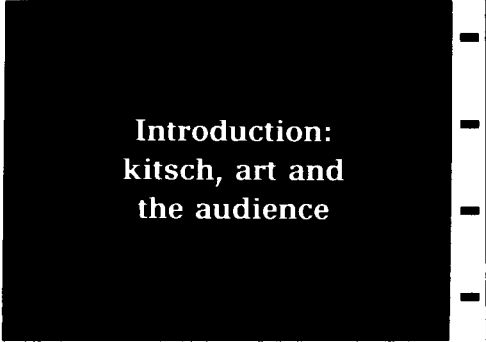


Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10791-4 - Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture

Paul Coates

Excerpt

[More information](#)


**Introduction:  
kitsch, art and  
the audience**

**Kitsch, camp and mass culture**

The emergence of kitsch parallels that of mass education from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It can be argued that kitsch is generated in one of two ways: through a failure of the aspiration to art or through consigning art to the back-seat of a vehicle driven by moralism. The former is a pallid simulacrum of art; the latter, art's bowdlerization. I will deal with them in turn.

Kitsch of the former kind is ersatz art for a culture whose value system ascribes supreme importance to art, the last metaphysical activity, even as subconsciously it is sceptical of art's unverifiable claims. Its inhabitants satisfy their culturally inculcated superego by purchasing something that resembles art, while their unacknowledged disbelief is satisfied by the object's actual disparity from art. This form of kitsch is wed to the nineteenth-century cult of the Beautiful. According to Hermann Broch, kitsch arises from a concern to work 'beautifully' rather than 'well': for Broch, this preponderance of the aesthetic over the ethical fosters evil.<sup>1</sup> The Kierkegaardian derivation of Broch's theory is patent; for although it can account for one variety of kitsch, its definition of the ethical as the middle term in a three-stage progression from the aesthetic to the religious renders it unable to account for the specific forms of kitsch generated by art's subordination to ethics or religion. The Beauty Broch describes is skin-deep, without the polysemous layered complexity art possesses in the hermeneutics of Dante, for instance. Such kitsch may be seen as a post-Romantic phenomenon: as Romanticism came to insist upon originality as the yardstick of art and as the notion of copyright began to be codified, artists who might once have been content with the role of copyist felt compelled to attempt more. Their transformation of Romanticism into cliché gave the lie to their individualistic Romantic message. Their kitsch was the blighted fruit of a minor artist's failure of self-recognition. Where the modernists, unable to escape quotation, flaunted it, the producers of

**Introduction****2**

this kitsch shamefully hid indebtedness. Their quotations absurdly strive to deny the yawning gulf between past and present (neo-Gothic architecture, for instance, wishes away the crisis of the nineteenth-century church) by presenting a minor derivative talent with all the afflatus of a major one.<sup>2</sup>

To speak of the neo-Gothic is to arrive at the variety of kitsch fostered by art's subordination to religious or moralistic ends. Here art is conceived as an illustration of what we already know, as *doxa* or tautology. The conception seeks to undo Romanticism's redefinition of art as exploration, the Baudelairean plunge into 'le nouveau', the emergence of 'the novel' as the name of the nineteenth century's major art form. Whatever its pre-nineteenth-century validity, the conception had been shattered by Romanticism's Promethean transvaluation of values. Its last-ditch battle unfolds in slow motion in Richardson's *Clarissa*,<sup>3</sup> where educative intent is pitched against amoral psychological investigation – or, in Bakhtinian terms, monologue enters into agonizing deadlock with the dialogue that will succeed it historically. The kitsch that follows radiates bad conscience: it is surely correct to ascribe greater importance to moral rectitude than to art, but on coming to this belief the logical conclusion is to abandon art, not to mingle inferior and superior syncretistically. It is perhaps this form of kitsch that is invoked in Syberberg's notion of kitsch as a fragment of myth.<sup>4</sup> It is the kitsch of the Wagnerian operas Nietzsche lambasted for the composer's insistence that they were 'more than just music' – more recently, of the quasi-Jungian films of George Lucas or so much moralizing SF; of Victorian anecdotal painting; of melodrama; and arguably, of the fictionalized, pseudonymous religious tracts of Kierkegaard himself.

There is, of course, a third term of relevance to the kitsch–art equation: entertainment. Kitsch may be bad art, but entertainment is something else entirely. Entertainment is the antiart of a world with no time for art. That has been the world, of course, as most generations have experienced it. For the reception of art requires a viewer strong – and usually leisured – enough to participate in the world's unmaking and remaking, in an activity that absorbs and changes one's life to the very depths. Entertainment is the diversion the world offers those it has rendered incapable both of the aspiration to art displayed by one variety of kitsch and of the subordination of art to ethics another kitsch displays. For Adorno that failure of aspiration is characteristic of what he terms the 'culture industry'. In his meditation upon this industry's systematic exploitation of the gulf between human beings and their culture, entitled 'Janus Palace',<sup>5</sup> he speaks of a process that is turning culture into kitsch and uses the terms 'kitsch' and 'entertainment' interchangeably. Here, I feel, he is mistaken. Kitsch is a specifically

**Kitsch, art and the audience****3**

modern – in particular, a nineteenth-century – phenomenon. Entertainment, however, is perennial. A Bakhtin would trace its transhistorical presence in carnivals and other mutations of popular culture. But the moment of carnival is fleeting,<sup>6</sup> the brief sabbath an authorized transgression that restores one for labour. If intermissions can be incorporated into regimes of exploitation, in the case of the twentieth century industrialized diversion gives off-the-job training for industrialized work: as Benjamin noted, the shocks of the cuts in a film match those of the 'apperceptive apparatus' in modern life.<sup>7</sup> For Goebbels, meanwhile, Zarah Leander was the best propaganda. Entertainment lacks the divided consciousness of kitsch, that crack through which nineteenth-century discontents filtered to the surface in mystified form. Its mode of address to the most superficial levels of the personality pretends that no depths exist: it would be too painful to recall the starved prisoner down below. Where art shows us human beings, presenting an often fearsome mirror to our selves and social orders, entertainment disperses humanity between the sub- and the superhuman, its dreams of redemption cynically aware of their own unreality.

By the end of the fifties in the West, enhanced purchasing power and a massive extension of the educational system – among other factors – had rendered the products of mass culture so pervasive as to secrete the dubious antidote of a new sensibility: that of camp. Where kitsch is failed art with a bad conscience and entertainment is content to be disposable, camp feeds both on the failure of low culture to become high culture (on kitsch) and on the failures of high culture itself. If high culture is shot through with failure – the most notorious instance being the compatability of reading Rilke with the operation of a concentration camp – it is partly because the Romantic, and then modernist, requirement that the artist create a world *ex nihilo* raised the stakes of the aesthetic endeavour to a level at which few could play, and even the remaining players often found themselves bankrupt in midcareer<sup>8</sup> – and partly because art could never become the religion it was widely called on to replace. Camp culture thrives on the failure of art; resigned to the production of kitsch and entertainment in our society, it tries to dispel their oppression by modifying the ways in which they are perceived. If it paradoxically transforms failure and dissonance into a sign of success, it is nevertheless dependent upon them for its shadowy substance and sustenance. Insofar as the camp sensibility is homosexual in origin, it delights in the failure of the culture that has placed gays beyond the pale. Camp is a culture of consumption rather than production – whence its rapid propagation in a consumerist society. Where kitsch producers feel the anxiety of the petit bourgeois educated beyond their tastes, and fearful of falling back into the abyss of the unlettered masses they know to be present still within

**Introduction****4**

themselves, the camp consumer practises the gay science of a deconstruction incapable of construction, the academic graffiti it doodles on culture's failed products legible in another light as a *mene tekel*: an air of *fin de siècle*, of the end of time hastened by the biological sterility of homosexual relations, hangs over it. Both belong to a culture of the after-image: kitsch helplessly quotes the art it cannot rival and the religion of which it falls short, while camp wastes on the dismantling of culture the wit and energy it could have reserved for the construction of art. In terms of Jameson's description of postmodernism, camp practises pastiche rather than parody. Its shallow euphoria of negativity frantically represses the knowledge of negativity's pain; it grins and bears it. For the camp sensibility, the exemplary figure should surely be Proust, whose pastiche deconstructions of other writers concluded in the construction of *À la Recherche*.

But since, as Raymond Williams has shown, cultures comprise residual phases alongside emergent ones, there were still some prepared to receive mass culture without mockery, to take kitsch or entertainment (Vincente Minelli . . .) for art. The revaluation of mass culture in the sixties, when pop art and structuralism unified the field of culture by connecting its poles – Superman and the *Übermensch* – employed the notion of intertextuality to demonstrate that even the most rarefied works of high culture needed roots, to say nothing of casting shadows. This revaluation of mass culture resulted among other things in the current near hegemony of the alternative term, 'popular culture', and involved acknowledgement of the value of one's unschooled – childhood or adolescent – apprehension of its products. This was in part a replay of the Romantic idealization of the unstructured perceptions of the child and of 'folk culture', whose spectre returned as youth culture. The child experiences the hackneyed work with the freshness he himself brings to it ('he' because the films that underwent revaluation were often such male fantasies as the Western – so that in some quarters among auteurists, the privileging of adolescent experience became an excuse for permanent residence in that stage of life). Similarly, to concede value to these works was to recognize or seek to recover the social or familial roots education so often severs. Thus, the idolization of Hollywood product by intellectuals raised on 'the great tradition' breathed both Young Turkishness and utopian nostalgia for an integral selfhood or culture. The assumption that these could persist so easily in conditions of modern capitalism and consumerism, however, was mere wish-fulfilment, yielding such schizophrenic mystifications as analyses of B movies with methodologies honed on *The Waste Land* or the dubious assertion that a still-polarized society was now entirely middle class. Effacing the high culture–low culture distinction could be an ideological, as well as a utopian, undertaking.

**Kitsch, art and the audience****5**

In between the camp aesthetic, with its mockery of kitsch, and the enthusiasts' acceptance of its pretensions lay the more common reaction of those who accepted a popular culture they then rejected as corny under pressure from that culture's next wave. Adorno defines the mechanism of 'the corny effect' as follows:

Likes that have been enforced upon listeners provoke revenge the moment the pressure is relaxed. They compensate for their 'guilt' in having condoned the worthless by making fun of it. But the pressure is relaxed only as often as attempts are made to foist something 'new' upon the public. Thus the psychology of the corny effect is produced again and again and is likely to continue indefinitely.<sup>9</sup>

The receiver's denigration of the 'corniness' of the past obeys a Mephistophelean law of mass production, whereby everything that comes into being has built-in obsolescence: 'alles was entsteht / Ist wert, dass es zugrunde geht'. Adorno's impersonal 'attempts are made' suspends the question of agency, which it ascribes instead to the zeitgeist. The inverted commas around 'guilt' and 'new' imply that to take old for new is merely the inevitable concomitant of inhabiting what Adorno elsewhere terms 'the administered world'. He is perhaps too understanding of the all too human mechanisms involved. The passage itself is almost Mephistophelean in character, as if penned by a being whose longevity yields the melancholy conviction that there is nothing new under the sun. The zeitgeist is an illusion born of the changing of masks; in essence it is eternal. Hence, the antihistoricism of Adorno's Marxism, which sees all human societies as still steeped in myth, may render it unable to discern the emergence of true novelty. The psychology of the corny effect may or may not continue indefinitely, but it has not always been with us. Nor is the denigration of the past ever total: awareness of one's past love colours mockery with narcissistic affection. One is grateful for the existence of a work whose naïveté permits one to define oneself as sufficiently sophisticated to see through it. For to see through a thing is not necessarily to reject it, as the Reagan phenomenon's invulnerability to critique *inter alia* has revealed; it is rather to accept its existence as an occasion to congratulate oneself on one's experience or worldly wisdom. Adorno describes the recognition of corniness as the surfacing of fury at the compulsion to conform. He fails to grasp, however, that the fury repressed in obedience to peer pressure is vented simultaneously against the older generation. Adorno does not perceive the degree to which conformist teenage consumption of popular music, for instance, also formalizes revolt against norms established by one's elders. The analysis is surprisingly undialectical. It overlooks the dialectics of utopia and ideology in mass culture.

**Utopia and ideology in mass culture**

Fredric Jameson, echoing Ernst Bloch, has proposed in *The Political Unconscious* the possibility of discerning utopian elements in every work of mass culture.<sup>10</sup> Ideology and utopia are of course virtually inextricable: the utopia of full meaning prefigured by the great artwork becomes ideological when access to it is restricted – as it always has been – while the shallow fantasies of mass culture can justly claim to provide their audiences with approximate conceptualizations of hopes of escape.

The argument may be tested against a much-loved Hollywood film, *Meet Me in St. Louis*. The choice of example is prompted in part by the film's use by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, in the most influential film course book of recent years, as a typical instance of ideology.<sup>11</sup> The notion of ideology Bordwell and Thompson advance may be accused, however, of failing to grasp both the contradictoriness of ideology and its possible use of contradiction to generate the confusion on which false consciousness feeds. *Meet Me in St. Louis* dreams of a reconciliation of the provincial and the central, St. Louis and New York. After all, why should a land's centre be deemed provincial? And why go to New York when the spectacle of the World's Fair Exposition lies on one's doorstep? (And if home is more mute and inglorious than St. Louis, glory can still enter through the awesome moveable feast on offer at the local movie theatre.) The film turns on a transformation so improbable in its context that it has to be read as utopian: the family's father revokes his acceptance of the promotion that would take him, and them, to New York. The patriarchal law of political economy succumbs to matriarchal values of rootedness and fantasy. (Father is heavily outnumbered by wife and daughters.) The volte-face becomes necessary following the youngest daughter's decision to destroy her snow people rather than leave them in St. Louis for anyone else. The scene glosses leaving a place in infantile fashion, as the equivalent of killing its inhabitants. The daughter's murderous rage has to be halted at all costs; hence, the film presents the fantasy of changelessness as utopian, rather than as a response to the pathology of the family's youngest member. It revokes the occasion of pathology in order to deny the possibility of pathology within the family and is blind to the ideological nature of the belief that family moves should depend on the will of their youngest members. The father's improbable U-turn has been foreshadowed by a series of unexpected transformations during the Christmas ball – ranging from the surprising graciousness of the feared and hated girl from the East, who can thus be absorbed into the family, to the moment at which Esther (the Judy Garland part) dances behind a Christmas tree with her grandfather and emerges on

**Kitsch, art and the audience****7**

the other side with her sweetheart. (The moment embodies a profoundly cinematic dream of time's reversibility, the metamorphosis of age into youth.)

Is this fantasy purely ideological, however? If ideology is the glue of social order, then it can be seen to deny it on one level at least: individualism, patriarchy and the economic imperative give way to the imago of an inviolate matriarchal community. And yet the idealization of the family is also deeply ideological. Another turn of the screw, meanwhile, shows that family to be utopian in its willingness to accommodate otherness: the extended family extends to the horizon, encompassing even New York, in a kind of conurbation of the soul. Nevertheless, the work's utopian features may be not so much antidotes to ideology as features of its structure. A belief that utopia is possible here and now may prevent defeatist acceptance of the way of the world (and the hardships of 1944, the film's year of release – hardships including the lack of males strangely mirrored in the film's preponderance of females), but it is blind to the barriers that separate current life from the ideal world of which the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition can only be a figure. The possibility that the dream factory itself is implicated in subjugation is never even aired, while the assertion of feminine power rings hollow in the midst of a war begun by men. And here the dangers of the Bloch–Jameson position become apparent: the argument that every form of ideology secretes a silver lining of utopia can obscure the deep disparity between our ideological life and one that would be worth living. The theoretical recognition that both components are present in all works can be a paralysing mystification, frustrating the application of criticism to determine which predominates in any particular case.

Even criticism, however, may be unable to make the necessary distinctions so long as it remains at the level of content: after all, narratives depend on oppositions (ideology *and* utopia), and most seek to affirm both. (If tragedy shows the opposites' mutual destruction, the lesson is that in this case the characters who embodied them sinned through excess: the chorus recommends the golden mean.) The danger of indiscriminate acceptance already mentioned may be averted nevertheless by seeking the criterion of the utopian on another level, that of form. From this perspective, the truly utopian work would not be the utopia whose formal resemblance to past works indicates enthrallment to old ways (More, Morris, Bellamy), but the one whose determination to make it new bespeaks true commitment to Otherness. Accordingly, the most formally achieved artworks – not necessarily the most accessible – would be the least tainted by ideology. Such works, however, are probably not the most formally innovative: as Adorno noted when discussing Stravinsky's *Histoire du soldat*, a thing's violent negation

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10791-4 - Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture

Paul Coates

Excerpt

[More information](#)**Introduction****8**

---

can conceal identification with it.<sup>12</sup> The truly utopian, able to draw on a past that includes the most recent avant-garde, is fettered neither to it nor to its programmatic negation. The avant-garde's rejection of existing formal languages at the turn of the century becomes the midwife of the great modernist works of Kafka, Musil or Proust. Expressionism's scissors cut the modernist birth cord; Picasso's cubism prepares the way for *Guernica*, which orders disjunctions into a significant syntax of rage. As they dissolve the realism–fantasy distinction on which so much popular culture rests, allowing the dreams popular culture sees as exiled irrevocably to enter reality, the great works do not just dream of reconciliation but practise it. Only utopias prepared to carry some things over from the past are ever likely to be real. They alone find bridges from the future to now.



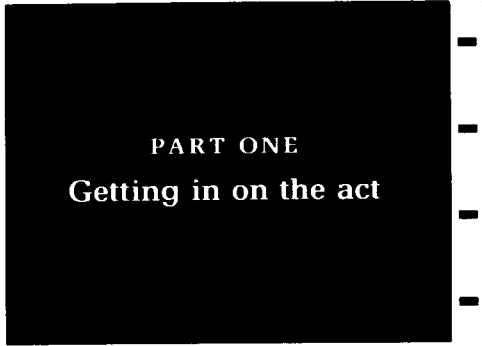
Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10791-4 - Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture

Paul Coates

Excerpt

[More information](#)



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10791-4 - Film at the Intersection of High and Mass Culture

Paul Coates

Excerpt

[More information](#)


CHAPTER 1  
Getting in on the act

The term 'mass culture' (and still more the term 'popular culture') may prompt one to ask where the masses are in relation to an industry that in claiming to speak for them so often takes in vain the name of the seemingly deified populace. And where does the individual who views him- or herself as a carrier of 'culture' stand in relation to a culture said to be for the mass? Is the term an oxymoron papering over the cracks of a social contradiction? This essay considers several possible positions on this issue, situated on a sliding scale from total exclusion to complete absorption. In *The Day of the Locust* the frustrating illusoriness of the dream factory's product generates fury in both individual and crowd; in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, the individual steps out of the crowd and so individualizes – and alters – the work, while in my final examples, singing along with the song may radically revise it ('Into the Groovey') or simply reinforce it (*The Player*).

### The shame and the fury

At one point in Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, Faye Greener – the aspiring Hollywood starlet living with Homer Simpson, a smaller-scale buyer of the body she wishes to sell big-time – begins bitterly to patronize her patron:

Faye called to the waiter again.

'He doesn't like the champagne cocktails', she said. 'Bring him brandy'.

Homer shook his head.

'Please, Faye', he whimpered.

She held the brandy to his lips, moving the glass when he turned away.

'Let him alone', Tod finally said.

She ignored him as though she hadn't even heard his protest. She was both furious and ashamed of herself. Her shame strengthened her fury and gave it a target.<sup>1</sup>

The shame and fury Faye feels are virtually omnipresent in West's novel, forming part of the self-hatred dramatized in West's contempt