

Mike Barrett

How does Clement Greenberg define kitsch? What is the kitsch factor of the avant-garde in art?

Kitsch arose at the same time as the avant-garde. It is the rear guard to the historical avant-garde. Though avant-garde art was revolutionary and moving art in new directions, eventually it lost much of its edge. Reliant on the bourgeois (though unwilling to admit this fact), when the ruling class falters, the avant-garde become timid and does not push the envelope as it once had. This allowed kitsch to become readily prevalent in society through mass manufacturing, advertisement, and commercialization. Kitsch is advertisements, comics, and cheap mass produced art. Where the avant-garde creates art that elicits an emotional or cultural reaction as an effect of the artwork, kitsch jumps right to the end product, telling the spectator what his or her reaction should be. Kitsch art thus becomes whatever message the manufacturers put into it. Art is no longer left to individual interpretation. Greenberg says the avant-garde imitates the process of art, while kitsch imitates the effect. That is, avant-garde art is about the causes, which the spectator then translates into the effect, whereas kitsch deals solely with effect.