

Ruth Holliday & Tracey Potts

# *Kitsch!*

Cultural politics  
and taste

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## CULTURAL POLITICS AND TASTE

Ruth Holliday and  
Tracey Potts

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*Kitsch!*

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For  
Jane Treglown  
Alan Stewart  
and  
David Bell

## *Colour plates*

Colour plates appear between pp. 144 and 145.

- 1 Murano glass rabbit, circa 1960 (photograph Ruth Holliday, bequeathed by Mrs B. Englefield, February 2003)
- 2 Racist kitsch: Mammy and Uncle Tom salt and pepper shaker (photograph Ruth Holliday, purchased by D. Bell, New Orleans, 2004)
- 3 Liberace costume (photograph Tracey Potts, Liberace Museum, Las Vegas, 2009)
- 4 Gaultier perfume advert, 2000. Courtesy of [advertisingarchives.co.uk](http://advertisingarchives.co.uk)
- 5 Monogamy spray: 5a front, 5b back (photograph Ruth Holliday, manufactured by Jesus Had A Sister Productions, purchased Leeds 2008)

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With love from Ruth and Tracey xx

*And so what if I love each sparkle  
and each spangle.*

*Why not try to see things from a  
different angle?*





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## *Kitsch!*

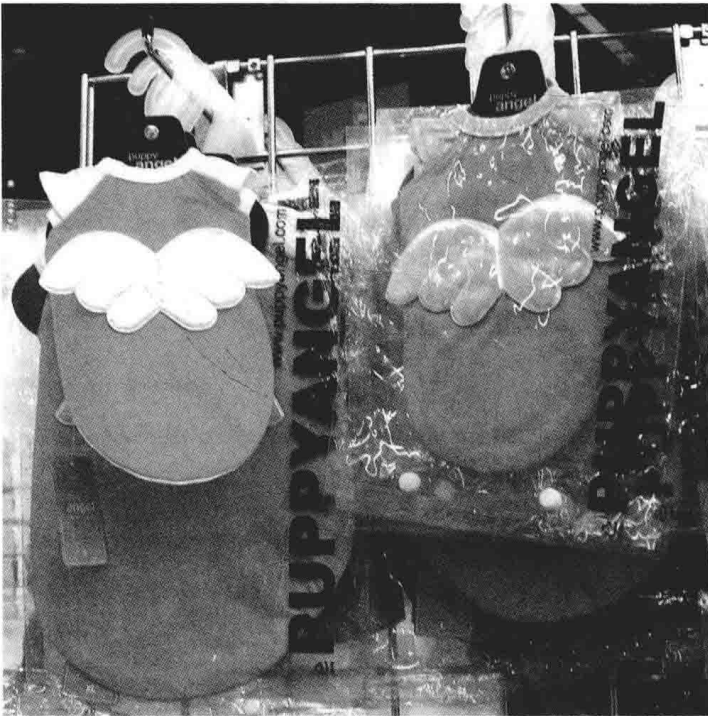
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# 1. Introduction

*America, Aloha Elvis, Blackpool Illuminations, Babycham bambis, Carmen Miranda, crazy golf, dog nativities, Dollywood, Eartha Kitt, Eurotrash, the Fifties, Farrah Fawcett Crème Rinse and Conditioner, Graceland, gold-plated taps, Hammer horror, hotpants, 'I love you', inflatable churches, Joan Crawford paper dolls, Jason King, Klassiks Go Disco, Kylie descending on a sparkly moon singing 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', Liberace, Lovehearts, Miss World, Michael Jackson, neon, nudist camps, outer space, Obama slippers, pencil skirts, Pink Flamingos (lawn ornament and film), Queen Christina, 'Qui Est "In" Qui Est "Out"' (or anything by Serge Gainsbourg), ra-ra skirts, Ra Ra Rasputin, synchronized swimming, sherry trifle, Tretchikoff coasters, tiki bars, Uri Geller, unicorns, Valentine's day, 'Vampyro's Lesbos', 'Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?', wigs (afro, beehive and Jackie O), 'Xanadu' (inc. rollerdisco and Olivia Newton-John), X-ray sex ('see through clothes!'), yellow ribbons tied round old oak trees, yeti boots, Zombies, 'Zing! Went the strings of my Heart'.*

## *Kitsch!*

It's easy to suppose – if we look around us and if we listen to the warnings of critics – that we're on the point of drowning in a sea of kitsch. A casual survey of the British metropolitan high street offers ample evidence of the kitschification of everyday life: mundane items from buckets to rubber gloves to ironing board covers are offered in a range of faux fabrics and opulent styles (cow, leopard, tiger and zebra skin, with Marabou trim and plastic pearls). 'Value' retailer Matalan advertises a range of homewares spanning seventeenth-century Baroque to Contemporary Retro; Argos highlights the kitsch in kitchen with cupcake aprons (with matching oven glove and teatowel) and pastel pink polka dot kettles. Moving upmarket, an Elvis impersonator lures shoppers into Selfridges – *Viva Las Vegas!* – where heart-shaped Le Creuset oven-to-tableware competes with cocktail monkeys, pink flamingo swizzle sticks, poker chips, replica Fifties espresso makers and outfits for dogs. Searching for gifts, we might wander into one of the many dedicated retrokitsch outlets that are a feature of the post-millennial retail landscape hoping for a 'fun' novelty item to surprise our loved ones or colleagues: a *Carry On Camping* picnic set maybe, or a Last Supper lunchbox? Or what about some bacon flavour dental floss?



Holidays overseas don't disappoint either: Walter Benjamin's old haunt – Passage des Panoramas – is awash with repro-Victorian novelties; plush giraffes and plastic flowers festoon a toilet in Crete; Mexican 'Day of the Dead' sugar skulls are found in Amsterdam; Seattle's renowned novelty shop, Archie McPhee – 'Mr Bacon says COME ON IN!' – stocks 'possibly the largest selection of snowglobes in the world', while, Bonanza, reputedly the world's largest gift shop is, predictably, to be found in Las Vegas (which, oddly enough, does disappoint ...).<sup>2</sup>

Once home – perhaps listening to *The Shangri-Las Greatest Hits* ('What colour are his eyes? I dunno he's always wearing shades') – we might slide a gold-tipped cocktail cigarette from the rear end of a plastic donkey, light it with a gun while adding guitar-shaped ice cubes to a watermelon daiquiri, kick off our cha-cha heels and settle down for 'an evening of mega kitsch viewing' in the form of *Eurovision*.<sup>3</sup> Or, having bewitched our interior to repel 'the gaudy and the godawful' by painting everything white and installing concealed storage systems, we might breathe a sigh of relief to have escaped the nightmare of other people's taste, all the time worrying about the portals through which tacky things sneak in: *those annoying 'novelty' gifts from relatives and colleagues; the increasingly trashy graphics deployed by TV news bulletins and Oh God, not Eurovision ...*<sup>4</sup> Or, we might see ourselves as having a well-developed sense of the ridiculous (*minimalists are so pretentious*) and invite a little bit of kitsch into our homes. *The knowing irony of that vintage Murano glass rabbit (see colour plate 1) tells the world that I don't take myself that seriously, that I am relaxed with my impeccable, appropriately twisted, good taste.*

Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start<sup>5</sup>

The very least that can be said about kitsch is that its reputation precedes it. As is often the case with notoriety, though, the dramatic details that occasion disrepute get lost over time. We suspect that this might be true of kitsch; there is a received idea that it signifies excessive bad taste but the specific dramas that have congealed into kitsch's reputation are less well known. We thought it helpful, then, to sketch in some highlights from kitsch-past in advance of introducing our argument, in order that we might, first, make the purpose of our intervention more clear and, second, place the estimation of kitsch

back into consideration. So settle in (*avec* or *sans* cha-cha heels), for a tale of industrial production and mass consumption, fire and plastic, fake jewellery, fascism, puppies and kittens, Mona Lisa socks, pop art, caravan heaven, Lolcats and boutique gnomes. As it should become clear, the social and cultural standing of kitsch has determined a good deal of its critical treatment thus far (as Kenneth Williams might subtitle our story: 'Infamy, infamy they've all got it in for me ...').<sup>6</sup>

### Mondo kitsch

Whether we love it, hate it or domesticate it, the idea of a kitsch invasion has been with us for some time now, gaining momentum since the 1960s. The accepted biography of kitsch, Gillo Dorfles' *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, consolidates the suspicion that 'kitsch is everywhere', telling a story of a debased and voracious mass culture in the process. 'There's no escape ...' Dorfles laments, recoiling from the sight of John F. Kennedy gnomes and Jayne Mansfield in a leopard-skin bikini.<sup>7</sup> The 'kitsch problem' (1969: 7) is judged to be one of global proportions infecting 'all man's forms of expression' (26). The product of a cynical culture industry, kitsch is a 'vampire' (300) intent on draining the lifeblood, no less, from 'western civilisation' (302). Kitsch is seen to manifest in architecture, ruins, literature, pornography, politics, cinema, advertising, religion, music, morals, art, tourist souvenirs, and even nature itself (kitsch consumers have the power to turn the world into a postcard).

Tomas Kulka, considering the vexed relationship between kitsch and art, confirms Dorfles' panicked assessment, concluding wearily:

You find it everywhere. It welcomes you to the restaurant, greets you in the bank, and smiles at you from advertising billboards, as well as from the walls of your dentist's waiting room ... 'Kitsch isn't limited to a few categories or examples,' says Jacques Sternberg. '*It's long ago taken over the world. If Martians were to take a cool look at the world they might well re-name it Kitsch.*'<sup>8</sup>

Kitsch is the Esperanto of awfulness; as Mattei Călinescu notes, 'out of the numerous terms designating bad taste in various modern languages, kitsch has been the only one to achieve a truly international status'.<sup>9</sup> From its origin in German (*verkitschen*), kitsch signifies today throughout the developed world as a peculiar form of epidemic bad taste, elevating itself above synonyms in French (*camelote*), Yiddish



(*schlock*, *schmaltz*), Spanish (*cursi*), and Russian (*poshlust*) (1987: 233). With this, as the capitalist face of modernity, kitsch 'has become one of the central factors of modern civilized life' (8).

Studies of national bad taste further reinforce the kitsch-is-universal view. Barry Humphries' compendium of Australian kitsch highlights 'the uncanny homogeneity' of his panoramic collection of artefacts, surmising: 'One might be persuaded that some Jungian synergic principle underlies them all.'<sup>10</sup> Noel Valis's study of *lo cursi* distinguishes between kitsch as a feature of Western industrialised culture and the particular culture of 'cursilaria', which marked the rise of the Spanish middle class, while Curtis Brown documents the United States's 'unparalleled achievements in the cultivation of



atrocious taste'.<sup>11</sup> Kitsch is generally acknowledged to be the offspring of globalised mass production, hence America's privileged role in turning the world plastic. Valis's and Brown's portraits both resonate with Frederic Jameson's view of American postmodern culture. The inexorable logic of late capitalism is congealed in a "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch'; from airport fiction to Hollywood 'B' movies to the architecture of the Vegas strip, the postmodern universe is kitsch to the point that escape and resistance remain, for the Marxist critic, something of an 'open' question.<sup>12</sup>

Kitsch geography, notwithstanding American economic expansionism, becomes psycho-geography in Bruce Begout's Las Vegas travelogue, *Zeropolis*, thwarting any possibility of escape. Outdoing the majority of kitsch critics for gloom, Begout proclaims the world to be a citizen of Sin City:

No matter where we live: Paris, Cape Town, Tokyo, Sao Paulo or Moscow, the culture of consumerism and recreation that has transfigured Las Vegas for nearly thirty years daily gains more ground in our everyday relation to the city. We are all inhabitants of Las Vegas, however far away we are from southern Nevada. Its name is no longer a fantasy. It lives in our heads, is expressed in our ordinary gestures.<sup>13</sup>

The kitschification of the world is the kitschification of the self: Las Vegas, prime kitsch real estate and the ground zero of late capitalist culture, has, so the story goes, infiltrated our very souls.

### Hey Las Vegas, the devil gave us to you<sup>14</sup>

Planet kitsch, for many, is mass culture hell; the perceived victory of kitsch is commonly figured eschatologically. Dorfles, for one, envisages kitsch as an incendiary force, believing his anthology to be possessed of a quality 'which *scorches* our hands, leaving permanent "aesthetic scars"' (1987: 11, our emphasis), while Brown warns of the 'retina-searing' contents of *Star Spangled Kitsch*. Umberto Eco, travelling in hyperreality (that is, the USA in the 1980s), beholds the devil in the edutainment museum.<sup>15</sup> Kitsch exhibits, typified by the waxwork, are said to operate as 'Satan's crèches' (1995: 12), where rampant and indiscriminate consumers of Leonardo's *Last Supper*, the Venus de Milo (with and without arms), and *The Planet of the Apes* encounter 'the absolute fake': 'the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show,