Kitsch and Morality

Aziz Alfailakawi

Throughout the realm of aesthetics there is the general sentiment that kitsch is inherently immoral. Although kitsch itself is a relatively ambiguous term, objects falling into this category are charged with a negative ethical stigma due to their being sentimental and manipulative. In this paper, I articulate the shakiness of the claim that kitsch *is* immoral by first comparing three accounts of kitsch to demonstrate how the term kitsch can be applied (or denied) to various aesthetic objects. I then argue that the charges of sentimentality and manipulation create further ambiguities regarding kitsch. I conclude that although certain objects can be kitsch, to categorically denounce kitsch on an ethical basis is too strong a claim. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Morality, Ethics, Aesthetics, Sentimentality, Manipulation*

1. Introduction

One of the central themes governing my delve into the world of aesthetics has been the relationship between art and morality. I have explored this topic from several angles – if art has cognitive value, if voyeuristic art forces its viewers to indulge in voyeurism, if art can push us to political action, and more. My line of questioning is not unique, however, and has been the topic of the research of many. It is important to note that in exploring these inquiries the question is seldom asked if art itself is immoral – the more popular and underlying question at this intersection is moreso if art *can be* immoral.[1]

Of the angles approached in exploring this relationship between art and morality, one has stuck out more than the rest: kitsch. This term functions as a catch all for some category of object engaged with aesthetically that seemingly eludes clear definition (Higgins, 1992, p. 576). Despite this ambiguity, however, kitsch holds a strong negative connotation (Harries, 1968, p. 75). Glancing through secondary literature, it seems that to call something kitsch is not simply to imply that it is *bad*; to be kitschy is to be immoral (Broch, 1975, p. 76). Due to this ambiguity and general sense of moral disapproval, during my delve into kitsch, the line of questioning has focused on two main areas (Harries, 1968, p. 75). Simply put, I have been asking *what kitsch is*, and *if kitsch is immoral*.

[1] This point will become important later in this paper.

I must admit, my knowledge of aesthetics was quite limited prior to the start of the year 2024. Before reading Tomáš Kulka's opening chapter to *Kitsch and Art*, I had no clue what *kitsch* referred to, or what it even was. As I immersed myself in texts and engaged in discussions on kitsch, I found myself further and further from the truth of the matter. It has now been months and I still do not know what kitsch is. This lack of knowledge is not mere ignorance, I must clarify. Rather, it is confusion. Although Kulka's attempt to define kitsch is seemingly as close as we, philosophers of art, have come to refining such a broad and general term, it proves to little avail. There is still considerable ambiguity surrounding the schema of categorization. What pieces count as kitsch, and what pieces do not? Despite there being a seeming consensus that pieces such as the various renditions of dogs playing poker qualify for the marker, the 'kitschiness' of other pieces seems to stand on shaky ground. As is the nature of philosophical debate, it would be somewhat odd if there was perfect consensus over the exact pieces that fit into the category. We do not even have that level of agreement when it comes to art itself. It would be unreasonable to place the responsibility on Kulka, or even on some other individual, to provide such a particular definition of kitsch that there would be no level of ambiguity surrounding the term whatsoever.

The issue with kitsch, although partially, is not wholly due to this ambiguity. As stated above, there is ongoing contention over which works are considered kitsch, much like there is debate over what constitutes high art (or even more generally, what is considered art). Rather, kitsch's ambiguity becomes an issue during discussions of normativity surrounding the term. In other words, the issue with kitsch being ambiguous arises when asking the question: is kitsch immoral?

There are numerous issues that arise when discussing kitsch and its morality. It is often the case that during discussions surrounding kitsch, scholars will either seek to define the term themselves or reference some other schema to base their argument around. It is not as though kitsch is a polysemic term. Whereas a trunk can either refer to a rectangular storage container or the breathing apparatus of an elephant, kitsch refers to a singular class of object. In defining kitsch, we are looking for criteria to denote the same thing. The issue arises, however, in that through these attempts at establishing conditions for what constitutes kitsch, the definition of the term has become more ambiguous as opposed to more specific.

Subsequently, when declaring kitsch to be immoral, we run into numerous philosophical conundrums. First and foremost is the issue of the generality of the claim. Are we asking if kitsch *can be* immoral, or if it *is*. We could compare this distinction to that of possibility and necessity. Is it merely possible for kitsch to be immoral or is kitsch necessarily immoral in being kitsch? If the latter, we find ourselves in the predicament of arguing for why simply meeting a criterion for some aesthetic category warrants moral denouncement. If the former, however, we find ourselves delving into a different line of questioning altogether. Once we are past this point, we run into a second issue: *what* are we calling immoral? I have been reading up on kitsch for months now and still

do not know what it is. To call kitsch immoral, to me, is tantamount to declaring 'those people' evil without clarifying who 'those people' even are.

Furthermore, before even setting out to construct an ethical argument condemning kitsch, we would find ourselves in a position of first having to make numerous determinations on the category itself outside of its general criterion. If all kitsch is immoral, is all kitsch immoral in the same way? If not, what distinguishes between the immorality of different types of kitsch? *Can we* distinguish between different sub-categories of kitsch while still meeting certain conditions for the larger kitsch umbrella? *What is* kitsch? Is kitsch a form of art, or merely a category of aesthetic work distinct from art? What separates kitsch from bad art? If kitsch is a type of art, we would then have to ask if art itself can be immoral. If not, however, we would then have to explore the definitions of both art and kitsch, possibly reformulating both to ensure that they preclude the other so that art may escape moral judgement, whereas kitsch could not.

Even then, regardless of if kitsch is art, to argue for an ethical condemnation of kitsch would consequently raise the question of where a kitsch objects' ethical weight lies. Is it the viewer that is immoral? Is it the producer of the piece? Is it the piece itself? Is it some combination of the three? If either of the first two, we would then need to determine what ethical system we are arguing through and how these perpetrators are worthy of moral denouncement. If, however, the ethical weight lies in the work itself, we would then have to pose the question of if an inanimate object *can* have any moral standing outside of its interaction with a viewer. The larger point being that to argue that kitsch is immoral is no simple task.

Before continuing, I do want to clarify that although I am asking these large questions, many (if not all) are far beyond the scope of this paper. My task here is not to provide some grand definition of kitsch (or art). Likewise, I am not seeking to argue that kitsch is *not* immoral. My concern has nothing to do with kitsch and its ethical standing. My task, rather, is to problematize the assertion that kitsch *is* immoral by exploring the shakiness of the terminology involved in such a declaration. How can we have a unified idea that kitsch is immoral when so many distinct works fall under the large category?

In writing this paper, I split my argument into two main sections. Each section, subsequently, is further divided into sub-sections. I first go through numerous definitions of kitsch to demonstrate the varying accounts of the term. This section will not serve as an endorsement of any uses of the term, but rather a demonstration of *other* views. It is in this section that I demonstrate the broadness of the category of kitsch, and how kitsch is defined in relation to its audience. I then delve into the moral quandaries of kitsch, namely its charges of manipulation and sentimentality, and explore how each charge becomes weaker when applied to the whole of kitsch. Through an exploration of sentimentality, we find a similar quality as observed in kitsch – its foundation in relationality. Finally, I end with some concluding remarks and display my bibliography. Let us begin.

2. Kitsch as it is Defined

As previously stated, regardless of how kitsch is defined, the term holds an implication of "moral disapproval" (Harries, 1968, p. 75). To call something kitsch is not merely descriptive, but normative. Most self-respecting artists would not *want* their work to be kitsch. We can see this normativity at play when examining various definitions of kitsch. In this section, I examine the descriptive definitions of kitsch as expounded by Tomáš Kulka, Gillo Dorlfes, and Kathleen Higgins. Although each are distinct in their approach, the accounts of kitsch in question find an underlying unity in the endorsement of Dorlfes' and Milan Kundera's descriptions of kitsch.[2]

2.1 Kulka

Kulka identifies three conditions for a work to be categorized as Kitsch. These criteria are:

> 1) [k]itsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions," 2) "[t]he objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable," and 3) "[k]itsch does not substantially enrich our associates relating to the depicted objects or themes. (Kulka, 2002, pp. 29-37)

Based on these conditions we can identify the painting *A Friend in Need* by Brow and Bigelow as being paradigmatic of Kulka's characterization of kitsch. This painting depicts an object highly charged with a stock emotion (a group of dogs), its object is instantly and effortlessly identifiable (a group of dogs playing poker), and it does not enrich our association with the group of dogs, or with poker.

There are two underlying points central to Kulka's definition of kitsch meriting closer examination for the purposes of our discussion: the ideas that i) kitsch is relational, and ii) kitsch is not art. In reference to the first point, to Kulka, it is not just a property of the work that makes it kitsch, but how we interact with it. The second and third conditions are exemplary of this claim. For a work to be kitsch we, the viewers, would need to be able to effortlessly identify the objects, as well as not have our associations with the object enriched. If, for any reason, I was unable to identify the object or I felt my association with the object change (positively) because of my viewing of the work, Brow and Bigelow's *A Friend in Need* work would no longer be kitsch. In terms of the second underlying point regarding Kulka's notion of kitsch, we turn to the second chapter of *Kitsch and Art*. It is here that Kulka begins by

[2] In each account, we find a reference to Kundera's often quoted passage on kitsch: "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 say: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass./ It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch" (Kundera, 2004, p. 251). Underlying this view of kitsch is the idea that an objects' kitchiness is found in relation, a feature common to each account examined in this paper. To Kundera, kitsch ceases to be kitsch once recognized at kitsch, entailing a dynamic necessary for an objects' categorization of kitsch. Likewise, in stating that kitsch is made kitsch by a tear entails that it is in one's reception of some object that it becomes kitsch. While exploring Kundera's notion of kitsch may yield further considerations in terms of its morality, Kundera appears to think of kitsch as a broader category than one confined by aesthetics. In other words, kitsch to Kundera relates to objects outside of the consideration of art. To delve deeper into his notion of kitsch, unfortunately, would exceed the scope of this paper. For Kundera's conception of kitsch, see Kundera (2004).

positing a disconnect between the titular terms. He states, "[c]onsumers of kitsch do not buy kitsch because it is kitsch; they buy it because they take it for art" (Kulka, 2002, p. 44). Implied in this statement, kitsch is *not* art, first and foremost. And so, when he is describing conditions for a work to be kitsch, he is referring to aesthetic objects, not to art. This distinction is important, as it not only reinforces the idea that kitsch is not simply bad art, but also formulates an idea of kitsch that is bound in an element of imitation: kitsch is not art, but appears as though it is art.

He goes on to describe kitsch as

> integral part of our modern culture… flourishing now more than ever before. You find it everywhere. It welcomes you to restaurants, greets you in the bank, and smiles at you from advertising billboards. (Kulka, 2002, p. 16)

Although Kulka's criterion for kitsch are relatively specific, it seems that he does not have a narrow view of what qualifies as kitsch. Advertisements, for example, are kitsch and not art. This assessment seems to be further reinforced by his ideas that kitsch "comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them," that "kitsch never ventures into the avant-garde," that it "never questions anything", and that it "does not require interpretation" (Kulka, 2002, pp. 27, 33, 99, 109). By nature of advertising, we seldom must interpret the subject matter depicted on a billboard or in a commercial. The advertisement does not disturb our worldview but plays on them for some ulterior purpose.

It is worth drawing attention to a possible connection between Kulka's and Clement Greenberg's notions of kitsch. To Greenberg, kitsch functions as a "distraction from boredom," "demand[ing] nothing of its customers except their money," and imitating the effects of art (Greenberg, 1961, p. 10, 15). This description of kitsch's function parallels Kulka's third condition – in which kitsch does not enrich one's association to the object viewed. Where they differ, however, is that, to Greenberg, kitsch functions moreso as a force drawing artists away from ambition and the avant-garde, and towards the ease of increased profits (Greenberg, 1961, p. 11). Thought of in this way, kitsch appears an effect of capitalism on the production of art.[3] It is not a phenomenon found in reception of an object, but its creation in its author playing it safe for the sake of commercial success.[4]

[3] Sianne Ngai builds on this point of the impact of commercialization on art. To Ngai, cuteness, what might be considered as a category of stock image necessary to Kulka's definition of kitsch, emerges as "a term of evaluation… in the nascent mass culture of the industrial nineteenth century… [contributing] to the ideological consolidation of the middle-class home as a space organized around consumption" (Ngai, 2010, p. 951). To delve too deeply into the socio-economic realm of kitsch, however, would exceed the scope of this paper.

[4] Although Greenberg's account of kitsch may merit further inspection in relation to this discussion, his criteria for what qualifies as kitsch are quite capacious. To Greenberg, one might consider all popular and commercial art to be kitsch (Greenberg, 1961, p. 9). Further, because of the strong connections he draws between kitsch and commercialization, focusing on his account runs the risk of far exceeding the scope of this paper.

2.2 Dorfles

In Gillo Dorfles' collection of essays entitled *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, he describes kitsch in a much broader manner than Kulka. Rather than outlining a set of conditions for the reader, or outright defining kitsch, he instead describes two distinct processes of

> 'kitschification': one related to intentionality, and the other to sentimentalization. The former method of kitschification is one in which an artwork is 'transferred' from its real status and used for a different purpose from the one for which it was created. (Dorfles, 1975, p. 17)

The type of kitsch objects Dorfles seems to have in mind here would include the variations of historical art pieces present in museum gift shops, where the original piece may have had some artistic value but has since been 'kitschified' through commodification and used for some purpose other than aesthetic appreciation.

The second description of kitschification outlined by Dorfles is not in a method of production, but rather through the process of sentimentalization achieved via reproduction. This type of kitschification occurs through

> the attitude of the individual when confront[ing] artistic and natural phenomena, which are observed from that particular point of view which immediately transforms them into something inferior, false, sentimental and no longer genuine. (Dorfles, 1975, p. 29)

In this latter process, it seems that what Dorfles has in mind is in an observer of art witnessing some piece, and attempting to recreate some element of it, but instead sentimentalizing the piece and divorcing it from its original genuine character. An example of this sort of kitsch can be seen in when comparing Edwin Landseer's *Trial by Jury* (the original) to *A Friend in Need* (the kitschified piece).[5]

From these two processes of kitschification we can extract a basic Dorflesian definition of kitsch. In both instances, it seems that kitsch objects are those that exist in relation to some other piece. It is a work that imitates another in some way, but either diverts from the original intention of the work or is inauthentic by sentimentalizing the initial piece. Through this lens, we might consider objects to be kitsch insofar as they imitate or sentimentalize some other piece of art. It is important to consider, however, that Dorfles does not seem to outright preclude kitsch from art. Although one could argue that in the first case of kitschification, insofar as the object is no longer intended to hold aesthetic value, it is no longer art. In the second case, however, the pieces in questions would seem to qualify as a subset of bad art, rather than just non-art altogether.

[5] It is worth noting that by both Kulka and Dorfles's accounts of kitsch, *Trial by Jury* avoids the category of kitsch. For Kulka, *Trial by Jury* was both the original painting, unique in its time, and was intended as satire. Because of these two elements, these law practicing dogs enrich our relationship via satire, and is thus not kitsch. On Dorfles' account, however, this is the original piece and has not gone through the sentimentalization process, and is, therefore, not kitsch.

2.3 Higgins

Unlike the prior two accounts of kitsch examined above, Kathleen Higgins' notion of kitsch is centred on the *experience* of kitsch, as opposed to solely on an object itself. To Higgins, kitsch exists "only in a relational context" (Higgins, 1992, p. 568). A piece is kitsch because it "provoke[s] a certain response" (ibid). Expanding on this idea of an object becoming kitsch through its reception, as opposed to solely through its production, she states

> [i]n order for an object to be experienced as kitsch, the object must somehow resonate with largely preconscious desires and beliefs; but an object's facility for doing this is not an independent property of the object. Instead, this facility is a relational property that depends on the object's cultural context and its relationship to… beliefs and desires held by members of its audience" (ibid). Despite this description of kitsch in terms of its relational properties, and the assertion that is primarily defined through its reception, she does admit that "many objects seem clearly designed to provoke a kitsch response. (ibid)

In that way, we can understand kitsch as being a category not only placed on a work primarily through its reception, but one that can be demanded of the work itself. In other words, a work can be kitsch purely based on how it is received (or kitschified, harkening back to Dorfles), but the work may also warrant a kitsch response based on its "kitsch appeal" (Higgins, 1992, p. 578). She does not seem to distinguish between kitsch and art, instead relegating the category to one of audience interaction with the piece in question.

Speaking to her characterization of kitsch itself, however, Higgins describes those works as typically being "simple and attractive," and idealizing of its subject matter (Higgins, 1992, 572). Nonetheless, Higgins concedes that there is a difficulty in identifying kitsch objects. Because, in her view, an objects' kitschiness is partly due to a viewers' response, "there is no clearly definable 'set' of kitsch objects" (Higgins, 1992, p. 576). Although Higgins' definition, like the previous two, would likely agree that the *A Friend in Need* painting would qualify as kitsch, in theory, one might be able to consider an artwork such as the Van Gough's *The Starry Night* as kitsch, purely based on one's reception of the piece. An argument may have to be made for the simplicity and idealized aspects of the work, though those elements are not required for the work to be kitsch. Such an argument would serve only to reinforce one's receiving of the piece as kitsch, but not qualifying it as kitsch in and of itself. It is worth emphasizing here that Van Gough's *The Starry Night* would avoid the label of kitsch under the schema provided by both Kulka and Dorfles.

Through examination of the views of kitsch by Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we see two common underlying elements: i) an object's kitschiness is not due solely to the properties of the work, and ii) there is a simplicity involved in the property of the work that brings the object closer to being kitsch.[6]

[6] A possible objection to this point of kitchiness existing outside of just the properties of the work may be found in Sontag's notion of camp and its overlap with kitsch. To Sontag, "[c]amp is… a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons" (Sontag, 2022, p._54). Thought of in this way, there is a quality of camp inherent to an object regardless of

It is important to note however that in each subsequent definition of kitsch we found a new type of aesthetic piece included that the previous definition may have been friendly to but did seem to outright point to. Kulka's view of kitsch would preclude Van Gough's *The Starry Night*, whereas Higgins' did not *necessarily*. Likewise, one could make the argument that *A Friend in Need* did not constitute kitsch through Higgins' view, despite Kulka's three conditions being met.

The underlying intention of this section is to illustrate the following points: 1) definitions of kitsch, while pointing to a singular category of aesthetic object, differ in subtle ways, and 2) kitsch is a broad term encapsulating numerous different types of objects. Although these three figures might agree on the basic properties distinguishing kitsch, they each differ in their views to such a degree that objects not included in one's definition become integral in another (Kulka, 2002, pp. 15-16, 27 and Higgins, 1992, pp. 569-570). We can see that although there is some general agreement over what constitutes kitsch, there is contention over what exactly kitsch is. What might be kitsch to one might not be kitsch to another. These points become even more pertinent when discussing the morality of kitsch.

3. Kitsch and Morality

In the views of Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we can identify two main charges of immorality present in kitsch: sentimentality and manipulation. In the Dorflesian account of kitsch, sentimentality is at the forefront – the second method of kitschification occurs *through* sentimentalization. In Kulka's account, however, this charge is more subtle. Kulka's first condition, that kitsch must depict "objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions," can be read as referring to sentiment, particularly when considering stock emotion (Kulka, 2002, p. 28).[7] Manipulation, on the other hand, is not a charge explicit in any of the three accounts. The closest we come to an explicit charge in our previous discussion on kitsch is in Kulka's idea that kitsch *appears* to be art, as opposed to *actually* being art. Instead, manipulation largely appears to be a sub-charge of the immorality of kitsch through kitsch's being sentimental. In other words, kitsch is manipulative *because* it is sentimental. This manifestation of sentimentality through manipulation is at the forefront of Higgins' view on kitsch. She characterizes kitsch as "provok[ing] a certain response" (Higgins, 1992, p. 569). This response is, subsequently, related to the emotions brought forth as a reaction to kitsch (Higgins, 1992, pp. 569, 578).

In this section I explore the charges of kitsch being manipulative and sentimental, problematising each accusation by relating them to

how one relates to it. The issue, however, arises that in Sontag's view there is not a complete equivalence of camp to kitsch (Sontag, 2022, p. 65). Rather, the overlap between these categories appears through a "'serious' point of view," which, in turn, points to a relationality necessary in the kitchiness of an object (Sontag, 2022, p. 55). To delve further into the nuances of camp and kitsch, however, would exceed the scope of this paper.

[7] Stock emotions" is a vague term, but he describes them as triggering an "unreflective emotional response," which is a criticism of sentimentality present in works such as Joseph Kupfer's "The Sentimental Self."

kitsch's ambiguity, as well as existing ambiguity present in each accusation. The charge of sentimentality rests upon the immorality of sentimentality, which, as we shall soon see, is somewhat ambiguous. In at least two accounts of sentimentality, what is sentimental arises through a sentimentalizing process. When it comes to manipulation, on the other hand, we find that the immorality present is predicated on deception – an act that is intentional – while this may not always be the case. As each charge is related to the other, I begin more broadly with the characterization of kitsch as sentimental, to then move on deeper into the charge of manipulation.

3.1 Kitsch as Sentimental

Although sentimentality appears as a charge against kitsch common to both Kulka and Dorfles, it is not unique to their views. Kitsch is often viewed as distinct due to this very element (Dyck and Johnson, 2017, p. 285). Thorsen Botz-Borstein goes so far as to describe kitsch as "an aesthetic product… [depending] on… sentimentality" (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p. 306). In that way, sentiment can be understood as an integral part of what makes kitsch *kitsch* (Solomon, 1991, p. 4). But what exactly is sentimentality?

Much like kitsch itself, sentimentality is a term elusive of exact definition. Mary Midgley describes sentimentality as the "[misrepresentation of] the world in order to indulge our feelings" (Midgley, 1979, p. 385). In this view, sentimentality is formulated as a lie produced in the service of self-indulgence. Deborah Knight, on the other hand, characterizes sentimentality as "a concept standardly associated with tender, comforting emotions and gentle feelings such as pity, affection, sympathy, fondness, caring, and compassion" (Knight, 1999, p. 411). This latter description of sentimentality seems to align, somewhat, with the treatment of the term by Joseph Kupfer, though not entirely. In "The Sentimental Self," Kupfer describes sentimentality through contrast to complex emotions. Throughout his paper, sentiments are characterized as emotions precluding "[t]hought and self-reflection," and rather pertaining to the emotions that are "warm [and] tender," that serve only to "[make] us feel good about ourselves" (Kupfer, 1996, pp. 547, 553, 557). In Kupfer's sense, sentiment would seem to be just those emotions that are simplistic, rather than complex. He does clarify, however, that simple emotions in and of themselves are not sentimental, perse, but become so after undergoing a process of sentimentalization (Kupfer, 1996, 544).[8] He describes this process as one in which we simplify our emotional responses to achieve "quick and easy affective resolution" (ibid).[9]

Here we notice a parallel to our conundrum with the term kitsch. Much like the views of Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we can identify a common underlying theme to the treatment of sentimentality across these three scholars, but with notable differences. In the case of Knight and Kupfer, sentimentality refers to simpler emotions, yet to Midgley it seems to be concerned moreso with

[8] Much like Dorfles' account of kitsch.

[9] He does not, unfortunately, explain exactly what this process looks like step by step, but instead refers to its outcomes.

a distortion of reality. This self-deceit can be seen as a shared view of Kupfer, insofar as the sentimentalizing process functions as a way of undercutting emotional responses through projecting a simplification of reality, but is largely absent in Knight's view. As a result, sentimentality describes two distinct occurrences—one of simplicity and one of distortion. Unless all that is simple is a distortion, we find a term a notable ambiguity where sentimentality refers to both.

When it comes to the criticism of kitsch as being sentimental, we run into a few issues. Firstly, the seeming danger in at least two of the accounts of sentimentality discussed above seems to be contingent on some active process undertaken by a subject. To both Kupfer and Midgley, sentiments come to be *through* a sentimentalizing process of sorts; the danger lies in an action performed by a person. And so, if kitsch's immorality lies in its sentimentality, then is it sentimental in and of itself, or due to its being sentimentalized by the viewer? While we could argue that the piece itself provokes its viewer into a sentimentalizing process, we would consequently run into a secondary issue: a primary charge against sentimentality is in self-indulgence (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p. 310 and Solomon, 1991, p. 10). In other words, the immorality of sentimentality lies on the person indulging in their sentiment, i.e. sentimentalizing. As Robert Solomon states, "the self-indulgence argument shifts the indictment away from the object of sentimentality and back to the subject, to the viewer and the not the art or artist" (Solomon, 1991, p. 10). When one over-indulges in, say, dessert, we seldom blame the cake for being too enticing. Rather, the fault lies in the person whom self-indulged. What distinguishes kitsch from dessert? Outside of pertaining to largely different categories of object, it seems that kitsch is unique in its manipulative nature, or so says Brown, Higgins, Karsten Harries, and Herman Broch.

3.2 Kitsch as Manipulative

To Broch and Harries, kitsch distorts reality into a "falsehood" (Harries, 1968, p. 152 and Broch, 1975, p. 49). It is an illusion parading around as art (Harries, 1968, p. 149). To Brown, kitsch is designed to serve a specific purpose distinct from aesthetic appreciation (Brown, 2000, pp. 42-45). It is commodity *disguised* as art (Brown, 2000, p. 45). And to Higgins, kitsch seeks to idealize and simplify, to "[provide] easy, effortless catharsis" (Higgins, 1992, pp. 569-572). In other words, "kitsch gives us a false and fraudulent… vision of the world" (Solomon, 1991, p. 5). Underlying each of these views on kitsch is the element of deceit. Kitsch deceives us into sentimentality. We approach kitsch with the vulnerability required for aesthetic appreciation, and kitsch, in turn, greets us with some underhanded goal. We can see cases of this when looking at kitsch objects such as propaganda, or advertisements, where they appear as art but, in fact, aim to manipulate us into indulging some desire. As is the character of manipulation, the producer of kitsch, and consequently the kitsch itself, hold an intention to deceive. Where this notion falters, however, is that not all objects that qualify as kitsch intend to pass as art.

In describing one's experience with a classic kitsch object (a fridge magnet

brandishing artwork in a museum giftshop), Cheryl Fok articulates the point that certain kitsch objects are "aesthetically designed, yet are not – and do not even pretend to [be] – great art" (Fok, 2024). In many cases in which we encounter kitsch in our everyday lives, as described by Kulka in his inclusion of advertisements as kitsch, or by Dorfles in his description of kitschification as entailing some other purpose than the one initially intended by the original work, we interact with kitsch where "aesthetics [are] not the point" (Fok, 2024). The way we "aesthetically relate to" a puzzle depicting the Mona Lisa differs vastly from the way we would interact with the painting itself (Fok, 2024).

Although one may concede that there *are* kitsch objects intended to deceive, this does not preclude kitsch objects that are kitsch for kitsch sake. In that way, these pieces of kitsch would not hold an intentionality to deceive or manipulate. And so, if those pieces of kitsch were sentimentalized, it would not be a process invoked by the piece itself but rather the self-indulgence of the viewer of the piece. In that way, the immorality of certain pieces of kitsch would then not pertain solely to kitsch, perse, but of the kitsch viewer. Consequently, the charge that kitsch is immoral would instead have to be that the *viewer* of kitsch is immoral when it comes to certain pieces. Furthermore, as alluded to by the characterizations of kitsch provided by Kulka and Higgins, much of what makes an object kitsch lies in its interaction with its viewer. A piece is not kitsch solely because of the properties of a piece. At least partly, an object becomes kitsch if its viewer experiences a kitsch response to the object. Understood through this lens, if kitsch is immoral, part of what makes it immoral is in the attitude of the viewer to the kitschified object. Kitsch cannot be kitsch in and of itself, and so if kitsch is immoral, part of that immorality comes from a view that is imposed on an object thereby making it kitsch.

We can further complicate this assertion that kitsch is categorically immoral by comparing two pieces that would typically qualify as kitsch. Although one could make an argument that a puzzle depicting the *Mona Lisa* is immoral in some way, intuitively it would have to be immoral in a different way than kitsch used in advertisements. Whereas the puzzle does not seek to manipulate, the advertisement does. While the puzzle does not even pretend to be art, the advertisement may. Based on intention alone, the former is not trying to do anything other than exist as a puzzle, whereas the latter might seek to function both to evoke desire, as well as convince the viewer of some message. Again, my point is not that kitsch is underappreciated, moral, immoral, or anything of the sort; it is that to claim that kitsch is immoral warrants further exploration and argumentation.[10]

[10] While one could assert the additional charge of kitsch being immoral based on how it is used, such as in propaganda or to further commercial success (sales), this charge positions the immorality present on the person using the kitsch objects, as opposed to kitsch itself. As such, kitsch would not be immoral qua kitsch but would be a *tool* of an immoral agent. If this charge is applied to kitsch itself however, that there is some property of kitsch that predisposes it to such uses, it consequently falls under the category of manipulation—that kitsch is immoral because it is manipulative and used to manipulate—which is addressed above.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have explored the notion that kitsch is immoral. Such a general claim raises numerous questions that ought to be answered pertaining to what kitsch is, where its immorality lies, and what makes it immoral. As we have seen through the definitions of kitsch provided by Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, kitsch is a broad term that points both to a specific class of object, as well as to other pieces that are tangentially related. The charges of kitsch being immoral are largely rooted in its sentimentality and, consequently, its manipulation. Through an exploration of each of these terms, we can see that while certain kitsch objects fit the criteria of being immoral due to these charges, others do not. Although certain kitsch objects seek to deceive and invoke sentimentality in its viewer, others merely exist as kitsch for kitsch sake. Additionally, because, at its basis, part of what makes kitsch *kitsch* is in its interaction with the viewer, to describe kitsch as immoral solely for being kitsch would partly be a moral standing imposed by a viewer on some object.

Before ending, I would like to re-articulate that this paper is *not* an argument in defence of kitsch. I am not aiming to say that kitsch is moral, or that kitsch is neither sentimental nor manipulative. Further, I am not intending to argue for or against sentimentality's moral standing. My sole purpose in writing this paper is to problematize the assertion that kitsch is immoral by exploring the ambiguity entailed in such a claim through highlighting the wiggle room provided by the terms: kitsch, sentimentality, and manipulation. It might be reasonable to call some kitsch immoral for being deceitful. It might be reasonable to call *some* kitsch immoral for being sentimental. It might even be reasonable to call some kitsch outright evil, but as I have argued in this paper, it seems unreasonable to state that *kitsch is immoral* without further distinguishing between different types of kitsch or refining the definition of kitsch to be more specific than a proverbial finger pointing in a general direction. I conclude with the following sentiment: kitsch *can be* immoral, but there is insufficient precision to say that kitsch *is* immoral.

References

Botz-Bornstein, T. (2015) 'Kitsch and Bullshit,' *Philosophy and Literature*, 39(2), pp. 305-321.

Broch, H. (1975) 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch,' In Dorfles, G. (ed.) *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*. New York: Bell Publishing Co., pp. 49-76.

Brown, S. (2000) 'On Kitsch, Nostalgia, and Nineties Femininity,' *Studies in Popular Culture*, 22(3), pp. 39-54.

Dorfles, G. (1975) *Kitsch; the World of Bad Taste*. New York: Bell Publishing Co.

Dyck, J. and Johnson, M. (2017) 'Appreciating Bad Art,' *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 51(2), pp. 279–292.

Fok, C. (2024) 'From Aesthetic to an Aesthetic: Kitsch as Entrenchment of Art,' *PHIL419: Art and Morality*, Loyola University Chicago. Unpublished Essay.

Greenberg, C. (1961) 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch,' In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp. 3-21.

Higgins, K. (1992) 'Sweet Kitsch.' In Alperson, P. (ed.) *The Philosophy of the Visual Arts*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 568-581.

Harries, K. (1968) *The Meaning of Modern Art; a Philosophical Interpretation*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Knight, D. (1999) 'Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality: A Meta-Aesthetic Perspective,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 57(4), pp. 411-420.

Kulka, T. (2002) *Kitsch and Art*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Kundera, M. (2004) *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Translated by M. Heim. New York: HarperCollins.

Kupfer, J. (1996) 'The Sentimental Self,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 26(4), pp. 543-560.

Midgley, M. (1979) 'Brutality and Sentimentality,' *Philosophy* (London), 54(209), pp. 385–389.

Ngai, S. (2010) 'Our Aesthetic Categories,' *Modern Language Association*, 125(4), pp. 948-958.

Solomon, R. (1991) 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality,' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 49(1) pp. 1-14.

Sontag, S. (2022) 'Notes on 'Camp'', in Cleto, F. (ed.) *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. pp. 53–65.

Aziz Alfailakawi
Loyola University Chicago
Philosophy Department
1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL, 60660, United States of America
azizfailakawi@gmail.com

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14762349