

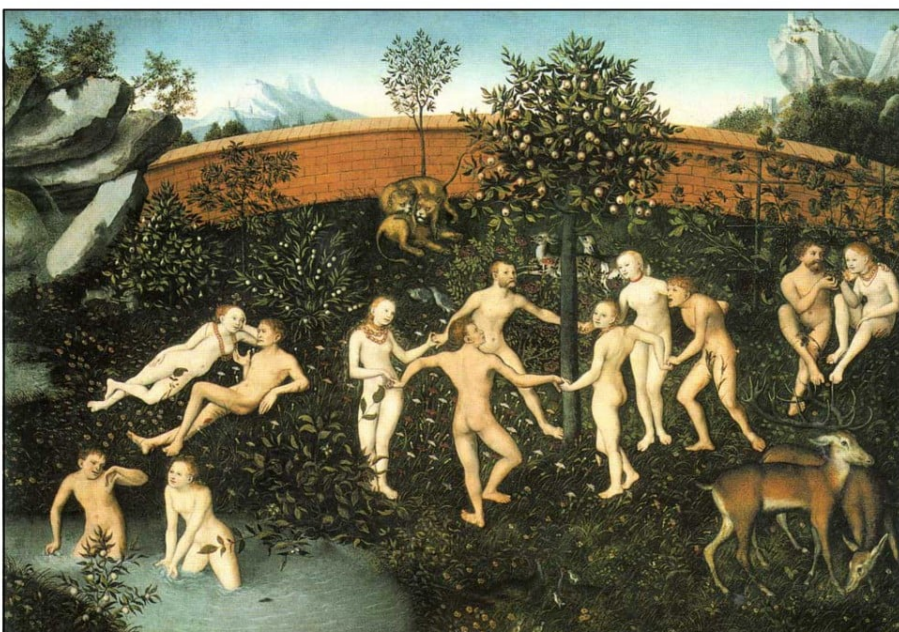
Progress

Loss of Paradise

The ancients did not believe in progress (Bury, 1932; Pollard, 1968; Meek Lange, 2011). They had two main ideas of how the world changes over time. One was that an initial state of peace and plenty – the Garden of Eden of Genesis, the Golden Age of Hesiod, or the Arcadia of Virgil – had degenerated over time to our present world of strife and suffering.

The decline from our golden beginnings to the present age of iron might have been simply caused by the passage of time, but more often than not it was attributed to human foolishness. The Jews told the story of original sin and the Greeks recounted the myth of Pandora's box.

Lucas Cranach (1530) portrayed the Golden Age as a time when we could dance without fear of the lion and eat of the tree of knowledge without concern for the consequences. The word “paradise” means an area enclosed by a wall. Suffering and death remained outside the wall.



Our forefathers' second concept was that nothing ever really changes. The world may go through cycles of improvement and deterioration, but in the end everything stays about the same. The world is not perfect and never will be. The Jewish preacher Ecclesiastes (3rd Century BCE, 1:9, KJV) claimed that all is vanity:

The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.

The Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (180 CE, *Meditations* X:I, Staniforth translation) proposed that the soul

... can encompass the whole universe at will, both its own structure and the void surrounding it, and can reach out into eternity, embracing and comprehending the great cyclic renewals of creation, and thereby perceiving that future generations will have nothing new to witness, even as our forefathers beheld nothing more than we of today.

These two ideas of history were often combined. Our original paradise cannot be regained. The beings that began in Eden now find themselves condemned forever to brief lives characterized more by suffering than by happiness, and leading inexorably to death.

Eastern religions adopted a similar view. They conceived of human life as a continual reincarnation into a world of suffering. The only escape was from the ongoing cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara*) was to remove oneself from the changing world (*maya*) by abdicating all desire and dedicating oneself to wisdom and charity.

City of God

Into the gloom that pervaded much of our ancient wisdom came the idea of salvation. Belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ would allow the believer to escape to Heaven at the end

of life. Failure to believe, however, would lead to Hell. In the 5th Century CE, Saint Augustine proposed that human beings can choose either to belong to the City of God or to remain in the Earthly City, the one founded by Cain (*City of God*, XV:1). People of the City of God progress “from earthly to heavenly things, and from the invisible to the invisible” (X:14).



The illustration at the right shows a terra cotta maquette from the Hermitage, a model for Bernini's 1650 statue of Augustine in St Peter's Cathedral. Bernini's sculpture was meant to be seen from many different perspectives. So perhaps we are not amiss in interpreting Augustine's work in ways not intended by the saint.

The idea of Christian salvation, like the benefits of many other religions, is basically mean-spirited and divisive. An elect will go to heaven; all others will not. Membership in the elite is not awarded on the basis of achievement but gifted by the grace of God. Indeed, Augustine believed that since God is omniscient, membership in the elect is pre-ordained.

Great Chain of Being

Augustine's thinking was embedded in the notion of a Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy, 1936) that he derived from Greek philosophers, most notably from the Neoplatonist Plotinus. God created the world. Within this world everything was arranged hierarchically from inanimate matter at the bottom through plants, animals, man, and angels, to God at the top. This concept was extensively worked out in medieval Scholasticism, but persisted long after, as evidenced by Alexander Pope's lines in his *Essay on Man* (1734, Epistle I:VIII):

Vast chain of being, which from God began,
Natures ethereal, human, angel, man,
Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see,
No glass can reach! from infinite to thee,
From thee to nothing!

The hierarchy also characterized human society with the anointed King placed at the top, the lords and clergy below and the peasants at the very bottom. Society was not supposed to change: one knew one's place, and did not move between the levels.

Enlightenment

All this began to change with the emergence in the Europe of the 16th and 17th centuries of a new way of thinking that questioned the authority of the past. The very idea that we may not have understood the world correctly in the past implied that we might understand it better in the future.

This way of thinking led to the Enlightenment of the 18th Century. The new sciences had shown that we could understand more and more about the workings of the world, derive laws to predict what might happen, and harness energy to change the world which controlled us. Lives were becoming better.



The Enlightenment gave birth to our modern idea of progress. In 1750 Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Baron de l'Aulne (1727-1781) published an essay entitled *A Philosophical Review of the Successive Advances of the Human Mind*. He agreed with the ancients that

All things perish, and all things spring up again; and in these successive acts of generation through which plants and animals reproduce themselves time does no more than restore continually the counterpart of what it has caused to disappear.

This sounds much like Marcus Aurelius. However, Turgot also noted that human beings were different from the rest of the world, since they can accumulate and communicate knowledge:

The succession of mankind, on the other hand, affords from age to age an ever-changing spectacle. Reason, the passions, and liberty ceaselessly give rise to new events ... The arbitrary signs of speech and writing, by providing men with the means of securing the possession of their ideas and communicating them to others, have made of all the individual stores of knowledge a common treasure-house which one generation transmits to another, an inheritance which is always being enlarged by the discoveries of each age.

This allows the idea of progress, whereby

... the whole human race, through alternate periods of rest and unrest, of weal and woe, goes on advancing, although at a slow pace, towards greater perfection (all quotations from Turgot, 1750, p. 41).

Turgot became most famous for his work on economics, his *Reflections on the Formation and Distribution of Wealth* being one of the foundational works of economic liberalism. Nevertheless, it is to him in particular and to the Enlightenment in general that we must trace the origin of our idea of progress (Younkins, 2006; Meek Lange, 2011). The statue of Turgot by Pierre Travaux (1853) illustrated above was appropriately photographed in the bright sunlight. Turgot was one of the giants of the Enlightenment.

Science advanced rapidly the 18th and 19th Centuries and by the beginning of the 20th Century it appeared that everything was within our reach. The study of thermodynamics had led to steam engines and automobiles, the study of electricity had given us artificial lighting and telephones, and the study of medicine had resulted in anesthetics and vaccines.

Society had become more humane. To some extent a belief in progress replaced our earlier belief in salvation.

Humanism is not science, but religion – the post-Christian

faith that humans can make a world better than any in which they have so far lived ... Christians understood history as a story of sin and redemption. Humanism is the transformation of this Christian doctrine of salvation into a project of universal human emancipation. The idea of progress is a secular version of the Christian belief in providence. (Gray, 2003. xiii)

No one was more enthusiastic in their belief in Progress than the people of the United States. They considered it their manifest destiny to replace the simple life of the Native Americans with the railways and industry of European civilization. The 1853 painting of *Progress* by Asher Brown Durand of the Hudson Valley School portrayed the changing American landscape. On the left are the Native Americans and on the right the New Americans. The unspoiled wilderness gives way to the glorious future. Both are suffused in sunshine: nostalgia for paradise is balanced by hope of heaven.



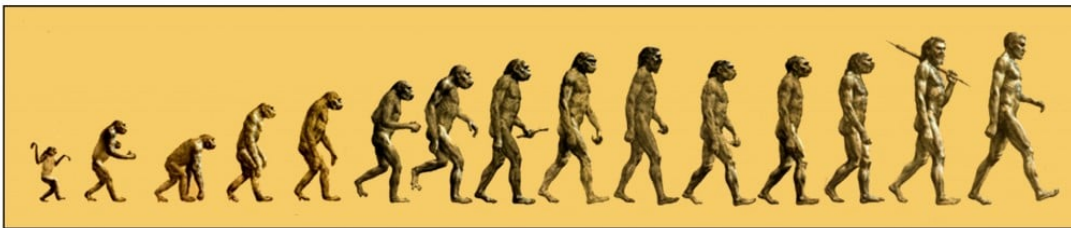
March of Progress

The Theory of Evolution inverted the Great Chain of Being. God did not create the world and all that is within it. Rather, the world evolved from inanimate to animate and from simple to

complex. Man descended from earlier humanoid species, that themselves had descended from monkeys. The universe developed from bottom up rather than from top down.

Religion generally rejected this world view. However some religious philosophers tried to combine evolution with divine purpose. Man was perhaps evolving toward a perfect being, an Omega Point where everything would be understood, time would cease, and God and man become one. (Teilhard de Chardin, 1959).

The evolution of man was often portrayed as a *March of Progress*. The most famous of these illustrations was by Rudolph Zaillinger for the Time-Life book on *Early Man* (Howell, 1965):



The idea of the *March of Progress* was conceived in much the same way as the Great Chain of Being, although the sequence was temporal rather than heirarchic. Yet it remained a chain, and we often engage in a futile search for missing links.

Zaillinger's picture suggests a linear sequence, with each humanoid species evolving into the next. This is completely wrong. Evolution has multiple branches, with most of the branches ending with extinction. Evolutionary progress is better illustrated by a bush than by a ladder (Gould, 1989). Furthermore, the evolution of man appears to have depended much more on chance contingencies than on an inevitable path. This does not make progress directionless, but does underline its precariousness.

Brave New World

As the Enlightenment progressed, the Common Man began refused to stay subservient. The Divine Right of Kings no longer held; revolutions occurred; democracy began to flourish. In the 20th Century governments began to grant Universal Suffrage.

However, we may have become too confident. Butterfield (1931) pointed out the human tendency to conceive of past history as necessarily progressing to the perfection of the present. Our present happiness simply confirms that our past policies were correct. The Great War shook this simple faith. Where could one place such terrible carnage in any concept of progress?

The tendency to see the present as the best of all possible worlds persists. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama announced the *End of History* (1989). Fascism had been defeated; communism had failed; democracy had triumphed:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.

All that was then needed was to export democracy to the rest of the world. Today we live with the violent results of this idea. The world and human society are far more complex than they appear. Progress may be both desirable and possible, but it will require more foresight than we have shown so far.

Angelus Novus

Not everyone subscribed to the idea that progress is beneficial. The first half of the 20th Century undermined everyone's faith. The rise of fascism in Europe, the war that it unleashed, the horror of the Holocaust, and the use of nuclear weapons were strong lines of evidence that history was descending into evil rather than progressing toward good.



Walter Benjamin gave terrifying poetic voice to this possibility by evoking a 1920 painting of Paul Klee:

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 1941, 257–8)

Benjamin’s warnings were disregarded in the years of peace and prosperity that followed World War II. In recent years, however, the idea that progress can be evil has been reconsidered:

To believe in progress is to believe that, by using the new

powers given us by growing scientific knowledge, humans can free themselves from the limits that frame the lives of other animals. This is the hope of nearly everybody nowadays, but it is groundless. For though human knowledge will very likely continue to grow and with it human power, the human animal will stay the same: a highly inventive species that is also one of the most predatory and destructive. (Gray, 2003, p. 4)

If anything about the present century is certain, it is that the power conferred on 'humanity' by new technologies will be used to commit atrocious crimes against it. (Gray, 2003, p. 14)

It is not hard to find historical examples of progress leading to problems (Wright, 2006). For example, the invention of flint arrows facilitated hunting but may have also led to the extinction of the very game that early man was pursuing. In addition, arrows provided yet another way for human beings to murder each other. Wright considers this early weaponry an example of a "progress trap" something that initially improves our lives but ultimately makes them worse.

Many of the problems brought on by progress are linked to human failings, particularly to selfishness. Wright considers the discovery of agriculture in this light:

The invention of agriculture is itself a runaway train, leading to vastly expanded populations but seldom solving the food problem because of two inevitable (or nearly inevitable) consequences. The first is biological: the population grows until it hits the bounds of the food supply. The second is social: all civilizations become hierarchical; the upward concentration of wealth ensure that there will never be enough to go around. (Wright, 2006, p. 108).

Modern democracies base their economies on capitalism. As well

as being inherently unfair, capitalism cannot survive without continually increasing consumption. This has led to our current ills of pollution and climate-change:

Capitalism lures us on like the mechanical hare before the greyhounds, insisting that the economy is infinite and sharing therefore irrelevant. Just enough greyhounds catch a real hare now and then to keep the others running till they drop. In the past it was only the poor who lost this game; now it is the planet. (Wright, 2006, p. 124).

Nevertheless

Though we must properly consider the problems that we face, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are getting better even if the pace is slow and variable. Despite the tremendous loss of life in the two world wars of the 20th Century, we are less murderous now than in the past (Pinker, 2011, 2015). Though governments are far from perfect, the people of the present world have more rights now than in the days of kings. And even if science can lead to such terrible things as nuclear war, it has also provided us with the benefits of modern agriculture, transportation, communication and medicine.

We are right to be careful. Yet we should not do away with progress and retreat to the past. The paradise that we think we remember is not real. The future dystopias we imagine are warnings not necessary predictions.

Temple of Longing

To balance Benjamin's vision of the angel we might conclude with another of Paul Klee's paintings, *Mural from the Temple of Longing* (1922). The colors of the painting come from the desert. The surface is weathered as if by wind and sand. The shapes likely represent a mountain village in North Africa. Klee had been irrevocably changed by a brief sojourn in Tunis

in the summer of 1914, and themes from that visit recur in many of his paintings. The blues of the picture suggest twilight, and the circular and semicircular shapes in the upper part of the picture may hint at a moon both full and waxing.



The various vertical constructions terminate in arrows which move away from us, upward and deeper into the space of the picture. Arrows occur many times in Klee's paintings and mean many things: the passage of time, the movement of things, and the force of desire. Here they may represent thoughts or questions:

The father of the arrow is the thought: how do I expand my reach? Over this river? This lake? That mountain? (Klee, 1925, p. 54)

A faith in progress is necessary. We should not simply accept our present state. We should long for a better world. However, we should always question how we should change the present to the future. And we should proceed with caution.

References

Benjamin, W., (1940, translated by H. Zohn, 1969). Theses on the philosophy of history. In

Illuminations. (pp. 253–264). New York: Schocken.

Bury, J. B. (1932). *The idea of progress: An inquiry into its origin and growth*. New York: Macmillan. Available at Internet Archive

Butterfield, H. (1931). *The Whig interpretation of history*. London: G. Bell and Sons.

Fukuyama, F. (1989). The End of History? *The National Interest*, Summer: 3–18.

Gould, S. J. (1989). *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, New York: W.W. Norton.

Gray, J. (2003). *Straw dogs: Thoughts on humans and other animals*. London: Granta.

Howell, F. C. (1965). *Early Man*, New York: TIME-LIFE Books, (pp. 41–45).

Klee, P. (1925, translated Moholy-Nagy, S., 1953). *Pedagogical sketchbook*. London: Faber. (p. 54)

Lovejoy, A. O. (1936). *The great chain of being: A study of the history of an idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Meek Lange, M. (2011). Progress. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Pinker, S. (2011). *The better angels of our nature: Why violence has declined*. New York: Viking.

Pinker, S. (September 11, 2015). Now for the good news: things really are getting better. *The Guardian*.

Pollard, S. (1968, reprinted 1971). *The idea of progress*:

History and society. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: Penguin Books.

Teilhard de Chardin, P. (translated by Wall, B., 1959). *The phenomenon of man*. London: Collins

Turgot, A.-R.-J., (1750, translated by Meek, R. L., 1973). *A philosophical review of the successive advances of the human mind*. In *Turgot on progress, sociology and economics*. Cambridge, UK: University Press. Much of this is available on Google Books

Wright, R. (2006). *An illustrated short history of progress*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

Younkins, E. W. (2006). Turgot on progress and political economy. *Le Québécois Libre*. 186. Available on webpage

Kitsch

The term “kitsch” came into being in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century (Dorfles, 1969; Calinescu, 1987; Riout, 2004). The etiology of the word is unknown. One possible source is the verb *kitschen* meaning “to collect rubbish” (Rugg, 2002); another is *verkitschen*, “to make cheaply” (Dutton, 1998). Words used to describe kitsch – “tacky,” “tawdry,” “garish,” “chintzy,” “schmaltzy” and “cheesy” – suggest cheapness, ostentation, triteness and sentimentality. Garden gnomes are a classic example.



Kitsch is bad art. However, the judgment of whether something is kitsch or not is highly subjective. Everyone has a personal idea of what is beautiful. In the words of David Hume

Beauty is no quality in things themselves: It exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different beauty. One person may even perceive deformity, where another is sensible of beauty; and every individual ought to acquiesce in his own sentiment, without pretending to regulate those of others. (Hume, 1757, section 7).

Nevertheless, Hume goes on to state that most people would agree to some general principles of beauty:

It appears then, that, amidst all the variety and caprice of taste, there are certain general principles of approbation or blame, whose influence a careful eye may trace in all operations of the mind. Some particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric, are calculated to please, and others to displease (section 12).

Experience and education allow one to understand and apply these principles. Thus we develop good taste. Kitsch is the art of bad taste.

The Rise of Kitsch

Kitsch is a phenomenon of the modern age. There has always been bad art, but this never became popular or widespread. In the past, bad art did not sell. Much of kitsch's success in

modern times derives from a commercial system that encourages its production and consumption. Kitsch is the art of the consumer society.

A major factor leading to kitsch was thus the rise of the bourgeoisie (Moles, 1971; Calinescu, 1987). In the nineteenth century the middle class expanded greatly. The upper middle class wanted to buy things of beauty, but they had not the education to do so with good taste. The lower middle class became able to purchase things beyond the bare necessities, but they were unable to pay for original art and settled for imitations. Industry quickly provided these and consumer kitsch was born.

The industrial revolution gave workers leisure time. So as not to be bored during this free time, people sought activities that were pleasing without requiring effort: entertainment rather than true art. Pleasurable relaxation was the goal of most of society; kitsch was the easiest means to this end. Abraham Moles (1971) considered kitsch to be *l'art de bonheur* the "art of happiness."

One might therefore consider kitsch as the art of the people. The following is from Abraham Moles (1971, p. 28, the French is elegant and my translation necessarily inexact:

Le Kitsch est à ce titre essentiellement démocratique : il est l'art acceptable, ce qui ne choque pas notre esprit par une transcendance hors de la vie quotidienne, par un effort qui nous dépasse – surtout s'il doit nous faire dépasser nous-même. Le Kitsch est à la mesure de l'homme, quand l'art en est la démesure, le Kitsch dilue l'originalité à un degré suffisant pour la faire accepter par tous. [Kitsch is in this way essentially democratic: it is acceptable art, art which does not shock us to transcend everyday life, or require any extraordinary effort – especially any surpassing of our present selves. Kitsch stays within our easy reach, whereas art exceeds our grasp; kitsch dilutes originality

enough to make it accessible to all.]

However, we cannot lay all the blame on the middle class. Aristocrats have often succumbed to ostentatious displays of wealth that would be generally considered kitsch. The “rich kitsch” of fake ruins and ceiling putti is every bit as bad as the poor kitsch of garden gnomes and fuzzy dice. Furthermore, the merchant class has sometimes displayed excellent taste. Patrons of fine art have come from wealthy members of the middle class as much as from the aristocracy.

Dwight Macdonald considered kitsch as essentially the same as the “mass culture” used to exploit the masses. He distinguished it from folk art which is created spontaneously by the people, and from high culture which is created for the elite:

Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. The Lords of kitsch, in short, exploit the cultural needs of the masses in order to make a profit and/or to maintain their class rule – in Communist countries, only the second purpose obtains. (Macdonald, 1953, p. 2-3)

Macdonald painted a pessimistic picture of our artistic future:

The Lords of kitsch sell culture to the masses. It is a debased, trivial culture that voids both the deep realities (sex, death, failure, tragedy) and also the simple, spontaneous pleasures, since the realities would be too real and the pleasures too lively to induce what Mr. Seldes calls ‘the mood of consent’: i.e., a narcotised acceptance of Mass Culture and of the commodities it sells as a substitute for the unsettling and unpredictable (hence unsalable) joy, tragedy, wit, change, originality and beauty of real life.

The masses, debauched by several generations of this sort of thing, in turn come to demand trivial and comfortable cultural products. (Macdonald, 1953, p. 16, the reference to Seldes is to his 1950 book *The Great Audience*.)

However, I am not sure that we can always fault the taste of the masses. Popular culture can promote kitsch, but it can also make significant artistic contributions. Shakespeare was notoriously beloved of the masses. Furthermore, he gave the penny public what it wanted.

Macdonald considered as kitsch everything produced by the entertainment industry – radio, television, movies, and comics. Much is but not all. Some works in these modern art forms are both beautiful and significant.

Reproduction

A second factor in the development of kitsch was the development of techniques for reproduction. Multiple copies of an image could be cheaply produced and widely marketed (Benjamin, 1936; Dorfles, 1969; Moles, 1971). Reproductions lack the aura (and the value) of the originals. And when used for purposes other than those of the artist, they might be considered kitsch: Renoir images on biscuit tins, Pollock paintings on silken scarves, Rodin sculptures as bookends.

And yet, and yet. Art has always been reproduced. Engravings of pictures and casts of statues allowed the dissemination of artistic creations. How else can art history be taught or learned? Reproduction is not wrong. It is not forgery. However, reproductions may sometimes be disconcertingly different from the original. The deceptive quality of kitsch may lie “in its claim to supply its consumers with essentially the same kinds of beauty as those embodied in unique or rare and inaccessible originals” (Calinescu, 1987, p 252). Yet one can also say this about original artwork, which is an artist’s reproduction of an experience, not the experience itself.

Most would agree that plastic replicas of the Eiffel Tower are kitsch. They serve no aesthetic purpose. In addition, such objects demonstrate “aesthetic inadequacy” (Calinescu, 1987) – their size and the materials they are made of contradict the aesthetic properties of the original.

However, visual art can be beautiful both in itself and in its contribution to our general set of images. A reproduction refers us to the image rather than to the original. Better a scarf should represent a Pollack painting than a cute kitten. The scarf is not the same as the painting, but it may still be pleasing to the eye and thoughtful to the mind.

What makes something kitsch rather than art?

So perhaps we need some criteria in terms of what is represented rather than with how or why it is reproduced. To say exactly why kitsch is bad can be difficult. Kulka (1996, pp 14-42) proposed that kitsch fulfills three conditions:

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

The next few paragraphs will consider and qualify these three conditions.

Overcharged Emotions

Kulka’s first condition is often considered as “sentimentality.” This characteristic of kitsch may have stemmed in part from the Romantic movement in art (Broch, 1969). In the late eighteenth century, art began to consider emotions much more directly than before. People enjoyed having their feelings aroused. Art sought to bring the viewer or the

reader to tears. Yet this could easily be overdone, resulting in mawkishness or melodrama. Over the top can be more uncomfortable than uplifting. Tears should not be wasted inappropriately.



Typical examples of kitsch are paintings of the poor designed to evoke feelings of pity. Pity at someone else's suffering is an important human emotion, but it is meaningless when it does not lead to some action to relieve the suffering. It is difficult to understand why anyone would want to hang paintings of begging children on one's walls even if they are as technically accomplished as those of William-Adolphe Bouguereau, whose *Little Beggar* (*Petite Mendiante*, 1880) is shown on the right. Bouguereau (1825-1905) was a famous academic painter who became quickly and completely forgotten after his death. He has been recently championed by Fred Ross, whose Art Renewal website reacts against the lack of figurative painting in modern art.

Kitsch often exploits pity – sentimental pictures of sad-eyed children are sold in the millions. Pity is a complicated emotion (Kimball, 2004): although it is primarily related to empathy and compassion, pity slides easily into feeling of superiority and contempt. Nothing can be done – the poor have only themselves to blame. The description of Bouguereau's *Petite Mendiante* on the Art Renewal website states "She looks at the viewer with desperation and exhaustion, causing a feeling of sadness in the viewer who knows she cannot be helped." This comforting conclusion is more rationalization than fact: as William Blake (*The Human Abstract* from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 1795) said

Pity would be no more

If we did not make somebody Poor

Distinguishing sentimentality from other emotions may be difficult. In J. D. Salinger's 1959 story *Raise High the Roof Beam Carpenters*, Seymour Glass quotes the Zen scholar R. H. Blyth "We are being sentimental when we give to a thing more tenderness than God gives to it" (p. 78). However, unless we know how God feels about something, this is a difficult criterion to apply. Seymour recognizes that he is being tendentious, but he is sure that God would not be as enamored as his wife of kittens with "technicolor booties on their paws." Yet if we cannot appeal to God or some other absolute principle, how do we decide whether sentiments are high or tacky?

Opera is an art of great emotion. The plots are usually melodramatic, and some people may feel that grand opera borders on the realm of kitsch. The emotions are high and the audience's involvement enhanced by the music. Yet high sentiment is not sentimentality. Opera opens itself up to meanings as deep as the emotions are high.

Art cannot exist without emotion. Art must move us to feel something about the world or about ourselves. The problem is that emotions can be used inappropriately, either commercially to sell worthless trinkets or politically to unite a population behind a party or its leader.

Kundera discusses political kitsch experience in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (p 251). A senator is moved by seeing children running on the grass.

Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass. The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch. The brotherhood of man or earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. ... And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.

It is good to feel deeply even about simple things. It is wrong to indulge in these emotions for their own sake, to be to be carried away by them to foolish ends, or to use them falsely to gain the sympathy of others. Political advertising loves kitsch for its sentimentality and its immediacy (Lugg, 1999). Kitsch is the fastest way to a voter's heart.

In his 1936 article *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin expresses his fear about the use of art for political purposes. He chillingly quotes the futurist Marinetti about the aesthetics of war:

War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of

the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of the big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages ...

This is art used to make the reader follow blindly in the path of fascism. The purpose of political kitsch is to stop critical thought. The viewer or reader succumbs to dangerous emotions and is carried away to inimical ends.

Effortless Appreciation

Kulka's second condition is that kitsch is "immediately identifiable." Greenberg (1939) suggested that all "academic" art – representational art created according to accepted conventions – is kitsch. He was reacting against the academic style of the late nineteenth century, the art of painters such as Bouguereau. He preferred modernist abstract art, which does not give its meaning easily. A skeptic might point out that some abstract art has no meaning to give. Indeed, some of the abstract art used to complement the furniture in modern dwellings is clearly kitsch. It is immediately identifiable as meaningless ornament, chosen on the basis of whether its color complements the sofa.



The art of Odd Nerdrum (1944-) provides an interesting commentary on kitsch and its relation to representation. This Norwegian artist paints figurative rather than abstract art (Nerdrum & Li, 2007). His painting style is based on Rembrandt and Caravaggio. Some of his paintings are directly representational such as the *Self-Portrait with Nosebleed* on the left. The technique is breathtaking. The image is as powerful as it is disconcerting.

Most of his images are surrealist – haunting representations of embodied souls in life or afterlife. The painting below shows a group of five women and one boy lying on the ground. They are almost naked. They are wrapped in what seem to be burial shrouds. All are singing. Their eyes are closed; the two staves suggest that perhaps two of them are blind. This dream-like image is difficult to interpret. Are they singing

praises before the throne of God, awaiting the resurrection, or lamenting some tragedy?



Nerdrum has experienced great difficulty with art critics, who describe him as out of touch with our time. He was unable to get a university appointment despite his obvious talent. In defiant response he declared himself an “artist of kitsch” and published a manifesto to justify kitsch (Nerdrum, 1990). Although he is a painter who represents human bodies rather than abstract ideas, his work is not kitsch in the way we generally use the term. His claim is a reaction to Greenberg, who really did throw out the baby with the bathwater. Nerdrum’s impressive technique allows him to create images of great intensity. The paintings stay in the mind, slowly divulging deeper and deeper meanings.

Photography poses difficulties for the definition of kitsch, since nothing is as immediately identifiable as a photograph. Kulka tried to address some distinctions between photography and kitsch. Photography is perhaps too real to be kitsch. A photograph of a sunset is not kitsch. It becomes kitsch if the photograph is printed on canvas to look like a painting, or on a poster with an inspirational quotation. Most photography is not art – it forms a record of something rather than an interpretation. Nevertheless, some photography can be

considered art. Then the photograph captures an image in a manner that is meaningfully different from the usual, or preserves a significant moment of existence beyond the present.

Lack of Meaning

Kitsch is minimally meaningful. The image tells us nothing more than what it portrays. There are no levels of interpretation. When there is something more than meets the eye, it is no longer kitsch. Kitsch is always serious; kitsch never makes you laugh. Kitsch is always comfortable; it never unsettles you. Kitsch preserves the status quo; it is the art that is loved by dictators

Common examples of kitsch are the souvenirs that we buy to remind ourselves of an intense experience (Olalquiaga, 1998). The image has significance only for the person who had the experience. For anyone else it is meaningless. A deeply kitsch experience is watching the slide show of someone else's holiday.

Many kitsch images involve nostalgia. They provide false memories of a time that never was, when we lived innocently in cottages with thatched roofs that never leaked and gardens that bloomed forever. Such images are immensely popular. They are the stock art of bed-and-breakfast and retirement homes. One of the most successful artists of recent times was Thomas Kinkade (1958-2012), the "painter of light" who provided reproductions of his paintings through either the internet or franchised dealers (Orlean, 2001). One of his masterpieces is *Nanette's Cottage*:



The painting shows a thatched cottage at evening with all the windows ablaze with light. The chimney is reinforced with an iron 'N' for Nanette and a heart shaped stone for love. A small rowboat is tied up in the stream at the edge of the garden, with a teddy bear still sitting on the seat. Upstream beyond the bridge other cottages all have their windows lit in neighborly solidarity with Nanette. Although the profusion of flowers indicates high summer, the home-fires are burning and smoke ascends from all the chimneys. In the further distance, a church steeple rises high enough to touch the sky. Prints of this image can be obtained in various sizes. Special prints can be "highlighted" by artists trained by Kinkadee to give them a special depth of color. This adds immensely to their cost. Art for the millions.

Pop and Camp

Any kitsch that aspires to meaning becomes pop art. Warhol's images of soup cans consider the role of advertising in modern life, and Lichtenstein's comic-book images comment on our simplification of reality. Pop art is infused with humor whereas kitsch is usually serious.

Another extension of kitsch is camp. The camp sensibility is difficult to pin down (Sontag, 1966). The emotions of camp are always intense and usually unrestrained – the art is usually described as “over the top.” Camp wallows in the exaggerated passions of opera and melodrama. Camp art is often associated with gender ambiguity in all its variety. Camp is simultaneously serious and satirical. Irony is a necessary feature: camp art can be considered at many different levels.

Peter Hujar’s 1974 photograph of the transvestite Candy Darling on her deathbed is one of the great images of high camp. Candy, one of Andy Warhol’s superstars, died of lymphoma. The facial makeup and silken blouse provide an erotic vitality completely at odds with imminent death. If a beautiful lady has to die, she should do so with glamour.



The photograph evokes stock emotions. The death of the maiden

is a story that has been told too many times. What is happening is immediately identifiable. This is a deathbed scene.

Yet this is not kitsch. The image conveys many different levels of meaning. Hripsimé Visser describes Hujar's photographs as "permeated by a realization of the human masquerade" (Stahel & Visser, 1994). Peter Hujar was homosexual and ultimately died of AIDS in 1987. He was well aware of the ambiguities of gender, and death was a common occurrence among his friends during the AIDS epidemic.

Nevertheless, the artist of the image is as much Candy Darling as Peter Hujar. The photograph proclaims a self that was created in defiance of her birth and maintained in the face of her death. One can be whoever one wants to be. Beauty can cheat Death, even if only for a moment. This is both posture and reality, both over the top and down to earth.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1936). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*. Translation by A. Blunden, 1998, available at <http://www.english.ual.ac.uk/~benjamin/>
- Broch, H. (1969). Notes on the problem of kitsch. In Dorfles G (Ed.) *Kitsch: The world of bad taste*. (pp. 49-115) New York: Bell Publishing.
- Calinescu, M. (1987). *Five faces of modernity: Modernism, avant-garde, decadence, kitsch, postmodernism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. (pp. 223-262).
- Dorfles, G. (Ed.). (1969). *Kitsch: The world of bad taste*. New York: Bell Publishing.
- Dutton, D. (1998). Kitsch. In J. Turner (Ed.) *Dictionary of Art*. London: Macmillan.
- Greenberg, C. (1939) Avant-Garde and Kitsch. *Partisan Review*. 6(5): 34-49

Hume, D. (1757). *Of the standard of taste*.

Kimball, R. H. (2004). A plea for pity. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 37, 301–316.

Kulka, T. (1996). *Kitsch and art*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Kundera, M. (1984). *The unbearable lightness of being*. New York: Harper & Row.

Lugg, C. A. (1999). *Kitsch: From education to public policy*. New York: Falmer Press.

Macdonald, D. (1953). A theory of mass culture. *Diogenes*, 1(3), 1-17.

Moles, A. A. (1971). *Le kitsch: L'art du bonheur*. Paris: Mame.

Nerdrum, O. (2001). *On kitsch*. Oslo: Kagge Forlag

Nerdrum, O., & Li, B. (2007). *Odd Nerdrum: Themes: paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures*. Oslo, Norway: Press Publishing.

Olalquiaga, C. (1998). *The artificial kingdom: A treasury of the kitsch experience*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Orlean, S. (2001). Art for everybody. *The New Yorker*, October 15, 2001

Riout, D. (2004/2014). Kitsch. In B. Cassin (Ed.) *Dictionary of untranslatables: a philosophical lexicon*. (translated by Rendall, S., Hubert, C., Mehlman, J., Stein, N. and Syrotinski, M., translation edited by Apter, E., Lezra, J. and Wood, M.). (pp. 538-539). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Rugg, W. (2002). Kitsch. In *Theories of Media. Keywords Glossary*. University of Chicago.

Salinger, J. D. (1959). *Raise high the roof beam, carpenters. And Seymour: an introduction*. Boston: Little, Brown. (Seymour's quotation from Blyth sounds authentic but I have not been able to find its source in Blyth's published works).

Sontag, S. (1966). Notes on "camp." In *Against interpretation, and other essays*. (pp. 275-292). New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Stahel, U. & Visser, H. (1994). *Peter Hujar: A Retrospective*. New York: Scalo Publishers.