BETWEEN MODERN AND POSTMODERN WORLDS: THEODOR W. ADORNO’S STRUGGLE WITH THE CONCEPT OF MUSICAL KITSCH

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ABSTRACT

MOLLY L. BARNES: Between Modern and Postmodern Worlds: Theodor W. Adorno’s Struggle with the Concept of Musical Kitsch (Under the direction of Felix Wörner)

The concept of “kitsch” remains a perennial concern for philosophers of aesthetics. Many distinguished writers have contributed to the literature on kitsch, yet the valuable work of the musicologist, sociologist, and philosopher Theodor Adorno (1903-1969) has been largely overlooked. Adorno nurtured an abiding interest in the topic of musical kitsch in particular, but was profoundly troubled by its implications for the cultural edification and psychological health of modern society. His writings also indicate that his ambivalence regarding kitsch became more acute with time. Through a close study of four texts by Adorno, including his analyses of specific musical works, I propose that Adorno’s increasingly conflicted attitude toward musical kitsch reflects growing tensions between modernist and postmodernist cultural perspectives in the mid-twentieth century, tensions that have persisted strongly into the twenty-first century. Indeed, Adorno’s thoughts regarding kitsch may help us understand musical aesthetics in his era as well as our own.
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Introduction

In 1967, after a decades-long career, the German sociologist, musicologist, philosopher and cultural critic Theodor W. Adorno wrote the following:

Though attempts to define kitsch usually fail, still not the worst definition would be one that made the criterion of kitsch whether an art product gives form to consciousness of contradiction—even if it does so by stressing its opposition to reality—or dissembles it. In this respect seriousness should be demanded of any work of art. As something that has escaped from reality and is nevertheless permeated with it, art vibrates between this seriousness and lightheartedness. It is this tension that constitutes art.¹

Perhaps more than any other words in his œuvre, this passage represents Adorno’s continued grappling with the definition of art, and by extension, the definition of kitsch. Throughout his life, Adorno (1903-1969) devoted serious critical attention both to “high” and “low” (or “popular”) artistic expression. Some of his more widely read essays on music, including “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938) and “On Popular Music” (1941) have provoked a common reaction in many readers today—to discount his critiques as merely elitist complaints about the supposed vacuity of popular entertainment. Yet as Robert Witkin notes, a closer investigation of Adorno’s writings on music and society reveal “not a judgement of taste but a theory concerning the moral and political projects

inhering in both ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ art.”

Adorno’s many discussions of art and his perennial attention to the idea of “kitsch” reflect less a desire to condemn that which he perceived as inferior, than the goal of demonstrating the functions and circumstances of both serious and popular art in contemporary society.

Indeed, in his work on aesthetics, Adorno dealt primarily with the sociological aspects of art and entertainment. His most fundamental questions involved the dialectical links between art and the social world in which it necessarily exists, yet he remained adamant that his observations were not based on any empirical study of the relationship between art and society, but on a philosophical inquiry into the nature of “truth content” (Wahrheitsgehalt) in art. This “truth content” consists in a dialectic between content and form within the artwork, a dialectic that the critical viewer finds to be true rather than false on the basis of the artwork’s position in its socio-historical context. For Adorno, only art in its highest form, particularly music, could express truth content. Only a utopian world, however—one that did not succumb to the degradation of commodity culture—could give rise to artworks that genuinely express truth content. Adorno’s purpose as a critic was not to change art or society in any significant way (for this would be an impossible goal), but to heighten the general awareness of the situation of art—especially music—in society, however dire or dismal that situation may be. The “reality” to which Adorno refers in the above passage is the inescapable reality of society with which art must contend in some way. Perhaps reflecting Kant’s notion of the “free play” or vibration of the cognitive faculties (the


imagination and the understanding) in judging artworks, Adorno argues that when we perceive true art, our consciousness will “vibrate” between reality (seriousness) and imagination (lightheartedness).\textsuperscript{4}

As difficult as it was for Adorno to articulate clearly the definition of or criteria for art, he found an equally daunting challenge in defining kitsch, which Richard Leppert has called “art’s bad conscience.”\textsuperscript{5} Adorno never quite defined kitsch in a concrete sense—kitsch as an aesthetic concept remains notoriously difficult to characterize—and in several writings he insisted that such a definition was ultimately unattainable. Yet he returned to the idea of kitsch time and time again over the course of his career, evidently finding in it something useful for explicating the fate of art in modern, commodified culture. In particular, Adorno believed that kitsch was intimately connected to the Marxist idea of “false consciousness,” a term used by Friedrich Engels which posits that individuals become ideologically deluded about their class status when living in a capitalist society. Adorno was especially concerned with kitsch as manifested in music.

Why is it important to investigate the term “kitsch” at all, if its essential meaning and proper usage remain enigmatic? And why should we use Adorno’s work as an entry point? I will argue that a study of the concept(s) of kitsch through the lens of Adorno’s thought can provide valuable insight into fundamental aesthetic dilemmas and their social context during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Adorno’s deep ambivalence regarding the term, and the concept itself, reflects broader tensions between modernist and postmodernist aesthetic outlooks, tensions that have persisted strongly into the early twenty-first century.


The “modernism” of the fin-de-siècle and first half of the twentieth century, originating in the Enlightenment, can be broadly characterized as a movement advocating progress and a renunciation of the past, together with the conviction that science, logic and reason offer paths to an abstract, objective truth about the world—in contrast to the Romantic subjectivism of the nineteenth century. In music, modernism manifested itself in the “New Objectivity” of neoclassicism, the highly abstract experimentations of the Second Viennese School, and a rejection of traditional forms, styles, and sounds. Postmodernism, on the other hand, a term which came of age slightly later than “modernism,” entering the critical discourse after the First World War, proposes no objective truth, levels out hierarchies of high and low (in a process of “decentering”), employs critical and literary theory, tends to be extremely critically self-consciousness, and is inclined to understand the world in political terms. Musical works influenced by postmodernist thought therefore often quote music of disparate times, places, and cultures (the third movement of Luciano Berio’s Sinfonia of 1968, for example, or the polystylistic works of Alfred Schnittke), tend to turn away from goal-directed form and structural unity (such as the works of Luigi Nono), and embrace pluralism, with a propensity to distrust distinctions and boundaries (such as George Rochberg, whose Third String Quartet boldly juxtaposed atonal and tonal languages in his works, much to the disapproval of some of his contemporaries who preferred strictly serial idioms).

Adorno reached intellectual maturity when modernism dominated philosophical and artistic thought, and lived to experience the explosion of postmodern skepticism in the arts during mid-century. His wrestling with the concept(s) of kitsch was heavily influenced by these broad cultural shifts, and one of his primary concerns involved the question of how
kitsch should be positioned within an aesthetic scheme—is kitsch fundamentally opposed to art, or does it lie inherent within art itself? Although Adorno came to see it as the latter, many writers on kitsch have conceived of it as art’s opposite. Indeed, Gordon C. F. Bearn, in his article on “Kitsch” in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, refers to “the almost universal characterization of kitsch as being qualitatively different from art.”6 But to view art and kitsch on a continuum, as Adorno implicitly did, rather than as two opposing poles, was to move in the direction of a postmodern vision in which aesthetic judgments became infinitely more complicated, and perhaps finally impossible. It appears that Adorno found increasingly untenable the implicit elitism inherent in the modernist notion of kitsch. But he was never able to abandon that understanding completely; for he believed that in any given historical setting, such aesthetic judgments were unavoidable.

While kitsch will constitute a major focus of this paper, I will not provide any sort of exhaustive account of the term or concept(s). Such a history would require a book-length study. Rather, I shall offer a two-pronged approach to the idea of kitsch within Adorno’s writings. In the first section, I provide a brief overview of the history of the term and concept(s) of kitsch, and of philosophical and aesthetic difficulties that it presents. In addition I give a historiographical survey of the most significant writers on kitsch who were Adorno’s contemporaries. The second section begins with a short biography and historical positioning of Adorno as a significant figure in twentieth-century aesthetic discourse. This historical context is followed by summaries and analyses of Adorno’s writings that pertain to kitsch. Over the course of this study, I will argue that Adorno’s conception of the term

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“kitsch,” which was originally informed from a predominantly modernist outlook, became gradually more postmodern in attitude.
I.

The “Problem” of Kitsch

It is a curious paradox that some of the commonest and most cavalierly invoked words are often also fraught with the thorniest conceptual difficulties. We find this paradox at work in the term “kitsch,” a word which—although normally understood as an adjective or noun describing art or décor that strikes the viewer as gaudy or in poor taste—also conjures in the Western mind a host of vague associations and images that may or may not be consistent with one other. Perhaps surprisingly, a significant amount of scholarly and non-scholarly literature has been devoted to investigating and clarifying the concept(s) of kitsch. Authors writing on kitsch have usually linked it to products created for artistic, decorative, or entertainment purposes, but the descriptor “kitsch” has also been summoned in relation to war, politics, Nazism, and other arenas seemingly far removed from aesthetic philosophy.7

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On the basis of a literature review on the subject of kitsch, it is evident that of all the perceived manifestations of kitsch in the arts and literature, kitsch in music remains the least understood phenomenon.

The origin of the word itself remains somewhat uncertain. A fairly robust scholarly consensus holds that the word emerged in Munich around 1860 or 1870, having developed from the then-common South German words *Kitschen* (“trash,” “junk”) and *verkitschen* (“to sentimentalize”). Another far less tenable argument persists that the term arose from a bastardization of the English word “sketch.” Irrefutably, however, the word “kitsch” is in essence a German term, and arose from a peculiarly German aesthetic consciousness. By the last decade of the nineteenth century it was being used to describe literary and musical works as well as visual and decorative art in Germany. Between 1910 and 1920 the term came into more common use in discourses on culture.

Aside from the term, when and why did the concept of kitsch begin to be employed in cultural dialogues? The commonly accepted view holds that the concept—as opposed to the term—arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century, at a time when the seeds of modernism (and even ideas of postmodernism) were beginning to take root. Indeed, most of the studies that have addressed this question of the concept’s origins have linked kitsch


9 Among the authors who subscribe to this theory are Theodor Adorno, Norbert Elias and Jochen Schulte-Sasse. Gordon C. F. Bearn notes that, ironically, while “English dictionaries tell us the word derives from the orthographically identical German word…German dictionaries tell us the word may actually come from English, from the word *sketch*. On this etymological hypothesis, the English, touring Bavaria and seeking souvenirs, would ask merchants and craftspeople to provide quick sketches of local scenery to take back home, and one can easily imagine that these Bavarian landscapes might have included saccharine, proto-Hummel inhabitants”; Bearn, “Kitsch,” in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 65.

directly to the rise of modernism. In this view, artists and thinkers of the fin-de-siècle, now overwhelmed by the burden of their aesthetic and intellectual past, attempted desperately to renounce their predecessors and create works of genuine originality. But all around this small intelligentsia, a newly wealthy commercial, consumerist bourgeoisie was forming both in Europe and in the United States in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. This new bourgeois class, sustained by their recently acquired material comforts, desired a kind of art, décor, and entertainment suited to both their emotional needs and educational level. They managed to fulfill this desire through new, mass-produced products—products the cultural élite disdainfully called “kitsch.” While this interpretation does not in fact go very far to give the term a clear definition, it at least supplies a historical context for discussion of the use and evolution of the concept.  

As the term itself comes from the German language, there is, as might be expected, quite an extensive German literature on kitsch. Authors such as Ludwig Geisz, Gert Richter, Hans-Dieter Gelfert, Ute Dettmar, and Thomas Küpper share a tendency to enumerate as many manifestations of kitsch in the arts and literature (or other areas) as they can justify. This penchant for cataloguing kitsch has carried over into the work of French and Anglophone writers, including Curtis Brown, Gillo Dorfles, Abraham Moles, and Celeste Olalquiaga. The primary problem with this method of identifying kitsch, as Gordon C. F. Bearn observes, is that it begins with objects already implicitly understood as kitsch, rather than by way of independently generated criteria. Thus circular reasoning ensues, and we

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11 As will be evident shortly, this conception of kitsch’s emergence is taken largely from the first extended discussion of the subject and now a classic text on kitsch, Clement Greenberg’s famous 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.”

12 Bearn remarks that “most discussions [of kitsch] begin with putative examples of kitsch…But the problem of kitsch is to decide what makes all of these heterogeneous objects kitsch,” in Encyclopedia of Aesthetics, 66.
are left with the conclusion that we can know kitsch only by seeing it, and not by reference to abstract conditions. Thus the elusiveness of the concept persists, in part because of the inescapable historical and cultural contingency of the term, and the subjective way in which it is most often used. All too often, the term is wielded thoughtlessly as a weapon to deride aesthetic expressions found lacking in some respect.\textsuperscript{13}

**Contemporary Writers on Kitsch**

For decades, intellectuals have attempted to write about kitsch in a relatively detached way, with varying degrees of success. At around the same time that the idea of kitsch came to the forefront of Adorno’s consciousness in the early 1930s, other writers in Europe and the United States also revealed their growing interest in the term. Complaints about the commercializing and popularizing forces in American society took vehement form among a group of cultural critics, including the American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) and the Austrian-born writer Hermann Broch (1886-1951), both of whom adopted the term “kitsch” in discussions of popular culture, especially in America.

Broch, a modernist author who lived in Austria until the Nazis forced him to emigrate to the U.S. in 1938, wrote short but pithy essays on kitsch both before (1933) and after (1950) he left Europe. Although Adorno’s essay “Kitsch” of 1932 was among the earliest intellectual treatments of kitsch, it remained unpublished, and thus Broch’s published essay

\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, in September and October of 2011, members of the American Musicological Society engaged in a lively debate on the subject via the society’s email listserv; the music scholars involved came to no particularly definitive agreements on the essence of musical kitsch. One of the scholars involved was Richard Taruskin, who wrote in an e-mail message to this author that “kitsch is an elastic term that can be shaped into anything one wants to deride,” and that use of the term to describe artworks “is just a cover for one’s prejudices” (Richard Taruskin, e-mail message to author, 27 March 2012).
of 1933 ("Kitsch and ‘Art-with-a-Message,’" which appeared in the scholarly journal Neue Rundschau) sparked philosophical interest and initiated the serious literature on the subject.\(^{14}\) In this short essay Broch characterized kitsch in no uncertain terms as a force of “evil,” not concerned with the ethical dimension of life, but only with the imitation of art to produce aesthetic “effect” (especially in music). He described the role of kitsch as satisfying nostalgia for a romanticized past, as depicting the world “as people want it to be,” and as rendering the realm of the irrational infinite into the rational finite.\(^{15}\) In the winter of 1950-51, Broch elaborated on his ideas in a lecture delivered to students at Yale University, in which he offered both a valuable historical contextualization and a stinging critique of the phenomenon of kitsch. Here, he explained that kitsch arose from the same stimulus as Romanticism, yet is not commensurate with it: kitsch and great Romantic art are opposites in the sense that the latter concerns itself with the whole of reality, while kitsch seeks only beauty. Broch went so far as to compare the relationship between art and kitsch to that between Christ and the Antichrist. Yet in Broch’s formulation only a very fine line separates art and kitsch: “Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art.”\(^ {16}\) Overall, Broch described kitsch in a highly abstract and ambiguous manner, while nevertheless presenting a compelling historical contextualization of the phenomenon.

Although his proved a much more politically inclined position, Clement Greenberg also helped to define kitsch as an aesthetic concept in a now-classic essay titled “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” first published in the Partisan Review in 1939. Greenberg’s essay

\(^{14}\) Broch’s 1933 kitsch essay was first published as a section of the article “Evil in the System of Values of Art” in the Neue Rundschau, a quarterly journal founded in 1890 and still published by Fischer Verlag in Frankfurt.


remains a standard reference for all writers grappling with the concept of kitsch; traces of his fundamental ideas run through almost all subsequent texts dealing with the term, and the prominence of this single text overshadows all other writings on kitsch, including Broch’s.\textsuperscript{17} In this landmark work, Greenberg outlined the salient qualities of his titular subjects, both of which he saw as extreme movements in culture that had in arisen in the industrialized West during the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{18} He characterized avant-garde art as concerned more with the means of expression than with that which is expressed; it strips the art product of content outside of the art process itself. On the other hand, he defined kitsch as a commercial, universal and immediate kind of art, not “true” art at all, readily consumed by the bourgeois classes, and constituting the first “universal culture” ever witnessed. He meant by this that a kind of globalized culture resulted with the rise of kitsch, so that local and folk art was becoming obsolete, replaced by cheap generic imitations of real art. He described kitsch thus:

\begin{quote}
popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes [sic] magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

With this characterization, Greenberg might well have named all products of mass culture as kitsch. Indeed, he assumed that his readers shared his sweeping condemnation of large-scale commercial production, even though one might argue that a vast gray area lies between

\begin{flushright}
\makecell{17 Indeed, nearly every writing on kitsch published subsequent to Avant-Garde and Kitsch makes mention of Greenberg’s essay.}\\
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 23-26. The correct term is “chromotype.”
\end{flushright}
“high” culture and the avant-garde on the one hand, and unapologetically crude or superficial popular culture (such as some kinds of advertising), on the other.

For Greenberg, kitsch took as its model the products of the masters of the past and the avant-garde, but diluted this art into a form that pandered to the supposedly cruder tastes of the masses. Greenberg, heavily influenced by Marxist thought, claimed that kitsch appeared as part of a larger response to industrialization and the growth of capitalism in the West. The influx of new masses into the cities looking for industrial jobs demanded a culture that they could understand, and kitsch satisfied that need: an enjoyment of kitsch did not require a great deal of education or intellectual concentration. Greenberg was careful to specify that kitsch could not exist without an already mature set of cultural traditions behind it, from which it “draws its life blood.” In other words, kitsch takes the codes and tenets of high art and “pre-digests” them for the public, producing essentially poor and artificial simulations of original art works. Greenberg discussed kitsch chiefly in reference to the visual arts and literature; other than his allusion to “Tin Pan Alley music,” he mentioned music only in a footnote, and even there gave no specific examples of what he might consider kitsch in this very extensive era of American popular music.

In addition to Broch and Greenberg, several other important contemporary thinkers composed essays on kitsch at around the same time that Adorno became concerned with the idea. In 1925, his friend and intellectual compatriot Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) published Traumkitsch (“Dreamkitsch”), an essay on Surrealism in which he both condemned the capitalist market surplus that gives rise to kitsch and expressed hope that kitsch might


21 Ibid., 32.
provide a new way of interpreting material culture.22 A decade later, in 1935, the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1990) produced a short essay called “The Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch” in the émigré journal Die Sammlung, in which he declined to define the term, but attempted to trace the emergence of the kitsch “style” in architecture, art, literature and music, and characterized his own era as “the age of kitsch.” Like Benjamin, Elias suggested that the ubiquity and inevitability of kitsch everywhere might lead to its “re-evaluation” as a “positive concept.”23

In addition to Benjamin and Elias, other voices joined the fray in the ensuing decades, but Broch and Greenberg remained the two most prominent figures to begin to articulate the notoriously thorny idea of kitsch. In many ways, Broch and Greenberg set the parameters for the “modernist” notion of kitsch on which later authors relied. But Adorno, in his more prolonged and far more concentrated engagement with kitsch, deepened the concept immensely (especially with regard to music), offering specific musical examples to illustrate his characterizations. In the following section, I will explore four texts by Adorno in which the idea of kitsch plays a primary role.

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22 In Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 236-39. Elias’s comment that kitsch might need to be reconsidered in a “positive” light recalls the 1930s concept of “vernacular modernism,” which describes those aesthetic aspects of modernist culture that have a wide-ranging impact: popular and mass-consumed advertising, fashion, entertainment such as radio and film, etc. Along those same lines, the Communist notion of “Socialist Realism,” or accessible culture available to the masses, was an admired ideal among many in the 1930s (I thank Tim Carter for these suggestions).

II.

Adorno on Kitsch: Four Texts

Adorno was born in 1903 as Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund in Frankfurt-am-Main, where he would live for over thirty years. His was a bourgeois family, and he grew up steeped in the values of traditional German high culture, particularly art music. His mother and her sister both performed music professionally, and the child Theodor was trained thoroughly in music, learning to play both the piano and the violin with considerable proficiency. Making music in the household and attending concerts with his family were regular activities of Adorno’s young life.24 Indeed, in January 1925 at age twenty-one, he moved to Vienna for a short time to study composition with one of the eminent disciples of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg (1885-1935). But, rather than music performance and composition, Adorno chose instead to pursue social and aesthetic philosophy, and became exposed to the neo-Marxist ideas of Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) and Walter Benjamin. Adorno always retained a keen interest in music throughout his career, however—particularly in music as related to its social environment—and devoted much writing to Beethoven, Mahler, Berg, and contemporary art music and popular music.25

From 1932 until 1934, Adorno taught philosophy at Frankfurt’s Institute for Social Research until he was forced into exile by the Nazi regime, and subsequently spent four years


25 Indeed, Adorno wrote more on the subject of music than on any other.
at Oxford University’s Merton College as an advanced student. He moved to the U.S. in 1938, and the experience had an enormous influence on his perspective regarding the interaction of society and the culture industry. His renown increased throughout the 1950s and ’60s, principally in Europe, as he continued to deliver lectures and write books and essays including *Aesthetic Theory*, published in 1970, the year after his death. What became known as the “Frankfurt School” of neo-Marxist social philosophy, whose ideas became foundational to critical theory in the latter half of the twentieth century, was genuinely established during this period.

As a modernist writer on aesthetics and society, Adorno dealt with the concept of kitsch in music—explicitly or implicitly—throughout his life. Scholars have not thoroughly explored Adorno’s conception of kitsch, most likely because the term does not figure centrally in his scholarship. And although Adorno is not typically remembered for his writings on kitsch, the concept in fact played a far more significant role in his thinking than is generally recognized. Below I shall examine four of Adorno’s writings most pertinent to

26 Adorno’s mother, whose maiden name he eventually adopted as his surname, was a Corsican Catholic; his father a German Jew who had converted to Protestantism. As a young man Adorno attended Frankfurt’s Johann Wolfgang Goethe University, where he received his doctorate in 1924 with a dissertation on the philosophy of Edmund Husserl under the direction of the neo-Kantian Hans Cornelius. After his brief studies with Berg, he returned to the university in Frankfurt to complete his *Habilitationsschrift* (a post-doctoral thesis) on Kierkegaard’s aesthetics under the theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich in 1931. His first trip to the United States occurred in the summer of 1937 at the request of his colleague Max Horkheimer, who had invited him to visit the Institute for Social Research in its New York City location. Upon his return to England in 1937, Adorno married his longtime companion Gretel Karpus, and in February of the next year, he moved to New York and obtained a secure position at the Institute. In November of 1941 he moved to the Pacific Palisades in California—the area where many German Jewish émigrés took refuge during and after the war, including Bertolt Brecht and Arnold Schoenberg—and became a naturalized U.S. citizen by 1943. He returned to Frankfurt in 1949 to teach in the philosophy department at the university, taking summers to teach at the Darmstadt School for New Music. He spent his remaining years in his homeland until a heart attack cut short his life in 1969.

his concept of kitsch. These include his essay “Kitsch” of 1932, his essay “On the Social Situation of Music” also of 1932, his essay “Commodity Music Analyzed” of 1934-40, and his book *Aesthetic Theory*, posthumously published 1970.28 My central aim is to arrive at a dialectical understanding of Adorno’s developing concept(s) of kitsch in music, and through the eras of modernism and postmodernism in the mid-twentieth century.29 Therefore, I shall for the most part restrict my explication of each essay to an analysis of the content dealing with, and relevant to, kitsch.

In my analyses of these texts, I seek to accomplish three main goals: 1) to reach an understanding of Adorno’s thought on this subject, and how it evolved over the course of his career; 2) to demonstrate how Adorno’s understanding of kitsch developed in relation to other aesthetic elements (the beautiful, the sublime, the ugly, etc.); and 3) how his conceptions compare with those of major writers on kitsch. I do not aim, however, to arrive at any kind of definitive description of kitsch. Such a goal would conflict both with Adorno’s dialectical style of argument—in which he sometimes appears to contradict himself and thus obscures any neat and compact definitions of terms or ideas—and with his very real wrestling with the concept of kitsch, a struggle continued throughout his career and indeed became even more acute toward the end of his life.

28 Other writings by Adorno in which he discusses or mentions kitsch include his essay “Why is the New Art So Hard to Understand?” (1931) and his book of fragments *Minima Moralia* (1951).

29 By “dialectical,” I am referring to Adorno’s method of argument, which his colleagues of the Frankfurt School also employed, and which ultimately finds its origins in the work of Hegel. In relatively crude terms, the dialectical argument is an inherently critical one and entails a continuous negation of every positive statement and vice versa. Contradiction is its most salient quality, thus: “To proceed dialectically means to think in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction already experienced in the object [Sache], and against that contradiction. A contradiction in reality, [dialectics] is a contradiction against reality” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 1966, trans. E. B. Ashton, New York: Seabury Press, 1973, 144-45).
“Kitsch” (1932)

Adorno’s earliest writing on kitsch came in 1932 when he was twenty-nine.\(^{30}\) Titled simply “Kitsch,” this extremely brief and aphoristic essay was never published during Adorno’s lifetime. Although Adorno was among the first writers to deal seriously and critically with kitsch as a social and aesthetic phenomenon, because he chose not publish his essay, his thought on this subject remained practically unknown in the U.S. until very recently; indeed only in the past few decades have any of his writings been translated into English and studied in American universities. As discussed above, Greenberg’s 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” has become, and to a large extent remains, the standard and oft-cited landmark writing on kitsch in America, but Adorno’s essay (of seven years earlier) complicates any such straightforward or pat descriptions of kitsch.

Adorno’s “Kitsch” essay represents an early foray into what was to become a major preoccupation of his career as a critic: the investigation of aesthetic taste as related to social stratification in the modern industrial world. He composed the essay purely on the basis of his life in Germany, before he had spent any time in England or the United States. Undoubtedly Adorno’s experience of mass commercial culture in America would later influence his conception of kitsch; that experience was, by all accounts, psychologically harrowing for him.\(^{31}\) Thus the primary challenge of interpreting Adorno’s thoughts on kitsch (as we find the term in this essay) lies in the difficulty of placing ourselves in the cultural

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landscape of Germany before the Nazi era and the Second World War. However, as Andreas Huyssen argues, “the framework for [Adorno’s] theory of the culture industry was already in place before his encounter with American mass culture in the United States.” In other words, the basic structure of Adorno’s thought on modern mass-consumer culture—the only kind of culture that, for him, could inspire the production of kitsch—was already in place before he left Germany. But it is important to remember that Adorno’s observations here were made on the basis of German mass culture during the Weimar Republic. His later writings on kitsch, after he had traveled to the United States, indicate a significant evolution and certain refinement in thinking.

Adorno’s aim in this essay is not immediately clear. He does not state whether he seeks to investigate the history of the term “kitsch,” or to interrogate the concept itself, or both. It is important to remember, however, that Adorno most likely composed this essay for his own purposes, not necessarily with the intention of publication. The essay as we see it today probably remains in the state it was in 1932—aphoristic, incomplete, draft-like. His primary motivation was evidently personal: to arrive at a clearer conception of what he

32 Andreas Huyssen, “Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner,” in Adorno: A Critical Reader, ed. Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 50. Italics mine. Indeed, the fundamental ideas that Adorno articulated around this time (the late 1920s to the early 1930s) remained relatively stable in his writings during the rest of his career. Yet this framework that was established early in his life still left room for a significant amount of doubt about philosophical questions regarding the relationship of aesthetics and society, especially after Adorno had experienced U.S. popular culture.

33 As we have seen earlier, accounts of the term and of the concept must necessarily be distinguished one from the other.

34 Adorno tended to publish his writings, and it is thus important to bear in mind that he did not appear to want his “Kitsch” essay released to the public, at least not immediately. The essay’s short length, incomplete sentences, and draft-like execution suggest that, while Adorno recognized the significance of kitsch enough to devote attention to an essay exploring it, he was approaching kitsch slowly and cautiously, finding it difficult to incorporate into his larger aesthetic theory. That the essay remained unpublished during his lifetime is testimony to Adorno’s own sense that he could not satisfactorily reconcile kitsch within a greater scheme of aesthetics and society.
recognized—even at this early stage in his life—as an idea crucial to a thorough contemporary understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and mass culture. Thus the essay poses a challenge to the analyst, because it was not written for wide readership, or even for Adorno’s immediate contemporaries (Horkheimer, Brecht, Kracauer, Lukács, Benjamin, etc.); it was written instead for his own philosophical clarification.

Not surprisingly, then, the essay opens in medias res, as if we, the readers, have just happened upon Adorno’s private train of thought. He begins with a forthright assertion that the word “kitsch” as used in contemporary society does not bear a resemblance to the word’s original meaning. Accepting somewhat presumptuously the conjecture that the word itself evolved from the English word “sketch,” Adorno employs this descriptor for his preliminary characterization of kitsch as “unrealized,” a kind of draft, a mere suggestion of something not fully manifest. This would suggest that kitsch represents the aesthetic opposite of the German ideal of organicism (to which Adorno subscribed, most obviously in his championing of Beethoven); in other words, it has no ultimate unifying factor or internal coherence, but only a rough, incomplete shape. Adorno subsequently begins his discussion of kitsch specifically in relation to music, describing kitsch music as resembling a “model,” a rough plan relying on obsolete historical forms rather than being a genuinely original piece. Adorno explains that kitsch music resurrects old, outmoded forms and conventions, now meaningless, having been plucked from their historical environments. These forms are no longer real to the current culture, but afford merely the illusion of continuity and stability. Kitsch music, then, acts as a vessel for primordial musical archetypes, which themselves no
longer hold power over us because they have exhausted their freshness and their potential for expressivity over the course of history.\textsuperscript{35}

Adorno does not dismiss kitsch music or its usefulness wholesale, however. In fact, a close reading of the essay reveals his ambivalence regarding the value of kitsch. Adorno asserts that kitsch is in fact superior to all products of the \textit{juste milieu} (“happy medium”), originally a French artistic movement that quite self-consciously attempted to merge realism (the academic style) with more progressive tendencies (Impressionism) in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{36} On the other hand, kitsch finds its \textit{raison d’être} in its “objectivity”—that is, kitsch can validate its existence through its (imperfect) perpetuation of a bygone objectivity; real kitsch acts as a kind of naïve preserve of historically significant objective forms and types that would otherwise be utterly annihilated in the inexorable march of history. Kitsch thus can serve as a means of historical awareness. But what does Adorno mean by this so-called “kitsch-objectivity” (\textit{Kitsch-Objectivität})? Today, many attempts at objectivity—perhaps especially in judging art—seems inherently naïve and suspect. But for Adorno, the one redeeming quality of kitsch music is that it preserves old forms that are objectively recognized as having a certain structure; forms that were once used as criteria to judge the success of a musical work.

Yet before he accords any more respect to kitsch, Adorno qualifies his justification: kitsch should penetrate, he says, only the “musical underworld” of operettas and popular

\textsuperscript{35} Adorno, “Kitsch,” 501.

\textsuperscript{36} Loc. cit. The works of the \textit{juste milieu} artists have largely been lost to history, as they were not as manifestly “progressive” as the works of the more radical Impressionists. Adorno probably had a low opinion of the \textit{juste milieu} because he felt that artists should always strive to reflect current society in their art; thus any attempt to preserve conventional forms would have struck him as a failure to pursue what was, for him, one of the fundamental ideals of art: progress.
songs. Yet he claims that kitsch can be found even in music that is not avant-garde but maintains some pretensions to seriousness: comfortably attractive music that depends on older forms and conventions, which Adorno calls “moderate, formerly serious music.”

This is a terribly imprecise phrase, and one wonders whether even Adorno himself had a clear idea of what he meant by the designation. By way of example he invokes the aesthetic movement called Jugendstil, a label rarely applied to music, but Adorno suggests that the work of Richard Strauss can be entirely subsumed under this category. Adorno, who was a composer of atonal music in the tradition of Schoenberg, was famously critical of Strauss’s music (whose Rosenkavalier could not have been more different from the aesthetic of the Second Viennese School), and here he indirectly condemns Strauss as a composer of kitsch.

Further, Adorno argues, real kitsch cannot be intentional in any sense. The composer of real kitsch is not aware of having created kitsch, and true musical kitsch can in no way possess self-awareness as kitsch, for then it would be approaching the realm of autonomous art. But “as soon as the composition itself makes claims and wants to be subjectively formed, but succumbs to kitsch,” it carries no more objectivity. In other words, if a

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37 Ibid., 502 (GS 18, 792: “mittlerer, ehemals ernster Musik”).

38 Adorno’s reference here to the “riddle of musical Jugendstil” is rather obscure. Jugendstil (“youth style”) was the German name of a (primarily European) fin-de-siècle movement in art and architecture known as “Art Nouveau” in France and as “Secession” in Austria-Hungary. In general it describes a style that takes inspiration from natural and organic forms, but in Germany the movement manifested itself in a combination of flowing, curving lines and straight, exact edges. Whatever Adorno’s intention was in invoking this artistic movement, he clearly had little respect for it.

39 Adorno, “Kitsch,” 502. Adorno alludes to this idea later in the essay when he argues that “The worst kitsch is kitsch with ‘class,’ which...has compositional ambition.” In one of his postings on the list-serv of the American Musicological Society, Richard Taruskin reflected Adorno’s understanding of genuine kitsch as being unintentional: “Is it not a necessary aspect of kitsch that it be poor or incompetent art that is proffered as fine or great art? Hence there cannot be kitsch without the concept of great art behind it. Pretension is the key” (e-mail message to the list-serv of the American Musicological Society, 19 September 2011). Roger Scruton, in his article “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament,” agrees: “The intention to produce real kitsch is an impossible intention, like the intention to act unintentionally” (City Journal, Winter 1999, 82-95).
composer sets out in a subjective (subjektiv) way to create an original piece, but resorts to employing defunct forms and filling these forms with banal clichés, the result is worthless kitsch. It is the objectivity (of defunct forms and materials) that is the hallmark of true kitsch.\textsuperscript{40} Implicit in Adorno’s argument here is that there is “real” kitsch and “false” kitsch. He proceeds to specify several (relatively) contemporary popular songs and songs from musicals, including the well-known hit “Tea for Two” by Vincent Youmans from the 1923 musical \textit{No, No, Nanette}, but does not analyze the song for its “kitschy” qualities. He dismisses all of this music as fictitious—kitsch—and now that it has lost all formal objectivity, it has no worth and should be purged from culture.\textsuperscript{41} Although Adorno does not explicitly articulate a distinction here between useless kitsch (“false” kitsch) and the merits of kitsch-objectivity (“real” kitsch), the difference is nonetheless apparent in his effort to defend certain aspects of kitsch—specifically, its potential to preserve forgotten objective forms. Adorno argues, in other words, that the quality of kitsch exists in degrees: there are better and worse forms of kitsch, and they lie on the same spectrum as art. Furthermore, the seeming ambivalence with which Adorno approaches kitsch here betrays his dialectical method of arriving at the “truth content” of an artwork.

In the third section of his essay, Adorno couches his discussion in terms of a social critique. Ever concerned with the social crises brought on by capitalism, he maintains that kitsch is a sociological phenomenon; the very existence of kitsch depends on, and is defined by, social context and conditions. In a characteristically aphoristic manner, he states:

\textsuperscript{40} Adorno, “Kitsch,” 502 (\textit{GS} 18, 792: “sobald aber die Komposition von sich aus Ansprüche anmeldet und subjektiv geformt sein will, aber dem Kitsch verfällt, ist die Macht von Kitsch-Objektivität in ihr dahin”).

\textsuperscript{41} Loc. cit.
“Impossible to grasp the concept ‘kitsch’ in a free-floating aesthetic way. The social moment is essentially constitutive of it.”⁴² At the same time that kitsch is created and defined by “the social moment,” however, it serves contemporary society in a perverse way. Adorno ascribes a particular role to kitsch: to delude people, to disguise the disheartening reality of their lives.⁴³ Products stemming from kitsch ideology are just that: ideological, or as Adorno describes them, “unrealized, illusory, living on false emotions.”⁴⁴ Thus for Adorno, kitsch, like all products of the culture industry, functions at base as deceit.⁴⁵

Moreover, Adorno asserts that the function of kitsch has changed during its term of existence. While it has always served to deceive, to comfort via false pretenses, this function had become more and more urgent. It is here that Adorno reveals his indebtedness to Marxist thought. He explains that in the nineteenth century, kitsch manifested itself in a romanticism aimed at the bourgeois and proletarian classes, who, though engaged in class struggle, felt comfortable enough with the world and their place in it to enjoy kitsch as a “metaphysics of death,” such as Wagner’s “Liebestod” from Tristan und Isolde.⁴⁶ But today, Adorno maintains ominously, the masses need a stronger anesthetic or escape from the agonizing realities of a global capitalist culture, and so kitsch can no longer romanticize death; instead, it denies it altogether. Indeed, at the time Adorno was writing, Germany was

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⁴² Loc. cit. (GS 18, 792: “Unmöglich, die Idee Kitsch freischwebend ästhetisch zu fassen. Das soziale Moment konstituiert sie wesentlich”).

⁴³ Kitsch has “a social function – to deceive people about their true situation, to transfigure their existence, to allow intentions that suit some powers or other to appear to them in a fairy-tale glow” (GS 18, 792: “hat [Kitsch] soziale Funktion: sie über ihre wahre Lage zu täuschen, ihre Existenz zu verklären, Ziele, die irgendwelchen Mächten genehm sind, ihnen im Märchenglanz erscheinen zu lassen”).


⁴⁵ We must assume here that Adorno was referring to worthless kitsch, or that which has lost all objectivity.

suffering from numerous hardships: a serious economic depression, tensions created by the ideological divide between Fascists and Communists, as well as Hitler’s assumption of power over the Weimar Republic, had all created a tremendous ennui and angst among the German people. Thus, Adorno concludes, kitsch today is even more deceptive in its euphemism and its misleading idealization of a fundamentally sick society. As Richard Leppert explains Adorno on this matter, “Were the present less painful, the lie of kitsch would be less insistent.”

Furthermore, Adorno argues, the popularity of kitsch music today exposes the hierarchy of social class even more plainly, with songs intended specifically to improve the morale of the lower classes—songs that “fool the girl at the typewriter into thinking she is a queen.” Referring to one of his song analyses from Schlageranalysen (Analyses of Hit Songs) of 1928, Adorno then suggests that kitsch often serves to comfort blatantly the struggling masses in a time of serious economic depression. He calls the process by which kitsch accomplishes this “stabilization” (Stabilisierung). In the face of devastating circumstances (namely the financial collapse of the Weimar Republic), kitsch music soothes

47 Richard Leppert, “Nature and Exile: Adorno, Mahler and the Appropriation of Kitsch,” in Sound Judgment: Selected Essays (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 252. In his commentary on Adorno’s “Kitsch” essay, Leppert clarifies Adorno’s distinction between art and kitsch: “Kitsch and art share common ground – too much for comfort. Both ‘escape’ reality, art through its autonomy, kitsch through the reification that attends commodity fetishization. Both are permeated with history, but whereas art seeks to invoke history, and indeed to ‘brush it against the grain,’ the history to which kitsch responds is one that kitsch either erases or, more likely, seeks to make more palatable,” (in Theodor Adorno, Essays on Music, 364). On this last point, however, Leppert does not appear to acknowledge Adorno’s idea of kitsch-objectivity. Adorno does not argue that true kitsch entirely “erases” history, but rather that it romanticizes certain aspects of it, and, more importantly, maintains certain (objective) formal structures found in art of the past.

by doling out familiar, established, and highly sanitized forms and sounds, thereby “stabilizing” conventions of entertainment in an otherwise chaotic world.\(^{49}\)

In the subsequent section of the essay Adorno considers typical traits of kitsch music, yet he describes these traits on a somewhat general level. He lays out four basic features of musical kitsch:

1. It maintains traditional but exhausted forms (“ancient […] ritual schemas like that of stanza and refrain”).
2. It exploits the residual emotional associations of erstwhile musical gestures and harmonies as if they are commodities, such as certain Romantic or impressionist harmonies or harmonic progressions.
3. It unites “the characteristic and the banal.”
4. It depends entirely upon predetermined types: templates that can be filled and then endlessly imitated.\(^{50}\)

The central criterion of “all genuine kitsch music,” for Adorno, is the uniting of the characteristic (Charakteristischen) and the banal (Banalen). This involves including in the piece of music some moderately distinctive feature (what we might call a “gimmick”) that will catch the listener’s attention—perhaps a certain timbre or syncopated rhythm—but at the same time restricting the piece’s expressive scope merely to the banal—the clichéd, the hackneyed, and utterly routine patterns. Adorno is careful to note that under no circumstances does kitsch music allow originality or artistic license on the part of its producer.

In the penultimate paragraph, Adorno condemns the “worst” type of musical kitsch—that which cultivates a pretension to artistic seriousness. This kind of kitsch can sometimes be revealed through an analysis of technique, or what Adorno calls “technical critique”: for

\(^{49}\) In this vein Adorno alludes to “Ich küssе Ihre Hand, Madame,” a hit song of 1929 by Ralph Erwin with lyrics by Fritz Rotter; it was featured in an eponymous silent film featuring Marlene Dietrich. Adorno had analyzed the song in his 1928 group of essays Schlageranalysen.

\(^{50}\) Adorno, “Kitsch,” 503.
example, if one were to analyze a song in the art music tradition of Schubert’s *Lieder* but found that the voice leading was poor or faulty, one might consign the piece in question to the category of kitsch. Yet, Adorno observes, although this analysis provides a point of entry into the search for kitsch, not all technical abnormalities equally qualify as kitsch. This assertion leads Adorno into his final and somewhat unsatisfying conclusion regarding the identification of kitsch in music. He explains that ultimately there can be no objective and immutable standard by which to measure kitsch, because the concept’s meaning is historically contingent. Furthermore, he argues, the *juste milieu* movement embraced the term as a way to justify its own “moderate” musical repertory that, because it makes no true innovations on its own but draws on nineteenth-century musical language with some newer harmonies added for flavor, no longer has any genuine emotional or psychological sway over listeners. Adorno goes so far as practically to discourage discussion of the concept of kitsch, arguing that “talk about kitsch itself begins to be kitschy, as it succumbs to the very historical dialectic from which its object emerged.”\(^5\)

He concludes with the prediction that people will “learn” to resist the temptation to use the term “kitsch” at all, once they recognize that the word accrues meaning only in polemics.

**“On the Social Situation of Music” (1932)**

In the same year that he drafted his posthumously published “Kitsch” (1932), Adorno also published a paper in the new journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* produced by the Institute for Social Research, an organization which had been founded in Frankfurt in 1923. Adorno’s

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\(^5\) Ibid., 504 (*GS* 18, 794: “So beginnt die Rede vom Kitsch selber kitschig zu werden, indem sie der geschichtlichen Dialektik erliegt, der ihr Gegenstand entstieg”).
paper, “On the Social Situation of Music” (Zur gesellschaftlichen Lage der Musik) is an extensive tract in two main parts: I. Outline, Production and II. Reproduction, Consumption. Here Adorno surveys contemporary musical culture (in both the realms of “serious” and “light” music) as a manifestation of capitalist society. Provocatively, he argues that music in the current culture has become nothing more than a commodity whose worth lies not in any inherent artistic merit but in “exchange value.” As Robert Witkin notes, in this essay Adorno lays the foundation of his theory of the “culture industry,” set forth with Max Horkheimer in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944). Thus Adorno here foreshadows his later argument that the traditional autonomy of art music has largely become a casualty of the “culture industry” of late capitalism. As a result, “the alienation of music from man has become complete.”

Adorno means by this that most music is no longer an autonomous humanistic art, expressing peculiarly human ethical or aesthetic values, but merely another cheaply produced item for market exchange and consumption. In advancing his case, Adorno identifies a subtle but serious flaw in the conventional division between “light” and “serious” music. Today, he claims, no such deep division exists; these two musical realms should instead be understood as both taking part in the process of commodification equally, as being two “halves of the musical globe,” each of which to the same degree participates in the alienation (Entfremdung) from society. He then offers a lengthy discussion of “light” music, a category Adorno views here as

52 Witkin, Adorno on Popular Culture, 83. In Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer explained that “For consumers the use value of art, its essence, is a fetish, and the fetish—the social valuation which they mistake for the merit of works of art—becomes its only use value, the only quality they enjoy” (Dialectic of Enlightenment [London: Verso, 1979], 128).

interchangeable with “kitsch.” He asserts that the music we call “kitsch” is that which reacts precisely in answer to the unhealthy “drives” of society, but that kitsch’s “suitability” to society is, paradoxically, the very aspect that promotes music’s alienation from society. In other words, the fact that kitsch responds perfectly to social need by deceiving people about their reality means that it no longer expresses the hardships of real human life, and is thus alienated from real human life. At the same time, kitsch serves as the most effective “means of diversion” for people, so it “at one and the same time is the closest to and the most distant from man.” Moreover, he argues, kitsch cannot be held to the same standards applied to art music; thus, when it is used and understood purely as a form of amusement or entertainment, it cannot be condemned.

This last point appears uncharacteristic of Adorno, who generally was wont to find fault with art that succumbed to the commodifying forces of the culture industry. Why would he claim that light music is immune from critique? We must remember that in 1932, Adorno was only twenty-nine and still not traveled outside of continental Europe; his future experiences in the United States during the late 1930s and ’40s would transform many of his opinions about the power of the culture industry. Here, he justifies his assertion by appeal to three main arguments: 1) light music is seen as a trivial and basically harmless pleasure; 2) it

54 In his Adorno’s Aesthetics of Music (p. 26), Max Paddison echoes this observation with the following point about Adorno’s conceptualizations of musical categories: “‘Folk music’ as a category increasingly tends in [Adorno’s] later writings to blur into a general concept of ‘popular music’ which is itself very hazy, and Adorno sometimes seems to make little distinction between popular songs (Schlager), jazz, and ‘light music’ (leichte Musik).”


56 Ibid., 425 (GS 18, 769: “die von jeglicher den Menschen zugleich die nächste und die fernste ist”).

57 Loc. cit.
is thought to be devoid of intellectuality and thus does not merit study; and 3) the way in which light music gratifies the drives of our psyche is so deep-seated that it would require a highly specialized theoretical interpretation in order to understand the process.

Further, he states, light music—which he is now using interchangeably with “vulgar music” (Vulgärmusik) should not be subjected to the same kind of technical analysis as art music.58 Technical analysis of “vulgar music” should be employed only in order to reveal three things: 1) the primordial (outmoded) forms on which vulgar music is built; 2) the fact that vulgar music records history for the purpose of channeling it into fundamental psychological drives; and 3) that any transformations or modifications in light music over time should be taken into account as indications of economic change (and thus of social change).59 After all, Adorno’s arguments are overwhelmingly predicated on his conviction that art reflects society, indeed, that social structure is immanent in art—and therefore any change in art should be understood as an indication of a change in the society that gave rise to it.60 This correspondence between art and society reflects a Marxist paradox frequently encountered at the time: can one criticize the artistic culture of a society that may not yet be justly condemned?61 Adorno notes that the signification of the various elements of light music depend on their historical context and the “given state of social progress,” and complains that scholars have not addressed the implications of the content of light music in

58 Adorno here seems to be using the term Vulgär in its literal sense, to mean music that is coarse, crude, appealing to our basest and most bestial instincts. Thus he conceives of Vulgärmusik as diametrically opposed to the cultivated European art music tradition. While Vulgärmusik should not therefore be analyzed for any inherent aesthetic qualities, he argues, it nonetheless may help us to understand certain primitive drives of the human psyche and resulting social change.


61 I am grateful to Tim Carter for this observation.
any given historical era. This study becomes especially important in view of the reality that light music does not cordon itself off from certain levels of social hierarchy nearly to the extent that high art and intellectual musical culture do.  

Adorno contends that an investigation of earlier manifestations of light music reveals historical social conditions, and, by extension, that an analysis of contemporary light music will demonstrate the submission of cultural life to high capitalism and industrialization. The “tension” between art music and vulgar music became acute only recently, he asserts, when high capitalism took hold in the late nineteenth century. By “tension” he means that the respective languages of serious and light music no longer share significant similarities. Serious music no longer may integrate folk elements, because bourgeois processes of rationalization and industrialization have overtaken the “folk.” Likewise, light music no longer takes cues from serious music, as was the case in the waltzes of Johann Strauss Jr.; instead, its content “is the obsolete or depraved material of art music,” and limits itself to monotonous melodies and overuse of the sequence. Adorno boldly links these features of melody and harmony in light music precisely to what he calls the “industrialization of production” in music, a phenomenon that he connects with a specific group of light-music composers who he describes as having retreated to the Salzkammergut in Austria and organized a kind of mechanized template for operetta manufacture. The quintessential example Adorno offers of this new style is the waltz from Franz Lehár’s operetta The Merry


63 Loc. cit.

64 Ibid., 428 (GS 18, 771: “das veraltete oder depravierte der Kunstmusik”).

65 Loc. cit. The Salzkammergut is a picturesque resort region in Upper Austria, renowned for its natural beauty.
Widow (1905), which became a major hit among bourgeois audiences (and remains so to the present day).

Toward the end of his discussion, Adorno emphasizes the effects of monopoly capitalism on light music. Light music has become, in a sense, powerless, as it has relinquished its erstwhile originality and creativity, no longer held accountable for any sort of aesthetic innovation. At the same time, light music wields a particular sway over listeners, who become hypnotized by its repetitive banality: either listeners find a sense of belonging in the seeming “objectivity” and all-inclusiveness of the refrain, or they become entranced by the ability of a hit song’s melody and lyrics to reach them on a personal (but finally superficial) level. After attempting his own analysis of the psychological influences of hit songs, Adorno concludes the essay with a lament that “no method for the analysis of the psychological effect of music has been developed […] which is perhaps in reality the most important [problem] in the social interpretation of music.”

In many ways, this essay complements and enhances Adorno’s observations in his “Kitsch” essay. “On the Social Situation of Music” is clearly a far more extended and unified piece of writing, and it contextualizes Adorno’s numerous reflections on “light music” in general, and on kitsch in particular. More specifically, in this essay Adorno elaborates on the notion of music’s “alienation” from society, and also provides other reasons for withholding condemnation of kitsch. Overall, however, “On the Social Situation of Music” paints kitsch and “light music” as overwhelmingly negative aspects of contemporary culture, a fact which suggests that in 1932, Adorno was operating intellectually largely from

66 Ibid., 432 (GS 18, 776: “Eine Methode nun, die psychologische Wirkung von Musik zu analysieren, ist noch nicht ausgebildet…vielleicht das aktuell wichtigste der gesellschaftlichen Deutung der Musik, keine zureichenden Anweisungen”).
a decisively modernist perspective. As we shall see, this perspective was to change in the coming years.

“Commodity Music Analyzed” (1934-40)

In 1934 Adorno was forced into exile by the Nazi regime and fled to England, where he studied at Oxford for four years, and moved to New York in 1938 to teach at the Institute for Social Research. During the six-year period 1934-40 while he was in England and the U.S., Adorno became increasingly interested in the implications of popular and light music mediated through the still relatively new technologies of the phonograph and the radio. These concerns were made manifest in a series of Adorno’s own musings, what we might call “case studies,” on various examples of what he termed “commodity music.” Published in 1955 as “Commodity Music Analyzed” (*Musikalische Warenanalysen*), the case studies include:

1. Gounod’s *Ave Maria*, based on J.S. Bach’s Prelude No. 1 in C major (1853)
2. Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C sharp minor (1892)
4. Tchaikovsky’s Symphony No. 5 in E minor, the *Andante cantabile* (1888)
5. “Especially for You,” a popular song by Phil Grogan and Orrin Tucker (1938)
6. “In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing-Room,” a jazz band piece by Raymond Scott, based on a pastiche of melodies by Mozart (1939)
7. “Penny Serenade,” a song by Arthur William Halifax and Melle Weersma, recorded and popularized by Guy Lombardo (1939)

Calling these individual studies “musical aphorisms,” Richard Leppert notes that the unifying element behind these eclectic selections is their common designation as “kitsch.” While Adorno explicitly invokes the word “kitsch” only in reference to the Tchaikovsky, he uses it again in the last section of the essay, where he summarizes his most significant points.

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Tellingly, Adorno chooses three examples from the concert hall and four pieces in a more popular idiom—demonstrating that works born from a thoroughly classical, common-practice sensibility may just as easily succumb to commodification as hit songs. Perhaps equally telling is that, among these composers whose music Adorno has chosen to condemn, none is German. Indeed, it seems that Adorno has here allowed some nationalist pride (or chauvinism) to color his choices of music to censure. He was certainly not blind to “commodity music” of his own culture, however: he criticized the music of Richard Strauss (who was, however, Bavarian—a foreigner in the eyes of many Germans), and the more popular work of such German composers as Alexander von Fielitz (1860-1930) and Franz Doelle (1883-1965), as well as the Austrian Robert Stolz (1880-1975).

Yet the role of Adorno’s German cultural chauvinism in shaping his conception of kitsch should not be ignored. Several decades later in his book *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno boasted that the French “have no word for kitsch, precisely that [word] which is a source of pride in Germany.” He meant that the French, unlike the Germans, make no distinction between high art and entertainment, and thus simply conceive of their choice among cultural offerings as that between good and bad. These biases become readily apparent in “Commodity Music Analyzed,” as well as astonishingly subjective assertions that have no basis in reasoned argument but instead reflect Adorno’s own preferences and experiences. The groundlessness of many of Adorno’s claims in these aphorisms also speak to his

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68 I am grateful to Tim Carter and Jon Finson for recognizing the likelihood of Adorno’s nationalist bias here.

69 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 314 (GS 7, 465: “das Französische kein Wort für Kitsch kennt, und eben das rühmt man in Deutschland”). In other words, the Germans’ source of pride derives from the fact that they possess the word “kitsch” to essentially distinguish art from non-art, whereas the French do not have a word to mark such distinctions.
increasing inability to rely on traditional, accepted standards and forms for making aesthetic judgments, as postmodern relativism crept ever nearer to the forefront of his consciousness.

Perhaps the most damning and clever (if highly opinionated) of Adorno’s critiques here is that reserved for Gounod, which opens the essay. In a remark at once utterly contemptuous and sardonically humorous, he describes the central image conveyed by the Ave Maria thus: “The soul delivers itself into the hands of the Almighty with uplifted skirt.”\(^{70}\) The piece, for Adorno, a kind of pornographic sacro-kitsch. Its professed earnest piety reveals itself, ultimately, as fundamentally disingenuous, because Adorno seems to hold that Christian devotion finds its strongest expression not in sensual self-indulgence (taking pleasure in the supple vocal melody with violin obbligato) but in selfless discipline and restraint. Adorno observes that the work’s success derives at least partly from its union of an ostensibly “serious” and controlled idiom—the keyboard prelude of Bach—with the romance and passion of a cantabile vocal line. The sacred theme of the Latin text, together with the intellectual depth and legendary religious conviction of Bach (who often wrote Soli Deo Gloria—“Glory to God alone”—at the end of his autograph manuscripts) are meant to justify and somehow excuse the manifest sensuality of the melody. Adorno ends his discussion with the lament that Gounod’s Ave Maria functions as no more than an appearance (Schein) of piety.\(^{71}\) “Thus saccharined religion becomes the bourgeois cloak for a tolerated pornography,” even though, as Adorno implicitly claims, Bach’s Prelude did not originally have a sacred function or meaning.\(^{72}\) Adorno’s central problem with the Ave Maria, then, is

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\(^{71}\) Ibid., 37-38.

\(^{72}\) Ibid., 37 (GS 16, 284: “Die versüßte Religion wird zum bürgerlichen Vorwand der tolerierten Pornographic”).
its basically deceptive quality. Yet he does not comment on the remarkably skillful way in which Gounod fitted his attractive new melody to the harmonic framework created by Bach. One wonders whether Adorno was simply objecting to the popularity of the reworked Bach Prelude.

The critique of deception and the resentment of popularity carry over into Adorno’s highly subjective discussion of Rachmaninoff’s Prelude in C sharp minor. Adorno attempts to show that the piece fulfills the musical amateur’s need to feel power over the material, and to demonstrate virtuosic technical skill. The Prelude provides the “infantile adult” with the empowering lie that even an amateur can dazzle audiences with theatrics and seeming omnipotence over the piano. The music itself “is just one long final cadence,” full of repetition, short and easily comprehended phrases, and predictability. Adorno argues that part of the work’s popularity derives from its insistent affirmation of some vague truth, made audible in the unrelenting cadence. Whereas the Gounod Ave Maria deceives the listener about the genuineness of its piety, the Rachmaninoff Prelude dupes the performer-listener into believing that his or her own musical abilities are extraordinary rather than average. Of course, we have no way of knowing whether Rachmaninoff intended any such deception. Again, we have here a tenuously argued dismissal of a popular piece of music, seemingly on the grounds that it is popular, and with little analysis of its musical value. Although one might be tempted to agree with Adorno instinctively, he nevertheless does not provide a compelling reason to dismiss the Rachmaninoff Prelude out of hand.

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Ibid., 38-40.
In the next aphorism, Adorno treats what he calls “Dvořák’s *Humoresque.*” Dvořák’s *Humoresque* in fact consists of eight piano miniatures, but in this essay Adorno apparently refers only to the most famous of these, No. 7: *Poco lento e grazioso,* which is known primarily in its arrangement for violin and piano. He criticizes the piece on two main points. First, he claims that it caters to the so-called “sensitive” person (*Der Feinsinnige*). These “sensitive” listeners to whom Adorno refers are not unusually perceptive or keen, he explains, and their supposed sensitivity is merely a construct of the bourgeois consumer who would like to possess a special aesthetic awareness. Second, he charges the piece with indulging in the “cliché of fame.” By this he means that the piece has gained success and recognition merely through tired clichés such as its title, its gratuitous use of “Bohemian” thirds and its “Slav” middle section, which he describes as so brief and hackneyed in its passion that it offers no challenge to the listener. Nothing about the doublestops in the piece sound particularly “Bohemian,” however. One wonders whether Dvořák’s Czech origin influenced Adorno’s critique here. Moreover, it appears that Adorno did not recognize that the work is inherently a “character piece” intended for domestic entertainment.

In the following case study, which also happens to be the only one in the “Commodity Music Analyzed” series in which Adorno explicitly mentions the word “kitsch,” he reflects on the *Andante cantabile* of Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony in E minor. The case study stands as a paradigmatic example of Adorno’s ambivalence toward kitsch, as well as his dialectical style, in which clear conclusions often elude the reader. With an obviously sarcastic tone, he offers a “Russian” program to accompany the gestures of the Russian composer’s music: a young officer and the general’s daughter confess their love for

74 Ibid., 40-41.
each other under a moonlit sky in the Crimea, their bliss disrupted only by the questioning of the Imperial Guard. Adorno provides this program as a way to demonstrate his assertion that the exaggerated emotional ardor of Tchaikovsky’s symphonic movement prefigures the manipulative function of commercial film music in the twentieth century. In fact, Adorno goes so far as to credit Tchaikovsky with composing what was essentially film music even before the technology of film had become a reality. And, by extension, he argues, Tchaikovsky foresaw the needs of culture industry consumers even before the culture industry arose. His music “combined drastic ideas with conventionality,” or, put another way, his music dealt with extreme existential and emotional situations using prosaic means.

In a bizarre way, although Adorno here describes Tchaikovsky’s Andante cantabile as kitsch, he simultaneously seems to praise the composer for a certain prophetic ability made manifest in his pre-film “cinema music.” One might almost read Adorno’s invented narrative here as a backhanded compliment to the Russian composer, in that Tchaikovsky’s music could stimulate such vivid imaginings. But Adorno’s critique is problematic to the extent that he applies criteria that might be viewed as ultimately arbitrary and subjective, at least from a postmodern perspective.

Adorno reserves a particularly cutting condemnation for the 1938 popular song “Especially for You” by Phil Grogan and Orrin Tucker. It comes as no surprise that Adorno cannot restrain his scorn here, as he most likely wrote this case study upon hearing this song on the radio (one of the prime purveyors of the culture industry) after his arrival in the United

75 Ibid., 41-42.

76 Ibid., 42 (GS 16, 288: “[die] Konventionalität mit Drastik des Einfalls verband…”). This comment echoes Adorno’s earlier statement in “Kitsch” (1932) that kitsch unites the “characteristic and the banal.”

77 It is highly unlikely that Adorno intended to “praise” Tchaikovsky, except in a sarcastic manner.
States in 1938. The song represented to him everything that was wrong with musical
culture—and popular culture at large—in the 1930s (especially in America). His critique
revolves around the argument that popular songs such as this, produced by the culture
industry, render the consumer utterly helpless—dependent on, and anonymous to the market
system. Referring to the specificity of the song’s title, as well as the supposedly personal
tone of the lyrics, Adorno asserts that “individual needs have been so ruthlessly eliminated
from the product that they have to be invoked like magic formulae to prevent the customer
from becoming aware of the murderous ritual of which he is the victim.”

Adorno finds that

the lyrics blatantly contradict the song’s goal of mass appeal (and hence vast earnings for the
songwriters):

Especially for you, that’s all I live for,
Especially for you, that’s all I’m here for,
Can’t you see what love has done to me
Just on account of especially for you?

As a final piece of evidence, Adorno offers the official copyright warning printed underneath
the title of the song, and suggests ominously that the consumer “belongs to the product and
not the product to him.”

Adorno’s critique may strike one as disproportionately abrasive in
relation to its object—a brief popular song—and seems to require more effort than the song
itself warrants. His criticisms may indeed have validity, but he contradicts himself in that he
had not much earlier (in “On the Social Situation of Music,” 1932) claimed that trivial
popular songs such as “Especially for You” do not necessitate such attention or

78 Ibid., 44 (GS 16, 290: “Denn das individuelle Bedürfnis ist aus dem Produkt so radikal ausgeschieden, daß es
wie eine Zauberformel angerufen werden muß, um das Kundenopfer daran zu verhindern, des mörderischen
Rituals innezuwerden, das an ihm vollzogen wird”).


condemnation. It is entirely possible, however, that he had come to recognize the alienation effects of such commodities disseminated via the radio, and reacted vehemently against such commodification.  

Similarly, Adorno’s last two case studies receive harsher disapproval than, it would seem, they merit. These case studies focus on two popular numbers from 1939, “In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room,” a jazz piece by the American composer and bandleader Raymond Scott, which takes its melodic cues from Mozart’s Piano Sonata K. 545, and the song “Penny Serenade,” written by Arthur William Hallifax and Melle Weersma and famously sung by Guy Lombardo. As he does the previous four case studies, Adorno treats these last two with utter contempt. But his contempt seems also to derive from a demand that these popular songs reach an artistic and imaginative standard that they were not designed to attain. Adorno would counteract this argument, maintaining that the culture industry that has helped to produce these songs has failed to provide consumers with products that uplift and edify them. At this point, Adorno clearly assumed a scale of musical and social value that, as we will see, he would later begin to find somewhat more problematic.

81 Indeed, by this time Adorno was probably quite familiar with the popular songs of the culture industry. Between 1938 and 1940, he conducted an “Analytical Study of the NBC Music Appreciation Hour (1938-40),” which can be found in Musical Quarterly 78, no. 2 (Summer, 1994): 325-77.

82 Of “In an Eighteenth-Century Drawing Room,” Adorno remarks (ibid., 46) that it only contributes to the trivializing of Mozart in our era, and exploits his genius for the sake of marketability. He writes, “Its simplicity matches the growing infantilism of the listener and its étude-like scales allow modern barbarians to laugh at the past for which they yearn and to pride themselves on how far they have advanced beyond Mozart” (GS 16, 291: “seine Simplizität fügt sich der Versimpelung des Hörens ein, und seine étüdengleich Skalen erlauben es zugleich den zeitgemäßen Barbaren, über die Vergangenheit zu lachen, nach der sie sich sehnen, und sich zu attestieren, wie weit sie es über Mozart hinaus gebracht haben”). Adorno (ibid., 47) describes “Penny Serenade” as “a nothing which obsessively points to its nothingness” (GS 16, 293: “ein Nichts, das zwanghaft als Nichts sich bekennt”).

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In his conclusion to his set of musical aphorisms (or case studies), Adorno laments the poor psychological state of modern society, describing the way in which the ego now wills itself to enjoy (what he considers to be) such mediocre cultural offerings as the “standardized Slav melancholy,” jazz, or the jitterbug. He explains how people use music today as a means of emotional catharsis—not for an appreciation of the aesthetic object itself, or for any ethical edification, but “a kind of psychoanalysis for the masses, but one which makes them, if anything, even more dependent than before.”83 He also offers perhaps his most piquant characterization of kitsch in all his writings, couched as an oblique compliment: “The positive element of kitsch lies in the fact that it sets free for a moment the glimmering realization that you have wasted your life.”84 Significant here is Adorno’s apparent shift from a largely Marxist framework (in “Kitsch” and “On the Social Situation of Music”) to a more subjective, psychological one. This shift at least potentially opens the way to a newly complicated and more postmodern view of kitsch and its function.

_Aesthetic Theory (1970)_

Adorno spent the last twenty years of his life in Europe, and during his last decade he labored over his magnum opus of aesthetic philosophy, _Aesthetic Theory (Ästhetische Theorie)_ . The book—which remained unfinished at his death in 1969, with an edited version published by 1970—has only recently become generally familiar to scholars in the United States. A relatively faithful English rendering of the text appeared as late as 1997, one which preserved

83 Adorno, “Commodity Music Analyzed,” 50 (GS 16, 295: “Selber gewissermaßen eine Psychoanalyse für die Massen, aber eine, die sie nur um so fester bei der Stange hält”).

the idiosyncrasies of Adorno’s original text and therefore endeavored to rectify certain inaccuracies and liberties taken in the 1984 English translation. The book represents some of Adorno’s most insightful thinking on the subject, but also presents the reader with tremendous difficulties (whether in German or in English translation). In the original manuscript, the various chapters had no obvious beginnings or endings, and the chapters themselves had extremely few paragraph divisions. The resulting text appears in somewhat intimidating blocks of words, in a difficult style typical of the Frankfort School, with few if any pauses provided for the reader. Indeed, the 1997 edition’s translator, Robert Hullot-Kentor, asserts that “[Aesthetic Theory] is oriented not to its readers but to the thing-in-itself.” The book stands not so much as an attempt to explain to readers any systematic aesthetic framework for assessing modern art, but instead it “means to breach [the] externality of aesthetics to art.” In other words, in Aesthetic Theory Adorno was more concerned with articulating the actual inner aesthetic experience of the individual consumer of art, rather than any external scheme imposed on art from the outside.

Of the four texts examined here, Aesthetic Theory is the latest, and the only text that Adorno wrote after having lived in the United States for more than a few years. The differences between this text and the other three earlier ones are striking; indeed, in this work Adorno betrays most obviously the increasing influence of postmodernism on his thought.

85 Christian Lenhardt translated the 1984 English edition, published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in London. Lenhardt—apparently arbitrarily and without regard for Adorno’s organization—separated the chapters under their respective titles and divided the chapters themselves into titled sub-sections that did not exist in Adorno’s drafts.

86 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, Translator’s Introduction, xi.

87 Ibid., xii.
The postmodernist element becomes especially evident in Adorno’s far more complex and ambivalent attitude toward his objects of analysis. This ambivalence is amplified by the fact that, as the translator Robert Hullot-Kentor notes, the book was “shaped by emphatic opposition to the world into which it must be fitted,” i.e., that of English-speaking U.S. culture. Such opposition is not nearly as apparent in the other three texts, which were written largely before Adorno had spent any significant time in the United States.

Somewhat surprisingly, the concept of kitsch does not figure conspicuously in *Aesthetic Theory*. Rather, it makes its appearance throughout the book in passing, almost furtively. In a few sections Adorno devotes attention specifically to kitsch as a concept, but by and large, kitsch becomes integrated into the book’s totality as an indispensable yet indefinable element. Indeed, as Adorno claims early in the book, “Kitsch is an idiosyncratic concept that is as binding as it is elusive to definition.” Yet Adorno does make attempts to capture this “elusive” concept, and below I shall analyze the salient aspects of his arguments.

Because Adorno’s (few) discussions of kitsch in *Aesthetic Theory* are relatively extensive in comparison to his references to the concept elsewhere, and because his own writing provides a better illustration of his thought than any paraphrase could, it becomes necessary to quote Adorno in full. His first extended discussion of kitsch in the book reads:

> By its very concept, art implies kitsch, just as by the obligation it imposes of sublimating the ridiculous it presupposes educational privilege and class structure; *fun* is art’s punishment for this. All the same, the ridiculous elements in artworks are most akin to their intentionless levels and therefore, in great works, also closest to their secret. Foolish subjects like those of *The Magic Flute* and *Der Freischütz* have more truth content through the medium of the music than does the *Ring*, which gravely aims at the ultimate. In its clownishness,

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88 Ibid., xi.

89 Ibid., 36 (GS 7, 60: “Kitsch ist ein idiosynkratischer Begriff, so verbindlich, wie er nicht sich definieren läßt”).
art consolingly recollects prehistory in the primordial world of animals…

Here, Adorno disconcerts the reader in several ways, especially given his previous contentions about kitsch. First, he suggests that the concept of art itself necessitates a complementary or accompanying concept of kitsch. He equates (high) art with the high-minded formality and dignity typically associated with “educational privilege” and aristocracy, and equates kitsch with the good-natured “fun” that teases the pretentious gravity of much high art. Second, Adorno takes us by surprise with an apparent defense of the absurd, the ridiculous, and the foolish. For him, Wagner’s “sublimating the ridiculous” in the Ring cycle decreases that work’s truth content whereas the unselfconscious absurdity in The Magic Flute and Der Freischütz does not labor to hide the ridiculous aspects of human life, but plainly acknowledges them. These are astute observations, but ones that do not resemble Adorno’s comments about kitsch in his earlier writings. His unanticipated implication here, undoubtedly influenced by postmodern thinking, is that an element of kitsch may serve as a healthy antidote to unduly sober high art.

Yet more startling revelations about kitsch can be found further into Aesthetic Theory.

In a much more extensive passage, Adorno attempts to characterize kitsch in more vivid terms:

Kitsch is not, as those believers in erudite culture would like to imagine,

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91 One wonders here whether Adorno might have taken Beethoven to task for a (perceived) lack of balance between solemnity and frivolity in his works. As for Wagner’s music, Adorno surely could not have thought much of it given its propagandistic use by Hitler and the Nazi regime during and after their rise to power.
the mere refuse of art, originating in disloyal accommodation to the enemy; rather, it lurks in art, awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth. Although kitsch escapes, implike, from even a historical definition, one of its most tenacious characteristics is the prevarication of feelings, fictional feelings in which no one is actually participating, and thus the neutralization of these feelings. Kitsch parodies catharsis…It is in vain to try to draw the boundaries abstractly between aesthetic fiction and kitsch’s emotional plunder. It is a poison admixed to all art; excising it is today one of art’s despairing efforts…art becomes vulgar through condescension: when, especially by means of humor, it appeals to deformed consciousness and confirms it. 92

It is readily apparent that this commentary contains echoes of Adorno’s previous descriptions of kitsch. As before, he acknowledges the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of fully defining kitsch, historically or otherwise; he emphasizes the “fictional” nature of the feelings that kitsch claims to evoke; and he calls upon the Marxist idea of “deformed consciousness” (better known as “false consciousness”) to describe the audience to whom kitsch caters. All of these elements appeared in Adorno’s earlier comments on kitsch. There are, however, some significant differences evident here. Most obvious is the suggestion that the quality of kitsch lies within art itself—here Adorno describes it not as the opposite, the antithesis, or the residue of art, but as inherent within even genuine art. He even goes so far as to claim that an attempt to separate art and kitsch today would be fruitless. Adorno also attributes to kitsch a certain sinister aspect when he depicts kitsch as “poison,” “lurking” in art, “awaiting ever recurring opportunities to spring forth.” This sinister quality to which Adorno refers—kitsch threatening to corrupt art at any moment—recalls the comments of Hermann Broch, who in

the previous decade spoke of the extremely fine line separating great Romantic art and kitsch. That both of these authors would make such an observation independently of one another highlights the increasing ambiguity between high and low forms of art in the mid-twentieth century—one of the hallmarks of postmodernism. 93

Adorno’s last discussion of kitsch in Aesthetic Theory is also his lengthiest. While it harmonizes with some of his statements about kitsch in his previous writings, it appears to contradict many of the claims he made earlier in the book:

One of the defining elements of kitsch may well be the simulation of nonexisting feelings and thus their neutralization along with the neutralization of the aesthetic phenomenon. Kitsch is art that cannot be or does not want to be taken seriously and yet through its appearance postulates aesthetic seriousness…If the definition of kitsch is to be meaningful, the expression of the artwork must be considered in itself an index veri et falsi; but to judge the expressive authenticity of a work leads to such endless complications—one of which is the historical transformation of the truth content of the means of expression—that they could only be solved casuistically and even then not definitively. Kitsch is qualitatively distinct both from art and from its proliferation, as is predetermined by the contradiction that autonomous art must dispose over the mimetic impulses that are themselves opposed to such control…The critique of kitsch must be vigilant, though it takes its toll on art as well. The revolt of art against its a priori affinity with kitsch was one of the essential laws of development in its recent history, and it participates in the destruction of works. What once was art can later become kitsch. Perhaps this history of collapse is the history of the correction of art, its true progress. 94

93 We have no evidence that Adorno knew Broch’s text. By the time Broch delivered his Yale lecture in the winter of 1950-51, Adorno had already returned to Frankfurt, and Broch’s lecture was later published in 1968, first in Italian, then in English, in Dorfles, The World of Bad Taste (see fn. 15).

We have already encountered Adorno’s definitions of kitsch as a “simulation of nonexisting feelings,” and also the suggestion that kitsch results from a disproportion between form and content: when a work has the appearance of gravity but an absence of substance. But here, Adorno reveals unmistakable puzzlement at the prospect of assessing the “expressive authenticity” of a work, finally concluding that such an assessment can never be “definitive.”

And at the end of this fragment, Adorno considers a shocking possibility: perhaps the existence of kitsch actually serves as a boon to the identification of true art. In claiming that art has “revolted” against kitsch in “recent history,” he seems to be referring to the avant-garde experimentations of Schoenberg and other composers of atonal music, who have succeeded in helping to “correct” art—to lead it away from the kitsch that plagued music in the first part of the century. Indeed, there may be here an implicit suggestion that Adorno is referring to a post-war backlash against all forms of sentimental popular culture that arose during the Depression and the war years, and especially against the “kitsch” that was so closely associated with the propaganda of Nazi Germany. Adorno’s surprising assertion that kitsch can function as such a valuable corrective to art—or at least a corrective to the misguided assessment of art—represents a thoroughly postmodern outlook, one that acknowledges the importance of an element he had described earlier in the book as a “poison.” Adorno leaves us with a very tangible sense that postmodern relativism has begun to encroach on the task of aesthetic judgment.

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95 For a fascinating exposition of this association, see Friedländer, Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death, 1984. Adorno, having been exiled from his homeland like so many other German-Jewish artists and intellectuals during the Nazi era, was poised to see Jewish composers such as Schoenberg as the saviors of art music in the wake of the Nazi regime, which exploited the music of Wagner, among others, in anti-semitic publicity for the Third Reich. I thank Tim Carter for these observations.
**Conclusion**

For reasons of space and coherence, this paper has examined the concept of kitsch as manifested primarily only through the medium of music. Yet why should kitsch in music be understood any differently from its appearance in the plastic arts or décor? Kitsch is, after all, a designation used in various ways to characterize any number of different cultural products. Music, however, presents an entirely new set of problems for the analyst or the aesthetician. The medium of music is in some ways “insubstantial”—we cannot touch or see music in the way we can a piece of visual art or a decorative ornament. We may often handle the physical paraphernalia of music’s existence, of course: the instruments, the scores, the recordings. But to articulate in words that phenomenon of music to which we respond emotionally—the fleeting sound itself—remains virtually impossible. Descriptions of musical sound will almost invariably strike us as lacking, because the perception of sound tends to be more abstract than the perception of visual stimuli. Thus the manner in which we discuss the elements of music must differ in some fundamental ways from the manner in which we discuss the plastic arts.

While we can often convey fairly accurately certain aesthetic features of the plastic arts in terms of color, shape, representation, style, etc., such descriptions of music tend to be far more imprecise. Many music scholars and analysts therefore tend to rely instead on the known, objective properties of a musical work—chords, keys, rhythms, instrumentation, orchestration, and so on. But these properties often fail to express that which we find most
meaningful in musical works: their remarkable ability to evoke (sometimes very specific) emotions. It is at this point when the concept of kitsch becomes pertinent. For indeed, when we hear a piece of music that we perceive as less genuine in its message, more “forced,” or attempting to be something it cannot, we often label it as “kitsch.” Articulating the causes for these perceptions and the reasons for this designation is another matter entirely, but Adorno has provided at least an entry point.

Like the concepts of art, beauty, ugliness, and other aesthetic ideas, the concept of kitsch has been defined and continues to be understood in a multitude of ways. Philosophical arguments about the meaning of kitsch will inevitably continue; no definitive conclusions may therefore be reached. But we can glean fresh interpretations of this concept through the work of Adorno, whose texts “Kitsch,” “On the Social Situation of Music,” “Commodity Music Analyzed” and Aesthetic Theory offer particularly valuable insights from a man of strong conviction, who lived to see the dawn of postmodernist thinking. Adorno’s wrestling with the concept of kitsch—especially musical kitsch—over the course of his career, which as we have seen grew more agonized toward the end of his life, reveals a highly sensitive listener and aesthetic philosopher suspended between two perspectives. On one hand he could never abandon the utter seriousness of his search for “truth content,” his desire to distinguish between genuine art and degraded imitations of art. On the other hand, his experiences with an ever-widening range of popular and light music led him to an increasingly complicated understanding of musical value, which made “truth content” ever more elusive, especially after the trauma of the Second World War. In the end, Adorno seems to leave us with a modernist concept of music that espouses specific aesthetic values, and a postmodernist concept of “kitsch” that can never be defined, but that always depends
upon the particular circumstances of the composer, the listener, the technology of production, and the social setting.
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