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Cheap Trick: *Trompe l'oeil*, photography and kitsch as economies of 'the real' in the discourses of modernity

ABSTRACT

Critical accounts of kitsch that have been prompted by Clement Greenberg's 1939 theorisation of avant-garde art bear more than a passing resemblance to the nineteenth-century critical reception of *trompe l'oeil* painting. Each of these critiques either accuse kitsch or *trompe l'oeil* artefacts of being both instigators and disseminators of a debased reality—a reality connected to the first waves of industrialised culture. This article examines the resemblances between these criticisms of kitsch and *trompe l'oeil*, especially in terms of what they reveal about the formalist-modernist conceptualisation of reality. By reviewing the literature that positions *trompe l'oeil*, photography and kitsch as superficially realistic modes of representation, the article aims to shed light on the discursive relations that produced a particular cultural conception of 'reality'. The implications of this approach have been well rehearsed in postmodern and post-structuralist accounts of mass culture, but the present discussion takes a different route by suggesting that a similar spirit of revision could be applied to artefacts that were not mass produced. This proves to be the case particularly where, as with nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil* paintings, such artefacts have also been derided as cultural forms.



Fig. 1. Roland De La Porte, *Portrait Medallion of Louis XV*, 1760. Oil on board, 49.5 x 40.5 cm, private collection.

Introduction

In 1761, Denis Diderot described two paintings of bas-reliefs by Jean-Baptiste d'Oudry in the following way: 'The hand touched a flat surface; but the eye, still seduced, saw relief; to the extent that one could have asked a philosopher, which of these two contradictory senses was a liar?'¹ In his 1761, 1763 and 1765 *Salons*, Diderot continued to struggle with the relationship between painting that he deemed illusionistic and a particular notion of artistic truth. In 1763, though, he was simply disdainful of Roland de la Porte's 1760 painting *Medallion Portrait of King Louis XV* (fig. 1). Here Diderot commented that 'Roland de la Porte is precisely one of those painters who lack this sublime: he is nothing more than a producer of *trompe l'oeil*.'²

The following discussion presents some of the ways that, since Diderot's *Salons*, *trompe l'oeil*, photography and kitsch have each been used to mobilise a modernist and proto-modernist conception of reality. Indeed, the sustained attacks on *trompe l'oeil*—which only let up when these ceased to be the kind of paintings that serious artists produced—and photography reveal striking resemblances to the critical accounts of kitsch, which only surfaced in the twentieth century. The essay moves back-and-forth between late-eighteenth-century, nineteenth- and twentieth-century critical discourses on *trompe l'oeil*, photography and kitsch in order to untangle a relationship between them that is not always immediately apparent. To be more precise, what counts as 'illusionism' here is underwritten by an absolute distinction between empirical reality—that associated with the physical world—and pictorial reality—that associated with representational realism—but on closer examination, these realities and the distinctions between them prove to be historically and culturally specific. At the same time, these disparate discourses all share the conception of a 'false' phenomenal reality that is positioned against the ideal of 'art'. Analysing these discourses—including the writings of Diderot, John Ruskin, Clarence Cooke, Clement Greenberg and Ernst Gombrich—clarifies the extent to which modernist invocations of phenomenal reality were defined by *trompe l'oeil*, photography and kitsch.

Piet Mondrian's essays on plasticity, the Marxist-inspired critiques of mass culture characterising the Frankfurt School's and Greenberg's Marxist critiques of mass culture typify the critical discourse on kitsch.³ Frankfurt School theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno presented mass culture as a force that generated a 'false consciousness' designed to keep the proletarian workforce happy and, thus, oblivious to the real conditions of an existence defined by exploitation. Traces of these sentiments can be discerned in Greenberg's critique of 'kitsch' as a parasitic visual culture that jeopardised art's cultural value. This critical tenor is also present, though less trenchant, in the 1980s and 1990s in the writings of philosopher Thomas Kulka and literary critic Matei Calinescu. Both writers critically examined the modernist use of the term 'kitsch' but, in keeping with the twentieth-century tradition of analytic philosophy, they did so without adopting the culturally relativist position associated with postmodern theories.

¹ Diderot, 1761, [1876], p. 146.

² Jean Seznec, 2011, p. 123.

³ Specifically Greenberg's 1939 essay 'Avant-garde and Kitsch',

Accordingly, culture described as ‘kitsch’ emerges, much as it did from its earlier incantations, as an inferior kind of culture. In many of the arguments presented, the notion of ‘reality’ is closely aligned with mass culture and the proletariat, and is perceived accordingly as a threat to the enlightenment that elite cultural forms such as art and literature offer. This essay, then, owes something to postmodern analyses of culture that question whether or not ‘popular’, ‘low’ or ‘middle-brow’ art forms are implicitly hegemonic. As such, it aims to prompt further contemplation of the extent to which the notion of an immutable reality helps guarantee the distinction between mass and high culture, particularly where such a distinction helps ensure that cultural authority remains the province of a social elite.

Trompe l'oeil

The French term *trompe l'oeil* literally translates as ‘deceives the eye’. One of the first recorded uses of the term was by the French artist and critic Philippe Chery in his attack on Louis-Leopold Boilly’s entry into the French Academy’s Salon of 1800.⁴ Chery uses the term to refer to the work of a French artist, but *trompe l'oeil* was just as commonly used to refer to hyper-realistic versions of the still-life genre popular in Northern Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. These were commonly associated with Dutch painters and notable examples include Samuel van Hoogstraten’s *Trompe l'oeil-Still Life*, 1664 (fig. 2) Cornelis Norbertus Gijsbrecht’s *Easel*, 1633, and the *Violin and Bow Hanging on Door*, 1647–1721, attributed to J. van der Vaart.



Fig. 2. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Trompe l'oeil Still Life*, 1664, Oil on canvas. Image courtesy of the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

⁴ Oxford Dictionary of Foreign Words and Phrases, s.v. ‘trompe l’oeil’.

Remarking on the popularity of Boilly’s painting, Chery observed ‘the crass ignorance of people with money, who, far from encouraging true talent, on the contrary grow ecstatic, like lackeys, before this kind of painting that one calls trompe l’oeil, which is [only] suitable to decorate the Pont Neuf.’ Chery, October 1800, cited in Siegfried, 1992, p. 34.

Trompe l'oeil paintings are often described in a way that links artistic intention with sensory confusion. Diderot's description of Oudry's imitation of bas-reliefs, for example, describes a work that might prompt viewers to reach towards the canvas in a state of disbelief. The illusionism of *trompe l'oeil* is thus associated with an intentional trickery by the artist.⁵ The eighteenth century, however, had inherited an historical bias against the inherent illusionism of painting which goes back at least to Plato's claim that painting was an art of deception that imitated only appearances and not reality itself.⁶ The seventeenth-century Dutch artist and theorist Samuel van Hoogstraten took up Plato's position in his *Inleyding*, for example, when he said that the art of painting was inherently duplicitous because it sought to 'deceive the eye.'⁷ In the nineteenth century, the term *trompe l'oeil* came into common usage when a growing number of writers and artists expressed doubts about the imitative aspects of painting. Chery, for example, writing about the 1800 Salon, noted 'the crass ignorance of people with money, who, far from encouraging true talent, on the contrary grow ecstatic, like lackeys, before this kind of painting that one calls *trompe l'oeil*, which is [only] suitable to decorate the Pont Neuf'.⁸ Chery's invective represents a critical suspicion that certain kinds of painting popular amongst 'ignorant' viewers were not 'true' examples of art but merely gimmicks, cheap imitations that inveigled viewers lacking an aesthetic education .

Trompe l'oeil paintings were also regarded with suspicion from a philosophical perspective. In the 1750s, French and British empirical philosophers questioned the validity of representational art in general; heightened realism was subjected to special scrutiny because it was thought to compromise the rational viewer's capacity to distinguish between phenomenal reality and the reality of and in pictures.⁹ Nearly a century later, John Ruskin wrote that *trompe l'oeil* prevented a genuine aesthetic experience since, as Caroline Levine puts it, enjoyment of the work of art lay 'less in our appreciation of the object represented than in the skill of deception.'¹⁰ Ruskin also argued that since *trompe l'oeil* were, by definition intended to deceive, they were antithetical to the greater truths that were art's natural domain .¹¹

Trompe l'oeil's poor critical reception in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France, England and America may be partly attributed to its perceived co-extensiveness with Dutch painting of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Diderot, for one, held many such Dutch paintings in low regard for reasons including their subject matter and their popularity.¹² It is worth noting that there was little precedent for the production and

⁶ Plato, [1969], pp. 597a-597e.

⁷ Hoogstraten's *Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst*, 1678, was an extensive treatise on painting. Westijn, 2009, p. 273.

⁸ Siegfried, 1992, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27. In *A Philosophical Inquiry into our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757 [2014], for example, Edmund Burke noted that imitation might be considered beautiful but not sublime.

¹⁰ Levine, 1988, p. 368.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² 'Remove the magic from art and the Flemish and Dutch paintings are nothing else but horrid stuff.' Seznec, 2011, p. 5.

popularity of Dutch painting in the seventeenth century. This was a market largely created by an expanded Dutch middle-class who wished to express their new-found prosperity with the purchase of art and who tended to favour portraits, landscapes and still lifes of modest scales over the frequently grander-scale depictions found in the Italian and Spanish traditions of history painting.¹³ Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historians did, however, praise the way that some Dutch artists were able to strike a balance between buyer demand and quality. Gerrit Dou and Willem van Mieris, for example, were routinely praised for their innovative use of the materials, techniques and the subject matter that applied to their trade. All the same, it was commonly held by French and English critics that the great bulk of these artists merely copied existing famous paintings, making minor adjustments to them as befitted patron requirements so that they could pass them off as their own.¹⁴

Some French and English historians and critics at this time may also have been trying to grapple with the difference between Dutch paintings and those produced in Britain and France. Svetlana Alpers has argued, for example, that the Dutch engaged with visual texts in the same way that the English did with verbal texts, and thereby leaned towards a more descriptive style of painting.¹⁵ Even though Alpers' contentions are a matter of some debate, they remind us that an understanding of the specific cultural climate surrounding the paintings' production and reception can help account for striking differences between artworks of arguably similar quality from broadly the same historical era and geographic region, but produced under different social circumstances.¹⁶ From these observations, we can deduce that it was a combination of factors that compromised Dutch paintings of the seventeenth century in the eyes of its detractors, factors that include: the manner in which these paintings were executed; their subject matter; and the sheer abundance of works made and sold in the country during this period.¹⁷

Aside from its associations with Dutch art, further aesthetic and analogical objections to *trompe l'oeil* painting surfaced in the French criticism of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries. In 1823, the art and architectural historian Quatremere de Quincy wrote: 'I love to abandon myself to [the painter's] illusions, but I want the frame to be there, I want to know that what I see is actually nothing but a canvas or a simple plane.'¹⁸ By recognising the integral relationship between the autonomy of the artwork and its separation from other spheres of existence emblematised by the frame, de Quincy

¹³ Smith, 1999, pp. 26–27. In this article, Smith suggests that this class of patrons may have preferred smaller sized canvasses due to the relatively modest scale of their homes.

¹⁴ Middelkoop, 1997, p. 5.

¹⁵ Alpers, 1984, p. 100.

¹⁶ See Carrier, 1983, pp. 80–84.

de Jongh, 1984, pp. 51–59.

Grafton and DaCosta Kaufmann, 1985, p. 264.

¹⁷ John Michael Montias, an American economist, advocated a socio-economic approach to Dutch art in the 1970s. His findings corroborate some earlier reports on the production of Dutch art in the early modern era and have been corroborated by subsequent studies. Notably, he estimates that there were 700 to 800 painters of some repute active in mid seventeenth-century Holland and that 8 to 10 million pieces of art were produced for the Dutch domestic market between 1580 and 1800.

Franits, 2016, pp. 355–359.

¹⁸ Gombrich, 1990, p. 236.

distinguished painting as art from painting as illusion by deferring to the importance of para-textual elements. Accordingly, just one aspect the picture's presentation—in this case, its framing—was enough to remind viewers that what was before them was an illusionistic depiction, not the thing itself.

The status of *trompe l'oeil* may have suffered further in post-Revolutionary French art criticism because of its use in Revolutionary festivals (notably, Cellerier's triumphal arch at the 1790 festival of Federation in Paris). In 'Trompe l'Oeil and Trauma', Richard Taws writes that 'the use of *trompe l'oeil* in this context was specifically criticised, as it corresponded to a deceitful and impermanent form of simulation with potentially anti-revolutionary associations.'¹⁹ Here, the devaluation of *trompe l'oeil* painting derived from its association with post-Revolutionary forces, making them seem as if they too were deceitful, illusory and transient.

When the term *trompe l'oeil* emerged between 1750 and 1800, the notion of painting as illusion—retrospectively described as *trompe l'oeil*—was already the subject of critical derision. This makes it particularly difficult to piece together a history of *trompe l'oeil* because we do not know precisely where scholars drew the line between the illusion of painting generally, and the illusion of *trompe l'oeil* specifically: the term emerged two- to three-hundred years after such paintings were in circulation and so when used anachronistically, *trompe l'oeil* referred to a history and theory of aesthetics without identifying particular artworks. This gap between terminology and the objects specified by it is further complicated by the fact that within its first few years of recorded use in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France, *trompe l'oeil* had become a derisory term. Contemporary researchers are thus left with a difficult task if they wish to distinguish between poor examples of *trompe l'oeil* painting and painting considered poor because it was *trompe l'oeil*.

Mass production and the wider dissemination of imagery made possible by the Industrial Revolution also haunted the nineteenth-century critical response to *trompe l'oeil*. To the extent that the two attributes could be considered independently, the critical suspicion surrounding *trompe l'oeil* shifted from a focus on its illusionistic capacities—the potential to confuse viewers regarding the boundaries between sight and touch, pictorial and non-pictorial reality—to one that converged on other longstanding philosophical and art historical debates concerning the legitimacy of realistic representation. In this respect, much of the negative commentary surrounding *trompe l'oeil* resembled that surrounding the new medium of photography.

***Trompe l'oeil*, photography and pictorial realism**

In the late nineteenth century, French, English and American critics and artists commonly used the term 'naturalism' (or the imitation of nature) in a derogatory sense.²⁰ *Trompe l'oeil* artists like William Harnett and John Frederick Peto were accused of mechanically reproducing reality by working 'to a recipe'. Writing about Harnett's 1889 painting *Social Club* (fig. 3), the American writer and art critic Clarence Cook further remarked:

¹⁹ Taws, 2007, p. 365.

²⁰ Donnell-Kotrozo. 1980, p. 164.

An essay might be written on this subject of imitative art ... But it is equally true that all the greatest artists ... have been known to keep this imitative skill in its true place, as servant not as master ... when we come down to works like this of Mr Harnett, it is evident that only time and industry are necessary to the indefinite multiplication of them.²¹

Apart from telling us that imitation on its own is not art, Cook's summation is typical of a broader critical stance that linked imitation with mechanisation to construct a representation of phenomenal reality against which the 'ideal' of art could be positioned.²² The inadvertent allusion to photography also evokes an image that can, due to the industrial processes of reproduction, be multiplied indefinitely.



Fig. 3. William Harnett, *The Social Club*, 1889. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, private collection.

David Freedberg claims that photography was deemed unartistic because its 'realistic' qualities made it 'too close to nature'.²³ That outlook certainly informed Charles Baudelaire's contention that the mechanical realism of photography ought to be regarded as something separate from a human, subjective encounter with nature and thus condemned as 'a refuge of all would-be painters.'²⁴ Like *trompe l'oeil*, photography became a material counterpoint to an ideal realm and perhaps even more so when its properties were harnessed for scientific or documentary purposes.²⁵

The conceptualisation of photography's inherent realism grew from the struggle to define it in terms of existing aesthetic categories, a struggle doubtlessly compounded by the fact

²¹ Ibid., p. 164.

²² 'The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected, our profession becomes either a liberal art or a mechanical trade.' Sir Joshua Reynolds quoted in Trubek, 2001, p. 47.

²³ Freedberg, 1989, p. 350.

²⁴ Baudelaire quoted in Gary Tinterow, 1995, p. 11.

²⁵ Pinson, 2002.

that, as Ernst Gombrich has commented, 'art had to shift the goalposts' once photography entered the game.²⁶ Yet the idea that the photograph represented the objective condition of reality was also questioned from a number of perspectives in the twentieth century, primarily those that remind us that if the camera is impartial the photographers is not.²⁷ Perhaps of greater significance here, though, is the way in which the idea of an objective facsimile of phenomenal reality was constructed through photography. The historian Lindsay Smith has observed that prior to photography, 'painting's potential for verisimilitude had other determinants.'²⁸ That is to say, painters were accused of being imitative and mechanically reproducing phenomenal reality before photography existed, yet paintings produced before the nineteenth century do not look like early photographs.²⁹ Moreover, in the cases of landscape and architectural photography, a conflation between what was considered an objective rendition of reality and 'the ideal' was unmistakable. In early photographs of Greek ruins, for example, monuments are presented as being symbolic of the heights reached by classical civilisation as well as its inevitable decline, and thus indicative of Enlightenment notions of the sublime.³⁰ Whether these followed a picturesque, archaeological or political view of that sublime depended on the photographer and the immediate historical and personal context of the photograph's production. Felix Bonfil's photographs of the Parthenon from the 1870s were meant to instil in viewers a sense of Greek architecture's 'timeless perfection'.³¹ Producing interior as well as exterior views, William Stillman, on the other hand, portrayed the structures as iconographic expressions of the Hellenic ideal: 'an ability to blend the aesthetic and the political'.³²

The perception that *trompe l'oeil* and photography are bound together through an intimate connection with reality continued into the twentieth century. Gombrich, for example, argues that the perfection of perspectival and chiaroscuro techniques resulted in 'that mastery of *trompe l'oeil* illusion in which painting beat the mechanical means of photography by a few generations.'³³

Social class also has informed ideas about what constitutes reality in the criticisms levelled against both *trompe l'oeil* and photography. The nineteenth-century popularity of these forms with proletariat and bourgeois audiences, for example, helped define them as non-artistic, a definition that formed a neat tautology when coupled with the belief that certain types of viewer were inferior to the task of genuine artistic appraisal.³⁴ In the 1827 *Journal des Artistes*, one writer claimed that 'illusion by itself seduces a crowd' while art

²⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

Gombrich, 2002, c.1960, xxiv.

²⁷ Szegedy-Maszak, 1987, p. 126.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

²⁹ In his *Discourses on Art*, for example, Sir Joshua Reynolds wrote 'The value and rank of every art is in proportion to the mental labour employed in it, or the mental pleasure produced by it. As this principle is observed or neglected, our profession becomes either a liberal art or a mechanical trade.' Sir Joshua Reynolds quoted in Trubek, 2001, p. 47.

³⁰ Szegedy-Maszak, 1987, p. 127.

³¹ Ibid., p. 132.

³² Ibid, p. 137.

³³ Gombrich, 2002, c.1960, p. 233.

³⁴ Pinson, 2002, pp. 15–16.

‘seduces people of enlightened tastes.’³⁵ Here, the writer draws parallels between social status and art in a way that also indicates the degree to which connoisseurship is enmeshed with that relationship. That taste was understood as an expression of a superior sensibility was, perhaps, all the more important in a social and historical context in which neither church nor aristocracy exercised exclusive control over the image. For Kant, who sought to both secure the universality and necessity of logical categories required by the modern scientific tradition while also limiting it to the specificity of empirical experience, the refined taste required to discern beauty was confined to the privileged few whose superior faculties had been nurtured and honed through education.³⁶ In the wake of industrialisation, though, being in possession of some education could no longer be considered an indicator of a refined aesthetic sensibility. In fact, as far as Clement Greenberg was concerned, the universalisation of education prompted the demand for ‘ersatz culture’ since the ability to read and write ‘was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes.’³⁷ It can therefore be seen that when mid-to-late nineteenth-century American art critics talked about *trompe l'oeil* as the art of servants, their attitude was characteristic of an overall concern about the ‘proper’ subjects, techniques and appreciation of art, one that continued to permeate criticism throughout the twentieth century.³⁸

Responses to *trompe l'oeil* were more sporadic in twentieth century Anglo-European histories and philosophies of art, perhaps because the serious and celebrated artists did not produce the sort of work that nineteenth-century critics might have called *trompe l'oeil*. Even though Picasso toyed with the distinction between pictorial and non-pictorial realities by including fragments of newspapers, catalogues, and furniture in his paintings, for example, these works did not subscribe to the figurative conventions characterising *trompe l'oeil* painting of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the most part, twentieth-century critics continued to maintain a distinction between *trompe l'oeil* and art proper. Despite Ernst Gombrich’s acknowledgement that all paintings are illusions, even he saw disparities between the illusion of *trompe l'oeil* and that of other paintings.³⁹ Greenberg, too, differentiated between purely illusionist art and art proper, such as that produced by Gustave Courbet which aimed at ‘realistic imitation’ but also revealed the materiality of the paint through which such illusions were created.⁴⁰ If justifications for the continued question mark hovering over *trompe l'oeil*’s status have been varied, then for the most part they belong to writers for whom the distinction between art and other forms of visual culture is crucial.

Echoing both Ruskin and Greenberg, Gombrich claimed that *trompe l'oeil* ‘cheat[s]’ because honest representations ‘must be achieved within the limits of the medium.’⁴¹ For the purposes of his argument, Gombrich positions art within a semiotic field where works

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Preziosi, 1998, pp. 62–79.

³⁷ Greenberg, 1991, c.1939, p. 32.

³⁸ Trubek, 2002, p. 42.

³⁹ Gombrich suggests that all paintings are illusions to the extent that they convey an impression of reality but do not duplicate it. Gombrich, 2002, c.1969, pp. 235–236.

⁴⁰ Pinson, 2001, p. 1.

⁴¹ Gombrich, 2002, c. 1969, xxiv.

should be seen as signs, not as illusory objects. As such, illusionistic paintings destroy 'the compact between artist and beholder', thus putting them 'beyond the pale of art'.⁴² Arthur Danto also wrote that *trompe l'oeil* should not really be considered part of painting's history on the grounds that such works really belonged to 'arcane curiosity'.⁴³ Moreover, Danto adds, the aura of *trompe l'oeil* was not that of art, 'but of something mysterious, occult, powerful and possibly forbidden.'⁴⁴

Analytical philosophical methods that distinguish between *trompe l'oeil* and art that incorporates illusionistic elements have been drawn on by twentieth-century writers. The aesthetician Christopher Williams remarks that when it comes to the definition of art, 'wholesale illusionism must be uncommon ... if the concept of art is to be useful'.⁴⁵ In the 1920s, Ernst Cassirer argued that works of art fostered an intellectually productive, awareness-raising state of appreciation by cultivating their audiences' capacity for 'objective distance'.⁴⁶ As a form that dispensed with that distance, illusionism could not be considered art by this definition. More pointedly, in the 1980s and 1990s, Richard Wollheim and Susan Feagin have sought to not only distinguish *trompe l'oeil* from painting proper but from other kinds of illusionism, such as the *quadratura* of the Italian renaissance, by drawing a contrast between presentation and representation.⁴⁷ Even the historian M.L. d'Otrange Mastai, who wrote a seminal study of *trompe l'oeil* in 1976, sees a distinction between *trompe l'oeil* and art based on artistic intention and the effect of the artwork. As she puts it:

Any realistically painted subject presented in this manner [for viewing in a perspective box] could then become a *trompe l'oeil*, although the artist did not intend it as such. This establishes another limitation in defining *trompe l'oeil*: a *trompe l'oeil* must have been conceived with the specific purpose in mind of convincing visual delusion.⁴⁸

D'Otrange Mastai's claim is worth further consideration since it introduces a key methodological issue that permeates the aforementioned attempts to distinguish *trompe l'oeil* from painting or art proper. For d'Otrange Mastai, the difference between art and *trompe l'oeil* is one based on the difference between works created for the purposes of fostering illusions, the way true works of art do, and works created for the purposes of fostering delusions, as *trompe l'oeil* paintings do. Using Andrea Pozzo's *Apotheosis of St. Ignatius*, 1691–94 as an example, d'Otrange Mastai explains that 'illusionism is make-believe, very like a theatrical spectacle. It invariably requires of the viewer a willing participation, amounting to complicity with the artist ... No deception is attempted or achieved.'⁴⁹ *Trompe l'oeil*, by contrast, 'strives relentlessly to achieve

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Trubek, 2001, p. 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Williams, 1998, p. 379.

⁴⁶ As did Aby Warburg, sometime later. Grau, 1999, p. 369.

⁴⁷ Feagin, 1998, p. 236.

⁴⁸ d'Otrange Mastai 1976, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 11.

perfect duplication of reality to the point of *delusion*.⁵⁰ Here, as in other critiques, artistic intention assumes a central role in distinguishing between the two types of painting. However, Mastai does not tell the reader what artists producing non-*trompe l'oeil* works intended except that they intended not to deceive.



Fig. 4. Ilya Repin, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Sultan of Turkey*, 1880–91. Oil on canvas, 203 x 358 cm, © State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. 2017.

Kitsch and art

There are few sustained, comprehensive accounts of *trompe l'oeil* in Anglo-European art historical or aesthetic writing until the late twentieth century, with the exception of Clement Greenberg's discussion of kitsch in his 1939 essay 'Avant-garde and Kitsch'. The term '*trompe l'oeil*' appears not once in this piece of writing, yet it proves to be a cohesive account of why *trompe l'oeil* painting is often cast in an unfavourable critical light.⁵¹ In 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', Greenberg argues that, having emerged from the same historical and material conditions as one another, the avant-garde and kitsch coexist in a dialectical relationship that has laid the groundwork for the artistic developments that mid twentieth-century writers felt characterised modernist theories and practices of art. To analyse their relationship is to help explain why the avant-garde seems to emerge both when bourgeois culture rises in the early-to-mid nineteenth century and when it declines in the latter half of the early twentieth century. The avant-garde rejection of realistic pictorial modes is thus presented as a result of both the declining fortunes of art's

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 8.

⁵¹ In a passage about the appeal of realistic painting, though, he does refer to one of its foundation narratives. 'Even the bird who pecked at Zeuxis' grapes applauded his skill.' Greenberg in Sally Everett ed. 1991, p. 32, 37

bourgeois power base and the rise of what Greenberg refers to as an 'ersatz culture'.⁵²

For Greenberg, avant-garde practices are a product of modernity. They emerged with a growing bourgeoisie whose wealth was attached to the Industrial Revolution and was mobilised against the 'new cultural phenomenon ... to which the Germans give the wonderful name of *kitsch*: popular, commercial art, and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc, etc.'⁵³

Mass industrialisation was crucial to the growth of kitsch, and Greenberg needed only evoke the techniques of industry to explain kitsch's detrimental effect on formal cultural values. Thus, 'Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas.' And 'because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be, except accidentally.'⁵⁴ Drawing on the rationalised techniques associated with science and industry, for Greenberg, kitsch erased a practicable distinction between 'those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere.'⁵⁵ When Greenberg's attention turns to a specific example of kitsch, his polemical argument reads even more like a summary of the critical distaste for *trompe l'oeil*. It recalls Phillippe Chery, for example, when he mentions Ilya Repin's *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Sultan of Turkey*, 1880–91 (fig. 4).

The painting, by an artist seen as the leader of Russia's school of realistic art in the 1870s, depicts an anecdotal episode from 1676 recounted in the nineteenth century by Nikolai Gogol in which the Cossacks draft a mocking response to Sultan Mehmed IV's demand that they submit to his authority.⁵⁶ Its critical reception in Russia was mixed. Some of Repin's peers accused him of pandering to popular taste and of lacking idealism whilst others saw the painting as a celebration of republican sentiments and the nobility of leading an adventurous life.⁵⁷ Greenberg argues that this painting fits the definition of kitsch because the artist 'can paint so realistically that identifications are self-evident immediately and without any effort on the part of the spectator', that spectator being equated with a peasant who 'can enjoy kitsch without effort'.⁵⁸ Rather than being an example of artistic appreciation nurtured through aesthetic education, the effortless enjoyment of the painting makes kitsch 'the culture of the masses'.⁵⁹ Greenberg's commentary also recalls de Quincey in its assertion that art should be separate from other spheres of existence. For Greenberg, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Sultan of Turkey* muddies the distinction between pictorial and non-pictorial reality since

⁵² Greenberg, 1991, p. 32. For Greenberg, 'ersatz culture' refers to a kind of culture that appeals to a newly urbanised, literate proletariat and petit-bourgeoisie who have neither the time nor inclination for the literature, art and music that only the educated nobility could once access nor the folk culture enjoyed by their forebears.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 32.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Lang, 2002, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Windhausen, 1997, p.151.

⁵⁸ Greenberg, 1991, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

in it 'the peasant recognizes and sees things in the way in which he recognizes and sees things outside of pictures—there is no discontinuity between art and life.'⁶⁰

Coupled with a contempt for academic art, Greenberg's focus on Repin's Socialist Realism affords him an opportunity to specify why a realistic pictorial mode is central to kitsch. He argues that in *The Cossacks*, the artist's meticulously faithful rendition of anecdotal history occurs at the expense of the artwork's capacity to engage its viewers in the higher order contemplation that links art with an ideal realm. In 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', this argument appears as the claim that 'the ultimate values which the cultivated spectator derives from Picasso are derived at a second remove ... It is only then that the recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic enter.'⁶¹ Once again Greenberg echoes Ruskin, who also suspected that realistic representation was incompatible with truthful art. For Ruskin, this truthful art was a counterpoint to *trompe l'oeil* since it prompted 'not dissonant impressions, but a single, stable moment of apprehension, based on the perfect translation of the forms of nature into paint'.⁶² Greenberg also believed that the sort of work that Repin produced allowed the artist to 'predigest' his art for his viewers, thus furnishing them 'with a shortcut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art.'⁶³ In the case of genuine art, by contrast, 'second remove' values 'must be projected onto it [the artwork] by the spectator sensitive enough to react sufficiently to plastic qualities. They belong to the "reflected" effect.'⁶⁴ Here Greenberg is claiming that genuine artworks allow 'cultivated spectator[s]' to see the materials of its production—in this case, the manipulation of paint on canvas—thus making it possible for a viewer to reflect on the general nature of painting as art and its relationship to the subject matter depicted. In contrast to the immediate visual pleasures offered by the verisimilitude of Repin's *Cossacks*, genuine art requires more thoughtfulness from its viewer and in doing so, facilitates a more meaningful experience. As with the nineteenth-century commentary surrounding *trompe l'oeil*, Greenberg's argument assumes that there is an implicit link between the social status of the viewer and the quality of the work. Further, Greenberg's use of Repin as an example of kitsch facilitates an argument justifying an identification of genuine art with avant-garde practices that, in the twentieth century, culminate in abstraction.

Some of Greenberg's arguments find further elaboration in the later substantial discussions of kitsch found in Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernism*, 1987 and Tomas Kulka's *Kitsch and Art*, 1988 despite the fact that each writer addresses kitsch from a different perspective. In Calinescu, we find the observation that 'kitsch clearly thrives on some emotional needs that are generally associated with the romantic world view.'⁶⁵ The reference to romanticism is important here since, like the modernist Austrian critic and novelist Hermann Broch (1886–1951), Calinescu attributes the link between romantic imagery and kitsch to the influence of the romantic world-view on nineteenth-

⁶⁰ Greenberg, 1939 [1991], p. 35.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 36.

⁶² Ruskin, 1843 cited in Levine, 1988, p. 368.

⁶³ Greenberg, 1939 [1991], p. 35.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Calinescu, 1987, pp. 239–240.

century conceptualisations of reality. According to Broch, pictorial realism was favoured by romantic artists because it helped ‘make the Platonic idea of art—beauty—the immediate and tangible goal for any work of art.’⁶⁶ As Calinescu adds, however, this occurred within an historical context whereby ‘the eighteenth-century quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns—brought about an almost complete relativisation of the standards of taste’, a relativisation accompanied by ‘a sentimentally oriented conception of art, which in turn opened the road to various kinds of aesthetic escapism.’⁶⁷

Kulka’s approach to the definition of kitsch is different. He does evoke the prominence of romantic imagery in kitsch by mentioning that ‘It seems very hard (if not impossible) to imagine a convincing kitsch of a child crying done in the manner that Picasso portrayed Ambroise Vollard in 1910.’⁶⁸ However, in order to establish the analytical validity of the concept and avoid the conclusion that kitsch is historically relative, he seeks to divorce it from the specifics of a movement or a time. As such, for Kulka, even though much of what was commonly termed kitsch in the twentieth century subscribed to the conventions of romantic or academic styles of painting, neither romanticism nor academic art were inherently kitsch.⁶⁹ Rather, ‘Works in the academic style would be considered kitsch only if they were produced after academic art had been superseded and rendered irrelevant for the contemporary artworld.’⁷⁰ Kulka further argues that these same historical processes inform the definition of realistic representation.⁷¹ He notes, for example, that it would have been difficult to produce an Impressionist painting in the mid-to-late nineteenth century that would have been deemed kitsch because Impressionism was not then accepted as a natural and realistic mode of interpretation. Now, though, canonical Impressionist work is accepted as ‘a quite natural and “realistic” mode of representation’, and thus, it is ‘no problem to produce an Impressionistically styled kitsch today.’⁷² A well-known example of what Kulka is referring to might be seen in the work of Thomas Kinkade, a self-described ‘painter of light’ who draws on characteristics associated with Impressionism for his mass-produced landscapes.⁷³

Phenomenal and pictorial realities

Kulka pursues the argument that kitsch is not historically relative by turning to the issue of what qualifies as ‘realistic’ in representational terms.⁷⁴ It is a pursuit complicated, though, by what he himself acknowledges as the role that representation plays in conceptualising reality. As he observes, ‘it may not be accidental that revisions of the basic mimetic assumptions concerning the aims and methods of the visual arts, which had

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 237

⁶⁸ Kulka, 1988, p. 21.

⁶⁹ This is also an issue that tends to dog attempts to explain the way *trompe l'oeil* operates.

⁷⁰ Kulka, 1988, p. 63.

⁷¹ ‘The circularity of the answer that the mass appeal of kitsch consists of it being liked by so many people and the explanation of its deficiencies by reference to their bad taste is hardly philosophically illuminating.’ Kulka, 1988, p. 21.

⁷² Kulka, 2002, c.1996, p. 23.

⁷³ Matz in James, 2012, p. 122.

⁷⁴ This is in support of his conclusion that kitsch cannot be judged in terms of aesthetic experience because it is not an aesthetic object.

been unquestioned for more than two thousand years, took place at the same time as the advent of photography.⁷⁵ The debates concerning the aesthetic value of photography helps illustrates this complication, as do the concomitant difficulties of asserting a universal distinction between depictions of reality and phenomenal reality 'itself'. Greenberg claimed in 1939 that, until recently, Western art was 'signalized by successful imitation, since there was no other objective criterion at hand' but the relationship between imitation and the reality of that which is imitated is much more complex than what he has suggested via his notion of an 'objective criterion'.⁷⁶ In fact, under the conditions that Greenberg lays out, the distinction between the reality that the artwork imitates and the artwork itself is tenuous at best. Recent writers, for example, suggest that the spread of photography and the debates surrounding it as a representational apparatus—the question of whether it is a medium more appropriate to the aims of science or art—ensured that the idea of phenomenal reality became synonymous with a photographic reality.⁷⁷ The appearance of *trompe l'oeil* painting that looked like photography attests to this. In a watercolour by Antoine Berjer, *Shells and Madrapores*, 1754–1843, the painter mimics the style, subject matter and composition of the early black-and-white scientific photographs that Daguerre produced for the French government. Similarly, William Henry Hunt's watercolours, such as *Plums and Berries on Mossy Ground*, 1860, look, at first glance, like early ink-tinted photographs (fig. 5).⁷⁸



Fig.5. William Henry Hunt, *Plums and Berries on Mossy Ground*, 1860. Pencil and watercolour, 19.5 x 27 cm, Image courtesy of Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

⁷⁵ Kulka, 1988, p. 89.

⁷⁶ Greenberg, 1939, p. 37.

⁷⁷ Szegedy-Maszak, 1987, p. 126.

⁷⁸ Incidentally, Hunt's work was highly praised by Ruskin for the way in which his attention to detail resulted in highly lucid renditions of form. d'Otrange Mastai, 1976, p. 245.

The sustained critical distaste for photography and *trompe l'oeil* in the nineteenth century, and its corollary in the twentieth-century discussion about kitsch, is thus one that revolves around a particular formulation of reality that attaches it solely to appearances. It is an attitude neatly summed up in the description of photography offered by the influential nineteenth-century art historian and critic Elizabeth Eastlake. In an essay published in the 1857 *London Quarterly Review*, she explains: 'She [photography] is made for the present age in which the desire for art resides in a small minority but the craving, or rather necessity for cheap, prompt and correct facts [appears] ... in the society at large.'⁷⁹ Eastlake's conceptualisation of the photographic image is thus one that couches it in the mechanical and prosaic terms associated with reality under the conditions of industrialisation and mass production.

The cultural historian Mark Seltzer senses deeper analogical anxieties at work in the assumption that the phenomenal reality constructed through photography and illusionism was bereft of anything but the mundane associations with day-to-day existence. As he sees it, the 'real scandal' of the popular cultural explosion that cheaper printing technologies made possible 'was not so much the compulsive appeal of illusionism ... but rather the democratization of the privilege of illusionism.'⁸⁰ In other words, when mass reproduced images became an element of daily reality, cultural critics recognised that the capacity of working class life to stand for an unmediated reality associated with a large, unsophisticated populace had been sorely compromised.⁸¹ As such, even though nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics turned time and again to the idea that mass-produced culture was inferior because it pandered to popular taste rather than sought to educate its public, Seltzer argues that such criticisms were not solely concerned with the quality of those products and their effect on their audiences but also with what those audiences represented. Indeed, Greenberg lamented in 'Avant-garde and Kitsch' that the universalisation of literacy meant that rather than being the highly refined skills needed for the acquisition of cultural knowledge, 'the ability to read and write became almost a minor skill like driving a car'.⁸² As far as he could see, universal literacy had brought about an appetite for Tin Pan Alley music and Penny Dreadfuls rather than for the epic poetry of Homer or Mozart's sonatas. It is hardly surprising, then, that, as Seltzer observes, 'one of the most familiar critiques of the rise of mass culture and the culture of consumption ... takes the form of a general critique of illusionism.'⁸³ Similarly kitsch, *trompe l'oeil* and photography may well have been considered problematic because they threatened cultural standards, but perhaps of greater concern was the threat that each posed to the singularity of a formal cultural vision against which the cultural taste of the vast majority of the population had traditionally been defined.

Conclusion

It is not inconceivable that nineteenth-century *trompe l'oeil* paintings looked kitsch to nineteenth-century critics if for no other reason than the fact that *trompe l'oeil* paintings

⁷⁹ Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, eds, 1998, c.2003, p. 660.

⁸⁰ Seltzer, 1991, p. 475.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Greenberg, 1939, p. 31.

⁸³ Seltzer, 1991, p. 475.

subscribed to a representation of reality that no longer enjoyed either a social or aesthetic currency. Certainly, this is one inference that can be drawn from the similarity of terms used in the criticisms of *trompe l'oeil* and kitsch.⁸⁴ However, the descriptive categories of 'illusionistic' or 'cheap' help explain how the terms *trompe l'oeil* and kitsch came to denote similar phenomena in differing historical contexts. This relativism is immediately perceptible in the fluid definitions attached to kitsch and illusionism, but it also informs the way that twentieth- and twenty-first-century viewers and critics contemplate nineteenth-century visual culture. Neither Eugene Delacroix's paintings nor copies of seventeenth-century paintings such as Frans Pourbus' *Queen Henrietta Maria* (c. 1611), for example, necessarily look kitsch to contemporary viewers informed by the commentary put forward by Greenberg, Calinescu and Kulka (fig. 6). Yet both are examples of what was considered to be in poor taste by many nineteenth-century critics.⁸⁵



Fig. 6. Copyist studio of the Uffizi, copy of Franz Pourbus, c. 1600–99, *The Portrait of Henrietta of France*, 1800–99. [medium unknown; dimensions approx. 65 x 75 cm], private collection.

The historical specificity of the visual idioms through which reality is constructed accounts for the critical dismissal of *trompe l'oeil* to some extent and are as discernible in the purportedly Impressionistic painting *Mickey and Minnie – Sweetheart Central Park*, 2017 by Thomas Kinkade, as they are in the existence of a photographic-like *trompe l'oeil*. That is to say, while both appear very different in many respects, they are both sites at which art and kitsch mingle in a way that legitimates particular versions of phenomenal reality.

The proto-modernist, modernist and formalist construction of an immutable, phenomenal

⁸⁴ It is actually more difficult to say, in terms of an object analysis, whether the criticisms were prompted by the fact that they were bad paintings or bad examples of *trompe l'oeil* (where the illusion was unconvincing).

⁸⁵ Orwicz, 1994, p. 73.

reality legitimises the autonomy and integrity of art in an expanded visual field by claiming its independence from phenomenal reality. The position is neatly summarised by Roger Scruton in 1983 when he wrote that the modernist approach to art is one in which 'the object is not treated as a surrogate for another: it is itself the principal object of attention'.⁸⁶ Perhaps inevitably, it is also a construction that gives rise to tensions concerning the definition of reality, particularly where this is presented as being external to the discourse that identifies it. Modernist and, in particular, formalist discourses evoke an unmediated phenomenal reality that allows critics to equate popularity with dishonesty, an equation that is indispensable to the argument that mass culture threatens the higher-order philosophical values associated with avant-garde culture. Under such conditions, only avant-garde practices, those that eschew the easy familiarity of a realist pictorial mode, can be considered genuine art. The value of the postmodern and post-structuralist review of mass-cultural criticism, by way of contrast, lies in its capacity to validate the truth of a mass-cultural reality. In doing so, it points to a visual sphere within which popular cultural artefacts offer an expanded field of opportunities through which to define the terms of phenomenal reality or 'the real'. Moreover, after revisiting what proto-modernists and formalist modernists referred to as 'high' culture in terms of its capacity to sustain dominant ideologies, we are now better positioned to examine just what is at stake when it comes to determining the nature of the relationship between visual culture and cultural hegemony.

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⁸⁶ Scruton, 1983, p. 114.

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Illustrations

Fig 1. Roland De La Porte, *Portrait Medallion of Louis XV*, 1760, oil on board, 49.5 x 40.5 cm, private collection.

Fig 2. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Trompe l'oeil Still Life*, 1664, oil on canvas, 63 x 79 cm, Image courtesy of the Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe.

Fig 3. William Harnett, *The Social Club*, 1889, oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, private collection.

Fig 4. Ilya Repin, *The Zaporozhian Cossacks Write a Letter to the Sultan of Turkey*, 1880–91. Oil on canvas, 203 x 358 cm, State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, © State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. 2017.

Fig 5. William Henry Hunt, *Plums and Berries on Mossy Ground*, 1860, watercolour, 19.7 x 24.1 cm, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Fig 6. Uffizi copyists studio, copy of Franz Pourbus, c. 1600–99, *The Portrait of Henrietta of France*, 1800–99, medium unknown, dimensions approx. 65 x 75 cm, collection unknown.