

The Value of Kitsch: Hermann Broch and Robert Musil on Art and Morality

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Few categories of aesthetic discourse have enjoyed the phenomenal rise of the term kitsch, which was catapulted into the limelight of German-speaking culture between 1900 and 1930. In the first half of the twentieth century the label “kitsch” made it possible to diagnose the crisis of autonomous art following the massification of culture and politics under the conditions of mature capitalism. According to this discourse, kitsch apes art while placing aesthetic effect in the service of ideological, political, or commercial manipulation. It does so by cheaply tinkering with affects, by presenting pre-digested formulas for interpreting reality, or by offering an illusory appeasement for fundamental human needs. Already in the 1960s, however, the term came to be seen as symptomatic of a conservative elite that was suspicious of mass culture and mass society and endeavored to resurrect the bourgeois discourse of autonomous, “pure” art as a privileged moral perspective on culture and society. If the post-modern debates initiated in the 1960s helped foreground the hybrid nature of aesthetic communication, which remains inextricably enmeshed with the political, the commercial, or the religious, they did not push off the table the fundamental issues out of which the discourse on kitsch arose. At stake is the question of how to evaluate the critical potential of art in mass societies given the lack of a generally accepted standard of judgment, or, to speak with the language of Western aesthetics, given the demise of the hegemonic discourse of aesthetic autonomy.¹

Hal Foster has described the crux of current debates on mass

culture as the challenge of distinguishing between critical and regressively affirmative art in the present. The difficulty lies in the ambiguous nature of contemporary artistic practices, which are often nestled between the ironic critique of the commodified status of art and the self-serving exploitation of art as a commodity (1-8). To be sure, the debates Foster examines in his review of neo-avant-garde experiments no longer center around a wholesale condemnation of mass culture as the fallen site of kitsch. Yet many of the arguments deployed today to evaluate the critical role of mass culture often echo the debates on kitsch as they highlight the loss of a clear-cut criterion of evaluation that would lend itself to connecting aesthetic, ethical, and political issues in a compelling way.² Indeed, the legacy of kitsch, one can argue, has been to promote a critical examination of the once self-evident Western discourse concerning the value of art. It is precisely this inquiry into the premises of aesthetic evaluation that makes the debates on kitsch relevant for our day.

In this essay I would like to consider the question of how aesthetic value is established by going back to the reflection of two prominent Austrian modernists, Hermann Broch (1886-1951) and Robert Musil (1880-1942), on the subject of kitsch. As I analyze their discussion of kitsch, I wish to foreground the different ways in which the two thinkers formulated the relation between their discourse and the evaluative processes it enacts. Is aesthetic value a quantity independent of the discourse that distinguishes true art from pseudo-art, or is value a function of this very discourse? How does either type of relation affect aesthetic discourse itself? The distinctive relation between discourse and evaluative process, which distinguishes Broch's and Musil's discussions of kitsch, grounds very different theoretical frameworks for articulating the entwinement of art and morality. Their diverging responses to the challenge of kitsch can serve to frame dilemmas that still confront aesthetic evaluation today. In what follows I will first examine Broch's and Musil's views on ethics and literature against the backdrop of their understanding of modernity. I will then turn to their discussion of kitsch, foregrounding the ways in which the distinction of value between art and pseudo-art is drawn within their respective discourses. Finally I will examine the implications of their discourses on kitsch for aesthetic evaluation.

Musil and Broch were well aware of the numerous ways in which their philosophical and artistic pursuits overlapped.³ Their modernist quest for defining the ethical and critical role of literature was informed by the traumatic experience of the collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in the upheaval of the Great War and the affirmation of totalitarianism in the 1930s. This historical horizon was for them emblematic of the centrifugal forces and potential for violence that characterize modernity. Their inquiries into the ethical role of art and literature proceeded from an understanding of modern societies as comprising disparate spheres of experience driven by competing operational logics. Both were concerned with exploring the relation between scientific knowledge and aesthetic cognition against the backdrop of the contemporary, relativistic paradigm in the natural sciences. For both an investigation of aesthetic experience in turn required scrutinizing the relation of the rational to the non-rational. Both regarded the novel and the essay as privileged media for this investigation.

Drawing on a vision of differentiated modernity that recalls Max Weber's, Broch identified the dawn of Western modernity in the collapse of the Judeo-Christian world view following the affirmation of rationality and an empirical mind set.⁴ The ensuing loss of a religious-metaphysical center of meaning produced the ethical black hole (literally, a "vacuum of value" or "Wertvakuum") that for Broch defined Western societies at the onset of the twentieth century. This historical development is described in the remarkable essay "Hofmannsthal and his Time" (1946/47), which identified Vienna as the capital of a gangrenous empire whose disintegration uncovered its actual, hollow core.⁵ The secularized religious yearning that deeply shaped Broch's modernist vision induced him to reject Weber's final diagnosis of an immanent and disjointed modernity and to instead regard the contemporary ethical vacuum as a transitional stage of dehumanization that could potentially give way to a new, unifying value system. This view was sustained by a cyclical notion of history as culminating in epochs of harmony and coherence blessed by the fullness of artistic style. These are necessarily followed by ages of decline and disintegrating value whose hallmark is the preponderance of kitsch. Broch placed the career of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, perhaps the most prominent Austrian poet of his day,

within this historical trajectory. In tracing Hofmannsthal's rejection of aestheticism and embrace of an ethically engaged poetic voice in the years surrounding the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, Broch emphasized that the poet's mission lies in overcoming the contemporary vacuum and ushering in new values (*Hofmannsthal* 125). As Paul Michael Lützeler notes, this emphatic notion of poetic mission constitutes a partial return to an understanding of literature that Broch had developed between the late 1920s and the early 1930s and subsequently subjected to critique following his experience of fascism.⁶ In Broch's eyes, art, and literature in particular, offered the medium for articulating the new system of values sorely needed by an age born of the traumas of totalitarianism and the Second World War. This understanding of the writer's mission was sustained by a late-idealistic notion of art as a medium that infinitely discloses the supra-temporal essence of reality. In Broch's eyes, art's power to mediate reality's infinite, and thus irrational, substance through finite (rational) symbols enabled it to create binding ethical values, to produce, in fact, a new metaphysics (*Hofmannsthal* 40-51).

Musil shared Broch's diagnosis of differentiated modernity, but concurred with Max Weber that the process of "disenchantment" that produced modernity could not be reversed. In a major essay of 1922, Musil acknowledged that the contemporary ethical disorientation had its roots in the decentered experience of a modern world perceived as a "Babylonian madhouse" that reduces the individual to "the playground of anarchic forces" (*Precision* 128).⁷ Yet for Musil it was necessary to rethink ethics while accepting the "life ... devoid of ordering concepts" that defines modernity (*Precision* 126).⁸ If Broch's diffuse religious hope identifies in art the medium for regaining an ethical center, Musil saw the aesthetic as the domain for a reflection on ethics that relinquishes the demand for a middle point from which a binding moral system could be derived. In the programmatic essay "Sketch of What the Writer Knows" (1918), Musil defines the writer's task as an inquiry into the singular aspects of experience. These form what he calls a "non-ratoid" realm, a domain that cannot be restlessly rationalized and systematized (*Precision* 62-64).⁹ This is for Musil the domain of ethics. That is, ethical experience lies for Musil in the radically singular, non-systematizable, yet thoroughly immanent. If for Broch the ethical is

grounded in a metaphysical space, whose infinite nature must seem irrational from a finite human perspective, for Musil the irrational is the radically singular, that is, the domain of finite, immanent human experience that resists generalization and systematization. Within this framework ethics forms the opposite of the system of values grounded in some realm beyond experience, which Broch envisions. Because of its singularity, the ethical grounds experiences that can hardly be verbalized, let alone shared.¹⁰ It is aesthetic experience, Musil argues in a 1925 essay on film, that makes it possible to grasp the singular by granting access to an alternate condition of feeling, an emotional modality that forms an alternative to ordinary life. This “other” emotional modality offers a realm of abstraction from ordinary experience that enables aesthetic imagination to dissect and reassemble the elements of the real so as to disclose new possibilities, new models for being human (*Precision* 206).

The extensive discussion of the mechanisms of aesthetic experience that unfolds in this essay represents one of two instances in which Musil dwells on the issue of kitsch at any length.¹¹ If aesthetic experience appears rooted in an alternative emotional mode that grants access to the singular, kitsch configures itself as an aesthetic modality that shuns the task of presenting singular experience and instead reifies it in ready-made formulas. Motion pictures—at stake here is silent film—exemplify this danger by reducing acting to formulaic gestures with stable meanings, “where anger becomes rolling of the eyes, virtue is beauty, and the entire soul is a paved avenue of familiar allegories.” This typification in “making connections and working out relations among impressions” is especially detrimental when the issue is conveying the singular emotional experience that for Musil is at the heart of ethics (*Precision* 203). Especially the “formulaic abbreviation of the feelings” on which kitsch relies stands in the way of the examination of ethical experience (*Precision* 206).

When measured against his extensive discussion of aesthetic experience, Musil’s characterization of kitsch in this longer essay appears relatively brief and circumspect. The need to distinguish between good and bad art yields a very general, formal criterion, which denounces any reduction or generalization of singular experience. This marks the great distance that separates Musil from Broch, who instead makes kitsch into a central category of his aesthetic theory

and, more generally, of his theory of value. In "Notes on the Problem of Kitsch," a talk from 1950 that recapitulates Broch's reflection on kitsch over more than two decades, kitsch appears as the perversion of art's intrinsic mission, which is the pursuit of an infinite idea. For Broch, Romanticism represented the cultural constellation that made kitsch possible, for it gave up art's traditional quest for expressing the infinite through finite artworks. In echoing Hegel's arguments in the introduction to *Lessons on Aesthetics*, Broch faults Romanticism for having elevated the finite to the dignity of the infinite, a substitution analogous to the historical transformation that led the Church to turn away from its pursuit of God as an infinite idea and to instead elevate its earthly institutions to the dignity of the divinity. Precisely this elevation of "the mundane ... to the level of the eternal" forms for Broch the substance of kitsch ("Notes" 62). Kitsch fixates and absolutizes one stage of the system, it specifies a finite idea of beauty, which can then be placed in the service of some other system for the purpose of aesthetic effect. Not coincidentally, Adolf Hitler, as well as the last German *kaiser* Wilhelm II and the Roman emperor Nero, were fond of beautiful effect and spectacle, which, as the text intimates without further explication, they knew how to exploit ("Notes" 65). Thus kitsch is for Broch not merely bad art, that is, a lesser instance of what counts as legitimate artistic expression. Rather it represents a parasitic "system of imitation," a diabolical double that poses as the system of genuine art. As such it forms a radical, destructive other to art, much as the anti-Christ represents the irreducible enemy of Christianity. This is why, as Broch peremptorily concludes, "Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art" ("Notes" 63). In masquerading as art, kitsch hinders it in its fundamental mission, namely, the creation of a new myth that can mediate between the irrational chaos of reality and the need for systematizing it. This mythological operation is indispensable for grounding the unifying value system so sorely needed in the present.

The insistence on value reflects Broch's interest in contemporary debates on the concept of value within the human sciences. His understanding of value grows out of his attempt at reconciling the anti-metaphysical, relativistic framework of modern science, on the one hand, with the redemptive power of a metaphysical conception

of history, on the other. This reflection is comprehensively articulated in the important essay on the “Disintegration of Values,” which is woven into the narrative tapestry that makes up the last segment of Broch’s acclaimed first novel, *The Sleepwalkers* (1931/32).¹² The collapse of values indicated in the essay’s title is a product of the breakdown of the ontology and ethics of the Judeo-Christian world. If in the Middle Ages the idealistic pursuit at the heart of Western culture found expression in the cosmogony of Christianity, whose monotheism made it possible to unify all domains of experience under one value system, since the Renaissance the various spheres of experience have come to autonomously pursue the infinite idea as the inherent principle that drives their respective systems. That is, as the operational logic of the various systems becomes absolutized—the logic of business as the merciless assertion of economic interest, that of the military as the ruthless deployment of force against the enemy, that of the painter as the unconditional pursuit of painting’s technical and expressive possibilities—the resulting clash of value systems begins to resemble Weber’s famed diagnosis of modernity as a strife among warring gods (*Sleepwalkers* 445-46, 485).¹³

In the context of this description of modernity it would be helpful to examine the ways in which the essay articulates the relation between thought and reality as the foundation for values, an issue to which the logical and the epistemological excursus in sections five and nine are dedicated. Here thinking is presented as a necessary abbreviation and simplification of multidimensional experience. To fulfill this function thinking anchors its infinite, abstract structure in a set of axiomatic truths that are valid at a given moment. The axiomatic system of the present, the text intimates, is consigned to the positivism and relativism of modern science (*Sleepwalkers* 424-26). Upon closer look, however, the absolute drive of modern science appears grounded in the pursuit of a Platonic idea, which anchors it in a space on the outside of contingent experience. In a move that would be indefensible within the parameters of contemporary scientific thought, the text attributes modern mathematics, one of the most prominent battlegrounds for the scientific revolution at the turn of the century, with a Platonic-theological content. The problematic arguments provided to support this thesis include the assertion that the concept of infinity developed within contemporary mathematics is analogous

to the infinity of Platonic ideas (*Sleepwalkers* 481-85).

The vision of modern science as driven by an idealistic pursuit, which emerges in the essay on disintegrating values, reflects Broch's metaphysics of history and culture. It grows out of Broch's deliberate refusal to consider issues of grounding and value within an immanent framework, i.e., within a theoretical model that relinquishes belief in a metaphysical outside of experience. There is, however, a contradiction between, on the one hand, Broch's ambition to deliver a cultural theory that will take into account the epistemological coordinates of modern science, and, on the other, his seeming disregard for a fundamental dilemma of modern epistemology since the collapse of academic Hegelianism, one of the last grand narratives of Western metaphysics. This is the question of how philosophy and science can ground their respective inquiries given that they can no longer assume a system of orientation, of signposts or values, outside of themselves. At issue is the impossibility of ultimately establishing an epistemologically 'correct' or ontologically 'truthful' relation to the given object of inquiry. Sympathetic readers have blamed Broch's neglect of this fundamental problem on his "impatient desire to know," an intellectual precipitousness that led him to seek the total vision of history and human experience that only metaphysics can afford, instead of accepting the constraints of an immanent, contingent notion of experience and knowledge.¹⁴ I would also emphasize the sense of urgency and well-meaning spirit of militancy that led Broch to insist on a new metaphysics of history and culture. It often seems that for Broch only an all-or-nothing stance could provide a strong enough response to the historical traumas of the decades extending from the First to the Second World War to engender the new ethics whose advent was presumably prepared by the vacuum manifested in these very upheavals. Hence, in his discussion of kitsch, Broch felt authorized to inject an idealistic concept of value into Max Weber's vision of differentiated life spheres. Value, as the result of the pursuit of an unspecified and unspecifiable idea, exists outside the empirical, contingent world, which it helps anchor. Thinking, the thinking that drives Broch's essay on disintegrating values, ultimately anchors itself in this metaphysical realm of ideas as it draws the distinction between art and kitsch. This position marks Broch's distance to the philosophy of his

time and severely limited the resonance of his vision of modernity and cultural-aesthetic theories.¹⁵

The limitations of Broch's theoretical framework draw attention to the evident caution in Musil's discourse on kitsch. The question that poses itself in this context is whether and how Musil, as the staunch advocate of an empirical, anti-metaphysical approach to experience, addressed the question of value inherent in his distinction between art and kitsch. Musil's most probing reflection on this issue unfolds in a brief text that enacts the difficulties of writing about kitsch. This text opens the second section in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, a 1936 collection of short prose texts that often blur the line between essay and fiction. The section is tellingly titled (with a nod to Nietzsche) "Unfriendly Observations."¹⁶ The performative character of Musil's meditation on kitsch, which is itself foregrounded by the title "Black Magic," requires that one follow carefully its progressive unfolding.

Divided into six short sections, each addressing one central issue, "Black Magic" begins with the question about the kitschy quality of a familiar type of entertainment in variety theaters, which involved itinerant groups of Hussar soldiers performing sentimental songs. The character of the scene as a "tableau vivant" suspended between art and life compels the narrator to suggest that kitsch is not so much a function of art, its deceptive other, as it were, but rather inheres in some manifestations of life itself. Art then is the medium that makes it possible to recognize kitsch, namely, as that which does not stand up to its test. Or, in the narrator's words, art allows one to remove the kitsch of life: "Is not art then a tool we employ to peel the kitsch off life? Layer by layer art strips life bare" (52).¹⁷ Yet this conclusion begs for a more substantive discussion of kitsch, which is taken up in the next section. Here the narrator points to the formulaic emotions triggered by the writer of family magazines. The automatism of emotional reaction, which characterizes kitsch, ultimately grounds in a too rigid connection between the signified of feeling and its linguistic signifier, a connection that is proper to the concept: "Thus kitsch, which prides itself so much on sentiment [Gefühl], turns sentiment into concepts" (53). The problem here does not lie in the shortcomings of available conceptual and verbal structures for articulating feeling, however. Think-

ing legitimately pursues its task of imposing an order on experience by both bundling disparate phenomena into one concept and disarticulating the single concept into many to account for a singular phenomenon (54). Difficulties arise however when thinking proves unable or unwilling to distinguish between the emotional substance of lived experience and its conceptualization. This makes it possible to deploy a conceptually stable representation of emotions in order to stabilize and sanitize emotional life. As the narrator concludes, "Kitsch affirms itself as something that peels life off of concepts" (53).¹⁸ Kitsch reifies concepts by depriving them of the imprint of lived experience, by erasing the singularity and ambiguity of emotional life.

Significantly, the question that presents itself at this point, "But what is life?" (53) is answered by a tautology: "Life is living: you cannot describe it to someone who does not know it" (54). This deliberately irritating rhetorical gesture serves to shake up the reader, signaling that the discussion is to become even more trying than it has been, given the slippery nature of the terms and the breadth of the issues at stake. Indeed, the text comes to foreground the very intellectual processes that drive it by explicitly thematizing the relation between thought ("Denken") and life ("Leben"). As the narrator suggests, the question about life is really a question of how thinking shapes and is in turn shaped by experience. This intellectual process is lovingly mocked as the narrator recapitulates the discussion of art, kitsch, and life by means of two syllogisms in the second-to-last section. The drastic recourse to syllogistic reasoning ironically reflects the attempt to bring some cogency to a discussion that threatens to run aground in a morass of slippery terminology:

Two syllogisms emerge from these assertions.
Art peels kitsch off of life.
Kitsch peels life off of concepts.
And: The more abstract art becomes, the more it becomes art.
Also: The more abstract kitsch becomes, the more it becomes kitsch.
(54)

The proposed syllogisms seek to exemplify the intellectual processes enacted by the text by schematizing them. In so doing, they aim to expose the structural affinities shared by art and kitsch. At the

same time, the choice of the syllogism suggests that thinking has no other foundations for its operations than its own processes. According to the first syllogism, both art and kitsch consist of a peeling-away operation: art peels kitsch away from life, kitsch peels life away from concepts. Art helps life shed its kitschy layers. These layers are themselves the product of a peeling-away operation, this time as the shedding of the singularity of emotional life from the conceptual structures deployed to denote it. As the second syllogism suggests, the medium of this peeling away is in both cases abstraction. That is, the more art abstracts or peels away the formulaic incrustations from life, the more it becomes art. The same is, however, also true of kitsch. The more abstract kitsch becomes, that is, the more it deprives life's manifestations of their singularity, the kitschier it gets. The question then becomes how to reconcile the claims entailed in the two syllogisms and come to a conclusion or stable definition:

According to the second [syllogism] it appears that kitsch equals art. According to the first, however, kitsch equals concept minus life. Art equals life minus kitsch equals life minus concept plus life equals two lives minus concept. But, according to the second, life equals three times kitsch and, therefore, art equals six times kitsch minus concept. So what is art? (54)

According to the second syllogism, kitsch equals art. This conclusion is, however, undercut by the first syllogism, which stresses that the operation of "peeling away" entails a different type of abstraction for art and kitsch. As the ensuing, humorously absurd formula shows, the attempt at resolving the two syllogisms does not produce a meaningful result but rather derails the reasoning that drives the text. Rather than offering the desired result, this second-to-last section closes with a baffled "So what is art?", which foregrounds the impossibility of offering a satisfactory conclusion linking the phenomena denoted by the terms "art," "kitsch," "concept," and "life."

It would be tempting to interpret this text as a testimonial to Musil's early insight into the precarious structure of thinking. In ostensibly uncovering the fundamental indifference of the deferral mechanisms that underlie linguistic and conceptual operations, one might argue, this reflection is bound to derail and undo thinking

rather than strengthen it. But what is at work in this text is neither an early articulation of a deconstructive understanding of language and thought nor an endorsement of the linguistic skepticism that especially shaped the Austrian *fin-de-siècle*. To be sure, in the end the question “what is art” remains open, and the last section closes pretty much where it started, at least apparently—namely, by the evocation of the Hussars and their irresistible black uniforms. This sight triggers anew the question whether their performance is to be categorized under the heading of “life,” “art,” or is rather just a “*tableau vivant*”: “That is not art! That’s life! But why then do we maintain that it’s just a *tableau vivant*?” (55). These last words indicate that the process is about to start again. The black magic to which the title refers can then be seen as an ironic commentary on the vicious circles—that is, the conceptual paradoxes—faced by thinking when it attempts to elucidate its own conceptual signposts within a self-referential framework. It possibly also points to the wicked effects of disarticulating thinking into all too rigid formulas—the syllogisms—that gnaw at thinking rather than fortify it. After all, black magic entails performing operations that exceed the sphere of action proper to the natural, empirical world and instead trespass into a domain of supernatural, forbidden forces.

It is crucial that the last section does not dwell on the wicked magic that befuddles reflection, but rather returns to the kitschy scene of singing Hussars that provided the initial pretext for the whole discussion. Though momentarily derailed by the examination of its own processes, reflection is nonetheless able to return to examining the puzzling experience which set it off in the first place. Are the singing Hussars real life or just a living *tableau*? the narrator fearlessly asks in conclusion. The circumstance that the questioning starts again demonstrates that reflection is not impaired by the derailment it incurs when it foregrounds the limitations of its own processes. It would also be misleading to conclude that the text has simply come full circle. Musil’s “unfriendly observation” suggests that there cannot be a reflection on art and kitsch, or on art and life, that does not at the same time thematize the mode in which it defines its terms and distinctions of value or draws its conclusions. The reason is that the operational mode of this reflection cannot be anchored in some external terrain, such as Broch’s Platonic ideas,

but must be assumed as being self-reliant, that is, self-referential. Yet this assumption is bound to derail and weaken the very thought processes which seek to grasp it, as the final formula shows. And yet, even though the process enacted by the text cannot yield the orderly conclusions Broch is able to offer, the reader does not go empty handed, since the text shows that even this paradoxical mode of operation allows for describing the affinities between kitsch and art, which both rely on processes of abstraction, though of a different kind.

Broch's choice to ground his reflection in a metaphysical realm of ideas enables him to offer a discussion of kitsch that proceeds from a grasp of the aesthetic sphere, which lays claim to both synchronic and diachronic totality. This comprehensiveness of vision remains precluded in Musil's text, which is instead compelled to proceed inductively, starting from the contingent experience of kitsch. This framework enables Musil's text to characterize kitsch as the formulaic reduction of feeling, which art can and must expose. Yet the desire to describe kitsch in more detail compels thinking to lay bare the processes that drive it. Hence the difficulties of drawing a distinction between art and kitsch are performatively enacted in a text that offers itself as a metacritique of its own reflection.

What can one learn from Musil's and Broch's diverging approaches to the issue of kitsch? Hal Foster's analysis of neo-avant-garde art, which I mentioned at the beginning, lays out questions that deeply resonate with Broch's and Musil's discourse on kitsch even as it is embedded in a very different historical and cultural framework. It is significant that Foster's survey of neo-avant-garde experiments closes with a circumspect appeal to "correct distance." Correct distance forms the premise of aesthetic practices that honestly raise the question of their own critical assumptions. This is a question of vision, Foster argues, namely, of what one becomes able to see given the standpoint one chooses to inhabit, where one stands in relation to the operations one performs, how one draws distinctions and establishes value (223). Both Broch and Musil fulfill Foster's demand of declaring one's standpoint, though in remarkably different ways. Broch's forceful discussion relies on a totality of vision, which is made possible by a standpoint on the outside of the contingent experience that is being scrutinized. This standpoint

grounds both the appealing aspects of Broch's reflection, namely, its resolute and emphatic quality, as well as those sides that seem less desirable from a contemporary perspective, that is, its intransigent, totalizing and moralizing gesture. By contrast, Musil's reflection inhabits a contingent, partial perspective, which is grounded in the paradoxical task of defining one's discourse from within this very discourse. The ensuing limitations of vision account for the partiality and tentative quality of his discussion of kitsch. At stake is a self-imposed conceptual and discursive self-scrutiny that results in a weaker evaluative stance. I believe Broch's and Musil's understanding of kitsch well exemplify the two poles between which aesthetic evaluation oscillates today. A juxtaposition of their discourses on art, kitsch, and value invites reflection on the necessity for stating the inevitable price the critic must pay for the position s/he chooses to inhabit in the evaluative process.

Notes

1 Wolfgang Braungart has emphasized the link between the emerging discourse on kitsch around 1900 and the crisis of the understanding of art as an autonomous system of meaning, which affirmed itself following the consolidation of modern bourgeois culture around 1800 (1-14). For a semantic and cultural comparison of the terms denoting 'pseudo art' in German, Spanish, English, and French see Matei Calinescu's chapter on "Kitsch," 223-62. For a discussion of the semantic mutations of the term 'kitsch' within German culture in the first half of the century, see Friedrich. For essays that shaped the discussion on kitsch after World War II, see Greenberg, Dorfles, Eco, and Moles. For a brief overview of the discourse on kitsch since the 1960s, see Kliche 284-88. For a discussion of the difficulties entailed in deploying the category in the analysis of pop culture at the turn of the twenty-first century see Römer.

2 Consider for instance the development of Marxist criticism since the 1960s. At the one end of the spectrum, Frederick Jameson has described the disengaged pastiche of postmodernism in terms of an imitation of styles that has lost the sense of linguistic norm and can no longer distinguish between plain meaning and parody. The argument according to which imitation accompanies the obfuscation of a shared standard of judgment echoes closely the standard critique of kitsch (quoted in Brooker 164-67). At the

other extreme, Jean Baudrillard's trajectory from an engaged Marxism to a gloomy mix of semiotic analysis and self-indulgent pessimism has produced the dystopian vision of a consumer culture in which the flickering images of interconnected media simulate a nonexistent reality—a vision that radicalizes the critique of kitsch by suggesting that simulation no longer requires a referent. Baudrillard 167-72.

3 Musil and Broch repeatedly crossed paths in the Viennese coffeehouses that were home to numerous intellectuals and artists before and after the Great War. Over time the awareness of their mutual affinities produced an undeclared competition. This was especially the case for Musil, who suffered under the comparison to the more successful Broch. The rivalry came into the open with the charge of plagiarism Musil leveled against Broch's essay from 1933, "Evil in the Value System of Art" ("Das Böse im Wertsystem der Kunst"). Musil claimed that Broch had appropriated some ideas from his 1931 essay on "Literati and Literature. Marginal Glosses" ("Literat und Literatur. Randbemerkungen dazu") without giving him due credit. An examination of the two essays reveals only a few general similarities and makes Musil's charge appear hard to sustain. On the rivalry between Musil and Broch, see Durzak 98-99. For comparative analysis of Musil's and Broch's fictional works, see Martens. For a juxtaposition of their essayistic practice, see Goltschnigg.

4 Broch likely attended Weber's 1918 lectures in Vienna. Durzak 60.

5 See especially 51-81 for the description of modernity's atomization in competing life-spheres, whose moral vacuum is reflected in the nihilism of the Viennese *fin-de-siècle* and epitomized by the perverted style ("Unstil" or "non-style") of Richard Wagner.

6 Lützel points out that Broch's growing awareness about literature's lack of social impact led him to denounce the self-referential gesture of modernism and to embrace the position of a skeptical "negative aesthetics." This turn is documented in the critique of literature's ineffectiveness that pervades Broch's late major novel, *The Death of Virgil* (1945), and which can be read as a self-critique. Lützel and Kessler 195-209.

7 The essay in question is "Helpless Europe: A Digressive Journey." *Precision* 116-33.

8 For readings of Musil's aesthetic and cultural projects as informed by desire to embrace the decentered structure of modernity see Luft, Barnouw 78-120, and Jonsson.

9 In drawing on the clumsy neologisms “ratioïd/non-ratioïd” (“ratioïd/nicht-ratioïd”), Musil sought to delimit aesthetic cognition from other cognitive discourses, while at the same time avoiding more familiar terms such as rationality and reason, which had currency in the anti-intellectual critique mounted by contemporary, cultural-pessimistic discourses (see for instance the writings of Walther Rathenau, Oswald Spengler, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain). Deploying neologisms was a way for Musil to avoid all terminological and conceptual proximity to these discourses, whose anti-intellectual and anti-modern bent he firmly condemned. For Musil’s discourse on rationality and its relation to emotional experience within the context of contemporary debates, see Barnouw 82-87.

10 For Musil’s understanding of ethics see his 1913 essay on “Moral Fruitfulness.” *Precision* 37-39.

11 The other instance is found in a brief prose text from 1936, “Black Magic,” which will be discussed in the last section of this essay.

12 The three narrative segments constituting *The Sleepwalkers* represent Broch’s novelistic attempt at providing a diagnosis of his age in order to usher in new values—a project he summed up in the notion of the “poly-historical novel,” which combines the multivalent and perspectival framework of modern science with a synthetic grasp of historical experience. The ten essayistic inserts on the “Disintegration of Value” in the novel’s third and last segment, titled “Huguenau oder die Sachlichkeit” (translated as “The Realist”), help situate the experience of the numerous characters, most notably that of its ambiguous protagonist Huguenau, within the framework of a sleepwalking humanity in need of redemption.

13 For Weber’s formulation, see the final section of his “Science as a Vocation” (152-53).

14 Broch himself coined the phrase “Ungeduld der Erkenntnis” in the essay “Das Weltbild des Romans” (“The World of the Novel”). Quoted in Barnouw 329.

15 Recent critics have emphasized the deep contradictions that mar Broch’s epistemological and ethical visions. For Dagmar Barnouw the main problem lay in Broch’s desire to claim a position that modern epistemology could no longer offer, namely, that of a metaphysical foundation. As she explains, Broch wished to embrace the epistemological framework of contemporary science, while at the same time enjoining the unifying, redemptive power of metaphysics in order to neutralize the harmful consequences

of scientific relativism (236). Barnouw also criticizes Broch's understanding of a sleepwalking humanity, pointing to the escapist traits of its underlying cultural-conservative view of modernity and the highly ambivalent understanding of mass society and democracy it entails (241-45). Thomas Koebner focuses on the religious underpinnings of Broch's view of cyclical degeneration and regeneration, which informs the redemptive vision at the end of *The Sleepwalkers*. As Koebner points out, its fundamental premise, according to which redemption can only occur after the affirmation of the greatest possible evil, provides an unwitting legitimization for phenomena like fascism and Hitler's dictatorship, which are assigned a necessary role in such a redemptive scheme (170-71). In the early 1940s Broch began to distance himself from this vision, in part as a result of a more thorough confrontation with democracy as a political phenomenon during his exile in the United States (184-89). For sympathetic critiques of Broch's theory of values and ethics see also the essays by Otto Peter Obermeier and Dietmar Mieth.

16 The German "Unfreundliche Betrachtungen" echoes the title of Nietzsche's collected studies, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*, written between 1873 and 1876. I offer my own translation for Musil's section title, which is rendered as "Ill-Tempered Observations" in Wortsman's translation.

17 The abbreviation "PP" henceforth refers to Musil's *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*.

18 The translator has chosen to render the German "Begriffe" both literally as "concepts," and more freely as "language," as in this passage. However, this latter choice obfuscates the text's main argument, which revolves around the relation between conceptual and emotional structures of knowledge—a longstanding concern in Musil's reflection. I have retained Wortsman's translation while substituting the term "concept" anytime the German "Begriff" is used.

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