kitsch in English, specifically names Satan, “the Father of Lies,” as the diabolical puppet-master behind religious kitsch (13-14).

I have argued against such reductions to the diabolical. In a 1998 article, for example, I defended what could be called “traditional kitsch” precisely for its calming, rejuvenating, and therapeutic potential, and sought to place it among strategies for coping with stress. More recently, in a 2007 article, though I was critical towards kitsch, I also pointed to the socially healthy impulses of sympathy and compassion that much “traditional kitsch” could be seen to encourage.

Perhaps at this juncture, before going any further, I should say a word or two about “traditional kitsch.” Given the seemingly endless number of kitsch compendia and coffee-table *Wunderkammer*, it is clear that kitschographers have laid claim to many families and subfamilies of kitsch. Indeed, one of the main ways in which the Dorfler collection was meant to break new ground was to expand the discussion of kitsch from considerations of collectible figurines and schmaltzy souvenirs to the wider phenomena of tourism, auto detailing, magazine advertisements, and other, more contemporary and energetic areas of material culture. It is, however, back to the thrift-shop shelves and the tops of family television sets that I have focused much of my attention: namely, to the world of what might be called “traditional” kitsch, that kitsch which pulls at heart-strings and evokes sentimental emotions, a return to nature, and the comforting embrace of a mother’s arms. For, regardless how many odd and new varieties of kitsch may be posited and catalogued, I am convinced that the ultimate home of kitsch – the root of kitsch’s evolutionary tree to which it can always return – is sweetness, schmaltz, and comfort.

To return from my digression, then: even though it seems that deflationary approaches to kitsch have won the day, it is my contention that, even if approaches which are critical of kitsch no longer dominate, the dominance of deflationary approaches is also not complete. Deflationary approaches to kitsch stake their claim on a field which, at least in the present context, is unavoidably contested. Even if one believes that criticizing kitsch is in fact pointless, worthless, or wrong-headed, it cannot be denied that – even as we pass into the 21<sup>st</sup> century – the impulse to critique kitsch is still alive and well. Over the course of this article I will

furthermore argue that at least some of the critical energy directed against kitsch is justified after all.

Maybe I should say a little about what brought me to kitsch and how I came to my present (still somewhat labile) position on kitsch. The main aspect of kitsch that has always attracted me as a subject for investigation, right from the very beginning, has been the incredible ambivalence I have towards it. This ambivalence was especially strong when, as I began reading about kitsch, I found my *own* preferences falling under the spotlight of the “kitsch” label, for at that point, there was no question of armchair theorizing – the kitsch consumer in question was me! Nonetheless, the main thrust of my first work on kitsch (1998) went to defend traditional kitsch from its most vehement attackers.

Even though I had for the most part defended kitsch, the initial ambivalence I had towards it never disappeared.<sup>4</sup> But it was Susan Orlean’s 2001 *New Yorker* piece about Thomas Kinkade, famed painter of cozy landscapes (reputedly the wealthiest artist in the United States), that awoke me from my kitschy slumber. Her *New Yorker* piece laid out Kinkade’s manipulation of his customers and re-connected me to a disgust with kitsch I had forgotten was there. I also found courage in the call to arms issuing from the pages of Thomas Frank’s periodical of cultural critique, *The Baffler*:

[T]he high critics declared that the production of mass culture was not worth talking about at all, since to do so was to make the distasteful assumption that the public stupidly fell for the commercial ephemera that increasingly made up our cultural surroundings [. . .]. While they spoke proudly of their own subversiveness and turned out account after account of the liberating potential of each act of consuming, the culture industry itself grabbed with both hands at the golden promise of rebellion-through-consumption. (14)

Most recently, I have found some inspiration in the work of Marita Sturken, whose analysis of comfort culture generated in response to the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 (hereafter referred to as “9/11”), while fully aware of critiques of the concept of kitsch, still finds a solid basis for a critique of actual kitsch insofar as it participates in a cultural and political whitewashing of the United States’ domestic and

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<sup>4</sup> In a footnote to that first piece on kitsch, I cautioned that “I do not wish to say that kitsch is always beneficial [. . .] my analysis refers mainly to kitsch when it is a tool for creating a domestic sanctuary; but when such tactics are applied on a large, national-political scale, then kitsch becomes questionable, even dangerous” (77, note 68).

foreign policy in an attempt to close down any space for getting outside of the United States' mythology of *a priori* innocence – an attitude she captures with the concept of United States citizens as “tourists of history.” To be fair, Holliday and Potts have recently advised caution with Sturken's approach, which they argue can fall into an all-too-easy critique which overlooks its own position of privilege (220-229).

### **Kitsch and the new Internet record**

Revisiting kitsch with a renewed sense of critique, I realized there was now a response to at least one of the sociologists' attacks on a critical consideration of kitsch: namely, technology allows us to confront, at least on an anecdotal level, the spectre of armchair theorizing about people's attitudes towards the objects they consume and like. By this new technological avenue I mean the rich Internet record which can now be found in blog posts; comment threads to blog posts and newspaper articles; *Amazon.com* customer reviews of books and films; and discussion threads about Facebook posts, all of which (as we shall soon see) allow people to speak their minds voluntarily, as they see fit – without the pressure, inconvenience, and artificiality of sociological questionnaires, focus groups, or telephone interviews.

Before going any further, however, two unavoidable caveats must be made. The first is that, at least initially, such evidence culled from web page discussion and comment threads is admittedly anecdotal. Nonetheless, even such anecdotal evidence may still serve to demonstrate the *existence* of different attitudes towards an ostensibly “kitschy” item, if not necessarily their extent.

The second caveat is in regard to the question of the reliability of people's remarks, particularly those made in the context of web page comment threads. Namely, there is always the danger that a remark made in a comment thread might be the work of a so-called “troll.” A comment thread “troll” is a person whose main purpose in posting remarks is to derail the conversation and provoke heated reactions, which the troll finds entertaining (“Troll (Internet)”). Given that stirring up emotional reactions is the primary aim of a troll, one cannot assume that a troll's remarks have any connection to what the troll actually believes. Indeed, when not simply posting off-topic non-sequiturs, many trolls use the strategy of simply posting offensive remarks violently opposed to the general tenor of the discussion. The troll may in fact even agree with what most commenters are saying, but stirring up a reaction is more important to the troll than expressing his or her own opinion.

The threat of trolling and other forms of insincerity is worsened by a kindred Internet phenomenon, that of “Poe’s Law.” Poe’s Law states that “Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humour, it is impossible to create a parody of fundamentalism that someone won’t mistake for the real thing” (“Poe’s Law”; cf. Aikin). Poe’s Law implies that any *insincere* statement of an extreme position (particularly those relating to religion), whether written by a troll or instead by someone intending parody or “snark,” can often be easily matched by very similar statements made *sincerely* by extremists. The problem, then, is that insincere statements in comment threads, especially extreme ones, can easily be mistaken for sincere expressions of the commenter’s actual beliefs or position. (Parodies in particular extend the problem beyond comment threads to the blog posts and YouTube videos themselves).

The upshot of these caveats is that one must exercise caution when using comment threads and other Internet sources as evidence for people’s attitudes. That said, these comment thread remarks have at the very least been *posted* – they are not figments of an armchair theorist’s mind. One must admit that the Internet provides a record of – if not always people’s sincerely held beliefs – then at least their voluntarily provided assertions. In addition, even when insincere, comment thread remarks may reveal what attitudes are taken to be common knowledge. And, of course, it would be just as foolhardy to assume that all comment thread remarks are insincere. Many comment thread remarks plainly *do* reflect the beliefs, feelings, and opinions of their authors.

These unavoidable caveats notwithstanding, the rich resources of comment threads do reveal the contested ground of contemporary discussions of kitsch. To give some idea of what I have in mind, let me briefly discuss two items of ostensibly kitschy 9/11 culture.<sup>5</sup> The two items in question are a) a small sculpture, Jenny Ryan’s *Soft 9/11* (which represents the “Twin Towers” of the World Trade Center as an anthropomorphized plush-toy), and b) Dennis Madalone’s viral music video, *America We Stand as One* (in which he reassures us that those who died in the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing wars are still there for us, in angelic form). I have chosen these items not merely for their ability to quickly reveal underlying assumptions connected to United States mythology, but also for the empirical, online record of the discussions which they have triggered – discussions which show that a complete surrender to their comforts can sometimes be difficult to carry out.

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<sup>5</sup> The following observations draw from my forthcoming book chapter, “9/11 as Schmaltz-Attractor.” The reader is referred to that discussion for a more detailed treatment.

## Jenny Ryan's *Soft 9/11*

First, let's consider Jenny Ryan's one-off plush toy sculpture, *Soft 9/11*. This first came to my attention through the popular blog, *Boing Boing*. If anywhere is the online home to omnivorism, it is *Boing Boing*, a stylishly down-to-earth, multi-authored, self-declared "directory of wonderful things." Mark Frauenfelder, the founder of *Boing Boing*, posted a picture of Ryan's sculpture above his declaration that: "Some might think Johnny Ryan and Jenny Ryan's *Soft 9/11* trivializes a horrible tragedy, but that kind of knee jerk reaction prevents them from contemplating this profoundly heartfelt work of art. It belongs in a museum" ("*Soft 9/11*").

Ryan's sculpture presents the Twin Towers as cartoonish, anthropomorphized figures captured in the combined moments that the attacking planes penetrated the buildings. The buildings, holding hands, show expressions of sickness and surprise on their faces.

Frauenfelder's somewhat defiant post quickly sparked hot debate over the meaning and import of Ryan's sculpture, the very first comment in the thread immediately making the move of deploying the word "kitsch." Indeed, the discussion that followed is a textbook case of the interpretive issues that an artwork can raise, particularly in connection with the tightly related question of the artist's presumed intention. What the lengthy discussion ultimately showed was that numerous positions regarding kitsch were in play, and that no sure interpretation of Ryan's work could be had. Ryan even entered into the on-line conversation, but seemed herself unsure of whether her own work was supposed to present a critique of crass profiteering based on 9/11 (and therefore a spur to *outrage* and *anger*) or whether the work was supposed to pull at the heartstrings of the viewer (and therefore act as an invitation to *sympathy*, *comfort*, and *healing*). At the same time, debate – punctuated by cautions of "too soon?" (as soon as the second comment) – raged as to whether the piece itself participated in the very exploitation which it ambivalently attacked. And, of course, given Frauenfelder's framing remarks, debate also raged over whether the piece merited the status of an art object worthy of inclusion in a museum.

Whatever else might be said about the debates raging in the comment thread to Frauenfelder's post, one thing that cannot be said about them is that the reactions and assertions of the commenters had just been made up by a speculating theorist. Those debates provide evidence for different, *competing* attitudes towards "kitsch" – not merely an "anything goes" or hands-off stance. To be fair, the audience for *Boing Boing* is a sophisticated,



extremely self-aware group. One might surmise that the many voices and meta-commentaries (on the ostensible kitschiness of Ryan's disaster plushy) to be found in *Boing Boing* comment threads depend merely upon the geekily stylish and self-aware readership of the blog. But, as we shall see in the next item, even works intended to be absolutely unambivalent and unsophisticated can emotionally fall prey to some of the same conundrums as Ryan's 9/11 plush toy.

### **Dennis Madalone's *America We Stand as One***

We have now reached Dennis Madalone's patriotic 9/11 viral-video rock ballad, *America We Stand As One*. The song for this music video, as Madalone has explained in numerous interviews, came to him in a moment of divine inspiration (Gorenfeld; Laskey; Prooth). The music video itself reinforces the song's trope of Madalone as divine messenger insofar as it provides the framing device of glowing spirits from above entering Madalone's body before he sings his song. The song expresses a message from the departed who have "fallen" in their struggles around 9/11 that, against all appearances, they are still with us, although "in a different way," as angels.

A remarkable aspect of the music video's reception is the fact that its hyper-sincere performance and multiply-layered redundancies – intended to make it unmistakably patriotic and inspirational – often had the opposite effect. Many viewers, as comments to the YouTube video and blog entries about the video made clear, found the video not merely unintentionally funny (unintentional camp), but wondered whether the whole thing was actually an extremely elaborate, deeply sarcastic joke.

The video quickly gathered thousands upon thousands of hits as two sharply contrasting contingents – those who found it genuinely inspiring and those who found it (intentionally or unintentionally) schmaltzy, bombastic, or full of itself – forwarded the link to their friends. With this divide in its reception, we see that the meaning of Madalone's video, particularly the question of its "kitschiness," is not a foregone conclusion. Notwithstanding frequently-met assertions that no one takes "kitsch" as a disparaging label seriously anymore, or that no one feels it is even worth making the effort of declaring something to be "kitsch" in the first place, many people patently *are* willing to draw a line in the sand and declare *America We Stand as One* to be kitsch, schmaltz, or cheese (and therefore questionable, ridiculous, or in bad taste).

To anyone having just passed through the "Dennis Madalone Experience," with its multilayered American flags, patriotic landmarks, and celestial

policemen, fire-fighters, and soldiers, not to mention its chorus of “America – we stand as one,” it should be clear that something *very close* in feeling to a military recruitment video has unfurled. This militaristic effect takes place in spite of the fact that, as Madalone explained to me in a telephone interview, he felt it could not be mistaken for Pentagon propaganda, because he made especially sure that none of the fallen were depicted holding weapons.

With this remark on the (unintentionally) military and nationalistic flavour of Madalone’s 9/11 power ballad, we have reached the threshold of my conclusion. Ultimately, one may well grant that the “kitsch” concept inhabits contested ground, and grant that in many respects the “kitsch” concept (to say nothing of the term!) has lost none of its bite,<sup>6</sup> and yet – the great caveat – one may *grant* all this contention over kitsch, and *grant* that the term “kitsch” is still regularly deployed to police taste boundaries, but still *deny* that these battles and skirmishes have any basis in reality. One might simply contend that those applying the “kitsch” concept to mark some item of culture as inferior or as deserving of caution are simply wrong. They use the word “kitsch,” yes, it might be contended, but the word being deployed has no actual referent.

## The Janus-Head of Comfort

The challenge of that caveat motivates my employment of the ancient Roman Janus-head image to capture the troubling moment in the comfort which traditional kitsch wishes to afford. For my contention is that, at least in some traditional kitsch, there *is* a solid basis for critique and concern, concern having to do precisely with its soothing and comforting aim. The figure of the Janus-head, as anyone who has seen a Janus-head image would immediately grasp, is two-faced. To invoke the Janus-head is, if nothing else, at the very least an allusion to some phenomenon which presents more than one aspect. And kitsch, as has just been amply demonstrated, is certainly *that!* With just a few examples, it has been

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<sup>6</sup> Witness the acrimony over the meaning of Thomas Kinkade’s recent death on April 6, 2012. Particularly in the comment threads to his newspaper obituaries, battles raged over the ostensible “kitschiness” of his landscapes, yet again proving that the accusation of “Kitsch!” is both flung and heatedly countered (Flegenheimer; Marshall). Indeed, after Kinkade’s death, the “kitsch” question rose up out of the comment threads and into the headlines with the article, “Kinkade: Home Decorator, Kitsch-Master, or Artist?” (Noveck). Clearly, “kitsch” is still a living issue. So it may seem that the deflationary approaches have not won the day, after all.

shown that the same ostensibly kitschy item can present radically different aspects: “kitsch,” non-“kitsch,” soothing balm, biting critique, and cold cynicism, to name a few.

But there is another – often overlooked – element to the mythological figure of the Janus-head. For Janus, standing for vigilance at a threshold, also governed warfare. It is said that his temple in the Forum had gates which “were open in times of war and closed in times of peace,” but, for that very reason, the gates to his temple were almost never closed (“Janus” 1968 and “Janus” 2010). My closing contention is that, at least for the United States, the ultimate context for much traditional kitsch – its hidden face – is warfare (as well as connected domestic repression).

This troubling thought has accompanied me in all my considerations of kitsch, but Dennis Madalone and Marita Sturken have pushed me to stare down this idea directly. Sturken sees the central orientation of United States mythology as encouraging what she calls a “tourism of history,” whereby Americans can simply pretend that all the horrible events to befall the United States occur unexpectedly to a country of untouchably good intentions, a country which never initiates any violent actions on the world stage itself, but only witnesses events contemplatively as an innocent bystander (acting, or rather reacting, only when forced to do so by unprovoked attacks).

I will not be able to develop this idea in any detail here, but trust that, if you have a chance to watch Madalone’s music video, the echoes of his closing refrain – “America, so good and beautiful” – will serve as a reminder of the ground we have already covered. Sturken argues that the quick comfort afforded by kitsch in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and other attacks serves not merely to comfort, but also (and more importantly) to stave off and silence any questioning of the mythology of the United States’ innocence and purity at home and abroad. In other words, when we look at one face of the Janus-head, that of comfort, the other face – that of tear gas, gun nuts, police brutality, prison rape, indefinite detentions, programs of torture, targeted assassinations, and military occupations – remains hidden.<sup>7</sup>

To be fair, I do not believe for example that Dennis Madalone intended to prop up United States militarism – indeed my impression is that he wishes to support peace. The fact that a particular “kitschy” item easily lends itself to backing up the United States’ military adventures does not necessarily mean that its producer intended for it to be used in that way.

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<sup>7</sup> I develop some of this line of thought using Edmund Burke’s concept of beauty in “The Flower and the Breaking Wheel.” See also Sturken’s much more detailed analysis.

Nonetheless, the ease with which *America We Stand as One* can be incorporated into US military mythology touches on the darker potential of such patriotic schmaltz. Of course, in many other cases, such as the infamous 9/11 collector's coins and other similar memorabilia, it is hard to believe that capitalizing on patriotism was not the producers' principle aim. And yet here, too, particularly as far as the consumers of these objects – and these consumers' aims and motives – are concerned, some caution along the lines endorsed by Holliday and Potts may also be in order.

But let me close with a final datum from the Internet record. Here we have evidence of what at least appears to be closely connected to the *Kitschmensch* attitude described by Broch and Dorfles. It comes from an *Amazon.com* customer review of Alexis L. Boylan's 2011 edited volume, *Thomas Kinkade: The Artist in the Mall*. Soon after Thomas Kinkade's death, one *Amazon.com* customer (screen name "Chris Larken") wrote a fiery response to all who had criticized "Thom," as "Larken" referred to Kinkade:

I bet many still do not know that Thom has passed away on Good Friday 4/6/12. It is a very sad day, a loss to America as well. From what I have read on the vile liberal forums and news outlets [...] It seems there are many many dark and evil hearted people, and haters in society calling themselves progressives. They are rotten to the very core. Well I got news for you. The reason you hate and dislike Thomas Kinkade artwork, is because you love evil.

This customer review writer goes on to declare that:

Anyone who is against Christianity will not like Thom's art. Pure and simple. It is like holy water to Satan. These people hate goodness – period. Evil always repels anything that is good, they hide from light. Light is a symbol of the divine. This is why Thom was called the painter of light.

Again, *contra* the sociologist's complaint, *this* declaration is not the figment of a theorist's psychological projection, but a review written by an *Amazon.com* user.<sup>8</sup> This customer review (written *nota bene* by someone

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<sup>8</sup> The caveat as to Internet trolls taken under advisement! I contacted this *Amazon.com* reviewer by means of the review and did hear back from him: "First I do understand that my review was forceful and strong, but I try to always tell things like they are without pulling any punches. Maybe *Amazon.com* is not the proper forum for my explanations, however, when a great man like Thomas is disgraced and cast as a bad man for no good reason, I react strongly." It is of course true that, if this person were an Internet "troll," the ruse need not end when correspondence begins. But I did acquire at least a rudimentary confirmation of the

*defending* Kinkade) unmasks the ideological substrate to Kinkade's sweet paintings with remarkable dispatch.<sup>9</sup> What is truly remarkable about this hellfire review of Boylan's Thomas Kinkade book are its striking parallels to the assessment of the "Kitschmensch" artist we saw before from Hermann Broch:

He who produces kitsch is [. . .] to get to the point, a bad person, he is an ethically depraved person, a criminal who desires the radically evil.

The question is: are the most intense varieties of kitschy sincerity truly as innocent as they present themselves? This customer review presents one forcefully stated answer to that question. In this case, at least, it seems some of the cozy glow on Kinkade's cottages comes from the flames of Hell. With this consideration, we have reached the end, a moment where the two faces of the Janus-head (namely, comfort and revenge) reveal their common spine.

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writer's position regarding Kinkade. (I did solidly confirm that my e-mail correspondent was the author of, or at least had direct access to, the "Chris Larken" *Amazon.com* reviews, but will spare the reader the details.)

<sup>9</sup> The radical theological oppositions in this *Amazon.com* review bring to mind the oppositions Nietzsche highlighted in *On the Genealogy of Morals* from an earlier Christian, St. Thomas Aquinas, who declared that "[t]he blessed in the kingdom of heaven will see the punishments of the damned, in order that their bliss be more delightful for them" (First Essay, Section 15, 485; Nietzsche quotes from *Summa Theologiae*, III, Supplementum, Q. 94, Art. 1). Nietzsche follows this in the same section with an even more expansive quotation from Tertullian on the same theme.

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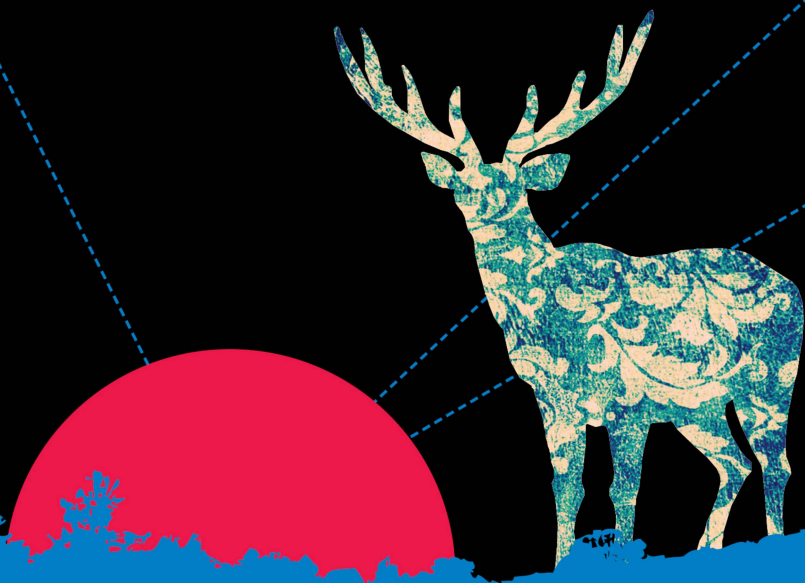


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