

The in-group/out-group dynamics of Nerdrum's positioning of Kitsch as a reflection of situatedness within contemporary art

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In his description of the Kitsch movement Odd Nerdrum distinguishes between Kitsch and art. This article investigates the concept of Kitsch as theorized by Nerdrum as a manifestation of situatedness within contemporary art. Nerdrum's positioning of kitsch as Kitsch, and as the alternative to contemporary art, links with other critics' views of the significance of kitsch within a post-industrial, modernist and postmodernist society. The techniques employed by Nerdrum in his attempts to re-situate Kitsch are held to reflect the concepts in-group/out-group dynamics, as theorized in social identity theory. I argue that Nerdrum attempts to reposition kitsch – from an out-group to contemporary art – to Kitsch - as an in-group. In this the Kitsch movement can be seen as the manifestation of the need for a change of the situatedness of those who create within the framework of what is considered to be kitsch. Nerdrum's definition of Kitsch, however, is shown to be an ironically modernist marginalizing force in itself, again situating certain artistic attempts as the out-group.

Keywords: in-group, kitsch/Kitsch, Odd Nerdrum, situatedness, the Kitsch Movement, out-group

Die in-groep/uit-groep-dinamika van Nerdrum se posisionering van Kitsch as 'n weerspieëeling van gesitueerdheid binne kontemporêre kuns

In sy beskrywing van die *Kitsch movement* onderskei Odd Nerdrum tussen Kitsch en kuns. Hierdie artikel ondersoek die konsep van Kitsch, soos geteoretiseer deur Nerdrum, as 'n manifestasie van gesitueerdheid binne kontemporêre kuns. Nerdrum se posisionering van kitsch as Kitsch, en as die alternatief tot kontemporêre kuns, hou verband met nog kritici se oortuigings van die rol van kitsch binne 'n post-industriële, modernistiese en postmodernistiese samelewing. Die tegnieke wat Nerdrum benut in sy poging om Kitsch te hersitueer word voorgehou as 'n voorbeeld van in-groep/uit-groep-dinamika, soos geteoretiseer in sosiale identiteitsteorie. Ek argumenteer dat Nerdrum poog om kitsch te herposioneer - van 'n uit-groep teenoor kontemporêre kuns – na Kitsch – as 'n in-groep. Die *Kitsch movement* kan hiervolgens gesien word as die manifestasie van die behoefté vir 'n verandering in die gesitueerdheid van diegene wat kuns skep binne die raamwerk wat beskou word as kitsch. Met die definiëring van Kitsch skep Nerdrum egter 'n nuwe raamwerk van ironiese modernistiese marginalisering, waar sekere pogings tot kunsskepping weereens gesitueer word as die uit-groep.

Sleutelwoorde: gesitueerdheid, in-groep, kitsch/Kitsch, Odd Nerdrum, die *Kitsch Movement*, uit-groep

Contemporary Norwegian artist Odd Nerdrum (born 1944) declared in 1998 at a retrospective exhibition of his work that he is not an *artist* but a *Kitsch painter* (Nerdrum 2011b: 25).¹ With this statement Nerdrum demands that his work be evaluated by (what he calls) the *standards of Kitsch*² (Nerdrum 2011b: 25). Hereby Nerdrum not only situates himself within a certain artistic context, but also allows other artists to situate their work by declaring themselves Kitsch artists. These artists, according to Nerdrum, are the creators of Kitsch – a movement (also referred to as *the Kitsch movement*) meant to restore that which Nerdrum feels contemporary art has declared to be obsolete.

In the traditional conceptualisation of the term, kitsch has in a sense been the antithesis of art (cf. Greenberg 1939; Binkley 2000; Kellman-Chapin 2013). As discussed later the concepts associated with the term have, from the nineteenth century to this day, held negative connotations, although many theorists are re-evaluating the position, importance and definition of kitsch

(see Boylan 2010; Tedman 2010; Kellman-Chapin 2013). Nerdrum strives in his theoretical, philosophical and artistic definition of Kitsch to reposition the meaning of kitsch, in aspiring for what he calls high Kitsch as a so-called reaction against structuralist modernist assumptions.

In his re-conceptualisation of Kitsch (transcending traditional ideas and definitions regarding *kitsch*), as well as what he calls the standards of Kitsch, Nerdrum focuses on the technical skills of an artist, working in a style that is not new and is always figurative (Nerdrum being a figurative painter himself).³ He states that “the highest mastery is what is worth following, not the times”, emphasizing his obvious preference for technical mastery of figurative artistic depiction instead of constantly changing contemporary ideas in art (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 42). According to Nerdrum’s framing of Kitsch, the movement aims to portray what he calls the eternal: love, death and the sunset, focusing on the sublime experience of the individual (Nerdrum 2011a: 23). Through these physical and intellectual qualities of Kitsch, and in his comments on the subject, Nerdrum presumes to set himself against modernist thought, specifically against its marginalisation of figurative art meant to solicit emotion (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 45). He also claims to react against the persistent view that certain forms of expression carry more weight than others (Nerdrum 2011c: 31). He chooses the word *Kitsch* as the term for that which he creates in protest against what he believes contemporary art has become.

These attempts by Nerdrum to situate his work (and supposedly that of his students and other likeminded creators of cultural products) within a so called superstructure⁴ which groups certain artistic endeavours together display a certain structuralist approach to defining and separating things or people into groups by order of classification. In order to further investigate and analyse Nerdrum’s Kitsch movement as an example of such a constructed group this article employs social identity theory as a theoretical premise from which one can investigate Nerdrum’s positioning of Kitsch, particularly dealing with in-group and out-group dynamics. By considering these dynamics Nerdrum’s paradoxical protest against modernism can be argued to be an ironic continuation of the modernist paradigm.

In order to facilitate this investigation, a discussion of in-group/out-group dynamics in terms of social identity theory and situatedness serves as a framework for analysing Nerdrum’s theorisation of Kitsch, as well as his positioning of Kitsch as the alternative to contemporary art. The origin, use, general understanding of the term and positioning of kitsch in relation to (and within) art is explored and considered from this social identity theory underpinning. Subsequently Odd Nerdrum’s (re)positioning of Kitsch is shown to reflect a conscious attempt at initiating a change in situatedness, by way of in-group/out-group dynamics, of those artists who consider themselves to be part of the Kitsch movement.

By considering all these aspects I argue that Nerdrum strategically focuses on certain characteristics of contemporary art and Kitsch in an attempt to improve the position of the new in-group (the Kitsch movement) by reacting against what he considers to be the negative qualities of the out-group (contemporary art). Nerdrum thus seemingly repositions kitsch, formerly the out-group in contemporary art, as the in-group within the Kitsch movement, thereby changing the situatedness of Kitsch and defining contemporary art as the out-group. Nerdrum’s attempts at opposing modernism is, however, shown as folly, as he merely continues to propagate the modernist paradigm through further exclusion of that which does not fit into his newly constructed in-group.

Situatedness and social identity theory

Situatedness or *being situated* suggests a fixed, framed notion of place which can be viewed as the modernist binary opposite to fluidity. From an identity framework one could consider Hall's (2003) investigation of cultural identity from within a cultural theoretical and sociological perspective. Here Hall (2003: 4) states that "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse". He continues that one needs to understand identities "as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies". This notion of identity being directly linked to a myriad of influences that surround and construct it is reinforced by Lindblom and Ziemke's (2003: 79) definition of situatedness as meaning that an agent's or entity's "behaviour and cognitive processes first and foremost are the outcome of a close coupling between agent and environment".

These statements allude to the idea that one's situatedness is dependent on several factors external to one's self. Being aware of these interactions could foster an understanding of how certain elements determine one's situatedness. On the basis of such awareness, these elements could be approached or positioned in such a way as to change one's own situatedness in relation to them. When considering Nerdrum's conceptualisation of Kitsch, it would seem that this approach to consciously change one's situatedness plays a central role in his theorization of the movement. Another theoretical approach which considers an individual or group's situatedness as it relates to that which surrounds it is social identity theory.

Trepte (2006: 256) defines social identity theory as a social-psychological theory that attempts to explain cognitions and behaviour with the help of group formation processes, first proposed by Tajfel (1978) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). Similarly Hogg and Abrams (1988: 3) define social identity theory as focused on "the group in the individual". Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose that the groups to which people belong, the in-group, are an important source of pride and self-esteem.⁵ These groups provide a sense of social identity (to groups as a whole and individuals within groups), a sense of belonging to the social world. Stets and Burke (2000: 224) explain that within social identity theory the self is taken to be an object which is categorised, named and classified in relation to other social categories or classifications – this process of categorization is clear when one reads Nerdrum's definitions of Kitsch (see Nerdrum *et al.* 2001; 2011).

When one's self-image is linked to group membership in this way, it follows that by enhancing the status of said *in-group*, one's own self-image is enhanced as well (see Stets & Burke 2000; Hogg *et al.* 1995). An increase in self-image can also be achieved by discriminating against the group(s) that one does not belong to, i.e. the out-group. Through this process of social categorisation the world is divided into "us" (self) and "them" (other), forming the *in-group* and *out-group*. Tajfel and Turner (1979: 35) state that within social identity theory the reason for the in-group to discriminate against the out-group is to enhance its collective self-image, leading potentially to intergroup conflict. They (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 40) define a social group as a number of people who believe themselves to belong to a certain group and are said to belong to this group by others.

As explained by Trepte (2006: 256), social identity theory can be divided into four underlying principles. These principles are held to be social categorisation, social comparison, social identity and self-esteem.

Firstly, social categorisation refers to the act of processing information into schemes and categories, in order to later make sense of that which we encounter. As with the way one

encounters any other object this process is applied to people and groups as well. Through this process people are placed into groups according to our perceived understanding of the expected similarities of people's habits, appearances, etc. which links with those whom we consider to be similar. Tajfel and Turner (1979: 40) call this a cognitive tool to aid social action. This process can lead to suppressing differences between individuals from the same group, and accentuating the differences from individuals from different groups (Trepte 2006: 257).

Social categorisation leads directly to the next principle of social identity theory: social comparison. The categories we create for those we encounter are then compared with other groups – defining an individual's place within society (Trepte 2006: 258). Trepte (2006: 258) continues that social identity theory assumes that we do not only categorise ourselves and others, but that we evaluate groups as well. Through this process of evaluation the relative superiority and inferiority of groups are determined. Social comparison is usually undertaken with groups that are similar to one's own. The closer the dimensions of the competing social groups, the higher the need is for one's own group to be considered in a more favourable light. Social identity and self-esteem are largely determined by the outcome of social comparison (Trepte 2006: 258).

By Tajfel's (1978) definition, one's social identity forms a part of an individual's concept of self, which is linked to membership of a social group, an attachment which carries significant value. A comparison between the in-group and out-group in favour of the former is the foundation for a positive social identity. Trepte (2006: 259) explains that social identity is continuously negotiated, as social comparison is constantly taking place because categories are always in a state of flux. Tajfel and Turner (1979) showed how different belief structures could influence positive social identity. The idea of "social mobility" comes into play here, as individuals can sometimes leave one group in order to join a group with a more prestigious social identity. In my opinion, it is this opportunity for social mobility that reflects the possibility of consciously being able to change one's (or one's group's) situatedness through a process of repositioning – as Nerdrum has attempted to do with the *Kitsch* movement.

Ultimately social identity theory considers self-esteem to be the foundation for individual motivation, although Hogg *et al.* (1995: 257) point out that this hypothesis has not been fully investigated. Trepte (2006: 260) concurs by stating that self-esteem is often considered as central to social identity, but that other motivational factors have also been considered.

If one considers social identity theory, as described here, as being linked with the concept of situatedness, the idea of changing the situatedness of the individual or group becomes closely linked to the intergroup dynamics between the in-group and out-group. Consequently the next section examines the traditional situatedness of *kitsch* in order to reflect on *Kitsch* as being re-situated through in-group/out-group dynamics

Positioning the term *kitsch*

Nerdrum's re-positioning of *kitsch* as *Kitsch* seems to reflect an attempt to change the categorization of *kitsch* (as a supposed out-group). In order to understand Nerdrum's need to theorize such a change one needs to understand how *kitsch* has been defined in the past. According to Kjellman-Chapin (2010: 27), there are many issues regarding the use of the word 'kitsch', a term used to describe a variety of artefacts and images, including commercial art and aesthetic falsehoods, as well as principles of taste, as it is linked to class distinctions and conceptualisations of camp.⁶

To understand these issues, it is necessary to investigate the so-called historical development of the concept of kitsch, as it reflects the situatedness of that which is deemed to be kitsch.

The term kitsch, as a modern phenomenon, has been in use since the 1860s, first recorded as being used by artists and art dealers in Munich to describe what they called “cheap” artistic items (Morreall and Loy 1989: 63). By “cheap” these artists and art dealers referred to items of an artistic nature that had been manufactured in such a way that they could be sold cheaply to tourists. Speed in the production of these *kitsch* products along with the use of lower quality materials implied that the craftsmanship and intellectual underpinnings of these items were mostly not of high quality (Kjellman-Chapin 2013: xi). Several authors, such as Kutnicki (2013: 174) indicate that kitsch is mostly connected to the idea of so-called bad taste. These comments imply specific judgements on taste regarding art and aesthetics, as does Kant’s theory on aesthetic judgement (1790), questioning not only the aesthetic quality of the work in itself but also the moral intention of the artist (see Kant 1911). Consequently ideas of taste have been linked to quality in art, in many cases making *bad taste* and *bad art* synonymous (Kjellman-Chapin 2013: xii). This hierachal idea of artistic endeavours implies that certain approaches to art are of more value than others. Morreall and Loy (1989) and Greenberg (1939), conceptualising art from different paradigms, illustrate how categorization of kitsch (and art) reflect the ideas of in-group/out-group dynamics. Morreall and Loy (1989: 65) posit that, what they call, *great art* should “challenge the audience to interpret it and react to it”. In their opinion (Morreall and Loy 1989: 65), and in that of Greenberg (1939), kitsch is the opposite of this so called *great art*, as it does not challenge viewers by confronting them with new ideas and techniques. Morreall and Loy (1989: 64) further argue that *bad art* is not the only criterion for something to be deemed as kitsch. For an object to be kitsch, the object must have certain elements of exhibition or display value (Morreall and Loy 1989: 64). This display value follows the idea that art of a high standard is normally also created to be displayed and appreciated. The difference is that, in the case of so-called high art, this appreciation is by an informed audience by way of contemplation.

Early theorists of kitsch (i.e. Greenberg 1939; Sontag 1964; Morreall and Loy 1989) argue that those who buy kitsch products do so with the illusion of achieving the same result as the “patron” who owns something of a so-called high artistic standard worth displaying to “informed” viewers. Sontag (1964) argues, as Morreall and Loy (1989) do, that purchasing, owning or admiring kitsch is a non-critical action. This means that the admirers of kitsch do not realise that the object of their admiration is actually kitsch (as defined by theorists such as Greenberg (1939), Morreall and Loy (1989) and Ruzgystė (2007)). Sontag (1964) states that the regard for a kitsch product from an informed point of view (as to the standards of taste) implies an ironic appreciation of such objects, which then implies a *camp* aesthetic. Kitsch, as theorised in the later part of the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century, is therefore seen by its (artistically uninformed) owners as bestowing on themselves an aura of wealth, elegance or sophistication (Morreall and Loy 1989: 63) – an assumption that would not be made by those who admire kitsch for its ironic properties (see Sontag, 1964), or regard it within another framework as does Nerdrum *et al.* (2001; 2011).

Another important element of kitsch put forward by Morreall and Loy (1989), as well as other theorists such as Ruzgystė (2007: 84) on the subject, has to do with its dependence on mass production as a means of production and reproduction. As shown below, kitsch does not necessarily have to be mass produced, although the importance and implication of mass production is acknowledged here. Considering works such as Walter Benjamin’s *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction* (1935), this article also acknowledges that mass production does not necessarily automatically imply the creation of kitsch.

The role of mass production in the creation of kitsch does, however, suggest the emergence of the idea of kitsch in the mid-nineteenth century. Industrialisation had made mass production a part of Western life by this time, something that would inevitably influence the creation of artistic items of all types (whether made by means of mass production – adhering to elements of kitsch or not – or reacting against mass production and/or kitsch). Mass production lowered costs, and lowering the costs of any item, including those with so-called aesthetic value, creates the opportunity for a wider public to become consumers of such products. Being able to afford artistic items, however, does not entail a corresponding knowledge of artistic traditions among these new consumers emerging from the working and middle classes (Greenberg 1939: 39; Ruzgytė 2007: 85).

On the one hand it follows that mass-produced artistic items not only replicated original artistic works but also created works, within this replication, which catered to the lowest common denominator of public taste and artistic knowledge (Greenberg 1939: 40). The increasing visual literacy, or semi-visual literacy, of the mass consumer of the industrial age led not only to the mass production of aesthetic items born from little knowledge of artistic traditions, i.e. kitsch, but – on the other side of the scale – spawned that which has been considered to be the binary opposite of kitsch – namely the modernist avant-garde.

In 1939, the art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) published an article in the journal *Partisan Review* called “Avant-garde and kitsch”. In this article he defines avant-garde and kitsch as phenomena of the modern age. Greenberg (1939: 40) argues that in Western society, before the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, there was a definite distinction between the creation of art and the creation of artistic cultural products. The distinctions between these two artistic endeavours were made in the light of class divisions (art made within an artistic tradition belonging to the elite and other cultural products belonging to, who Greenberg calls, the peasants). These artistic and cultural products were different from what we are familiar with in a post-industrial world – because the means and ends of production were differently focused. Artists in a pre-industrial world created for principals (e.g. religious focus in medieval times, humanistic focus in the Renaissance); for an educated class that had knowledge of the arts (e.g. religious and aristocratic patrons educated to a higher degree than the general population), within a specific framework and with a specified audience in mind (e.g. inspiring devotion among church goers or political subjects, or portraying a position of power).

For those outside of this privileged high class, any artistic and cultural activities were closely linked to folk art, centralised within small communities and based on centuries of traditions and customs (Greenberg 1939: 41). Greenberg (1939: 41) does not consider pre-industrial folk art to be kitsch. Although, seen in retrospect, folk art does share some of the elements of kitsch, it was created on the basis of a different intention. Small communities of rural people did not purchase their artistic items as tourists at shops or markets creating such artistic items for just such a purpose. Within these small communities artistic items were made by the community itself. Urbanisation, especially in the nineteenth century, capitalism, and mass consumption of mass-produced cultural items of an artistic nature signalled the demise of folk art, because the small community that catered for itself no longer existed. Kitsch found its foothold in this economically, socially and ideologically changing industrialised and urbanised Western world (Greenberg 1939: 39).

In the second half of the nineteenth century artists of this fast-moving, innovative and sometimes confusing new world sought new ways to depict what was going on around them. So, along with the rise of kitsch – and in an reaction against that which inspired kitsch – came,

by way of the avant-garde, the rise of modernism. Greenberg (1939: 36) states that the avant-garde developed within Western bourgeois society. This society's extraordinary sense of history, coupled with a critical awareness of socio-economic conditions, made the development of avant-garde culture possible. Greenberg (1939: 36) further states that avant-garde artists had to isolate themselves from general society if they were to bring about any real innovation. The focus of the avant-garde was to find ways in which art and culture could progress in the ideological confusion and violence of modern times. Within this school of thought developed the concept of *l'art pour l'art*, where subject matter and content became something to be avoided in art at all costs. This eventually led to abstract or non-figurative art. With the avant-garde artist rejecting general society and withdrawing into the privileged artistic knowledge of the bourgeoisie, the general public (those people who formed the working class and lower middle class) became even further removed from participating in the creation of art and cultural product of a high standard. This arguably enhanced the power of kitsch, as kitsch reliably continued to offer entertainment and/or aesthetic product to the masses – those who were not educated in the arts and theories of taste in the way the knowledgeable expert is. The same could be said of the role of kitsch throughout the rise of Modernism and even Postmodernism.

Within the modernist aesthetic great changes took place in the perception and creation of art from the end of the nineteenth century, but specifically in the early decades of the twentieth century. The influence of rapidly improving science and technology directly changed the way people lived and perceived the world. Furthermore the turbulence of two world wars deeply impacted on society at large, something directly reflected in the art movements that arose around these times.

Looking back at the development of art and aesthetic consciousness over the last century and a half, Vermeulen and van den Akker, in their article "Notes on metamodernism" (2010: 1), argue that society has progressed beyond modernist and postmodernist thought. Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010: 4) characterise Modernity (which in this case suggests modernism) as a discourse and inherently a product of the white, European male's gaze. This is characterised by ideas of utopianism, (linear) progress, grand narratives, Reason, functionalism and formal purism. As part of the development of modernist thought in art's relentless push *forward* during the first half of the twentieth century, figurative depiction was eventually left behind, and with it the artistically uninformed viewer. Through this, art became mainly accessible to what Wartenberg (2002: xiii) calls the knowledgeable experts, a fraction of society made up of artists, academics, curators, art historians, art theoreticians, gallery owners and the visually literate public. Therefore, as the avant-garde and Modernism gradually became increasingly abstract, so kitsch came to be identified not only as what was cheap and mass produced in the nineteenth century, but also as that which did not reflect Modernism's ideal of order through abstraction. Through this categorization social identity theory's concept of in-groups and out-groups is reflected.

The second half of the twentieth century (with notable changes in post-World War II society and the rise of consumer culture) saw the development of postmodern thought. As the term Postmodernism is problematic in itself, so too is a simple definition of postmodernist art (see Lyotard 1984; McHale 1991). Postmodernist thought, however, is seen to have dislodged itself from the absolute truths, ideologies and hierachal views of modernist art. Binkley (2000: 133) argues that the last decades of the twentieth century saw an end to the division of high culture and low culture, and also, debatably, an end to the division of art and kitsch. Kjellman-Chapin (2010: 27) counters this argument by stating that the use of the word kitsch has remained, seemingly, to refer to a known category. She (Kjellman-Chapin 2010: 28) poses the question as

to how the category implied when the term kitsch is used would be defined, as the word recalls “a category of production that deliberately panders to popular tastes; [which] is considered illegitimate, insincere, inauthentic, and without redeeming aesthetic merit”. Kjellman-Chapin (2010: 27; 2013: ix) lists a variety of products that could be, and have been, labelled as kitsch. She names a spectrum of objects that range from garden gnomes and snow globes to original works of art (as well as reproductions of such works) by artists such as Jules Joseph Lefebvre (1834-1912) (figure 2). Comparing inexpensive, mass produced items of an aesthetic nature with Lefebvre’s work, which has been criticised for being sentimental, Kjellman-Chapin (cf. 2010 & 2013) does not attempt to raise or lower the objects to the same level, but endeavours to illustrates the ambiguousness of the use of the term kitsch.



Figure 1
J.J. Lefebvre, *Lady Godiva*, 1891, oil on canvas
(retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jules_Joseph_Lefebvre#/media/File:Lady_godiva_full.jpg).



Figure 2
J.J. Lefebvre, *Ophelia*, 1890, oil on canvas
(retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jules_Joseph_Lefebvre#/media/File:Ophelia.jpg).

Where Greenberg, writing within the modernist milieu of 1939, found it easy to oppose kitsch with the concept of art, art critics at the turn of the second millennium find it decidedly less straight forward to define kitsch as a phenomenon. Kjellman-Chapin (2013: ix) writes:

From its etymological and, one might argue, its ideological, beginnings in the latter half of the nineteenth century, kitsch has steadfastly resisted a single definition. [...] trading on contested notions of taste, vague and shifting notions of beauty, and unstable cultural hierarchies.

What Kjellman-Chapin highlights here is the fact that although the term kitsch is easily applied, mostly as a term for that which does not meet the standards of contemporary ideas regarding taste, it is not defined as something in itself, but rather as that which it is *not*, thus situating kitsch as *the other* – that which is marginalized as being different from the *self*. This, again, links to ideas of the out-group being different from the in-group, not necessarily for what it *is*, but for that which it *is not*. In the light of the views of writers such as Kjellman-Chapin (2010, 2013) and Nerdrum *et al.* (2001, 2011), it would seem that kitsch needs to be re-evaluated, specifically as something with its own autonomous identity as opposed to being defined by that which it is not. Nerdrum's re-positioning of Kitsch seems to address this issue of situating kitsch as the out-group based on the perception that it is the *other* to contemporary art.

(Re)positioning kitsch: Nerdrum and the Kitsch movement

Nerdrum (2011b: 25-32) explains in his manifesto speeches of 1998 and 1999 that he has come to the realisation that his art cannot be accepted in the contemporary art sphere because it does not pursue the same principles as contemporary art does. He (Nerdrum 2011b: 26) constantly refers to the development, popularity and prominence of modernist beliefs about what art is and what the purpose of art is. Nerdrum and his students are painters who depict the figurative, much in the style of the old masters – specifically Baroque painters. Nerdrum suggests that the development of art at the beginning of the twentieth century could be seen as representing “metaphysical applause to the new sciences” (referring to the changes brought to society by rapid developments in science and technology), and that it took form in order to embody a certain truth. He suggests further that this truth is related to man as a social being – thus considering man's⁷ experience of the world as universal. From the dawn of Modernism, posits Nerdrum⁸ (2011b: 27), art centred its existence on the resistance it evinces to tradition, historicism and power in all its forms. Hence innovation became a core characteristic of modernist art rather than following tradition. Creating works of an artistic or cultural nature based on an established historic tradition (such as the case of Nerdrum and his students) would therefore not be allowed or be considered as art, as it does not attempt to innovate (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 44). This idea, as linked with definitions of kitsch in the previous section, illustrates Nerdrum's awareness of kitsch's situatedness as out-group.

Nerdrum (2011b: 27) states that in time Modernism itself has become a tradition. Institutions, critics, teachers and educated people are expected to be open to the *new* because of the constant pursuit of novelty within this tradition. He (Nerdrum 2011b: 27) argues that his opposition to Modernism is not based in the movement's prominence as the prevailing order within the arts. He explains that the term kitsch within Modernism has become a generic name for all that is not regarded as intellectual and new. Kitsch is seen to be all that is old-fashioned, sentimental, melodramatic and pathetic. He quotes the Austrian author and philosopher Herman Broch who proposed in the 1930s that: “Kitsch is the Antichrist, stagnant and dead” (Nerdrum 2011b: 27). From this one would be able to conclude that Nerdrum sets himself against what Modernism marginalised as the other. That which does not follow Modernism's pursuit of the depiction of the universal experience of man through new approaches is pushed to the side and derogatorily referred to as being *kitsch* – notwithstanding the vagueness of this classification.

Nerdrum's revolt against Modernism seems to hold for Postmodernism too. Although Postmodernism does not seek universal truth as Modernism does, and attempts to break down the hierarchy between different approaches to artistic creation, there is still a marginalising of that which does not strive for new and unique ways of expression, very often focusing on the conceptual rather than technical mastery. Again, the generic term *kitsch* is applied to that which is not sufficiently daring, challenging and new. In response to this Nerdrum seeks to create an arena where those *artists* who feel the need to work within an established tradition of painterly excellence, for example, can function without having to commit to the ideas of contemporary art. For this reason he refuses the derogatory associations of the word *kitsch* and uses the idea of *Kitsch* to describe that which he creates, as well as his reason for creating it.

Nerdrum (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 48) argues that *Kitsch* seeks to generate emotion within the individual; it is *about* the individual. He argues that *Kitsch* should bring to the fore the gravity of life, in the best cases bringing "exuberance to silence through the depiction of sublime nature". In his description of *Kitsch*, he defines it as being in contrast with contemporary art's "sense of irony and emotionlessness, because *Kitsch* serves life and the individual's search for meaning". It does not seek to convey feelings and emotions through abstraction or ideas set outside of the painting. It seeks to depict that which haunts the individual through skilful figurative portrayal. It does not seek new ways to depict man's turmoil, but attempts to master artistic skills within a set tradition of figurative artistic creation. In these aims, Nerdrum (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 48) argues, lie the potential of achieving high *Kitsch*. He (Nerdrum) explains that *low Kitsch* is a stage that one needs to go through in order to be able to attain high *Kitsch*, because high *Kitsch* understands the gravity of life, whereas low *Kitsch* is still learning (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 47-48).

It is through this positioning that Nerdrum seeks to change the way in which figurative painting is regarded. In 2011 Michael Gormley, then editor of *American Artist Magazine*, remarked that Nerdrum has done for the word *kitsch* what the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) movement has done for the word queer by adopting it to describe that which drives the artist to create instead of serving as a slighting term (Kralik 2013). In this, it can be argued, Nerdrum has changed the situatedness of those who create outside of the tradition of contemporary art. This article pays further attention to this idea later, as Nerdrum has in his conceptualisation of *Kitsch* set up his own parameters of inclusion and exclusion. In redefining *Kitsch* Nerdrum has redefined the identity of those who consider themselves part of this (out-) group. This idea links directly to identity issues within the notion of situatedness, but also with that of otherness within in-groups and out-groups (in social identity theory). Consequently the next section explores the relevance of situatedness and social identity theory, as they relate to Nerdrum's theories.

In-group/out-group dynamics within the *Kitsch* movement

When considering the way in which *kitsch* is seen as a collective reference to that which does not apply to the prevailing taste in art, it could be argued that *kitsch* – as an admittedly vague but far-reaching concept – is situated as the other, while contemporary art (as defined by the so-called knowledgeable experts) represents the situatedness of the self. This links with Nerdrum's (2001; 2011) statement that *kitsch* has become a generic term in Modernism, as well as with Kjellman-Chapin's (2013) comments on *kitsch* being positioned not as what it is, but as what it is not. This also relates to the principles of social identity theory, as discussed earlier.

The manner in which kitsch is marginalised implies a process of social categorisation, where (aesthetic) objects and their creators are considered to be outside the framework of contemporary art and are categorised as being different in their aims, objectives and value. Through this process contemporary art, as the self, becomes the in-group, while kitsch, as the other, becomes the out-group. This categorisation leads to social comparisons, as explained by Trepte (2006: 258). As objects that are considered to be kitsch and their creators are identified as being of lesser value by a group that considers kitsch and its makers to be an out-group of lower standing, the social comparison is tilted against what is deemed to be kitsch. This, in turn, results in those who are the creators of what is considered to be kitsch having a negative social identity imposed on them. These creators of cultural products that are seen as kitsch are therefore situated within a framework that influences their self-esteem (if the general assumption that self-esteem is the foundation of social identity theory is to be accepted) (see Trepte 2006 & Tajfel and Turner 1979).

If one then considers Tajfel and Turner's (1979) idea of social mobility as an opportunity to change the situatedness of those who have been negatively situated through social identity, Nerdrum's positioning of Kitsch can be seen as an attempt not only to re-situate the meaning and significance of kitsch, but also the social identity of those who have been branded as being makers of kitsch. For the sake of this argument, let us consider the aims of the Kitsch movement as set out by Nerdrum (2011a: 23):

The Kitsch Painter should not be judged on national, rational or religious ground in his depiction of life – but on the basis of timeless qualities.

The Kitsch Painter is not protected by the time in which he lives. He strives to represent history's most sublime qualities, and should be judged in accordance with these.

A work of Kitsch is either good or bad, and good Kitsch must not be classified as Art. This would be an error in judgement. Kitsch is not Art. Kitsch refers to the sensual and the timeless.

The Kitsch Painter is committed to the eternal: Love, death and the sunrise.

Innovation is of no importance, nor is originality. Going in depth is the goal, for in the depiction of nature itself lies the individual expression.

Because Modernism and Art are the same, Kitsch is the saviour of talent and devotion.

This list makes a few things clear regarding not only Nerdrum's definition of Kitsch, but also what Kitsch is not. Nerdrum starts off by detaching Kitsch from nationality, rationality and religion. He states that Kitsch's importance does not lie in its assimilation with these structures, but in its focus on timeless qualities – in technique and message. Secondly, he states that Kitsch (or the Kitsch Painter) is not “protected” by the time in which it is created. Here the idea of art progressing and changing through constant innovation to keep up with “modern” ideas is set as something that Kitsch does not strive for. Kitsch aims to remain the same in its depiction of the sublime and is therefore part of a continuous process of artistic creation that has existed for centuries. In addition to this, he states that works of Kitsch can be considered as either good or bad – a judgement made in accordance to a Kitsch painting's reflection of what Nerdrum considers a product that reflects the timeless qualities of Kitsch, as well as the technical skill of the painter – what Nerdrum also calls high Kitsch (Kreyn and Nerdrum 2011: 47-48). No matter where a work of Kitsch is placed on the scale of good or bad, Nerdrum holds that it is not to be called art. He emphasises the idea that Kitsch is committed to the eternal ideas of love, death and the sunrise. These concepts are ideas that Nerdrum considers to be deeply personal and thus not the aims of art, but the focus of Kitsch. Furthermore, Nerdrum reasons that Kitsch is not innovative or original, but focuses on the depiction of nature in the name of individual expression. Finally, Nerdrum implies that art, through Modernism, no longer seeks to redeem talent or devotion, and that Kitsch now fulfils this role.

When one considers this manifesto outlining the aims of the Kitsch movement it strikes one that much of what is said refers, however directly or indirectly, to the position Kitsch takes up *against* contemporary art. In this lies the question of in-group/out-group dynamics. Nerdrum continuously reinforces the idea that Kitsch is a binary opposite to contemporary art. In this way the Kitsch movement finds its defining features invariably in what it is not, i.e. not succumbing to the ideas of contemporary art.

As argued above, Nerdrum's conceptualisation of Kitsch reflects a conscious change in situatedness, through social identity. If an artist's work is described as being *kitsch* (with a lower case "k"), it refers to a derisive description (negative social comparison) vested in concepts of what art should be within the contemporary art landscape (being the in-group). By differentiating Kitsch from contemporary art in comments such as declaring that "because Modernism and Art are the same, Kitsch is the saviour of talent and devotion" (Nerdrum 2011a: 23), Nerdrum not only redefined Kitsch but also sought to raise the status of the group, making it an in-group by way of positive social comparison.

Some problematic issues worth noting do arise when one reads Nerdrum's manifesto as well as other detailed comments on his conceptualisation on Kitsch (see Nerdrum *et al.* 2001; 2011). It becomes evident throughout this research that Nerdrum is reacting against the general vagueness of what the term *kitsch* implies (mostly on behalf of his own figurative painting style), but Nerdrum's deliberation on Kitsch fails to clearly outline what Kitsch entails. Apart from a few vague self-supporting aims, Nerdrum's manifest does not outline what Kitsch is or does, but continuously opposes Kitsch as a binary to [concepts of] contemporary art. It is my opinion that Nerdrum, ironically, positions Kitsch as that which it is not, as not being contemporary art, or in his own words: "Kitsch must be separated from art" (Nerdrum 2011c: 32). Moreover, Nerdrum endorses a hierarchy regarding work created within the Kitsch movement by referring to low Kitsch that needs to develop into high Kitsch – the latter being the preferred and ultimate embodiment of Kitsch.

Although Nerdrum refers to artists outside of the figurative painting tradition, such as composers, in his defence of *kitsch* he pays little attention to the multitude of other objects that are also considered to be *kitsch*. His musings on Kitsch ultimately focus on the aims of his own work and that of his students, creating a positive social identity for themselves.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate Nerdrum's conceptualisation of Kitsch as part of the Kitsch movement as a reflection of a change in situatedness through the in-group/out-group dynamics of social identity theory.

A historical contextualisation of the development and social position of objects that are deemed to be *kitsch* shows that the word *kitsch* had initially served as a description of items of an artistic nature that served to amuse and stimulate a growing mass of industrial city dweller and tourist consumers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By the early decades of the twentieth century the term had become widely known and used, but its application in practice encapsulated so much that a single definition of *kitsch* had become impossible. Instead, authors such as Greenberg (1939) positioned it as the binary opposite to Modern art and so-called educated taste. It becomes clear that the concept of *kitsch* had by this time come to mean that which is different from modern art and of lesser aesthetic and cultural value. At the start of the new millennium Postmodernism has supposedly gradually dismantled hierarchy within the

arts, but authors such as Kjellman-Chapin (2010 and 2013) argue that the vagueness of the application and meaning of the word *kitsch* still positions what the term describes as being on the margins of contemporary art.

As a reaction to this marginalisation and *othering* of certain forms of artistic and cultural production, Nerdrum sets out to reposition kitsch. He redefines his work as Kitsch and theorises the meaning, aims and importance of Kitsch in several speeches and publications. He calls Kitsch a superstructure for those who do not wish to create within the limits and boundaries of contemporary art.

I argue that Nerdrum's repositioning of Kitsch displays a change in the situatedness of objects, and consequently their creators, that have been judged as kitsch. I assert further that this (attempted) change in situatedness reflects intergroup dynamics as explained in social identity theory. Through a process of social categorisation and social comparison, Nerdrum repositions Kitsch in relation to contemporary art by declaring Kitsch to be that which contemporary art is not. This process consequently changes the social identity of those who consider themselves to be part of this new in-group, created by Nerdrum, thus indeed changing the situatedness of these group members.

The situatedness of Nerdrum's new in-group (the Kitsch movement) does not come without its own complications. In his attempt to contest the way in which kitsch is seen as the *other*, he positions Kitsch in a manifest that constantly announces it as the alternative to contemporary art. By doing this he again defines Kitsch by what it is not, instead of clearly defining what it is. Nerdrum also sets up a hierarchy within Kitsch, when referring to low Kitsch and high Kitsch. This implies that one form of aesthetic creation is, once again, seen as being of more value than another. Of further importance is the fact that Nerdrum constantly opposes modernistic thought, but uses phrases like universal man (with its inherent connotations to patriarchy), and the term superstructure, as well as the concept of writing a detailed manifest – all very strong modernist elements.

Nerdrum may therefore have succeeded in changing the situatedness of his own work, and the work of his students and followers, not by diminishing the prominence of the social identity of contemporary art, but by in turn marginalising those kitsch products that do not conform to his new social group's values as the new out-group.

Notes

- 1 This statement was made at the press conference held before the opening of the retrospective exhibition of Nerdrum's work "Odd Nerdrum – Paintings 1978-1998", at The Astrup Fearnley Museum of Modern Art in Oslo.
- 2 In this article the term kitsch appears both as written with a lower case "k" or with an upper case "K". In these cases kitsch (with a lower case "k") refers to the broad idea of the term, which this article examines in the section discussing the development of the concept of kitsch in modern society, whereas Kitsch (with an upper case "K") refers to Odd Nerdrum's repositioning of certain artistic endeavours, which this article also examines.
- 3 Due to copyright restrictions images of Nerdrum's work cannot be included in this article. Visit www.nerdrummuseum.com to view his collection.
- 4 Nerdrum's use of the term superstructure is noted here. The term's obvious link to Marxist ideas on the division of society regarding economic structure – where the superstructure represents the political and legal institutions of society (Wolff 2011), is addressed later in the article.

- 5 Some authors question the centrality of self-esteem as the foundation of social identity (see Hogg et al. 1995:257; Trepte 2006:260). Considering Nerdrum's (2011:30) comments on the position of the creator of Kitsch as needing a superstructure to work within (which may also refer to the self-esteem of the artist), I accept the possibility of other motivational factors that may fuel social identity, but retain the hypothesis that self-esteem lies at the heart of this matter.
- 6 Camp can briefly be described as an ironic, yet informed, appropriation of kitsch elements
- 7 within art (see Sontag 1964). Although camp's roots are intertwined with kitsch, this article does not focus on the approaches of camp or camp's (ironic) use of kitsch.
- 8 I take note of the use of the term man as opposed to an alternative such as human beings, and refer back to it (along with repeated instances thereof) later in this article.
- 9 Nerdrum's obvious and repeated use of modernist language is noted and discussed later.

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