Gabrielle Szmidt

Professor Shaeffer

Philosophy 301

17 December 2015

Essay 3

Thomas Kulka examines 'kitsch' as a form of 'art' in his paper "Kitsch". Kitsch is defined as "something that appeals to popular, tacky, or lowbrow taste and is often of poor quality" It might have a German etymology in which it means "to knock off cheaply". Kulka explains what exactly 'kitsch' is and what makes 'kitsch' kitsch. Kulka states that there are "two basic facts about kitsch: that is has an undeniable mass-appeal; and that is considered (by the art-educated elite) bad." In his paper, Kulka proves these facts about kitsch and convinces us that kitsch has no redeeming qualities.

Kulka begins by stating what types of objects are prominent in kitsch pictures, which are: "puppies or kittens of various sorts, children in tears, mothers with babies, long-legged girls with sensuous lips and alluring eyes, palm beaches with colorful sunsets, pastoral Swiss villages framed in mountain panoramas, pasturing families of deer in a forest clearing, couples embracing against the full moon, wild horses galloping along the waves of a stormy sea, cheerful beggars, sad clowns, sad faithful old dogs gazing towards infinity (often immortalized in porcelain), etc." He then goes on about what all of these things have in common. "They are all heavily emotionally charged. They are highly charged with stock emotions which spontaneously elicit a ready response." This is a huge component in kitsch. This is what makes it as popular as it is. Making something that will make people have an emotional response when they look at it, this will make the consumer want to purchase the object even more. When using people's emotions against themselves, they will always fall for whatever emotion you are trying to get them to feel.

Kulka states, "It seems that these features do not just typically concur with kitsch, but actually constitute a condition." This is interesting to note. He's not very specific about what he means by this. He does explain that, "objects of everyday life which are not considered particularly pretty and which are devoid of any emotional charge. It is, of course, easy enough to make bad pictures of chairs, chimneys or washing machines, but no matter how hard you try, it will not be kitsch." He is stating that ordinary objects are not kitsch, and you cannot make it kitsch. This is interesting because some of the examples he gives earlier could be considered as ordinary to certain people, but there is something special about the items he described that makes them able to become kitsch.

"From the above considerations it also follows that it would be much more difficult to produce an abstract kitsch painting than a figurative one." So he thinks that it would be a more easily obtained goal to make kitsch out of things we all know and love from either our past or our current likes, rather than making kitsch out of things that are ideas we cannot fathom or think that would be "cute". Kulka then goes into describe, "We should feel secure and comfortable when we look at the picture... There shouldn't be anything disturbing or threatening in kitsch. A typical kitsch is reassuring not only because we respond spontaneously but also because we know that we respond 'rightly', that is, we know that we are moved in the right kind of way, which is to say, in the same way as everybody else." This describes exactly what kitsch should make us feel when we look at it. We should feel clam and happy and secure when looking at this form of art. While some people may not agree with the fact that it is not art, we can all agree that the feelings we feel when we look at kitsch are those feelings. We can then think about how if really affects us as human beings.

"Kitsch does not work on individual idiosyncrasies but on universal images, the emotional charge of which is highly inter-subjective. Kitsch is to reassure us in our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them." We are able to use this to prove the point of how kitsch is specifically made for the emotional response of the consumers. We can see that kitsch isn't made to make us think about our lives or question everything we've ever done up until this exact point, but it is made so that we can look at it and relax. So we can have a few minutes in our mind not worrying about grades, finals, papers, and life in general. They make things that we consider kitsch because everything else in life is too stressful and we might as well enjoy ourselves by looking at stupid pieces of 'art' and laugh at ourselves later on in life for buying those pieces because why the hell would we buy something like that. It's because when we saw that piece it reminded us of a better time and made all the stress go away. It relaxes everything in our mind to help us cope with life.

"In order that the spectator should respond appropriately to the represented subject-matter, he has to be able to capable of recognizing it... Kitsch, as a matter of fact, always satisfies this requirement. We never have a problem in telling what kitsch is about. If we did, the emotional charge and the relevant associations related to the depicted subject would not, so to speak, get across and the picture thus wouldn't elicit the response which kitsch typically does." Here we can see there is another part of kitsch that makes it kitsch. It has to recognizable to the consumer. If it were not recognizable, then they wouldn't be able to sell it, and the consumer would not elicit the feelings they have when looking at the kitsch. If the consumer did not elicit the feelings required in order to purchase the items, then they would not purchase the item and kitsch would no longer be a popular selling point for products.

"The above considerations may lead us to the conclusion that kitsch employs a very natural, or realistic mode of representation. After all, Cubist and Futurist representations strike us (at least on the first sight) as somewhat odd and artificial. It would be, nevertheless, too hasty to indentify the stylistic features of kitsch with realism. For kitsch is in many respects very unrealistic and unnatural." With this argument we can decide that kitsch is something that isn't quite to the point of natural, or real for that matter, but something that skews reality for the consumer. Everything that is kitsch is over exaggerated and over the top. This makes it more appealing to the consumer and makes them want to purchase the item even more. This can also make people dislike kitsch a lot. Since it is over the top to the point where some people could be grossed out or disgusted by it, it can turn people away. That's why people don't consider it a piece of art when it is produced. Because some people think it's just too out there with proportions and the way it makes them feel.

In class we talked about propaganda and kitsch and if we could compare the two. If people think kitsch has any propaganda or political qualities, then they obviously do not understand what kitsch is. Kitsch is made to make us as consumers feel happy and calm. Usually propaganda and politics do the exact opposite of that. They usually rile people up and cause arguments and make people go and do crazy things in the name of their political "party" or their cause. Those two types of work are completely two different types of work and they cannot even be properly compared. It's like comparing ice cream and steak. One is sweet and yummy and makes you feel happy, where as the other one can bring out an all outrage between people who disagree if we should be able to eat it or not. They're not even on the same level as the other. It's ridiculous to even think that kitsch and propaganda are even close to being in the same medium.

There are no redeeming qualities in kitsch. It's almost impossible to make good things come out of it. It's just for the consumers. The consumers may like it, and they may continue to purchase it, but eventually it will all end up in a dump because the person who bought it grew out of the item and decided they didn't want it anymore. The consumers only buy it because it makes them feel something at the moment when they first see it and whenever they see it in their home, but otherwise, there is no reason to purchase kitsch. Kitsch could be considered a great way for people to get more involved with the art community, if anyone thought of kitsch as a type of art. Kitsch is in its own special category of things for people to buy and not criticize because if we do criticize it, then it can become art.