

## **‘Walking the Line’: Kitsch, Class and the Morphing Subject of Value**

**Tracey Potts**

Kitsch, once reviled as the enemy of art and friend of the fascist, has recently entered a new phase of its life-course. Its appearance in art galleries and upon metropolitan sideboards has led many to conclude that taste hierarchies have been undone and matters of aesthetic judgement relaxed. This article argues to the contrary, drawing attention to the subtle symbolic economic activity that attends kitsch in its rehabilitated state. Paying heed to the intricate manoeuvrings that help to stage and revalue certain kitsch objects is revealing of a set of obscured class actions, that are all the more powerful as a means of securing social distinction for remaining beneath notice.

Recent episodes in the social life of kitsch need to be calibrated with recent episodes in the story of class. The insistence that kitsch is no longer a class issue is informed by outmoded notions of social distinction. Referring principally to Beverley Skeggs’ work, with its sharp consideration of the shifting dynamics of contemporary class formation, this article directs energy toward the increasingly prominent symbolic economic basis of social division and discrimination.<sup>1</sup> This reads as if Skegg’s work belongs with the outmoded Supplemented with Alan Liu’s account of post-industrialism in *The Laws of Cool*, the capital interests at stake in seemingly perverse acts of consumption become clear, and their symbolically violent and affective dimensions exposed.<sup>2</sup> In short, the spectacle of Lyon’s heiress, food writer and broadcaster Nigella Lawson wearing a Playboy t-shirt conjuring up ‘white trash’ recipes can be read to signal the very opposite of the end of taste history.

### **‘Mmm... he’s goodbad but he’s not evil’<sup>3</sup>**

According to a number of journalists and academics the taste competition is over. Where once kitsch operated as an indicator of social position – an alpine mural and flying ducks helped to mark *Coronation Street*’s Hilda Ogden as working-class – these days such distinctions fail to signify straightforwardly. Clear-cut divisions between so-called good and bad taste have dissolved into bewildering configurations: ‘it’s so bad it’s good’, says Wayne Hemingway of *The Love Boat* in the

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<sup>1</sup> Beverley Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> George ‘Shadow’ Morton. ‘Give Him a Great Big Kiss’. *The Shangri-Las*. 1985. LP TOP 100.

characteristic twist that marks kitsch in its current received sense.<sup>4</sup> Unswerving hostility, similarly, seems consigned to the past. If Hemingway loves the things that are seen as bad others enjoy hating bad things: kitsch appears to Barry Humphries as a form of ‘perverse entertainment’ or as the author of *Black Velvet* subtitles her collection, kitsch is *The Art We Love to Hate*.<sup>5</sup> Bad becomes good, bad becomes enjoyably bad and sometimes, as Enid Coleslaw observes in *Ghostworld*, some things are ‘so bad they pass through goodbad and become bad again’.<sup>6</sup> For John Waters, declared by William Burroughs to be ‘the Pope of trash’, matters of taste are exquisitely convoluted:

...one must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. . . . To understand bad taste one must have very good taste. Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humour, which is anything but universal.<sup>7</sup>

For Waters, the twisting that sees bad as good, producing goodbad, is a good twist, creating a connoisseurship of bad taste along the way. Janet Street Porter would agree. Declining the chance to appear in a Channel 4 celebration of bad taste, Street Porter declares ‘that good and bad taste are dead’ and further that the whole subject is ‘simply not an issue any more’.<sup>8</sup> With Posh and Becks leading the way, the old aesthetic order has been overthrown and replaced by a democratised and playful design-oriented eclecticism: ‘when you see art students with fluffy dice in their cars, and Wayne Hemingway (owner of Red or Dead) writes a book about kitsch, you know anything goes.’<sup>9</sup>

Art students are not the only ones with fluffy dice. Kitsch, especially since the 1960s, has found a place in the artwork – as found or source material. If at first, the appearance of kitsch in the artworld was unwelcome – author of what has been deemed the definitive statement on kitsch, Gillo Dorfles, spoke of ‘the art of [his] time’ as being ‘cursed by the vampire kitsch’ – these days a more expansive attitude is seen to prevail.<sup>10</sup> As Bob and Roberta Smith note, ‘artists of today... have lesser difficulties accepting the industrially influenced (mass-) cultural trash which had posed a big problem for the previous generations despite the openness of their concepts’; the aesthetic hierarchy

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<sup>4</sup> Wayne Hemingway, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Icons: Kitsch* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Barry Humphries, *Barry Humphries’ Treasury of Australian Kitsch* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 9; Jennifer Heath, *Black Velvet: The Art We Love to Hate* (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> *Ghost World*. Dir. Terry Zwigoff. United Artists. 2001.

<sup>7</sup> John Waters, *Shock Value* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1995), p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Street Porter, ‘LifeEtc’, *Independent on Sunday*, 21 October 2001, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Street Porter, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste* (New York: Universe Books, 1968), p. 300.

that once placed kitsch as the antithesis of art appears to have withered away.<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, in the design world: ‘something astonishing has happened: kitsch has become an influential cultural force in contemporary design’.<sup>12</sup> Ceramicists and designers, taking the lead from contemporary and pop artists, have been embracing kitsch as an antidote to ‘mass-produced functional minimalism’.<sup>13</sup> Eva Londos prefaces her photoessay on garden gnomes thus: ‘in the period of postmodernity, when many artists and cultural producers are inspired by “kitsch,” it seems pointless, if not impossible to maintain the concept of kitsch.’<sup>14</sup>

Regardless of whether the concept is maintained – and there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is alive and well – there is a growing consensus that kitsch has at least lost its class connotations. Judy Attfield, for one, is convinced that kitsch ‘responds to a wider need for an engagement with authenticity’, while Sam Binkley, arguing on similar grounds, detaches kitsch from class.<sup>15</sup> Not only has the ‘taste hierarchy’ that informs judgements around kitsch been effectively dismantled by the actions of post-60s social and cultural theory, he suggests, taste habits and preferences no longer line up easily with class identities. A taste for kitsch, consequently, is no longer ‘the property of a distinctive strata . . . but a general corrective to a modern problem, that of existential and personal disembeddedness’ (p. 149). Kitsch as predictable, sentimental and familiar answers a common, even universal need brought on by the fact of late capitalist mass consumer culture. Our existential insecurities – too many things, too many choices! – are assuaged by Norman Rockwell and concrete lions: ‘in its appeal to sentiment, kitsch aims to re-embed its consumers on the deepest personal level’ (p. 135). A combination of counter-cultural pop art aestheticism – *everything’s groovy* – and generalised good feeling – *who takes themselves that seriously?* – appears, then, to have won out. Just as we see in *Amelie*, gnomes can travel the world; in our ‘current situation . . . influences rush in all directions and between different levels, crossing borders without passports, and paying no consideration to origin or copyright.’<sup>16</sup> In such a world it is tempting to agree that ‘the concept of kitsch seems to be of little use and rather out of date’<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bob and Roberta Smith, *Make Your Own Damn Art!* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> William Wiles, ‘Kitsch is a controversial subject. “Sometimes it upsets people.”’ *Icon*, issue 051 September 2007, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Wiles, *ibid*, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Eva Londos, ‘Kitsch is Dead – Long Live Garden Gnomes’, *Home Cultures*, 3 (2006), 293-306 (p. 293).

<sup>15</sup> Judy Attfield, ‘Redefining Kitsch: The Politics of Design’, *Home Cultures*, 3 (2006), 210-12 (p. 207); Sam Binkley, ‘Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy’, *Journal of Material Culture*, 5 (2000), 131-152.

<sup>16</sup> *Amelie*. Dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Miramax. 2001; Londos, p. 299.

<sup>17</sup> Londos, *ibid*.

## **‘I’m a different person, turn my world around’<sup>18</sup>**

Such charitable mass culture arguments are appealing, especially with respect to their projection of a taste(less) democracy. However, these new episodes in the career biography and social life of kitsch need to be considered alongside new instalments in the story of class.<sup>19</sup> The appearance of gnomes in unexpected places – underwater in the Lake District, at Prince Charles’ Highgrove residence, in the Big Brother house, formed from cigarettes in Sarah Lucas’s studio – turns out to be insufficient grounds either to announce the redundancy of kitsch or to assert the classlessness of taste formations. Similarly, the conviction that Cultural Studies has effected lasting transformations in the realm of aesthetics and cultural value is overconfident. As Beverley Skeggs argues in *Class, Self, Culture*, ‘class is not a given but is a continual production’, and equally, ‘value changes over time’ and so ‘can never be a known quantity.’<sup>20</sup> The time when class announced itself through the wearing of bowler hats or flat caps or the pouring of tea before milk has been superseded by an era where social positioning perpetually reconfigures and renews itself.<sup>21</sup> Alan Liu notes the shapeshifting tendencies of white-collar professionals together with the rapid churning of capital that is the constituent feature of post-industrial class formation.<sup>22</sup> Social distinction has become a permanent makeover show; the requisite skill of the successful social subject becomes one of shrewd creative destruction and futurology – *where next? What will set me apart from the crowd?* – together with symbolic economic investment. The ability to churn and distribute symbolic value is the new class imperative. Further, when the game becomes figured according to an attitude and manner of exchange rather than an investment in things – accumulating and liquefying assets at exactly the right time – the actual objects become subordinated to their astute handling. In Skeggs’ words, it is less ‘the object of exchange but rather the relationships that enable exchange (and hence power) that are important’, the ability to affect the smooth transfer of funds from object to object becomes the means by which class is made.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Marlin and Max Reich. ‘Lola’s Theme’. Shapeshifters. 2004. 12inch single.

<sup>19</sup> Igor Kopytoff, ‘The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process’ in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 64-94.

<sup>20</sup> Skeggs, pp. 3 & 65.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Frost Report : The Class Sketch* on <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgA4K-bnwh0>> [accessed 26 October 2007]. Also *Gosford Park*. Dir. Robert Altman. VCL Communications. 2001

<sup>22</sup> Liu also notes the prevalence of shape shifting as a theme in early 90s TV and cinema (exemplified by *Terminator 2*, *The Mask* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* along with music videos such as 10cc’s Cry <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9skEZHYxOo>>), and would likely approve of *Lola’s Theme* as a possible anthem of the churning of capital.

<sup>23</sup> Skeggs, p. 3.

The following argument aims to demonstrate that, despite opinion to the contrary, class work can be seen to continue unabated in relation to kitsch. In order to bring the specific features of such work into view a theoretical frame sensitive to mechanisms of contemporary class formation is needed. Liu's notion of 'camouflage technology'<sup>24</sup> (a technique of cultural appropriation) helps to supplement Skeggs' observations as to the ascension of a symbolic basis for social discrimination, thereby explaining the process whereby certain groups are able to mobilise the cultural property of others to their own advantage. The notion of so-called 'dictator kitsch', considered alongside the annual protests of the self-nominated 'tasteful' who berate the working classes for their excessive Christmas lights show that it is still possible to be seen to be spectacularly tasteless. In line with Bourdieu's conviction that classifications of the tastes of others invariably generate self-classificatory effects, such judgements are, in turn, illuminated for their class-making motivations.<sup>25</sup> The adjudications of haters of General Noriega's Christmas tree and British council estate festivities share a logic: establishing constitutive limits of taste and simultaneously projecting the contours of civilised personhood. As well as forming a portrait of excessive otherness, such interior and exterior savagery institutes relations to things (as opposed to things themselves) as the basis of in/appropriate taste formations. The twists and oscillations of sophisticated handlers of kitsch found goodbad taste in self-consciousness and above all control. A division thus emerges between irony and sincerity, performance and essence, in step with Walter Benjamin's formulation that 'art begins two meters away from the body.'<sup>26</sup> Translated into Skeggs' terms, there are those for whom kitsch can operate as a resource – who crucially can separate and detach from it – whilst others remain marked by its presence.<sup>27</sup> Metropolitans and artists, on the one hand, stand opposed to totalitarians and 'chavs' (a recent hatecode for the British working class) on the other, inaugurating in the process an acceptable ethical foundation for safe kitsch consumption: cool.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Liu, p. 101

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Dream kitsch', *Selected writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. by M. Jennings, H. Eiland & G. Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap/Harvard University, 1999), pp. 395-6.

<sup>27</sup> Skeggs, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> In thinking through cool as the modern 'ethos of alienation' (p. 87), Liu deploys ethos as a 'flexible term...as capacious as "Zeitgeist"...as specific as "ethic or "aesthetic". A fuller gloss would triangulate the term somewhere in the midst of Williams's "structure of feeling", Bourdieu's "habitus", Habermas's "lifeworld" and Gouldner's "culture of critical discourse"... Ethos locates the process of emergence (and submergence) where identity at once cleaves from and to inchoate social experience. Cool is thus an ethos, not an identity.' (p. 72). As Bourdieu reminds us, questions of aesthetics operate inescapably as 'a dimension of the ethics (or better, the ethos) of class' (1991, p. 47).

**‘Ha-ha-ha, hee-hee-hee, I’m a laughing gnome and you can’t catch me’<sup>29</sup>**

Aesthetic codes may switch allegiances, cross-pollinate and do so at speed but to see this as a sign of the *relaxation* of aesthetic judgement and social distinction is to become complicit in the contemporary disappearance of class from social and political agendas. As Skeggs notes, class seems generally to have disappeared – or to have *been* disappeared – from view in cultural analysis, and furthermore, that it seems to be unacceptable or ‘even distasteful’ to talk about class at the present moment despite ‘economic polarisation reach[ing] unparalleled depths’.<sup>30</sup> Hard-edged discussions detailing economic inequities have been supplanted what Liu identifies as a ‘fuzzy, lifestyle version’ of class talk: ‘cultural class’.<sup>31</sup> Like David Bowie’s gnome, cultural class is hard to pin down and is expert at escaping common and academic attention; all the more important, then, to risk bad taste in talking about bad taste and to attend to the *detail* of the existing taste situation. Instead of being bedizened into thinking that class no longer figures in taste formation, joining in with the misrecognitions taking place in received ideas around taste, it is crucial to trace the intricate trajectories of kitsch as it makes its way across contemporary aesthetic terrain. To neglect these moves is to allow important mechanisms for asset production and self-making to proceed unchecked and, worse, to render them all the more powerful for operating in disguised, charismatic form.

As the realm of culture becomes increasingly the (market)place where class is made, the unmasking of its symbolic economy is imperative if social inequity and other poverties are to be addressed seriously. In Skeggs words: ‘we need to understand the symbolic valuation of culture, labour and property, which enable it to have an exchange-value, for either selling, rental or asset accrual’ (p. 71). With this the processes by which old orders (taste formations, cultural properties etc) are dismantled, rearranged and, in the sociological view, asset-stripped, are in need of special attention. Equally crucial is the consideration of the means by which subjectivity is itself mobilised as an exchangeable resource. The contemporary story of class is dominated by a figure termed by Paul Smith as the ‘subject of value’, i.e. an enterprising, possessive individual, ‘endowed with an ultimately self-interested rationality.’<sup>32</sup> As Liu shows, the formation of a certain kind of personhood, and the recognition of the self as an asset, has a long history reaching points of intensity in the Taylorist era and in current post-industrial psychologies. What is new, and Liu is

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<sup>29</sup> David Bowie (composer and performer). ‘The Laughing Gnome’. 1967. 7inch single. DM 123.

<sup>30</sup> Skeggs, pp. 45-6.

<sup>31</sup> Liu, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Smith, ‘Unified capital and the subject of value’, in *Mapping Multi-Culturalism*, ed. by A.F. Gordon and C. Newfield (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 358 cited in Skeggs, p. 64.

especially sensitive to this development, is the extent to which cultural ‘others’ become attractive sources of revenue: like Kazuo Ishiguro’s class of organ donors in *Never Let Me Go*, subjects existing on the margins of the social contract operate as well-springs of cultural vitality for subjects of value.<sup>33</sup> As Skeggs puts it: ‘only some can utilise their culture as a property of the self: others are forced to perform it as a “natural” part of being. We have different access to becoming a subject of value.’<sup>34</sup> Subjects of value are not only able to make the most of what they have, perfecting a particular habitus that allows them to proceed through the social world as ‘fish in water,’<sup>35</sup> they can afford, through performances of ‘calculating hedonism’, to let their hair down occasionally, and play a kind of cultural air guitar.<sup>36</sup>

Subjects of value, enterprising occupants of the office cubicle in Liu’s version of events, can have it both ways in that they have refined a means of utilising cultural forms and practices associated with those traditionally excluded from the normative world of work – in short, subcultures and subcultural stances – as a source of supplementary value. Liu’s term for this appropriation of the imaginary subject position of the other (crucially, the position is empty and affords no ethical obligation to the life situation of its actual occupant) is ‘camouflage technology’ or ‘camo-tech’.<sup>37</sup> Briefly, camo-technicians perfect a regulatory subject temperature of ‘cool’ by oscillating between cold, affectless professionalism (anaesthesia) and hot compensatory leisure (hyperaesthesia). A modification of the Frankfurt School grand narrative of twentieth century life,<sup>38</sup> camo-tech operates as a technique of maintaining energy and hence revenue for white-collar professionals who, ironically (in every sense) perform versions of ‘outsider’ cultures to maintain and augment their social position:

Thus did cool come into its own as the ethos of modern alienation: a whole attitude or character of low affect that at once harmonized with the system of technological rationality and disengaged itself from that system by identifying just enough with outsiders to live a depersonalized fantasy of the Outside as pure style or decor.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let me Go* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> Skeggs, p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), p. 127.

<sup>36</sup> Mike Featherstone, ‘The body in consumer culture’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1 (1982), 18-33 (p. 18) in Skeggs, p. 137.

<sup>37</sup> Liu, p. 101.

<sup>38</sup> See Theodor Adorno, ‘Free Time’, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. by J. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>39</sup> Liu, p. 103.

In taking the temperature of capitalist modernity Liu simultaneously exposes the hidden subject of the twentieth century narrative: feeling. The common shape that feelings borrow from words acknowledges the correspondence of emotion and temperature, in that we speak, for instance, of a person's warmth or coldness towards us, or describe someone as hot-tempered.<sup>40</sup> The success of the property owning classes is predicated, squarely, on feelings management. In his epic journey through industrial and post-industrial terrain, Liu identifies the class undercurrent of 'the structure of non-feeling' that constitutes the dominant emotional style of successful living thus establishing an affective basis for the production of the subject of value.

The perfection of coolness has become a source of contemporary cultural and symbolic value which feeds the subject of value charismatically: symbolic capital and coolness have this much in common, they can only operate charismatically in that once the mechanisms for their respective productions are exposed, they effectively evaporate.<sup>41</sup> Profitable cool stances are a restricted currency however, in that a drama of separation and detachment is necessary to their mobilisation as a resource. Skeggs highlights how notions of 'cool' operate in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* as both resource and essence: on the one hand, John Travolta's character (Vincent Vega) is able to 'act' cool through performing a stylised version of 70s blaxploitation-blackness, on the other, Jules Winnfield, played by Samuel L. Jackson, is the very embodiment of cool and is hence denied the possibility of detaching from the source of his coolness. Where Vincent is free to mobilise blackness as cool (importantly, detaching from it where necessary), Jules is inscribed and restricted within his coolness (i.e. blackness), the polarity of which carries the ever-present risk of being reversed into a negative rather than profitable essence. Making profit from cultural property depends ultimately upon an ability to control one's assets and importantly, to recognise potential assets, mobilise them as such and manage their value. Given that some of us are socially obliged into act of 'forced performativity' (i.e. hailed into gendered, racialised, or classed scripts and ways of being) the ability to control one's world and profit from its constituent situations is compromised, to put it mildly.<sup>42</sup>

The heat that kitsch gives off – in the imaginary of artists and keepers of art in particular – makes it ideal material for camo-technical operations, especially given the increasingly diffuse contours of the spaces of class manufacture. One consequence of the dispersal of economic into lifestyle class is the expansion of terrain where social distinction might be instituted and enacted.

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<sup>40</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 19

<sup>41</sup> Liu sums up cool's elusiveness and fragility thus: 'Those who insist on asking, the internet has not so subtle ways of declaring, are definitely uncool' (p. 177). See also, Nicolas Roope, 'Cool is... the Ultimate Chameleon?' *Observer*, Cool Brands supplement, 14 October 2007, pp. 8-11.

<sup>42</sup> Skeggs, p. 74



Where once white collars were required to reimburse working hard by playing hard, in the era of demand culture ‘the goal is... to make human resources conform to the nervous, jumpy, constantly assembled and reassembled, just-in-time capital of postindustrialism.’<sup>43</sup> The fuzzy class game is fought out on all fronts, 24/7. The domestic interior, once figured as an escape or refuge from the world of work, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is a significant scene of symbolic capital manufacture.<sup>44</sup> Subjects of value – ‘smart workers’ in current business-speak – live as well as they work, comporting themselves impeccably between home and office. Domestic arrangements in an ‘always on’ culture consequently carry social, cultural, capital and moral agendas; knowing how to arrange one’s furniture and to perform cultivated relations to culture today form key additions to the smart worker’s curriculum vitae. In Skeggs’ words: ‘The sort of labour that is being sold is related to the wider qualities of *being a particular sort of person* and having a *particular composition of cultural resources*.’<sup>45</sup> With this the regulatory fluctuations in temperature that took place over broad temporal swathes (e.g. around the hours of 9-5 or between cold week and hot weekend) have been subject to a kind of downsizing and micromanagement. Thermostatic oscillations can be found to operate, as it will become clear, in the text of a single recipe, in the careful customisation of a light fitting and in the placement of an object on a sideboard.

**‘I want an old fashioned house, with an old fashioned fence, and an old fashioned millionaire’<sup>46</sup>**

In the days following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein ‘satisfyingly horrendous’ images of his palaces circled the globe.<sup>47</sup> A catalogue of taste crimes, Hussein’s interiors were understood as confessions: ‘almost a smoking gun’; ‘the epitome of horror’, his palaces, like his genocidal activities and his personality, are ‘monstrous’, leading P. J. O’Rourke to quip: ‘if a reason to invade Iraq was wanted, felony interior decorating would have done’.<sup>48</sup> Reading the reflections off the gold taps and monogrammed china, art critics and interior designers saw straight into the dictator’s soul. ‘Looking at these paintings’ claimed *The Guardian*’s Jonathan Jones, ‘is like seeing the owner

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<sup>43</sup> Liu, p. 56.

<sup>44</sup> See Tracey Potts, ‘Organising Space : Clutter, Storage and Everyday Life’, *Keywords* (2007).pp.88-105 for an account of the blurring of the distinction between home and office.

<sup>45</sup> Skeggs, p. 73.

<sup>46</sup> Livingstone/Wolf. ‘Just an old fashioned girl’. *Eartha Kitt*. 1956. 12 inch LP. LPM-1300.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Jones, ‘Look at the size of those missiles’, *Guardian*, G2, 15 April 2003, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, p. 5; Johnny Davis, ‘Dictators of Style’, *Independent on Sunday*, 27 April 2003; P. J O’Rourke cited in *Dictator’s Homes*, Peter York (London: Atlantic Books, 2005), p. ix.

naked.<sup>49</sup> Assessing the tyrant's predilection for images of phallic weaponry and large-breasted blondes Jones continues:

Embarrassing isn't the word. They seem to represent a systematic style and therefore a sensibility. The hysterical aesthetic, the hyperpornography of power and violence – this does not just seem coincidence. And if this is the authentic taste of Saddam, it is that of a man who seems on this evidence to have lived according to a code of aestheticised, eroticised violence for which no one has yet come up with a better word than fascism. (ibid)

Declared to have worse taste than Hitler, Hussein's 'execrable' sensibility and abhorrent politics are on clear view in the 'shining hideousness' of his art collection. Aesthetic hideousness equates unerringly with moral hideousness. Hussein is the worst fascist kitschmaniac: dredged from the 'universal cultural gutter' the paintings' iconographic palette consists mainly of 'psychotic porn' (ibid), the Fuhrer, at least Jones seems to suggest, had pretensions in his aesthetic ideals.

The idea of tyranny writ large as kitsch provides a publishing opportunity for Peter York, whose anti-style guide, *Dictator's Homes*, constitutes something of a contemporary degenerate interiors catalogue. Ostensibly, an invitation to play a game of 'aesthetic schadenfreude', York's survey of totalitarian decorating schemes operates on the charismatic level as post-ironic guidance in how not to decorate.<sup>50</sup> Twisted into an arch, 10 point 'get the look' master-class, the aesthetic offences of despots are held up to ridicule. Top of the list of crimes is the mistake of primitives: the idea that power and wealth can be openly and quantitatively displayed. According to York, the collision of 'unrestricted imagination with unimagined power' results invariably in overblown style, absurd proportions and usually gold taps: 'the display principle is absolutely central – not just Wotalotigot, but power and intimidation too' (p. xi). Utterly uncultivated and lacking in 'any training in the Duke of Devonshire side of things', dictators are ignorant of 'civilised' codes of powermongering; 'stealth-wealth' (ibid), as York terms it, is unrecognisable to the lumpen authoritarian imagination. Reviewer Andrew Mueller finds it all too much:

The instinctive reaction of York's educated, middle-class, western observer to the temples of kitsch in his book will be to laugh, *and properly so*. The physical manifestations of tyranny are invariably hilarious, the more so for their humourlessness. In late 2000, I spent a day driving around Baghdad with a photographer, collecting pictures of portraits, statues and

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<sup>49</sup> Jones, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> York, p. ix.

other representations of Saddam. We spent much of the jaunt in hysterics - especially at an enormous, uproariously camp painting of the great twit in a beige slacks-and-waistcoat ensemble, a bouquet of lilies in one arm, and a white Panama tither tipped rakishly over one eye.<sup>51</sup>

Offering the definitive vision of degeneracy, dictator kitsch speaks – or rather, shouts – for itself, requiring little commentary beyond laughter and explosions of derision.

Stripped of charismatic ideology, though, ridicule and sardonic amusement are revealed as subject-manufactories. The knowledge work of discussions of dictator’s interiors function foremost to secure the identity of a self-assured cosmopolitan subject who can delight in the apparent vulgarity of the most savage taste. There is an important lesson here beneath the scorn, stealth-wealth, from the sociologist’s viewpoint, forms the basis for ‘civilised’ operations around capital exchange and, moreover, exchange itself constitutes the foundation for cultured relations to things. Drawing on Peter Stallybrass’ work, Skeggs highlights the centrality of exchange value to the colonial project and hence to the cultivation of a civilised personhood (the precursor to the subject of value). The emphasis on exchange rather than mere possession was key:

It implied a new definition of what it was to be European; that is, a subject unhampered by fixation upon objects, a subject who, having recognised the true (i.e. market) value of the object-as-commodity, fixated instead upon transcendental values that transformed gold into ships, ships into guns, guns into tobacco . . . and all into accountable profit.<sup>52</sup>

The basic lesson of capital exchange consisted, then, in transforming things – invested with ‘particularity, history and memory’ – into commodities and in doing so, permanently detaching value from a straightforward relation to appearances. Stealth-wealth emerges from the ‘hidden abode of production’ and its constitutive commodities bear ‘no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.’<sup>53</sup> Showy wealth, hence, betrays a basic illiteracy in the ABCs of capital power: seeing value in things themselves rather than in their relations in a dynamic field of supply and demand is to parade a primitive relation to property. Further, the *manner* of acquisition, as Bourdieu has noted, becomes an important marker of

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Mueller, ‘The Tyranny of Design’, *Guardian*, 8 October 2005, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguide/books/story/0,14684,1586148,00.html>>

<sup>52</sup> Peter Stallybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’, in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. by P. Spyer (London: Routledge, 1998). Cited in Skeggs, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967). Cited in Skeggs, p. 9.

distinction in separating savage from civilised.<sup>54</sup> The dodgy dealings of the deposed President of the Philippines and his wife, for instance, extend to the composition of their collective portfolio: ‘their possessions were huge, unfocused and vulgar; a jumbled mass of valuables hovered up from all over the world. Even their investments seemed tacky.’<sup>55</sup> Voracious and indiscriminate in their appetites – the shoes were the least of it, even the President’s political programme is described as ‘showy’ – Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos offer the spectacle of the constitutive limit of civilised subjectivity.

Constitutive limits can be found at the other end of the social scale for those invested in cultivating stealth-wealth profiles. In recent years, an annual conversation concerning the boundaries of tastelessness has broken out in Britain during the Christmas period. Volumes of commentary appear in the expanded spaces of the public sphere debating the aesthetic merits of decorating domestic exteriors with Christmas lights. Imported from North America, practices of festive illumination assume a distinctive class character in a British context: large scale installations of flashing sleighs, reindeers and parachuting Father Christmases, etc are to be found concentrated largely in working-class residential areas across the country, to the extent that a specific British geography has been identified.<sup>56</sup> Inflatable Homer Santas and illuminated Nativity scenes are by no means allowed to glow peaceably, though. Edensor highlights the violent contestation of aesthetics and space that saturates many of the public responses to festive illuminations:

What is immediately noticeable in the tone and language of most of this criticism is a class-oriented repertoire that combines stereotypical slander of the working-class in the form of the ‘chav’ and attendant effusions of disgust.

Christmas lights are ‘tasteless, tacky and an embarrassment to the neighbours’; they are ‘totally over-the top’ and ‘environmental vandalism on the grossest scale’; they are ‘blinged up,’ designed as a competition of ‘one-upmanship,’ and in their rampant and conspicuous consumption, an affront to the spirit of Christmas. With their aesthetically ‘inappropriate’ treatment of space, Christmas lights are seen to illuminate a classed topography, inciting the protests of those who feel entitled to speak on behalf of landscape and environment. A posting from the hatesite Chavscum.com exemplifies the idea of a naturalised geography of class, in Edensor’s words, the

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<sup>54</sup> Bourdieu, *Distinction*, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> York, p. 69.

<sup>56</sup> Tim Edensor and Steve Millington, ‘Illuminations, Class Identities and the Contested Landscapes of Christmas’ *Sociology* (forthcoming, 2008)

belief in ‘a luridly imagined space populated by chavs and their associates’ that resonates with notions of the respectable and the scenic:

This little council house beauty can be found in its natural habitat of Cardiff’s North Way. Astonishingly it makes up 25% of Cardiff’s electrical consumption and is sponsored very graciously by the benefits agency.<sup>57</sup> (39 words)

Whilst flashing Rudolph remains tethered to his ‘natural’ habitat – his sleigh securely parked on the council estate – he operates very much in the same way as Saddam’s gold taps: as a spectacular vision of the limits of taste and as a marker of an especially crass and unbridled consumer. ‘Chavvy’ Christmas taste is figured as a kind of light pollution, though, in its perceived leakage, radiating well beyond its reasonable boundary. In addition to complaints about the extent of the Christmas season (‘Is November the first not a little early?’), a common objection takes the form of concern over the contamination of picturesque spaces and the epidemic spread of a consumer driven Christmas (‘Christmas decorations have been becoming tackier year on year’).<sup>58</sup> Such assertions of propriety, and containment, are, in themselves, status-making in their authoritative performance of space marking. Class based inscriptions (*your sort is tasteless and over the top*), as Skeggs observes, enact a process of ‘making through marking’ (p. 12). Christmas lights, simultaneously then, light up the class profiles of haters. If the classified are deemed to be ignorant, excessive, wasteful, polluting and in thrall to an increasingly dumb and exploitative popular culture, classifiers are, absolutely, the obverse: aware, considered, controlled, civic-minded and able to access civic authority (‘planning permission ought to be sought for this kind of decoration’), authorised to speak on behalf of the planet and to adjudicate on matters of taste and decorum.<sup>59</sup> As Skeggs notes, there is a moral agenda evident in projections of propriety: classifiers, as burgeoning subjects of value, demarcate themselves as agents instituted in notions of self-possession’, and in doing so identify as capable of ‘invest[ing] in themselves’ as opposed to ‘those who cannot’ (p. 10). Given the dissipation of economics and class talk into flattened and neutralised concepts delineating an ‘equal space where everybody is free to exchange’ (p. 63), ‘those who cannot’ are culpable in their inability to make the most of themselves. Appeals to environmental politics and diffuse notions of prospects and potentials (‘what a waste of resources. They aren’t exactly thinking of the long term future for the kids are they?’) thereby operate as effective alibis for self-righteous self-making.<sup>60</sup> In

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

short, in the era of self-responsibility, the classified squander and are blameworthy in their recklessness, while classifiers, deservingly, capitalise.

### **‘I’m spinning around, move out of my way’<sup>61</sup>**

It might be tempting to assume that away from the perceived badlands of badbad taste things are more laid-back. There are many more subtle classifying relations to kitsch though than straightforward hate, especially in these post-perverse times. The belief that kitsch is free to travel without documentation is shown, at its most benign, to be so much wishful thinking. As it will become clear, kitsch is discursively restrained in its appearance in hitherto prohibited territory; shackled to information issuing from design and aesthetic history, not to mention academic discourse. Consequently overburdened with documents, kitsch is necessarily ‘informed’: tamed and rendered safe for consumption via a culture of information.<sup>62</sup> Once rendered as information, kitsch is readied for a further transmutation: from the base material of garish plastic into a subtle form of gold. The production of a certain knowingness around kitsch, circulating as the hidden currency of a symbolic economy completes its rehabilitation: installing a durable distinction between good and bad bad taste that operates shrewdly and mostly in secret, inaugurating, in the process, a new class of kitsch consumer.

Nigella Lawson’s introduction of kitsch into the kitchen in her T.V. tie-in cookbook *Nigella Bites* offers an instructive case in point in that it incorporates all manner of ironic manoeuvres and self-conscious performances.<sup>63</sup> Subtitled ‘Trashy’, the kitchen kitsch chapter includes recipes for Ham cooked in Coca-Cola, Elvis Presley’s legendary fried peanut butter and banana sandwich, and deep-fried Bounties with pineapple, together with a governing philosophy of trash: ‘Trashy is a state of mind, a game of mood: the food itself deserves, demands to be served and eaten – unsmirkingly, unapologetically and with voluptuous and exquisite pleasure’ (p. 145). Further, to qualify as trashy ‘in its platonic ideal’, food must contain ‘at least one brand-name product’, ‘use a low-rent ingredient’ and ‘seek to evoke some food or food-related substance that is industrially produced, not naturally occurring’ (ibid). Despite her emphatic assertion that ‘there’s no element of let’s-go-slumming smuggerly’ (ibid) to the recipes, there is an identifiable degree of class tourism, or as Liu would see it, camo-tech, operating in Lawson’s culinary attitude. The source material for her performances is clearly camo-technical, in its all mass-mediated American ‘white trash’

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<sup>61</sup> Ira Shickman/Osborne Bingham/Kara Dio Guardi/Paula Abdul. ‘Spinning Around’. Kylie Minogue. 2000. CD single. CDRS6542.

<sup>62</sup> Liu, p. 107.

<sup>63</sup> Nigella Lawson, *Nigella Bites* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001). Further page refs are given in the text.

excessiveness: Elvis and Roseanne Barr provide a capacious subject position for Lawson to occupy whilst the American South surrenders its recipe suggestions. Camo-tech airmiles not only provide necessary distance – camping, ‘bangles jangling’, in an imaginary pop culture trailer park (rather than a council estate closer to home) obviates any consideration of actual occupants of such a social space – they simultaneously add capital in the form of prestigious Americana. ‘Trashy’ is well resourced: with books from a trip to Graceland, rare ‘cast-iron’ corn-on-the-cob shaped cake moulds, ‘schlepped... from Broadway Panhandler in New York’ (p.141) and ‘gorgeously garish’ vegetable fat of the brand that blue-collar types might use.

Far from being unsmirking and unapologetic, kitsch in Lawson’s kitchen is self-conscious, carefully orchestrated and abundantly *informed*. The action of deep-frying branded, industrially produced chocolate bars for a dinner party, for instance, requires meticulous discursive staging. Offered as a ‘perfectly serious pudding – more or less’, fried Bounties follow a menu structured around the urbane flavours of Japanese and Thai fusion food. Accompanied by pineapple to ‘cut across the [fritters’] sticky sweetness’, a triumph ‘rather than a funny turn’ (p. 143) is ensured. Astringency protects against undue sugar rush; ‘the juice of four uncompromisingly sour limes’ steadies a ‘déclassé’ concoction based around childhood sweets and mass-produced biscuits (it’s ‘dark intense’ base, further, contrasting with the light fluffiness of its topping). The use of commercially produced ingredients involves, simultaneously, an act of translation: ‘may I introduce you to Maryland cookies’, and one of distancing from the act of translation: ‘Yes I like them too, but we’re talking culinary status queens here, the pose of the label-conscious purist’ (p. 145). Choreographed proximity and distance combine to effect the perfect relation to trash. In producing low-rent recipes that appeal to the ‘good-taste gods’ there is a risk of negating their *necessary* vulgarity – exciting, edgy bad taste becomes mere good taste. The frisson of kitschy goodbad relies upon a residual sense of inappropriateness. Equally, vulgar cheapness mustn’t be allowed to win out: ‘all campness aside, it has to be good – better than good: it can taste surprisingly elegant or prejudice-challengingly seductive, but the one thing it mustn’t taste like is a joke.’ (ibid). Kitsch in the kitchen, thus, shimmies between the accepted poles of good and bad. Her recipe for Watermelon Daiquiri is exemplary:

You don’t have to go overboard with the postmodern, anxiously ironic bit: this is ambrosia even for the good-taste gods.

But if on the other hand you’re concerned that commendation might detract from its vulgar charm, just make it and drink it, wearing mules to match. (p. 134)

Precisely calibrated oscillations of excess and restraint – more or less – coalesce into the debonair gestures of the exquisitely goodbad. Or as Liu and Skeggs would see it, Lawson, through camo-technical means, succeeds in ‘having her cake and wilfully playing with it’ (Skeggs, p. 23).

Similar moves can be detected over in the design world. Despite confident assertions that kitsch is effectively the new minimalism, some artists and designers seem uncomfortable with too close an association. Ceramicist Barnaby Barford, whose work is seen as the ‘paragon of the new kitsch,’ on the advice of his gallery, refused to contribute to a recent article showcasing contemporary kitsch design.<sup>64</sup> Barford is not alone: Alison Britton corrects potential misconceptions of fellow ceramicist Richard Slee’s work: ‘they might be looking at ideas about kitsch but they’re certainly not being kitsch in themselves at all.’<sup>65</sup> Clare Twomey’s contribution to a recent ceramics event at the V&A (consisting of a flock of slipcast ornamental birds distributed throughout the permanent collection) is seen to perfect the proper stance in relation to kitsch. Jo Dahn comments:

The installation had wit and lyricism; Twomey enjoys walking the line between good and bad taste, art and kitsch, and the little blue birds were “Disneyesque,” almost (but not) cloyingly sweet like creatures from a fairytale. It was as if they were engaged in playful subversive conversation with the stately casts.<sup>66</sup>

Twomey’s work is valued for plotting its aesthetic course carefully: negotiating accepted divisions knowingly, drawing close but withdrawing crucially at the last minute from sticky Disney sweetness. Such playful oscillations necessarily exploit rather than ignore kitsch’s shady past. Walking lines and engaging in subversive chat entails the preservation of a residual sense of wrongdoing, producing work which is valued for its ‘surreal, satirical tableaux’, ‘wit’, ‘black humour’, ‘cultural nostalgia’, ‘instant heritage’ and ‘bling gigantism’.<sup>67</sup> The ‘pariah among styles’ must maintain contact with its past – as ‘ugly, cheap, tacky, chintzy, ostentatious, unserious, unsophisticated, whimsical, (and) twee’ (ibid) – to perform its aesthetic task of undermining current orthodoxies: in design terms, the dominance of modernism’s conjoined principles: functionalism and minimalism.

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<sup>64</sup> Wiles, p. 60.

<sup>65</sup> Alison Britton, ‘Ceramic Points of View: Episode 8, Richard Slee’s Cornucopia < <http://feeds.vam.ac.uk/vam-podcasts> >

<sup>66</sup> Jo Dahn, ‘Clay Rocks at the V&A’, *Ceramic Review*, November/December 2006

<sup>67</sup> Wiles, pp. 61-2



Kitsch works dialectically, then, in its new aesthetic role and so must be unleashed in restricted circumstances. Kate McBride, designer-maker of excessively ostentatious tea sets, describes her design attitude as deliberately antagonistic:

Whenever you see these beautiful modern homes, fantastic designs, my instinct is always to put something very strong there, something inappropriate, and that's a very kind of kitsch way of looking at it – just to break up the line, just to give the eye a bit of a jar.<sup>68</sup>

Kitsch is valued for its iconoclastic properties; design studio Timorous Beasties would approve and join in with the all the jarring. Their 2004 subversion of 18<sup>th</sup> century Toile de Jouy wallpaper, Glasgow Toile, delights in the inappropriate: crack addicts, prostitutes and homeless people populate scenes traditionally reserved for the pastoral.<sup>69</sup> Dolce and Gabbana publicist Salvo Nicosia plays the game of aesthetic disturbance skilfully in his Milanese penthouse: a 'white-painted chandelier (formerly gold) is perfectly misplaced in the clean contemporary kitchen'.<sup>70</sup> Furnishing a 'stop-gap' place to 'chill' before 'jetting to London', Nicosia's aesthetic thermostat is regulated to the finest degree: a general ambient temperature is achieved through careful juxtapositions of excess and restraint (kitsch heat and cold, clean minimalism), controlled iconoclasm (the 'perfectly misplaced') and customisation (a gold – possibly *dictatoresque* – chandelier is cooled down with the strategic use of white paint).<sup>71</sup> Other objects are rehabilitated through systematic design history labelling: Murano glasses jostle with Philippe Starke and Philip Treacy's Andy Warhol hat (boxed in Perspex) to become *objets* of congealed knowledge.

Confrontational schemes by no means go without saying however, and adding 'the requisite touch of irreverence' requires painstaking, even obsessive, mapping and informing. As the recent Marks and Spencer's advertisements would have it, this isn't just *any* chandelier: its transgressive location in its constituent system of objects needs to be noted precisely, as does its former appearance. The mass manufactured, once located historically, becomes a potential design classic or icon.

Informing kitsch is vital, then, and relentless, if its 'radioactive' and contaminating qualities are to be kept in check.<sup>72</sup> Betrayed by its standard epithet 'tacky', camo-technicians are wary of kitsch's abject stickiness. The 'Hideous! Hahaha!' scaffolding must be carefully labelled if

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<sup>68</sup> Cited in Wiles, p. 65

<sup>69</sup> See < <http://www.designmuseum.org/design/timorous-beasties>>.

<sup>70</sup> Alexandra Shakespeare, 'Urban Outfit', *Elle Decoration*, March, 2002, pp. 106-113 (p. 110).

<sup>71</sup> Shakespeare, p. 111.

<sup>72</sup> Wiles, p. 65

it is not to evaporate (ibid). Even Attfield, champion of ‘wild things’, worries about touching kitsch as an academic subject of enquiry for fear of ‘running the risk that might label all my writing as so much kitsch’.<sup>73</sup> Kitsch must be ‘tame[d]’: held to account as ‘the key to help explain popular taste’ (p. 204), contextualised within the field of the popular taste and ultimately, redefined. The classed dimensions of the action of redefinition remain beneath the radar of Attfield’s project. Class is mentioned only to be disavowed: ‘kitsch is not necessarily a working class taste’ (p. 207), and a groovy-anything-goes conclusion is reached:

Kitsch remains an open term, full of possibilities of meanings with which to attempt to understand how people use popular taste to be in touch with the freer aspects of identity and expression. (p. 211)

The malleability and permeability of kitsch, or any other aesthetic code or taste formation, is socially regulated, however, and in no way free and open. As Skeggs, following Bourdieu, notes, the aesthetic and its charismatic appreciation congealed in notions of taste is ‘always defined by those who have the symbolic power to make their judgement and definitions legitimate’ (p. 107). Contextualisation and redefinition, particularly with the aim of *taming* kitsch, is merely to participate in the contest to dominate the field. And while this might be for beneficent purposes – to reframe the popular positively – to neglect the classed basis of access to the means of cultural production and the processes of redefinition is to allow powerful techniques for social reproduction to proceed unchecked. Redefining – as a species of informing – does little beyond confirming one’s symbolic power to rename and to generate symbolically consecrated information, and leaves the mechanisms of the symbolic economy unimpeded. Obituaries – kitsch/taste is dead! – similarly, are revealed to be performative in essence (the energy invested in calling death shows the subject to be displaying vital signs) and reliant upon the accumulated wealth of the namer.

Naming a certain class of objects, historically received as bad taste, as kitsch, is the first move, then, in a series of symbolic economic transubstantiations. Gathered into a knowledge enclosure – read through their aesthetic or design history – ornaments that in another domestic setting ‘brighten up the place’, *become* kitsch or vintage collectables or examples of mid-century modern, etc establishing distance at the moment of naming.<sup>74</sup> Turning kitsch into so much

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<sup>73</sup> Judy Attfield, *Wild Things* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Attfield, p. 202.

<sup>74</sup> Edensor notes the fundamental misrecognitions of haters of working class Christmas lights. Far from being concerned with one-upmanship or conspicuous consumption, council estate illuminations are shown to be founded in notions of warmth, community and sociality. See also, Daniel Miller, ‘Things that Brighten Up the Place’, *Home Cultures*, 3 (2006), pp. 235-249.

information readies it for its final transformation into capital. Just as time became money at the beginning of the twentieth century, post-millennium, it is informed style that generates revenue. As inequitably distributed information/knowledge – inevitably so, the uneven composition of the social field ensures differential access to information – design discourse works to secure the value of certain things. As in the economic economy, though, symbolic interest rates fluctuate and stocks can plummet. Decorative avant-gardes and distinctive schemes of inhabiting, threaten through their very success in dominating the field, to morph into ‘taste by numbers’, their value as subject-making resources depreciating accordingly.<sup>75</sup> The operative action of installing distance is also an emotional one: kitsch epithets – cloying, sickly and sweet – are feeling words. Budding subjects of value need to be careful with their feelings; the rapid churning of capital requires quick evacuation of feelings from things.<sup>76</sup> The accrued endowments of the consecrator, equally, are crucial in making meanings stick; well consecrated consecrators have the hope of attracting the appropriate class of investors necessary to shifting value from object to object. Belief in the exchange rate of symbolic currency is crucial if consecrated goods are to hold their value. Slee, to his gallery’s consternation, threatens to blow the whistle on the game that turns kitsch into art:

It amused me that when I started doing landscape pieces which incorporated really cheap ornaments, a gallery was selling something priced a 50p in a souvenir shop up the road at the price of a piece of art. The gallery owner wasn’t pleased when I brought the subject up though. She was a bit worried it would undermine the confidence of people who might buy the stuff.<sup>77</sup>

Securing the value of symbolic currency necessitates a necessary deception, which further militates against democratic and open distribution of its codes and operating procedures. ‘Get the look’ blueprints and explicatory design texts usually succeed in holding something back. Prohibitive pricing or esoteric sourcing (a recent codeword for finding stuff which can’t be readily acquired on the average high street, Paris flea markets are a favourite haunt of accomplished interior designers) maintains the base conditions for social distinction: materials by definition must be *exclusive*, in every sense.

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<sup>75</sup> Polly Vernon ‘All in the best possible taste’, *Elle Decoration*, February 2003, p. 36.

<sup>76</sup> It is revealing that the current phenomenon of ‘de-cluttering’ posits the emotions as an obstacle to good living. De-cluttering shows see cash rather than memories in the attic. See Potts, p. 12.

<sup>77</sup> David Redhead, ‘Hans Stofer and Richard Slee in Conversation’, *Crafts*, November/December 2006, p.44

## Conclusion

The intensification of symbolic economic means of self-making, thus, injects an element of anti-democracy into the taste scene. As it has been shown, the reconfiguring of taste economies can be compared more to a kind of off-shoring than the perceived equitable redistribution of wealth. The degree of control that accompanies certain deployments of bad taste betrays the fact that the taste competition has moved to different ground and has intensified rather than relaxed. In ways that mimic the novelty can of baked beans that conceals a safe key and the family jewels, funds have been transferred from their traditional depositories and hidden in unlikely places.<sup>78</sup> The affectation of stances of kitschy, bad taste, on the part of the subject of value, acts literally as camouflage for what is happening to notions of social class, helping it to disappear from view. The combined deliberations of Skeggs and Liu, with their dexterous handling of the dynamics of post-industrial class formation, illuminate the off-stage machinations that accompany seemingly innocent ‘trashy’ indulgences and perverse enjoyments. What appears in the light of their work is, disconcerting, to say the very least. The vision of the privileged drawing energy – heat – from those who, to borrow Bourdieu’s phrase, bear the weight of the world, is chilling rather than cool.<sup>79</sup> There are points where the temperature drops to below zero, where the low affect subjectivity of the sophisticated subject of value would be better described as cold. Glasgow Toile (RRP £100 per roll) distils utterly the ‘*depersonalised* identity of the Outside as pure style or décor’, to recall Liu, and presents a vision of what Adorno referred to ‘an absence of affect in the face of the gravest matters’, for him the pre-condition of fascism.<sup>80</sup> Mueller’s jaunt through Baghdad, likewise, begs serious questions, most urgently: under what conditions, and *for what kind of subject*, are the manifestations of tyranny *hilarious*? At its most benign, however, camo-tech kitsch still functions as a form of cultural vampirism (for which the phrase ‘culture vulture’ appears as an apposite label). Far from being part of a democratised landscape of things, in which carefree bricoleurs roam without fear of prejudice or judgement, so-called ‘new kitsch’ offers sustenance to certain subjects at the exorbitant expense of others.

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<sup>78</sup> See <[http://www.homesafes.net/product\\_detail.asp?pid=822](http://www.homesafes.net/product_detail.asp?pid=822)>.

<sup>79</sup> Other examples of cold camo-tech kitsch include playboy t-shirts, white trash fridge magnets, chav parties, pimping (as in Pimp my Ride) and death row menus, see <<http://www.deadmaneating.com/>>, for example and Nigella Lawson’s *Feast* (Chatto & Windus, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Theodor Adorno, ‘Education after Aushewitz’, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 191-204 (p.192).