ON KITSCH IN NATURE AND TECHNOLOGY

Redefining Kitsch for Posthuman Feminist Aesthetics

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KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
	This research makes a case for a shift from thinking of kitsch as a phenomenon extending from the industrial revolution, to one that is considered preternatural, existing as a state of being or a process of becoming. This re-theorization co-opts the pejorative connotations of 'bad', 'trash', and 'imitation' and 'failure' into positive processes and useful metaphors for contemporary aesthetics, particularly for feminist aesthetics. Its ultimate goal is to articulate an aesthetic theory for Posthuman Feminist Aesthetics and to redefine kitsch as it exists in media culture.

GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE
ACADEMICS

1. Introduction

This research attempts a theory of kitsch as it relates to nature and technology. In considering kitsch as a *mixed, impure or hybrid state* it can be thought of as more closely affiliated to posthuman subjectivity in which we are amalgams of human and machine. As such, like Irazabul (2007), I consider that kitsch is a 'phenomenon more relevant to our own time than it was to the era that made it a massive experience' (p.203).

As a phenomenon that emerged from industrial technologies of reproduction, the possibility of what kitsch is and how it functions demands reconsideration. The phenomena of mechanical reproduction and mass production that spawned original kitsch objects have given way to infinitely more complex and ubiquitous technologies. These "new" media technologies such as websites, virtual worlds, social media, digital photography, 3d printing, computer games, mobile apps, human-computer interface, to name a few, have changed not only how we access, consume and process information but also how we produce and reproduce objects and images.

If aesthetic theory changes with its object, then any new aesthetic theory must take into account the dematerialized, virtual-digital nature of contemporary culture. Kitsch is no exception. Because the very meaning of kitsch itself has been contested over history it exists itself in a mixed state: between definitions, between time periods, and between the technologies in which it operates (from mass reproduction/mechanical reproduction to digital, virtual technologies).

Several research attempts have been made to update or elaborate a new theory of kitsch (see: Irazabul; 2008, Binkley; 2000, Stewart; 2014). These theories do away with the traditional cultural hierarchies of 'high' and 'low' with which kitsch is traditionally understood. Instead- these theories propose theories of kitsch that operate in a "post-truth era" (Lewis & Lewis; 2018), as a 'repetitive system' (Binley; 2000), even as "redemptive and liberating" (Irazabul, 2007; p.200) suggesting the possibility of kitsch's own unique value and aesthetic worthiness. These theories offer much to the debates of kitsch, liberating them from "the baggage of an antiquated view of culture" (Binkley, 2000; p.132)

The origin of the word kitsch comes from the German verb *verkitschen*, meaning to make cheaply. The term was first used in the nineteenth century to refer to inexpensive souvenirs and prints sold to tourists on the street. These objects were "knock-off imitation luxury products, 'fine art' items crudely and glibly manufactured" in an attempt to resemble high art objects of the elite (Binkley; 2000, p132). Such objects were easily reproduced with the new technologies of mechanical reproduction during the Industrial Revolution, opening up an entire world of consumer culture, in which the "rise of kitsch" was blamed for the "erosion of 'high culture' (Binkley; 2000, p132).

Modernist critics were concerned with the fallacy of kitsch considering it "an aesthetic form of lying" in which "the whole concept [...] centers around such questions of imitation, forgery, counterfeit and what we may call the aesthetics of deception and self-deception" (Calinescu, 1987; 229). Greenberg argued that kitsch is "vicarious experience and faked sensations" (1939,12). In postmodern culture, kitsch was revived and its "shape shifted again" in its use as an ironic or critical tool used to assert its opposition to distinctions of high and low. Yet kitsch resists unanimity about what it is, what it does, or what it can be. As Matei Calinescu wrote: kitsch is "one of the most bewildering and elusive categories to modern art" (1987, p232). Over tie, the parameters of its signification stretch and bend. Given the ambiguity of its meaning, kitsch operates as a floating signifier, whose converse, antithetical nature espouses the possibility for signifying something new. Monica Kjellman-Chapin states: "Kitsch's definitional boundaries are wildly irregular and frequently indistinct, trading on contested notions of taste, vague and shifting notions of beauty, and unstable cultural hierarchies. [...] Due to the ever-transforming, context-driven, and experience-bound nature of kitsch, its continuing relevance is all but assured" (2013, pp. ix-x).

Recent scholarship on kitsch takes "new" technologies into consideration and pushes its limits in a different direction. For example, Irazabul proposes the term *hyperkitsch* – whereby kitsch is considered within the blurring of the real and imagined through digital and virtual technologies. She puts forth the idea that:

> If kitsch is here to stay, we need to explore its pedagogical, liberating and redemptive potential...The blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imagined has produced a new vocabulary aimed at capturing that elusive, yet revolutionary change: reality is no longer what it used to be. [...] The boundaries of kitsch have expanded dramatically in our times, ranging from all forms of kitsch 'art' to kitsch architecture, and urbanism, ie. from objects that we can possess to spaces we can inhabit. (2008; p203)

It is within this expansion of boundaries that I propose this new theory of kitsch.

I would like to suggest a different way of thinking of kitsch by affirming the inherent technicity and sensibility in all living things. This is not to claim that previous readings of kitsch have been wrong, but

they have reduced it to objects and images, in other words, inanimate matter and information. If the concept of kitsch is to be expanded another approach needs to be taken. To begin, I will make clear the critical foundation upon which this research makes several claims. First is the use of the term *tekhnē* by Heidegger, which considers all beings technical, and therefore takes into account the *originary technicity* intrinsic to all living things. Second is the use of existing research in bioaesthetics, which emphasizes the *inherent sensibility* in all living things (Mandoki; 2017). These two critical operations allow me to take into consideration a broader spectrum of possible objects that can or would be considered aesthetic, opening up the field of aesthetics and taking into consideration the *lived sensibility and technicity* of microorganisms, animals, and plant life, as well as that of the (post)human experience. It is not just that "kitsch carries the baggage of an antiquated culture" but, as I will argue, that of nature as well (Binkley, 2000, p132).

I see this research fitting into the emerging field of Posthuman Aesthetics. More specifically, it is an attempt to propose a theory that fits within Posthuman Feminist Aesthetics. Is it possible to conceive of kitsch in a way that doesn't reduce its meaning to mere 'cheap imitation' and 'artifice'? Furthermore, if imitation and artifice are some of the essential processes of the digital-virtual paradigm, the now dominant method for cultural production and the diffusion of information-then isn't more accurate to say that this classification is outdated? Can kitsch be a possible allegory for feminist scientific and political knowledge?

My reconsideration of kitsch starts by considering it as a preternatural phenomenon existing in nature as a state of being or a process of becoming. In this theory, kitsch is treated as a verb: *to kitsch someone or something, to be in state of kitsch.* Being in a state of kitsch implies a being in-between, a mixed state, where being is always a process of becoming. In other words, this research suggests shifting the question of what kitsch is to what kitsch does. This re-theorization co-opts the pejorative connotations of 'bad', 'trash', and 'imitation' into positive processes and useful metaphors for contemporary aesthetics, particularly for feminist aesthetics. If kitsch is a floating signifier, my goal is to appropriate it as an ally for feminism, and, in particular, for feminist aesthetics. I hope to make a case for a shift in thinking of kitsch as 'trash' or 'bad' or 'imitation' by providing metaphors that build off the possibility of kitsch being a positive and useful process. Furthermore, the idea of artifice and imitation (the copy) is reconsidered. In virtual digital culture, imitation and artifice are essential processes in image making, gene editing, bioengineering, etc.,

challenging the traditional concept of what is original and authentic.

In turning my attention from objects of kitsch to a method of kitsch that acts- or is an actor- I argue that kitsch can be considered as a process of mediation, in which life itself is a medium, a 'vital process'. Mediation is defined by Kember & Zylinska (2012) as:

> a key trope for understanding and articulating our being in, and becoming with, the technological world, our emergence and ways of intra-acting with it, as well as the acts and processes of temporality stabilizing the world into media, agents, relations, and networks. [...] [It is a] multiple, entangled processes of becoming. (pp)

As such, Kember & Zylinksa point out that media cannot be externalized from its subjects. Kember and Zylinska remind us that Heidegger, in his essay "The Question Concerning Technology" refers to the original Greek meaning of the word technology as *tekhnē* and *poèsis*, which mean "bringing forth and presencing"(2012; p13). This "originary technicity" implies mans' "inherent tendency" towards technology, in which artifice and Being are not mutually exclusive. For Heidegger, technology is a "world forming process" that operates at both the cultural and biological level. Kember & Zylinska ask the question: "if media cannot be externalized from subjects or "users", then how might we engage with "them" differently?" (2012; p.1) They state that media "are not a means to *our* ends; instead they have become part of us, to an extent that the us/them distinction is no longer tenable." (2012; p.13)

As we can see, the distinction between what is natural and artificial is a false division that must be considered in relation to the many interlocking, embedded ways that nature and technology intersect in today's world. Kitsch, in being considered as an artificial operation, demands a reevaluation in this specific critical context. Each of the figures offered for case study in this essay are performing a kind of mediation, which, according to Kember & Zylinska, offers the possibility of "the emergence of forms always new", and the "potentiality to generate unprecedented connections and unexpected events" (2014; p24). Moreover, they write: "mediation is also a differentiation, a "media becoming," that is always at the same time a process of "becoming other" (p.25). This generation of the novel forms is of critical importance to my argument of kitsch- what has been historically considered as an imitation of previous forms (in most cases, a rip off of other art or sensations) is in this study flipped aside and offered the redemptive potential that Irazabul claims: that kitsch, through these very processes of failure and imitation, can be useful, positive, and productive.

It is essential here to contextualize the terms authenticity and originality in relation to their origins and to update them as they exist in media culture. As Olaquiaga (2007) points out:

> The notions of authenticity and originality are [...] a response to mass reproduction. [...] Only when the proliferation of copies threatens and in effect displaces singularity of an object does this singularity become important, representing an experience and a presence considered unique in space and time. This experience is that of authenticity, and is made present in the original. (48).

While kitsch is considered synonymous with the inauthentic and the unoriginal, it is interesting to note the historical origins of these terms, and their coincidence with the term kitsch, which appeared roughly at the same time under these concerns. While the copy is older than modernity - these terms came to importance at the height of modernity simply because "*pre-modern copies didn't threaten the primacy of the original*" (49). The copies of mechanical reproduction attempt to "*induce the experience of singularity itself*" (52).

2. Kitsch in Nature & Technology

If kitsch is a kind of reproduction- the process of re-producing *something*- then it is my hypothesis that we can link it to the biological processes of reproduction to test how and what it does during this process. More specifically, I argue that it is during the mixed state of reproduction, for example, gestation, that the kitsch state occurs. My argument is that it is specifically in this mixed state of reproduction, essential to evolution, that new forms emerge (by way of mutations). As such, it is possible to imagine a new modus operandi for kitsch- in which the copy (as in the copy of DNA) is an essential paradigm in the production of novel forms. Supporting this idea, Steve Jones, in Darwin's Ghost, writes that:

> Evolution is inevitable. It depends on mistakes in reproduction. Descent always involves modification, because any copy, be it of a picture or a gene, must be less than exact. Information cannot be transmitted without loss, and a duplicate of a copy is, in turn, less perfect than what went before. To reproduce in succession an original again and again is to make--to evolve--something new. What went in emerges transformed by errors of descent, the raw material of biological change. (1999; p. xix)

To examine this, I will make two case studies: the parasite mushroom *Cordyceps* and the process of building muscle in the figure of the bodybuilder.

2.2 Parasites & Noise

Michel Serres points out that the French word *parasite* has three meanings: 1. Biological parasite 2. Social parasite 3. Static or interference (noise). It is this third meaning that I find most useful in understanding the kitsch process. "Noise is productive and creative: noise, through its presence and absence, the intermittence of the signal, produces the new system'" (Serres, 2013:52).

To examine this, I look to the *Cordyceps* fungi, which uses the ant as its host. When an ant inhales the spore of this mushroom, its system is interrupted, and for the first time in its life, the ground dwelling ant desires to climb upward. She climbs the nearest tree and as she sits, waiting, the mushroom begins to spout out of her body and she is transformed into the mushroom.

Serres (2013) writes: "The introduction of a parasite in the system immediately provokes a difference, a disequilibrium. Immediately, the system changes [...]" (182). The mushroom replicates itself by interrupting the ant's system. The spore can be thought of as the noise in system, and it is this noise that produces something new out of the ant. It is the point at which the ant is neither the ant nor the mushroom that I am interested in- this is the moment when the organism exists in a state of kitsch, no longer what it was, but not yet what it will become. It is ant-becoming-mushroom.

2.3 Kitsch Bodies & Failure

Bodybuilding, writes Kathy Acker, is about "nothing but failure"(1993; p.22). As a series of controlled movements, the continuous counting of the same repetition, muscles are built by being broken down. The kitsch body is a body made from repetitions of targeted failure, from repeating. In order to build the body, in order to fail again, the builder must increase the weight reps or intensity, in order to "again come to failure"(19xx; p.22). Failure in this case is used to produce – to reproduce- and is an essential gesture in the production of something new, in this case, muscle, or the construction of a new form in the body.

To exaggerate a feature, the kitsch process works slowly by breaking down its isolated target in order to shock it into growth (Acker, 1993; p.23). Kitsch failure requires a warming up, a gradual increase of intensity. The body of the bodybuilder exists in a state of kitsch whereby she is always in a state of becoming, working herself up to failure again and again. By repeating failure, the kitsch body exists in a continuous state of becoming, a suspended state of flux. However, failure, by repetition in the case of the bodybuilder, produces the new form of muscle.

2.4 Kitsch in Third Nature

As I have already set up that the distinction between nature and technology is a false division, I have chosen to use Olalquiaga's term Third Nature to refer to kitsch in the post-natural or contemporary technological climate. Third nature is Olalquiaga's term to describe "a manipulation of nature that has no cultural presence other that itself" where the "technological apparatus has reached such perfection that it remains invisible"(2007; p.54). These organisms are indistinguishable from natural organisms, yet rife with technological advancements that created them. I use the term third nature in alliance with Olalquiaga- to distinguish between points in nature- from the nature of the Industrial Revolution when kitsch was first introduced, to nature today- where technological advancements have mediated our natural world.

One example of this third nature is synthetic biology: "the science of selectively altering the genes of organisms to make them do things that they wouldn't do in their original, natural state." (Church & Regis 2012; p.2) Furthermore:

> Just as computers were universal machines […] so biological organisms approached the condition of being universal constructors in the sense that with appropriate changes to their genetic programming, they could be made to produce practically any imaginable artifact. (Church & Regis, 2012; p.4)

One example of this is Mirel, a bio-plastic in which microbes are genetically engineered to metabolize corn sugar to produce plastic pellets. The plastic is excreted from the microbe in small pellets that can be melted and molded to make everyday objects traditionally made with petrochemical plastics. These biologically altered organisms are "programmable manufacturing systems", tiny biological factories.

The state of kitsch here is the moment when these microbes are filled with little plastic pellets. Its existence is predicated on a mixed reality- both synthetic and natural, whose ultimate goal is to produce a natural plastic. Plastic is an interesting material to consider in the kitsch spectrum as it is one of the most iconic materials with which kitsch objects can be made- think of plastic figurines, plastic shells, etc. These plastic pellets are excreted from the microbe and separated to make MIREL. Essentially, we have a completely useful and beneficial bioplastic from the excrement.

Glow

The glow is my term for re-envisioning Walter Benjamin's 'aura' in the informatic domain of the digital, virtual. Walter Benjamin's term "aura" (year) describes objects of a singular or original importance, which emanate a particular quality that signifies their originality. This quality is what he referred to as the aura of the object. Benjamin's aura suggests that reproductions, no matter how exquisitely crafted, are incomparable to the original they emulate. In other words, they quality of the presence of a product/object of mechanical reproduction is always depreciated in relation to its original. However, in informatic culture, the artistic process no longer always ends with as discrete, material object that can be displayed, collected, and preserved. The glow is what emerges from the easily duplicated images and objects of information be it a video, digital image, website, GIF, etc.

4. Kitsch As Feminist Ally

As I have shown, I propose that there is a way around the denigrations that kitsch imbues: that kitsch as failure, faked sensations, lying, deception, parasitical and unoriginality is a potentially redemptive quality as suggested by Irazabul. I have argued that failure, deception and even the parasitical are all capable of producing something "new" and that it is through the weak spots that kitsch embarks on a path that allows it to actually contribute something new to culture.

Kitsch in this theory is considered a mixed state, or a state of splitting – and is therefore one such possible subject position for feminist epistemologies; one possible entry point in the articulation of aesthetics for posthuman philosophy, a feminist kitsch coyote/trickster whose open-ended and malleable nature can be used as an ally for theorizing the feminist posthuman. Haraway writes:

> The split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positions and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations with fantastic imaginings that change history. Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge […] The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another (1991, p.193).

In this way, we can see that this theory of kitsch could be of use in considering feminist subjectivities in posthuman aesthetics. In neither privileging the high nor disregarding the low, the kitsch state embodies a mixed, split, hybrid state in which subjects are capable objective witnessing from various vantage points outside of the singular "I" in humanistic philosophy.

Appendix i. Kitsch(ed) Theory:
Possible Terms for Future Research

Darwin
Kitsch selection   (natural / sexual selection)
Kitsch Mutation   (random mutation)
Kitsch Species

Deleuze & Guattari
Molar kitsch   (molar desire)
Molecular Kitsch   (molecular desire)
Kitsch Machines   (desiring machines)
Desiring-Kitsch
The Kitsch Unconscious (machinic unconscious)
Unconscious Kitsch
Kitsch Bodies
The body-without-kitsch   (body-without-organs)
Kitsch sensation(s)   (sensation)
Becoming Kitsch   (becoming-other)
Kitsch-analysis   (schizoanalysis)
Kitsch Production   (desiring production)

Derrida/Deleuze/Simondon
Kitsch Difference   (difference)

Bergson
Kitsch accumulation   (accumulation)
Kitsch memory   (memory)
Kitsch duration   (duration)
Creative Kitsch   (creative evolution)

Haraway
Kitsch Witness   (modest witness)
Situated Kitsch   (situated knowledges)
Kitsch Coyote   (coyote)
Kitsch Trickster   (trickster)
Material-Semiotic-Kitsch (material-semiotic-actors)

Hayles
Flickering kitsch   (flickering signifier)
Kitsch Machines   (writing machines)

Schroedinger
Naive Kitsch   (naive scientist)
Kitsch Life
Darko Suvin
Kitsch Estrangement   (cognitive estrangement)

Bertolt Brecht
Kitsch effect   (estrangement effect / distancing effect / alienation effect)

Benjamin
Glow   (aura)

Mulvey
Gaze   (trance)

Trinh Minh-Ha
kitsch-appropriated others   (inappropriate/d others)
Inappropriate/d kitsch

Floating Terms for the Kitsch Humanities
Kitsch creature(s)   Kitsch creation(s)
Kitsch pain   Kitsch pleasure
Kitsch anatomy   Synthetic Kitsch
Kitsch computation   Kitsch Modification
Kitschcraft   (witchcraft)   Kitschism
Kirsch-consciousness   Kitschology
Kitsch Life   Kitschasthenia
Kitschpepsia   Kitsch Cartography
Kitsch Noise
Kirsch Wave
Kitsch Spectrum
Kitsch Resistance   Kitsch Liberation
Kitsch Individuation   Kitsch Communities
Kitsch Myth   Kitsch Legend
Kirsch Cohort
Kitsch Context   Kirsch Contextualization
Kitsch Modernity   Contemporary Kitsch

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