The Imperfect is our Paradise:

Wallace Stevens, Kitsch, Philosophy

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The readings I’ve selected for today are Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘The Poems of our Climate’ and passages from Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (pgs. 237-244).

In one sense, my choice of these readings is arbitrary, as the themes I want to use them to explore can be found in many other sites of intellectual and cultural history: not just in literature, but in the history of the visual arts, architecture, political movements, philosophy and popular culture. I chose the Stevens poem as my focus because, quite simply, it’s my favourite poem, and I think a potent distillation of the themes I’d like to examine. Kundera’s book, on the other hand, isn’t at all my favourite novel. In fact I think it’s something of a failed novel. But I do think Kundera’s novelistic failures have a lot to do with his successes as a critic and as a theorist, which in turn make his description of kitsch here again, especially potent. But I could have equally selected essays by Adorno, Herman Broch or Clement Greenburg– all who work in a Marxist tradition of kitsch – to offer a similar starting point.

So what do Stevens’ poem and Kundera’s discussion of kitsch have to do with each other, and what do they both in turn have to do with philosophy?

My proposal is that one thing that Stevens’ poem offers us is a contrast between the particular ethical and aesthetic mode that Kundera and others call ‘kitsch’, and a different mode, which for lack of a better word we might call a more honest, open or detotalizing mode. So let me begin with the poem, and then turn to how we might situate it in a theory of Kitsch:
I
Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations – one desires
So much more than that. The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there.

II
Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one’s torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III
There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

We have a flower arrangement, a perfect flower arrangement. All the elements are in place: a brilliant bowl of white porcelain, cold, low and round; a still afternoon, light reflecting off the snow outside; a pool of water, clear and brilliant-edged; pink and white carnations. We have a flower arrangement, but no arranger: no ego, no will. “Nothing more than the carnations there”.

And yet, Stevens tells us, “one desires so much more than that”. That is, one desires so much more than this image of complete perfection, and this erasure of self and desire, the concealment of the “evilly compounded, vital I”. Despite this attempt at sublimation of self, “One would want more, one would need more, more than a world of white and snowy scents”. The reason, Stevens tells us in the third stanza, is that there would remain “the never-resting mind”, a mind which could not bear this perfect image for long, that “would want to escape, come back/To what had been so long composed”.

The imperfect, Stevens tells us, is our paradise. The imperfect is hot in us, unlike the cold porcelain. It is bitter, but it is also the source of delight; imperfection is the thing that is “so much more than pink and white carnations”. And so we must dwell not only on images of perfection, but also dwell with “flawed words and stubborn sounds”.

Here we have the contrast between two modes, two ways of being in the world: a mode whose telos is perfection and completeness, and a mode that rejects the sufficiency of perfection and the possibility of final completion.

Now, it’s true that Stevens’ image of the flower arrangement isn’t kitsch in the sense of how we normally or colloquially use the word: it’s not gaudy, or maudlin, or even in obviously poor taste – although flower arrangements, especially those involving carnations, are not obviously in good taste either. Nonetheless, I think it can be useful to think of the image of the flower arrangement as kitsch – and Stevens’ poetic critique of that image as a critique of kitsch. Since Stevens himself was a practitioner of flower arrangement, one might even read the poem as a critique of his own tendencies toward kitsch.

The word ‘kitsch’ is of obscure etymology, perhaps coming from German words for ‘rubbish’ or ‘to make cheap’, or the English word ‘sketch’, or even an inversion of the French ‘chic’. It began to be used in the 1860’s in Munich among art dealers to describe the cheap, massed produced and sentimental pictures that then were flooding the German art market. In the 1930’s, the term was taken up by Marxist critics, most notably Theodor Adorno, Clement Greenberg and Hermann Broch. For them the category of kitsch was useful for its duality as both an aesthetic and an ethical category. For ‘kitsch’ has always indicated not only or even bad art, but moreover dishonest and deceitful art: art whose aesthetic failures are bound up with its ethical failures. Adorno called Kitsch a form of “false consciousness”, Greenberg “the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times” and Broch “the element of evil in the value system of art”.

This refined concept of kitsch contains many elements: didacticism, mere imitation of real art and real aesthetic experience, the quick and easy triggering of emotion. For Greenberg, kitsch is necessarily tied to a particular means of production, namely mechanised mass production, and for both Adorno and Greenberg it is a specifically
modern form of distraction from the conditions of oppression. Thus for Adorno and Greenberg, the avant garde tradition in art is the opposite of kitsch, since it is not mass-produced and (they claim) not in service of oppressive ideology. Meanwhile, Broch identifies the avant garde with kitsch. In this connection, one might draw an analogy between avant garde art and the Marxist analysis of religion: religion is not just the ‘opium of the masses’, but also a theoretical rather than manifest revolution against oppression.

The element of kitsch I want to focus on, and that Kundera focuses on, and that is indeed common to all of these accounts, is this. A kitsch object presents itself as complete, as a total and totalizing system. It doesn’t just exclude what lies outside of it, it actually denies the existence of a world outside the system. As Kundera says, kitsch is the denial of shit. This particular feature of kitsch allows us, as Kundera does, to apply the idea far beyond just works of art: to political regimes, to experiences, to ways of being in the world – and, I will suggest at the end, maybe even philosophy.

If we return to Stevens’ poem, we see, I think, first the presentation of a kitsch possibility: that it might suffice to dwell forever on this image, that it could be enough just to have flowers perfectly arranged in a brilliant bowl on an afternoon in late winter. We then get a critique and destruction of the image. The ‘never-resting mind’ breaks through to say that this is not enough, that there is something outside this closed system, that no closed system will contain the mind.

As I said, my choice of Stevens is in a sense arbitrary in that this dialectical movement between kitsch and critique can, I think, be found everywhere. Think, for example, of the contrast in Plato’s *Symposium* between Aristophanes’ vision of love and that of Socrates. According to Aristophanes’ myth of the circle men, we are all just halves wandering around, looking for our other halves, having been split from them by the jealous gods. It’s a myth that dreams of completion and perfection. But Diotima, via Socrates, offers a radically different vision of love: it is in the nature of eros, she says, to be reproductive, not contemplative. That is, love isn’t by nature contemplative, ever finding total and integral satisfaction; the erotic drive should lead us to forever desire, forever create.

Think too of the contrast between the High Renaissance and Mannerism, Kierkegaard’s ethical and aesthetic modes versus his religious mode, romantic comedies versus
comedies of remarriage, the buildings of Corbusier versus those of Hundertwasser, the ‘hysterical realism’ of Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* versus the haunting restraint of Marilyn Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. (Indeed, even compare *White Teeth* with Zadie Smith’s recent essay in the *New York Review of Books*, “On Joy”)

When we start using the concept of kitsch in this way – to draw a distinction between the mode that dreams of completeness, and the mode that dwells in incompleteness – it becomes clear that not everything that is kitsch is bad, or in poor taste. But everything that is kitsch, I submit, promises the unpromisable: total satisfaction, no residue of desire. Kitsch denies most of all human nature – our desires and restlessness, but also our corporeality and temporality, our inevitable association with shit.

A final question – not for me to answer, but perhaps for us to discuss. What sort of philosophy would or should count as kitsch philosophy, and what sort of philosophy resists kitsch? The obvious, and I think in some sense correct answer, is surely Alain de Botton: pre-digested philosophy on the cheap, with all the satisfactions but none of the demands of real, or ‘high’ philosophy. A mere simulacram of philosophy.

But perhaps a worthwhile question is: can we find kitsch philosophy in ‘high’, academic philosophy?

If a kitsch philosophy is one that purports to answer all questions, to be the final word, without gesturing to what is outside of it, not containable within its own system, that makes an issue of its own limits? Does this not characterise much of analytic philosophy? And is not the experience of doing analytic philosophy – playing ‘the game’ as we say – sometimes so similar to doing those absorptive activities that we think are typical of kitsch, like watching TV or playing a video game, albeit more intellectually taxing and a lot less fun? Can analytic philosophy be, in this sense, kitsch? If so, then what does a non-kitsch philosophy look like? And more importantly, what does a non-kitsch life look like?