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The Kitsch Masterpiece: Odd Nerdrum and the Problem of the New Old Masters

Jordan Walker

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by

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Under the Direction of Susan Richmond, PhD

ABSTRACT

Norwegian figurative painter Odd Nerdrum has garnered fame and notoriety for his founding of the Kitsch Movement, a group of contemporary painters who have rejected the modern usage of the term “art” in order to return to the style of the Old Masters. When asked what the goal of a painter within the Kitsch Movement is, Nerdrum claims that it is to create masterpieces. This paper examines the seemingly paradoxical connection of the words “kitsch” and “masterpiece” through the lens of contemporary art and visual culture in order to address the state of figural painting and tradition. The argument presented here is that Nerdrum, in rejecting the term art, is in fact acting in a very artistic way that aims to reinvigorate both art and painting. However, Nerdrum’s stated goal of creating a masterpiece today is not without problems, which must be addressed in connection with the Kitsch Movement’s production.

INDEX WORDS: Aesthetics, Contemporary Painting, Figurative Painting, Canonization, Modernism, Postmodernism, Postart, Mimesis, Naturalism, Skill, Originality, Replication, Representational Painting, Sincerity, Truth, Timelessness, Mythology, Archetypes, Arthur Danto, Donald Kuspit, Clement Greenberg, Jean Baudrillard

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DEDICATION

For my mother and father, naturally.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Perhaps fittingly, I first encountered the work of self-proclaimed kitsch painter Odd Nerdrum in a coffee table book rather than in a gallery or museum. The timing, too, was appropriate. It was the winter of 2012, and I was a graduate painting student full of my own preconceived notions of some institutional hierarchy of images in relation to art and culture. The very mention of the word "kitsch" would conjure pictures of things that surely existed at the bottom of this hierarchy: the dreaded "low culture" of Hallmark greeting cards, gaudy posters of yesterday's popstars, and all forms of commercial illustration. If ever the notion of kitsch *painting* was suggested, I could only think dismissively of the likes of Thomas Kinkade or the painted billboards of the 1950's—either one a far cry from the "real" paintings of Rembrandt and Caravaggio that I was so enamored with. This is why my inaugural encounter with Nerdrum would mark a troubling brush with the unknown; if this was truly kitsch, then it was unlike any kitsch that I had ever seen.

Nerdrum's was a majestic and desolate world rendered in the same moody chiaroscuro of the Old Masters and populated with enigmatic figures that recalled medieval and Nordic myths (Fig. 1). These were works that were undeniably contemporary, yet also ancient and timeless. The result was a confrontation with the aesthetic, a headlong collision with something strangely sublime that left me—as much as anyone can claim such a thing from a coffee table book—transformed. What was troubling, however, was the recognition that these affects were traditionally held to be functions of *art* rather than kitsch. Altogether, the experience left me saddled with a single burning question: how does one distinguish art from kitsch in today's visual culture?

Figure 1: Odd Nerdrum, *Five Figures Around a Water Hole*, 1992

1.1 Odd Nerdrum and the Kitsch Movement

It must be said that I am hardly the first person to wrestle with this quandary. For some decades now, the question of kitsch has cast a long shadow over contemporary figural painting. For many painters the term is an instant kiss of death, one that relegates works to the realms of illustration and low culture regardless of skill in execution. However, it is the very stigma of the word that causes Odd Nerdrum to emerge as an interesting presence. Rather than eschewing the label of kitsch, Nerdrum embraces it as a separate yet equally viable philosophy from art which has since gained a notable following. This following takes the form of the Kitsch Movement, a group of painters who have rallied around Nerdrum in response to his work and writing.[1] Several

[1] Brandon Kralik, a painter affiliated with the Kitsch Movement, has this to say: "The Kitsch Movement began 15 years ago when Odd Nerdrum declared himself a Kitsch Painter. This occurred at the opening of the large 1998 retrospective exhibit of his paintings at the Astrup Fearnley Museum in Oslo. It was at this point that Nerdrum admitted that those who had been calling his paintings kitsch had been correct in doing so, and he apologized for masquerading as an artist. Nerdrum had not been the only painter to be branded with the kitsch label, it had been applied to many of us, but he was the first one to accept the moniker and wear it with pride." (Brandon Kralik, "The Dawn of the Kitsch Movement," *The Huffington Post*, September 30, 2013. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-dawn-of-the-kitsch-mo_b_4013483). Nerdrum's 1998 lecture, entitled "Kitsch Serves Life," is included as the opening essay of his book *On Kitsch*. (Odd Nerdrum, "Kitsch Serves Life," in *On Kitsch*, ed. Odd Nerdrum et. al. (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2001)).

key factors take primacy within this movement: an emphasis on craftsmanship over concept, emotional experience over lofty intellectualism, and sincerity over irony (Fig. 2). Nerdrum's kitsch is simultaneously a revolt against modernist sensibilities and a reclaiming of the mimetic techniques of the Old Masters—to such a degree, in fact, that when asked to name the ultimate goal of a painter within the Kitsch Movement, Nerdrum once gave the bold reply "to make a masterpiece."[2] In any discussion of such conceits as high and low culture, however, the words "master" and "masterpiece" quickly become intriguing. In contrast to the traditional view of kitsch, these terms seem to imply an absolute zenith for cultural production. Indeed, Nerdrum's technical acumen has led some critics to deem him one of the "New Old Masters."[3] It is in this title that we find our core conundrum; how can one be a master—a creator of the highest possible art—and simultaneously reject art to identify as a painter of kitsch?

1.2 The Problem of the Kitsch Masterpiece

It is the paradox of the "Kitsch Master," and by extension the "Kitsch Masterpiece," that brings us to the purpose of this paper. We have entered into a time in history that various critics have deemed "postart" and "post-historical," a time in which art has ceased to progress and visual culture is defined primarily by a saturation with consumable and disposable images.[4] In

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[2] Odd Nerdrum and Maria Kreyn, "Kitsch? Maria Kreyn Interrogates Odd Nerdrum," in *Kitsch: More Than Art*, (Oslo: Schibsted Forlag, 2011), 51.

[3] These are usually figurative contemporary painters who are notable for such qualities as "craftsmanship" and "admiration of the past." Donald Kuspit proposes, among others, the following list of New Old Masters: "David Bierk, Michael David, Vincent Desiderio, April Gornik, Karen Gunderson, Julie Heffernan, Odd Nerdrum, Joseph Raffael, Paula Rego, Jenny Saville, James Valerio, Paul Waldman, Ruth Weissberg, and Brenda Zlamany…" Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 182-184.

[4] "Postart" is the term used by Donald Kuspit to describe art that is lowered by the interests of mass consumability. He describes it as "completely banal art—unmistakably everyday art, neither kitsch nor high art, but an in-between art that glamorizes everyday reality while pretending to analyze it." (Kuspit, *The End of Art*, 90-92). The term "post-historical" is here suggested by Arthur Danto, who describes it as evidence that "the great master narratives which first defined traditional art, and then modernist art, have not only come to an end, but that contemporary art no longer allows itself to be represented by master narratives at all." He defines "Contemporary" art as "what happens after there are no more periods in some master narrative of art." Essentially, "anything goes." (Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi, 10, 47).

his 2004 book *The End of Art,* American critic Donald Kuspit addresses the shortcomings of postart banality, and in his postscript poses the question of whether masterpieces are being made (or even *can* be made) within this paradigm.[5] The answer, he contends, is yes. For Kuspit, the term "masterpiece" supposes two things: "aesthetic transcendence"—that is, a return to beauty and craftsmanship—and production in the studio of a master.[6] In addressing the work of the New Old Masters such as Nerdrum, Kuspit proposes that these painters are actually evidence of a new, "post-postmodern" form of painting that is "neither traditional nor avant-garde, but a combination of the two" and weds "the spirituality and humanism of the Old Masters and the innovation and criticality of the Modern Masters."[7]

However, one must question the validity of whether this synthesis of the old and new, as Kuspit suggests, could be art's salvation from the purgatory of postart. If that is the case, then one must also find a way to reconcile Nerdrum's role as a New Old Master with his abandoning of art as a term. In a roundabout sort of manner, is the "non-art" he creates actually artistic in its ambitions? Could Nerdrum's work be considered a sort of mimetically-skilled analogue to such figures as Marcel Duchamp? It is the stance of this paper that Nerdrum's rejection of art as a term is ultimately artistic in its ethos; in jettisoning the word art, Nerdrum is actually rejecting those qualities that he regards as having rendered the artworld banal in an attempt to open art back up to the qualities that he feels make it transformative and meaningful. However, complications arise in attempting to resurrect the old-world masterpiece in today's visual culture. This can especially be seen when one considers the nature of mimetic skill, replication and canonization, and how "originality" is discussed.

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[5] Kuspit, *The End of Art,* 174-192.
[6] Kuspit, *The End of Art,* 177-178.
[7] Kuspit, *The End of Art,* 182-183.

In order to examine Nerdrum's work and philosophy in connection to the questions above, it is necessary to first lay the proper groundwork. On the following pages, I will provide a brief monographic account of Nerdrum's life and oeuvre. Proceeding from this point, an analysis of the key terms "kitsch" and "masterpiece" will be offered, followed by an overview of the philosophy that guides the Kitsch Movement. Finally, I will address the problems of the figurative masterpiece faced by painters working today, and draw conclusions accordingly. This is the story, for good or for ill, of the Kitsch Masterpiece.

Figure 2: Odd Nerdrum, *Frontal Self-Portrait*, 1998

2 ODD NERDRUM IN MONOGRAPH

2.1 Nerdrum Himself

Odd Nerdrum was born on April 8, 1944, the illegitimate child of Lillemor Nerdrum and David Sandved. He did not know his biological father while growing up (they would only meet much later in life), and had a troubled relationship with his mother's husband Johan Nerdrum (who would divorce Odd's mother when the painter was six years old). For one year during

Nerdrum's infancy, the ravages of World War II forced his family to leave their home in Norway to live in Sweden. As a child, Nerdrum's teachers—most notably the writer Jens Bjørneboe—described him as precociously talented and intelligent, but with limited ability to connect with his classmates. While Nerdrum seemed to feel disconnected from his parents and other people, however, he found a strong sense of connection with nature, as well as with the narratives of myths and faerie tales that would often influence his childhood drawings.[8]

A continuous theme for Nerdrum, both in his life and his work, is that of *alienation*.[9] Even in light of his early difficulties, the most profound alienation that Nerdrum would experience is doubtlessly that of his early attempts to make his way in the art world. During Nerdrum's time as a student, "nonfigurative modernism" held firm sway in Norway.[10] Nerdrum studied at several notable schools during his formative years, including the National Academy of Art in Oslo[11] and the Academy at Düsseldorf (under Joseph Beuys, no less), but his interest in the painting techniques of the Old Masters was met with a cold reception at every turn. Biographer Jan Åke Pettersson describes two specific artistic encounters in Stockholm that would mold the young Nerdrum's sensibilities.[12] The first was negative, a viewing of Rauschenberg's sculpture *Monogram* (Fig. 3) at Moderna Museet. For Nerdrum, this would encapsulate everything he felt to be lacking in the art of modernity, particularly any connection to "basic and timeless human

[8] Jan Åke Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum: Storyteller and Self-Revealer,* trans. Inger Fluge Mæland and Jan Åke Pettersson (Oslo: Aschehoug & Co., 1998), 17-20.
[9] Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen, *Odd Nerdrum Paintings*, trans. Francesca M. Nichols (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1994), 19.
[10] Hansen, *Odd Nerdrum Paintings*, 11.
[11] Biographer Jan Åke Pettersson relays this account regarding Nerdrum's experience at Oslo: "The application had included three paintings. Two of them were reasonably finished, while the third one had been hurriedly thrown together to meet the deadline. The fact that this was the one that the committee found so promising as to admit him into the nation's leading art school, made him question the criteria applied to modern art." Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 20.
[12] Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 20-21.

qualities."[13] The second encounter would offer a much more positive resonance: Rembrandt's 1661 painting *The Batavian's Oath to Claudius Civilis* (Fig. 4) at Nationalmuseum. Here, Nerdrum found what he felt had been missing. Rembrandt, together with such similar painters as Caravaggio, would set the compass for Nerdrum's interest in figurative painting from that moment onward.

Figure 3 Robert Rauschenberg, *Monogram*, 1955-1959

[13] "In [modern art] he found only emptiness and artistic self-annihilation." Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum,* 20-21.

Figure 4: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Batavian's Oath to Claudius Civilis*, 1661-1662

2.2 Nerdrum the Painter

Nerdrum has since made a name for himself by utilizing the techniques of the Old Masters to produce work that is consistently mimetic, figurative, and narrative. While his earliest works were overtly geared towards social commentary (Fig. 5), his more mature works moved into the distinctive imagery that is most commonly associated with his oeuvre.[14] These are the works that would abandon direct representations of society in favor of creating a mythological, allegorical world.

In confronting the "mythological" paintings of Odd Nerdrum—arguably those most in keeping with his soon-to-be-addressed philosophy of kitsch painting—one must at all times consider two major points. First is the particular way in which Nerdrum employees the techniques of the Old Masters. His imagery is mimetic, but with an emphasis on the physicality

[14] Notably, these earlier works also express the theme of alienation: "His is a type of criticism and a rebellion that presuppose a fundamental lack of identification with society and its norms. It is […] an expression of alienated existence." Hansen, *Odd Nerdrum Paintings,* 19.

of the objects and people that he paints that comes through with his tactile handling of surface and materials. From Rembrandt, he draws the ability to apply this to the human figure.[15] From his other chief influence, Caravaggio, he draws what has been called the most singular aspect of his work: what Pettersson deems the play of "light from another world" on "meaty" flesh.[16] Together, these aspects of surface and chiaroscuro create a theatrical yet naturalistic approach to image-making meant to immediately ensnare the viewer's imagination and resonate in a deeply emotional and sometimes disturbing manner. (Fig. 6).

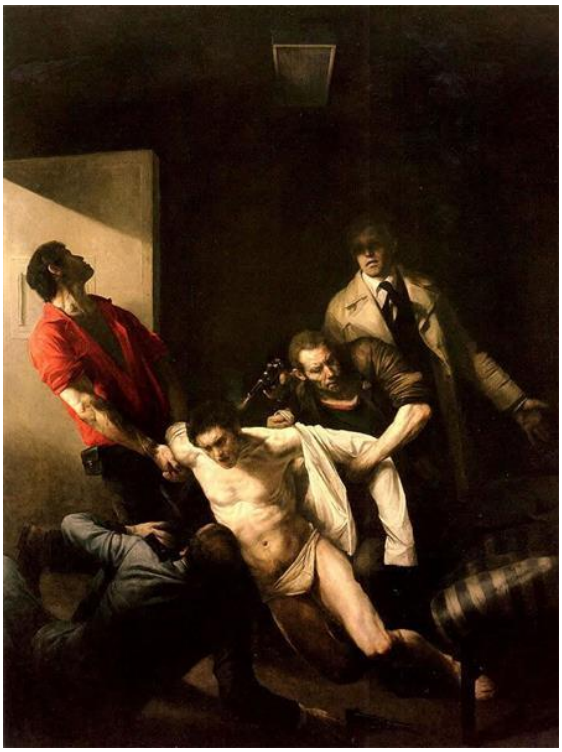

Figure 5: An example of Nerdrum's earlier, more socially-driven work: *The Murder of Andreas Baader*, 1977-78

[15]Hansen, *Odd Nerdrum Paintings*, 13-14.
[16] Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 34.

Figure 6: Odd Nerdrum, *The Night Guard*, 1985-1986

The second point that we must consider in terms of Nerdrum's paintings is that of the imagery itself, which is often characterized by a blending of the ugly and beautiful.[17] His mythological scenes depict people in strange archaic clothes who exist outside of any recognizable time. While their attire might occasionally suggest that of ancient Celts or Norsemen, the periodic presence of a modern firearm dispels any notion of an actual primitive civilization. Furthermore, these figures often seem to carry some physical or mental disability; for instance, some are blind, and some are missing limbs (Fig. 7-8). Perhaps even more intriguing than the people, however, are the wastelands that they inhabit. These spaces take the form of vast deserts of rock or hardened lava, with few signs of architecture or vegetation. Often, the scenes are set in a type of twilight hour to allow full use of Nerdrum's particular brand of chiaroscuro. The result is a sort of eternal "magic hour" that is equal parts mystical and

[17] Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 108.

foreboding (Fig. 9). Critics have attempted to interpret these tableaus as depictions of a postapocalyptic future, though Nerdrum does not see them as such. For the painter, they represent a "flight from civilization" and a "return to a natural state."[18] Like his techniques, the setting of Nerdrum's imagery represents a rejection of modern progress in an attempt to reclaim a lost and virtuous past.[19]

Figure 7: Odd Nerdrum, *Return of the Sun*, 1986

[18] Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 56, 62.
[19] Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum*, 45-108.

Figure 8: Odd Nerdrum, *Unarmed Man*, 1996

Figure 9: Odd Nerdrum, *The Seed Protectors*, 1987

Facing constant opposition to his work from the art world, Nerdrum ultimately made the controversial move of denying that his paintings were art altogether. Art, to his eyes, had been changed by the values of modernism, and had thus abandoned the path of figurative, mimetic paintings in the style of Rembrandt and Caravaggio—the path that, for Nerdrum, yields masterpieces. If painters today were to follow this path, they would need to ascribe a term other than "art" to their work. The term Nerdrum chose to embrace was the one that his critics had so often used against him: "kitsch."[20] In order to fully understand the implications of this, we must turn our examination towards kitsch in relation to how scholars have addressed it historically. If kitsch is, as some have suggested, an "antithesis to art," then we may find that defining it depends in part on providing a definition for art itself. [21]

3 AN OVERVIEW OF TERMINOLOGY

The primary difficulty in addressing the dichotomy of kitsch and art lies in the fact that art, traditionally held as visual culture's apex, becomes increasingly difficult to define as time goes on. The very question 'What is art?' lands with a resounding thud in the wake of modernism and postmodernism, an ever-expanding elephant in an equally boundless room of discourse. It is not my purpose here to propose some innovative new definition for art, or even to linger on the question for longer than is necessary. Rather, my primary goal in this segment is to establish some criterion against which we might define kitsch. If kitsch is the epitome of low culture, then what function of "high culture" is it failing, supposedly, to fulfill?

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[20] Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 71.

[21] Nerdrum himself uses term *antithesis*, though he is specifically referring kitsch as an "antithesis of *modern* art" [emphasis mine], with kitsch taking the role of "the unified concept of all that wasn't intellectual and new, for all that was conceived as brown, old-fashioned, sentimental, melodramatic, and pathetic." (Odd Nerdrum, "Kitsch Serves Life," 10-11.) Tomas Kulka also uses the phrase to refer to the perception of kitsch being diametrically opposed to art in the broader sense. (Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), x, 2.)

3.1 Art and Kitsch

I will begin by proposing three qualities that are particularly important to the relationship of art and kitsch, perhaps especially in regards to painting: aesthetic beauty, emotional expression, and mimetic skill.[22] While traditionally it might be tempting to see these things as existing exclusively within the domain of art (a realm where at one time or another they each held inexorable dominion), it is notable to point out that these three elements are often more readily associated with kitsch in today's world. Indeed, the fact that these factors are actually *not* required to constitute art can be a challenging revelation. Is art always beautiful? Clearly not, as the ugly and grotesque were powerful artistic entities even before modernism; Goya's painting of *Saturn Devouring His Sons* leaves a lasting impression, to be sure, but few would contend that granting the viewer an experience of traditional beauty was one of its goals. Is art, then, always self-expressive—that is, emotionally charged? Again we must say no, as any person demanding this criterion would be sorely disappointed by an exhibition of Minimalist sculpture or the geometrically calculated works of Piet Mondrian.[23] Finally, is art always a demonstration of skill, even skill that is not mimetic in its intent? Surely this must be so, as the very word "art" descends from the Latin *ars*—a word that is sometimes taken to *mean* skill! Alas, Duchamp's readymades promptly close all discussion on that matter.[24]

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[22] "Beauty" is included here to establish its connection with traditional forms of kitsch. In the broader sense, "aesthetic taste" would perhaps be the better term for discussing art and kitsch together, given the way that art—or even Nerdrum's paintings—might sometimes forego beauty to explore the unsettling or grotesque.

[23] While Mondrian's work might prove expressive in other ways, they are not overtly emotional in the manner that we will see kitsch to be.

[24] Historically, there is debate as to whether readymades should be considered art or anti-art. In his book *The Invention of Art*, Larry Shiner gives the following justification for naming Duchamp's *Fountain* as art: "*Fountain* would seem once again to be art, since its aim was not so much to overthrow the system of art as to open it up." Furthermore, these instances of anti-art are now assimilated into the narrative of art history in such a way that it becomes somewhat difficult to discuss them as true "anti-art." Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History,* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 291-292.

What then, are the qualities that set art apart? It could be argued that the potency of art—even art that is neither beautiful nor overtly expressive nor even mimetically "skillful"—is its ability to engage critically with the world.[25] In keeping with this notion, Arthur Danto offers what is perhaps one of the most satisfying attempts to give art a definition for the current age by summarizing art's essence as "embodied meanings."[26] For Danto, it is not visible qualities such as beauty, expressiveness, or craftsmanship that differentiate art from nonart, but rather the unseen qualities such as meaning itself, the communication of ideas and beliefs, and embeddedness in the context of time. If we expound upon this further, we might say that art is a sort of cognitive catalyst meant to raise us to new heights of understanding regarding the world and the human experience.[27]

Historiography must be considered here; the ideal or higher state of being that art points towards changes from age to age—Humanism and nature for the sculptors of antiquity, God for the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance, and philosophical Truth for modernity.[28] As form must follow function, art has historically adopted the forms most conducive to communicating the ideas of the era that made it. That is to say, if art *is* beautiful or expressive or skillfully made,

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[25] As suggested by Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," In *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961 (essay originally published 1939)).

[26] Arthur Danto, *What Art Is,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 37.

[27] In attempting to propose definitive criteria for art, we must bear in mind that the "fine arts" as a distinctive category only came to be around the 18th century. "The fine arts, it was now said, are a matter of inspiration and genius and meant to be enjoyed for themselves in moments of refined pleasure […] By the early nineteenth century […] the fine arts [were] given a transcendent spiritual role of revealing higher truth or healing the soul." (Shiner, *The Invention of Art*, 5-6.) In *Critique of Judgement,* Immanuel Kant writes "Fine art […] is a mode of representation which is intrinsically purposive, and which, although devoid of an end, has the effect of advancing the culture of the mental powers in the interests of social communication." (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 (originally published 1790)), 135.)

[28] This notion is inherently Hegelian. There is an interesting section in Hegel's *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* that discusses his views concerning the "ends" [purposes] of art. Here, Hegel sees humanity as caught between the conflicting drives of morality/law and nature/passion. As a broad concept, "truth" is seen as "the reconciliation of this antithesis." Thus, "[…] art has the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of sensuous artistic shape, of representing the reconciled antithesis just described, and therefore, has its purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation." George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, trans. Bernard Bosanquet, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2004 (originally published 1886)), 55-61.

it is because that was the most effective vehicle for the beliefs of society at the time. What is interesting about kitsch, then, is its tendency to rely *solely* on these immediate external qualities—the things that can be taken in at a glance—with no need for further reflection. This is part of the allure of kitsch; it fulfills the things that people might expect or even desire from art, the visual and emotionally exciting elements, with none of the challenging or subversive aspects that art (especially from modernism onward) tends to present.[29] This aligns neatly with the writings of Tomas Kulka of Tel Aviv University, who proposes three concise criteria for defining kitsch:

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.[30]

It would be remiss to make these claims regarding kitsch—especially in light of Kulka's third criterion—without addressing Clement Greenberg. In his seminal 1939 essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch," Greenberg presents kitsch as a counterpoint to the challenging and forward-thinking ethos of the avant-garde. Where avant-garde art critiques itself by seeking to attain autonomy and "purity," thus raising culture to a new height, Greenbergian kitsch is willing to spoon-feed the masses by meeting them on the ground-level. [31] Historically employed by Socialist regimes

[29] "Kitsch comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them. […] Since the purpose of kitsch is to please the greatest possible number of people, it always plays on the most common denominators." Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 26.
[30] Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, 37-38.
[31] Greenberg addresses the notion of purity in greater detail in his 1960 essay "Modernist Painting": "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself […] The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effect of each art any and every effect that might

as a form of cultural opiate, kitsch is immediately accessible to the layman, requiring no formal training in such pursuits as aesthetic theory or criticism—or, for that matter, any understanding of art history.[32] It is grasped and enjoyed in an instant, and then promptly forgotten en route to the next morsel.

Despite the influence of his writing on the subject, Greenberg is hardly the first to warn about kitsch. Several years earlier, German scholar Hermann Broch confronted the matter in such essays as "Evil in the Value-System of Art."[33] Here, Broch constructs a somewhat different dichotomy grounded in ethics to present kitsch not only as culturally inferior, but morally corrupt. Liturgical imagery abounds; for Broch, art fulfills a sort of quasi-spiritual role by acting as revealer and redeemer, "revealing" truths and insights about the world and the relations of its people and redeeming us from the inevitable darkness of death.[34] This is an art whose prime directive is not so much beauty, but goodness. Kitsch, therefore, is what Broch deems a type of "Antichrist"—posing as art by presenting beauty, but unable to fulfill any of art's other, more transcendental functions.[35] What it offers is a means of escapism, a way of "fleeing" from death without overcoming it.[36] Put another way, if art is salvation then kitsch is distraction. For this

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conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered "pure," and in its "purity" find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence." Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1982 (essay originally published 1960)), 5-6.

[32] A passage from Greenberg worth quoting at length: "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations. Kitsch changes according to style, but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money—not even their time." Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," 10.

[33] Hermann Broch, "Evil in the Value-System of Art," in *Geist and Zeitgeist: The Spirit in an Unspiritual Age*, ed. John Hargraves, translator, (New York: Counterpoint, 2002 (essay originally published 1933).

[34] "'Good' work must be able to connect […] to the discovery of new insights and new forms of seeing and experiencing that confer the character of universal truth" (17). Where death is concerned, Broch goes so far as to deem "absolute redemption from death" to be "the aim of all creativity." (20). Broch, "Evil in the Value-System of Art," 16-18, 20.

[35] Broch, Evil in the Value-System of Art," 28-31.

[36] In Broch's own words, "kitsch never attains the annulment of time, and its flight from death is just 'killing time.'" Broch, "Evil in the Value-System of Art," 36-37.

reason, Broch claims the "maker of kitsch […] is ethically depraved, a criminal willing radical evil."[37]

Finally, in decades following Greenberg, Matei Calinescu of Indiana University would notably tackle the subject of kitsch in his 1977 book *Five Faces of Modernity.*[38] Here, Calinescu presents kitsch as a byproduct of modernity and industrialization, a twofold force which created a means for the inexpensive reproduction of images and objects while also producing middle-class consumers with leisure time who would inevitably seek forms of entertainment to combat the onset of boredom.[39] As such, Calinescu sees kitsch as uniquely related to the concepts of consumption and time:

> In the postmodern age, kitsch represents the triumph of the principle of immediacy—immediacy of access, immediacy of effect, instant beauty. The great paradox of kitsch, as I see it, is that being produced by an extremely time-conscious civilization, which is nevertheless patently unable to attach any broader values to time, it appears as designed both to "save" and "kill" time. To save time in the sense that its enjoyment is effortless and instantaneous; to kill time, in the sense that, like a drug, it frees man from his disturbed time consciousness, justifying "aesthetically," and making bearable an otherwise empty, meaningless present.[40]

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[37] On the same page, Broch says "for whoever works for the effect of beauty, whoever seeks only that effective gratification […] will use any and all means without hesitation to achieve this effect." Broch, "Evil in the Value System of Art," 37.
[38] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006 (originally published 1977).
[39] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity,* 247. Greenberg and Broch both make similar arguments on this point in their writing.
[40] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity,* 8-9.

The image of a drug, or illusion, is paramount.[41] Calinescu's kitsch creates the illusion of affluence and "aesthetic consciousness."[42] One particularly intriguing element in Calinescu's writing is his claim that this is sometimes a matter of context and presentation. Even a Rembrandt, he contends, might become kitsch if it were hung as decoration in the elevator of a millionaire.[43]

Kulka, Greenberg, Broch, and Calinescu each take their own approach to kitsch, but remain unified by common threads. If we take their collective writings to the letter, then we must inevitably come to the following conclusion: kitsch is not true art, or for that matter true culture, but rather a facsimile thereof—a tempting pastry that ultimately proves to be little more than empty calories. This is tellingly indicative of the state of contemporary visual culture as a whole. If kitsch is distraction, then ours is a culture *built* on such distractions—a visual system that points not to truth or reality, but only to itself.[44] Similarly, images become the signifiers and harbingers not of nature or divinity, but of products and streaming services. Transcendence, or even redemption, is neither possible nor desired; these are difficult and dangerous things requiring discomfort and change from a world that much prefers the comfort of stagnation and banality. This is where kitsch takes its foothold.

3.2 The Masterpiece

Having offered some means of contextualizing art and kitsch within contemporary culture, there is another entity that we must account for before we can proceed to the Kitsch

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[41] Further passages of note from Calinescu: "What constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague "hallucinatory" power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy "catharsis." On the next page, he writes, "Kitsch may be conveniently defined as a specifically aesthetic form of lying. As such, it obviously has a lot to do with the modern illusion that beauty may be bought and sold." Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 228-229.
[42] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity,* 241, 243.
[43] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 236.
[44] This is what Jean Baudrillard calls the 'hyperreal.' Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994 (originally published in 1981)), 1.

Movement—namely, the construct of the master/masterpiece. Much like "art" itself, "masterpiece" is a word that sees no shortage of common hyperbolic use. How often do we utter it as an expression of admiration for an object or image that is not merely beautiful, expressive, or skillful, but *especially* so? Even popular movies and other forms of entertainment are sometimes deemed masterpieces by critics if they are especially well-crafted, influential, or otherwise significant. All in all, if art represents the uppermost tier of visual culture, then the masterpiece is its absolute peak against which all else is measured.[45]

In light of these points, how do we separate the *fact* of the "masterpiece" from its vernacular exaggeration? In his book *Masterpieces: The History of an Idea,* Medievalist Walter Cahn traces the history of the word's usage and how it affects our structuring of art history. The book's introduction has this to say: "Calling something a masterpiece is to canonize it, neutralizing its asperities and making it the common cultural property of friend, foe, and the indifferent alike. We erect a kind of hall of fame in which the objects of our admiration can be permanently enshrined, not for our selfish contemplation only, but for the benefit of humanity at large."[46]

This passage introduces a very pertinent concept, that of *canonization*. Clearly the canonized artwork is often characterized by widespread fame, but there is more to be considered as well. In the 2007 book *Defining Art, Creating the Canon,* British philosopher Paul Crowther connects canonization to themes of style, originality, and influence.[47] "Influence," in particular, he deems to be "the most decisive criterion of canonical work."[48] In other words, a work that is

[45] An excerpt from Walter Cahn: "When a work of art impresses us as the highest embodiment of skill, profundity, of expressive power, we call it a masterpiece. In this way, we acknowledge its supreme place in our esteem, and at the same time, seek to set our judgement […] beyond challenge or equivocation" Walter Cahn, *Masterpieces: Chapters on the History of an Idea,* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), xv.
[46] Cahn, *Masterpieces*, xvi.
[47] Paul Crowther, *Defining Art, Creating the Canon: Artistic Value in an Era of Doubt,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 38-39.
[48] Crowther, *Defining Art, Creating the Canon,* 39.

canonized—be it an overarching "oeuvre" or individual "masterpieces"—is one that has demonstrated a creative influence on artists that follow.[49]

Naturally, the canonized masterpiece proves integral to the historiography of art. The way art history is structured often simplifies entire eras down to a few famous examples that are given authority to represent all other production from a certain time and place. Strangely, this has the effect of creating a certain cult of celebrity around particularly well-known works and makers. When we talk of Old Masters, we often afford them an almost mystical sort of reverence due to their skill and cultural authority.[50] The entire paradigm of masterpieces—that is, art history as a sequence of notable artworks and artists—exists through emphasis on these monographic instances of uniqueness and individuality. Much of this serves to reinforce (however unintentionally) the old-world view of the artist as a person possessed of extraordinary gifts, an almost superhuman demiurge set apart from the common person. The artist in monograph is simultaneously mythic hero and mythmaker, a Vasarian genius with a precocious childhood and an uncommon world-view who triumphs over numerous trials and challenges through his or her remarkable skill (or alternatively, for the Vincent Van Goghs and Emily Dickinsons of history,

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[49] "The artists who creatively refine and develop their style and/or maintain high formal standards are, of course, the more likely to achieve canonic status. This is because by opening up new possibilities for themselves they also open up new ideas for other artists working in the medium in question. Indeed, as well as their *oeuvre* having canonic significance per se, it may become possible to identify key works within it as canonic in an individual sense, i.e., as *masterpieces*." (Crowther, *Defining Art, Creating the Canon*, 39). Questions of influence and canonization are also addressed (albeit in regards to literature) in the writing of Harold Bloom, particularly in his books *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* and *The Anxiety of Influence*. In the former, Bloom connects canonicity to the notion of "aesthetic supremacy" (24), and states that "[one] breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength, which is constituted primarily of an amalgam: master of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, and exuberance of diction. (29). (Harold Bloom, *the Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 24-29). In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom addresses the influential nature of canonized works, proposing that the poet [or maker, in the broader sense] must always exist in relation to his or her precursors. (Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 5-16).

[50] Interestingly, the word master actually descends from the word *magister*, meaning "one who possesses authority over others." We generally tend to view the "masterpiece" as wielding a similar authority in culture. Cahn, *Masterpieces*, 7.

dies a tragic death in misunderstood obscurity and leaves behind works that will one day find their "rightful" recognition).[51] While the notion of artistic genius has become antiquated, there is still something to be said for the connotations of myth and individuality that surround it.[52]

Clearly there is a certain thrilling romanticism about the masterpiece narrative, one that almost begs association with the emotionally charged and picturesque world of kitsch. But is it possible for kitsch to become a masterpiece? In tying the question of the masterpiece back to Nerdrum and the Kitsch Movement, it is important to return to Kuspit's assertion that "masterpiece" implies "aesthetic transcendence" and production in the studio of a master. While this alone is rooted in a strong historical precedent, we might also connect it with the emphasis that Nerdrum and his students place on *craftsmanship* in regards to adopting the techniques of the Old Masters. As Cahn points out, the very term "masterpiece" carries built-in connotations of craftsmanship, as the word itself originates from medieval artisans, who were required to produce a "masterpiece" at the conclusion of their apprenticeship to demonstrate technical mastery of their chosen craft.[53] The question that ultimately arises is whether Kuspit's criteria for the masterpiece, especially in light of the word's technical history, allows for something that identifies as kitsch. If a work of kitsch is remarkably beautiful, expressive, or well-crafted, does it warrant canonization by virtue of being aesthetically transcendent?

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[51] These points are addressed in the writing of Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, who draw attention to the various "leitmotifs" that occur in the biographies of artists (8). These biographies often employ anecdotes to paint the artist as a larger-than-life figure (8-11), resulting in "elevation of the creative individual to the status of a culture hero" (20). Ultimately, they deem this "the legend about the artist" (12). Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 1-27.

[52] As we have seen, the concepts of myth and individuality are especially pertinent in Nerdrum's work.

[53] Cahn, *Masterpieces,* 3-22.

3.3 Addressing Kitsch and the Masterpiece

As a final note in this section on terminology, I will briefly examine the ways in which kitsch and masterpieces have intersected traditionally. For this purpose, it becomes relevant to turn once again to Calinescu, who points out that despite kitsch's diametric opposition to avant-garde art, the two often partake in a practice of sampling one another. This traditionally occurs in two forms: "(1) The avant-garde is interested in kitsch for aesthetically subversive and ironical purposes, and (2) kitsch may use avant-garde procedures (which are easily transformed into stereotypes) for its aesthetically conformist purposes."[54] Artists such as Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Takashi Murakami have frequently used the imagery of commercial and pop culture in their work—a practice often seen in the 'remix culture' of postmodernism onward. Thus, it may well be possible to build a masterpiece using kitsch as raw material (Warhol's images of Marilyn Monroe and Campbell's soup cans, firmly canonized by art history, come to mind as evidence). As for the opposite, it is quite possible for art—masterpieces especially—to become raw material for kitsch. We have already seen the example of Rembrandt hanging in an elevator; again, context and presentation are key here. The kitsch object placed in a gallery is repackaged as art, but the art object repurposed as decoration is, arguably, lowered to kitsch.[55]

While the two cases that Calinescu describes might offer an apt summery of how masterpieces and kitsch have traditionally interacted, it is important to clarify that neither case aligns with what I mean to address by the phrase "Kitsch Masterpiece." This is a term does not

[54] Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 254.
[55] In defense of this point, Calinescu has this to say: "To determine whether an object is kitsch always involves considerations of purpose and context. In theory, there should be nothing kitschy about the use of a reproduction or slide even of the Mona Lisa in a study of art history. But the same image reproduced on a plate, a table cloth, a towel, or an eyeglass case will be unmistakable kitsch. A number of excellent reproductions of the same painting put beside each other in a shop window will have a kitsch effect because they suggest availability in commercial quantities. The mere consciousness of the industrial multiplication of an art object for purely commercial reasons can kitschify its image." Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 257-258.

simply imply an ironic use of kitsch for the sake of art, or the commercial "debasement" of a preexisting art-historical masterpiece. Rather, the Kitsch Masterpiece, the aesthetically transcendent masterpiece that marks the ultimate goal of Nerdrum and his students, is something else entirely—an entity of both visual and emotional power rooted in traditional mimetic techniques and an emphasis on human qualities. To discover what this means, we must now turn our attention fully to the Kitsch Movement itself, and to the philosophy that drives it.

4 THE KITSCH PHILOSOPHY

4.1 High Kitsch

It has been observed, both here and in other writings, that Nerdrum's work does not necessarily fit the common conception of kitsch—the world of snow globes and collective figurines and saccharine paintings destined for decorative purposes. The discrepancy is probably stated best by Norwegian author Sindre Mekjan in his essay "Kitsch—Heart and Soul, Blood and Guts": "Kitsch is traditionally used to describe garish, vulgarized objects, or cheap, mass-produced paintings with simple, inane motifs. Nerdrum's complex, enigmatic and often grotesque paintings fit these characteristics as poorly as the paintings fit over the living-room couch."[56] While even Greenberg's kitsch was by its very nature accessible and palatable, Nerdrum's paintings often feature challenging and off-putting elements (in one notorious instance, which will be addressed later, Nerdrum creates a monumental scene of a woman defecating; in another, the painter renders himself proudly displaying his own erect penis).[57] How, then, do we reconcile the way kitsch is often spoken about with the kitsch of Nerdrum's

[56] Sindre Mekjan, "Kitsch—Heart and Soul, Blood and Guts," in *On Kitsch*, ed. Odd Nerdrum et. al. (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2001), 14.

[57] For this reason, a strong case could be made that of the scholars examined in the preceding section, Hermann Broch is perhaps the one most closely aligned with Nerdrum's kitsch. Both Broch and Greenberg are cited frequently in the literature of the Kitsch Movement.

work? Perhaps even more pressingly, how do we close the gap of cultural value between kitsch and masterpieces? To account for these issues, Nerdrum employees a term we have not yet explored: "high kitsch."

For Nerdrum, high kitsch represents not so much the world of the saccharine or the commercial, but rather an alternative course for painting that leaves behind the changes brought about by modernity. This forms the basis of what we will refer to as a Kitsch Philosophy. This Kitsch Philosophy, which exists at the core of the Kitsch Movement, has been the subject of no shortage of discourse. In 2018, for example, Nerdrum delivered a lecture at The Representational Art Conference (TRAC) in Leeuwarden, detailing what he felt to be the fundamental flaws in the state of contemporary painting. For Nerdrum, these flaws could be traced back not simply to modernity, but specifically to changes in the ethos of art brought about by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement.* A key point of contention is Kant's insistence that a "genius" is someone who does not rely on imitation and craftsmanship, thus laying the groundwork for the insistence on innovation and experimentation seen in modern painting.[58] This innovation would be lionized by modern art historians (the "art police", Nerdrum dubs them) who prioritize originality as an indicator of quality. The most grievous result of this shifting paradigm in Nerdrum's eyes is the loss of "craft and sincere expression," as well as an excising of "the human face, the story/myth,

[58] In particular, Nerdrum makes the claim that Kant is stating "Genius is the opposite of imitation," "The genius fumbles to something no one has seen before," and that artwork "shall be judged by whim, not craft." The first two points he connects to section §45 and §46 of *Critique of Judgment.* In section §46, Kant states "[…] fine art is only possible as the product of genius. From this it may be seen that genius […] is a *talent* for producing that for which no definite rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule; and that consequentially *originality* must be its primary property" (136-137). Nerdrum links his third claim to section §1, likely in reference to Kant's statement "If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not, we do not refer the representation of it to the object by means of the understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination […] we refer the representation to the subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (35). (Kant, *Critique of Judgement,* 35, 136-137.) Odd Nerdrum, "Immanuel Kant Changed Our Heads," YouTube, October 23, 2018, video, 40:13, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcjVXBXn7b4

and the magic of recognition." The antidote, he argues, is a return to the values of Aristotle, who emphasized not only mimesis, but the techniques of tradition and the practice of storytelling.[59]

While Nerdrum's 2018 lecture is hardly the first expression of his views regarding representational painting, it does reveal the core aspects of his philosophy. Modern art has lost certain vital qualities relating to mimetic skill, expression, and tradition—qualities that modern philosophy has shed in its quest for Truth and innovation. In Nerdrum's eyes, the loss of tradition and sincerity in favor of this innovation (and later, irony) constitutes the loss of a crucially human element in painting.[60] Nerdrum calls for a reclaiming of this by creating a new paradigm that emphasizes pathos and craftsmanship as well as the experience of the individual.

4.2 The Literature of the Kitsch Philosophy

The Kitsch Philosophy is explicitly outlined in Nerdrum's 2001 book *On Kitsch*, a small collection of essays and images that plays out like a sort of kitsch manifesto. Along with essays by Nerdrum and other affiliated painters such as Jan-Ove Tuv (one of Nerdrum's former students) which lay the groundwork for the Kitsch Philosophy and describe the difficulties faced by kitsch painters in the world of contemporary art, the book also features poems, a script for a one-act imagined dialogue between Odd Nerdrum and Edvard Munch on the state of figurative painting, and even a list of "Kitsch Aphorisms."[61] Perhaps the most interesting part of this book, however, is a Kitsch Questionnaire prepared by Nerdrum and Tuv by which the reader might test their own alignment with the values of art or kitsch. This features a list of such questions as "Do

[59] Nerdrum, "Immanuel Kant Changed Our Heads," YouTube, October 23, 2018.
[60] "Kitsch is about the eternal human questions, the pathetic, whatever its form, about what we call "the human." The task of kitsch is to create a seriousness in life, at its best so sublime it will bring the laughter to a quiet. Kitsch serves life and therefore seeks the individual, in contradiction of art's irony and dispassion. Nerdrum, "Kitsch Serves Life," 11.
[61] For example, "As long as you have a memory, you have something to search for. There is always something new in repetition," "There is more to be won from earnestness than from irony," and "The eternal human being bears his suffering in wonder. The modern copyist shrieks in terror." Odd Nerdrum, "Kitsch Aphorisms," in *On Kitsch*, ed. Odd Nerdrum et. al. (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2001), 58-60.

you prefer Truth to talent and sensuality?" "Do you long for a dialogue with the present rather than an eternal expression?" and "Are you more attracted to living in an artistic process than creating a masterpiece?" According to the writers, the artist will answer "yes" to each question, while the kitschperson will answer "no."[62]

Most, if not all, of the writings found in *On Kitsch* were later compiled with new essays and images to form a much larger second volume in 2011: the somewhat provocatively-titled *Kitsch: More than Art* (Fig. 10).[63] One of the most intriguing additions made to this later book is a transcript of an interview between Nerdrum and New York-based figurative painter Maria Kreyn. It is here that Nerdrum discusses the term "high kitsch" and additionally makes the claim that the ultimate goal of the kitsch painter is to create a masterpiece.[64] In both *On Kitsch* and *Kitsch: More Than Art*, the term "masterpiece" is evoked as a sort of mystical height for aesthetic effect in figural painting, and can only be attained through diligent following of the Old Masters through the development of techniques. There is no indication of allowing for the "Modern Masterpieces" one might find in the MoMA, and certainly not the "Readymade Masterpiece" of Duchamp; for Nerdrum, a masterpiece is something rooted squarely in premodern tradition.[65] Indeed, the appearance of being old—of looking "like worn out icons"—is part of what he deems captivating about the work of the Old Masters and is something that he encourages any aspiring kitsch painter to emulate.[66]

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[62] Odd Nerdrum and Jan-Ove Tuv, "The Kitsch Questionnaire: Test Yourself: Are You a Real Kitschperson?" in *On Kitsch*, ed. Odd Nerdrum et. al. (Oslo: Kagge Forlag, 2001), 44-45.
[63] Perhaps in keeping with the kitsch ethos, subtlety is not one of Nerdrum's foremost concerns; the cover of *Kitsch: More than Art* also features a self-portrait of Nerdrum holding a brush and palette entitled *The Savior of Painting.*
[64] Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 39-75.
[65] "But a masterpiece means that it lives in the tradition. You can't make a masterpiece if you look at Pollock, because in his work there is no standard. But if you have a bunch of these 'old masters,' then maybe it is possible. We need direction. So we look at Rembrandt, who looked to Titian, who looked to Masaccio." Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 51.
[66] Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 51.

Figure 10: The second Kitsch text, *Kitsch: More than Art*, features one of Nerdrum's self-portraits on the cover, posing as the "Savior of Painting."

It is vital to emphasize that Nerdrum views the masterpiece as belonging solely to the realm of premodern works. Art—that is, work that has followed the course of modern progress—has reached the dead end of postmodernity by abandoning the old ways, and as such is no longer capable of yielding masterpieces. Kitsch, however, has retained all the qualities necessary to create such work. This attempts to dismantle the script proposed by Greenberg in which kitsch is an inferior culture capable only of distraction. Ultimately, Nerdrum takes the stance that art and kitsch both have their place, but the two must remain separate and different.[67] In fact, some of his statements even seem to suggest that what we call “art history” can be divided into two divergent paths. One path follows the route of mimesis, beginning with the Greeks and Romans before moving on to the Renaissance and the Baroque. This is the road walked by the kitsch painter.

[67] Nerdrum and Kreyn, “Kitsch?” 55-58.

The second path is that of abstraction, beginning with the Middle Ages, then reemerging with Impressionism and progressing through modernity. This is the avenue of art.[68]

5 THE KITSCH MASTERPIECE

5.1 The Three Key Issues of the Kitsch Masterpiece

Kuspit argues that Nerdrum's work heralds a new sort of entity in the artworld, a post-postmodern work, and may well signify a return to the possibility of producing masterpieces—"aesthetically transcendent art," as he defines it. This is significant in that, much like Nerdrum's Kitsch Philosophy, Kuspit's writings on the New Old Masters describes a return to aesthetics in art that has gone missing during the banal stages of postart.[69] Here, we must set aside for a moment the semantics of classifying Nerdrum's work as art against the painter's wishes, and allow for the possibility that Nerdrum's philosophy—much like the anti-art readymades of Duchamp—are not denying art so much as (re)opening new (or old) possibilities to what art can be.

To begin, it is necessary contend with the ways in which the masterpiece must be addressed in the wake of the postmodern world—a world where kitsch not only exists, but can aspire to masterpiece status. There are three chief factors that make any discussion of masterpieces after

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[68] Here, Nerdrum is specifically proposing a restructuring of how museums categorize work. In his own words, "I think museums should be divided into two types of objects. The western mind that comes from the Greeks is not the modern Art story. One part of this museum begins with the Greeks, moves to the Romans, then to the Renaissance, then Baroque, and then to the few figurative painters today. The other path is the Art path. You take a jump and go to the medieval period, then to the impressionists, and then continue into the modern and contemporary periods." Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 66.

[69] In *The End of Art*, Kuspit connects postart to the term "post-aesthetic," which describes a state in which "[a]rt is no longer fine art, that is, the expression and mediation of aesthetic experience […] but rather a psychosocial construction defined by its institutional identity, entertainment value, and commercial panache." (28). For Kuspit, the post-postmodern work of the New Old Masters is an attempt to reconnect art with aesthetics. "The purpose of art," he writes, "is to dialectically transcend ugliness by revealing its immanence through beauty. It is the deepest sense that art can make. This sense was lost when art became postart. But the New Old Masters restore art's depth of meaning, implying that postart is meaningless as art […]" Kuspit, *The End of Art,* 28, 191.

modernity difficult: the nature of *originality*, the nature of *mimetic skill*, and the nature of *replication* (a distinct entity from the problem of originality). These three terms are thought of in a radically different way than they were prior to modernism, and thus they cannot be ignored.

First, we must consider the problem of *originality*. This is a term that has commonalities spanning the modern and premodern world. For the premodern, this is the realm of the demiurgical Vasarian genius who conceives of what others cannot. For the modern, it is the world of innovation and progress. In either case, both have found their end in the post-historical paradigm. Here, there can no longer be masterpieces as there is no longer originality. Any possibility for masterpieces today has been swallowed by the world of simulacra—which according to the writings of Jean Baudrillard, is the most telling characteristic of contemporary society. Baudrillard states that ours is a world of the "hyperreal"[70]: a "world of simulation […] where the highest function of the sign is to make reality disappear, and at the same time to mask its disappearance."[71] The images of hyperreality are "more real than real […], and more art than art (it enters into the transaethetics of banality, of insignificance, of nullity, where today the pure and indifferent form of art is to be seen.)"[72]

Second, we must contend with the nature of *mimetic skill*. We have already seen that figurative naturalism is an integral factor to the high kitsch that aspires to create masterpieces. This is also evident in the "forerunners" of high kitsch such as Rembrandt, or the example that Greenberg provides in Russian academic painter Ilya Repin. Often, the skill seen in such works as Repin's, or even Nerdrum's, is not only representational in its intent, but is representational in

[70] "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it." Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.
[71] Jean Baudrillard, "Objects, Images, and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusions," in *Art and Artifact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997), 12.
[72] Jean Baudrillard, "Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality," in *Art and Artifact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997), 21.

a manner that is meant to "heighten reality and make it dramatic."[73] It could easily be argued that this kitsch, the kitsch of Greenberg, fits neatly in with Jean Baudrillard's writings on hyperreality, in which real experience and culture have been largely replaced with mediated or virtual experience and entertainment. Here, the skillful image becomes a form of spectacle rather than a meaningful engine for transcendence.

Finally, we are faced with the problem of *replication*. At first glance it may seem redundant to address this after having already discussed originality, but here the term actually engages a unique and vital set of criteria. Notably, replication contends with the genealogy of styles and influences that produce a certain work—arguably one of the most central elements to the discussion of the Kitsch Movement. Of particular significance is the Kitsch Movement's interest in creating work that looks old or ancient, especially in styles akin to Rembrandt or Caravaggio. Again, one must ask if this is merely a form of simulacrum, bound to repeating what has come before with no means of transcending time aesthetically.

5.2 Originality

The first question, that of originality, could immediately be challenged by the following counterpoint: Is originality actually necessary? At TRAC2018, Odd Nerdrum's son Ode Nerdrum, himself a painter associated with the Kitsch Movement, posed several questions to attending painters to determine whether their sensibilities were more in line with art or kitsch. Among these questions, the second stands out as particularly interesting: "What appeals in the *Mona Lisa*: divergence or familiarity?" [74] Put another way, does *Mona Lisa*—perhaps the most recognized masterpiece today in the entirety of the Western canon—resonate because it is

[73] Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," 14.
[74] Ode S. Nerdrum, "Are You a Kitsch-Person or an Artist?" YouTube, June 15, 2018, video, 34:11, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyWEQxWWAY0

necessarily original? The "familiarity" mentioned here refers not to our recognition of the painting as a famous masterpiece, but to its elements that might be familiar even if we had never seen it before—human elements such as the face and character, and archetypal elements such as the iconic composition and genre of portraiture.[75] In a way, this familiarity is tied to the high kitsch notions of tradition and accessibility.

This is somewhat related to the Kitsch Questionnaire prepared by Odd Nerdrum and Jan-Ove Tuv; the kitschperson—the person more aligned with Aristotle than with Kant, as Ode Nerdrum's interview points out—answers that familiarity is what is important. We have already seen that the Kitsch Philosophy looks backwards in time rather than forward for the criteria to produce a masterpiece.[76] Even Odd Nerdrum's imagery, with its mythological themes, heavily emphasizes archetypes and familiar forms in the midst of its displays of alienated humans.[77] The crux of the issue is not so much that originality is inherently good or bad, but simply that it means something different for the *premodern* masterpiece—the Rembrandt that builds on tradition and figurative story—and the *modern* masterpiece, which solely aims to turn its gaze forward and look to new means of realizing Truth and concept. The post-postmodern masterpiece, then, must look to the forms and techniques of the past in order to engage the present. Originality in the modernist sense may have been exhausted, but the capacity of

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[75] Among those interviewed by Ode Nerdrum, one person remarks that he likes the familiarity of Mona Lisa's smile, which reminds him of his daughter. Another points out Mona Lisa's "intrinsic sense of humanity" as a resonant instance of familiarity. Conversely, another person argues in favor of divergence, claiming that it is Mona Lisa's original qualities that cause her to stand out among similar painted portraits of women from history. Ode S. Nerdrum, "Are You a Kitsch-Person or an Artist?" YouTube, June 15, 2018.

[76] For Nerdrum, painting a masterpiece is not so much a study in creating something original. Instead "[it] is about being a successor of something great." He later addresses the chain of influence that this creates, saying "your successor is not necessarily better than you, but he can develop what you have tried to do […] He, perhaps, can do it better because he has learned from you, and the next may be better than he is." Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 54, 66.

[77] Of myths and archetypes, Nerdrum claims that "Without these common stories we live in a vacuum. So you have to create pictures that have a strange myth that captures you like a good melody." Nerdrum and Kreyn, "Kitsch?" 64.

traditions and archetypes to resonate today overrides any need to say that a lack of originality can preclude transcendence (Fig. 11).

If we apply the argument above to Baudrillard's critique of hyperreality in contemporary culture, it is intriguing to note that Nerdrum's archetypal imagery of alienation could conceivably be read as a parable for this state of society. The desolate wastelands become Baudrillard's "desert of the real" (a phrase famously quoted in the 1999 film *The Matrix*),[78] and its people—so often blind, demented, or missing limbs—are those lost in the deluge of virtual media without ever experiencing the fullness of the world around them or truly connecting with other human beings (Fig. 12).[79] Read thusly, these works do not function as illustrations of a science-fiction world or divertingly bizarre kitsch decoration, but rather become a potent criticism of the way we engage with images as a whole. If the vaguely familiar becomes alien in the process, then the work may be all the more dynamic for it.

[78] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

[79] While he does not draw the same connections to Baudrillard, Kuspit addresses isolation as an integral element of Nerdrum's oeuvre: "Again and again, Odd Nerdrum paints isolated figures […]. It is this isolation that has turned them in upon themselves and twisted them out of emotional shape, which is sometimes reflected in their misshaped, tormented bodies […]. Indeed, it seems that his people can only survive in isolation, for when they are together they tend to be indifferent to one another, or judge each other harshly, or destroy each other, as Nerdrum's group pictures indicate." Donald Kuspit, "Old Master Existentialism: Odd Nerdrum's Paintings," in Jan-Erik Ebbestad Hansen, *Odd Nerdrum Paintings*, trans. Francesca M. Nichols (Oslo: H. Aschehoug & Co., 1994), i.

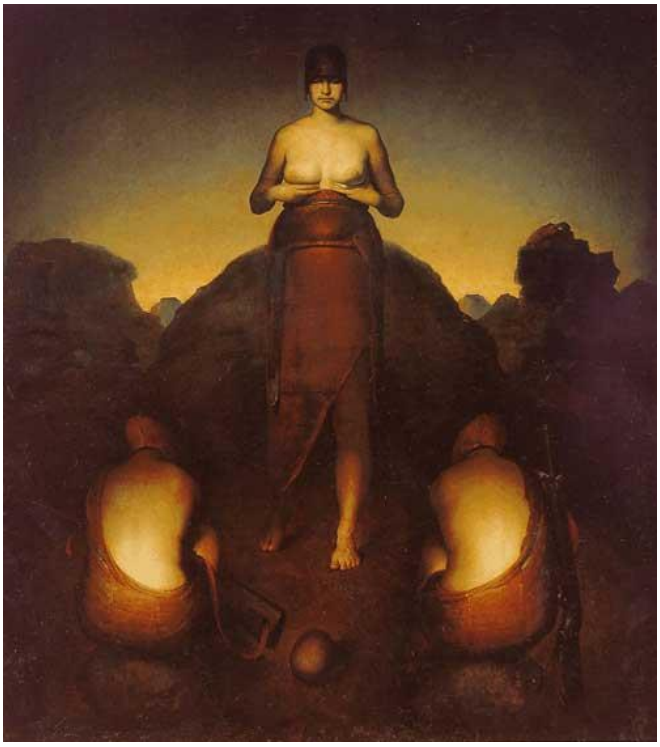

Figure 11: Odd Nerdrum, *Woman With Milk*, 1987-1988: An example of archetypal imagery and iconic composition in Nerdrum's work

Figure 12: Odd Nerdrum, Dawn, 1990

Finally, it must be noted that it was the modernist avant-garde—the very thing that the Kitsch Movement seeks to oppose—that historically placed the most emphasis on originality and the rejection of tradition.[80] After modernity's end, some scholars have made the claim that this form of originality does not hold up to scrutiny. In her 1981 essay "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," Rosalind Krauss points out the paradox that even the avant-garde relied on formal archetypes—for example the use of grids.[81] Moreover, she contends, what originality we do recognize can only exist in relation to the existence of replication, as innovation must always stand out against the "prior example" of the familiar or recognizable.[82] True originality, it might be argued, is simply not possible, and therefore should not be an end towards which aesthetics and mimetic skill are blindly sacrificed.

5.3 Mimetic Skill

This marks a fitting place to return to the second question: the nature of mimetic skill. Clearly, after modernism and Duchamp, we cannot speak about skill in the same way we might have in earlier centuries. More pressing than that, however, is the fact that today's representational painters—even the most technically proficient ones—face more competition from the visual world than the Old Masters did. The likes of Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and

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[80] Rosalind Krauss equates this "revolt against tradition" with connotations of birth and life. "More than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. […] [Originality] becomes an organicist metaphor referring not so much to formal invention as to sources of life. The self as origin is safe from contamination by tradition because it possesses a kind of originary naiveté." Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1985 (essay originally published 1981)), 157.

[81] Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 157-158.

[82] In Krauss's own words: "Now if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that "originality" is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence." Later, she states "The priorness and repetition of pictures is necessary to the singularity of the picturesque, because the beholder singularity depends on being recognized as such, a recognition made possible only by a prior example." Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde," 157-158, 166.

Raphael had only nature and their contemporaries to compete with, but painters today must vie for attention not only against an endless deluge of social-media posts, but also against high-definition movies and video games made with cutting edge computer graphics. If the Greenbergian kitsch of Ilya Repin sought to give an exaggerated and more dramatic version of reality, then today's visual culture practically brings this practice to the level of apotheosis.[83]

For Nerdrum, this is an integral factor in the way he considers skill. Jan Åke Pettersson addresses Nerdrum's use of craftsmanship as vital means of making the work stand out and granting it longevity—that the presentation must be engaging if it is to bring the viewer to the story.[84] This perhaps becomes even more important when contextualized in a world where images are consumed en masse—usually in the form of internet searches and social media feeds. However, it is possible that the "wow-factor" of skill alone ultimately proves hollow if it does not serve some purpose beyond visual gratification. This is where it becomes vital to consider the relationship of skill and subject matter. To illustrate this, I will turn to a somewhat extreme example.

Perhaps one of Nerdrum's most challenging paintings is *Twilight*, a large image of a solitary woman defecating in the woods (Fig. 13). There are several factors at play here, most notably the shock that comes from a confrontation with the unclean or taboo. It is not my purpose here to

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[83] Greenberg actually makes a similar point in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," writing "It is lucky, however, for Repin that the peasant [who might prefer Repin's paintings to Picasso's] is protected from the products of American capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell." Clearly, the bar has been raised even higher today. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" 14.

[84] "By painting these timeless scenes—carefully processed by using durable natural materials in a time when art has become invaded by technology and characterized by transitoriness—Nerdrum also exemplified some of the qualities sacrificed along the road to our current social machinery. For he has always regarded the craftsmanship invested in his paintings to be of major importance. If a picture was not well painted, it would simply be lost in the multitude of visual pollution. Even his own ideas and thematic references ran the risk of becoming outdated and uninteresting. Then it would not matter that he had said something significant about man, the world, or himself, if it were not conveyed in an interesting way. Only the skillful execution of a painting could ensure its survival." Pettersson, *Odd Nerdrum: Storyteller and Self-Revealer*, 100.

argue whether this particular painting is a "masterpiece" per se, but rather to address the interesting push and pull of aesthetics that occurs when repellent or disquieting subject matter is combined with an "aesthetically-pleasing" handling of paint. The ghoulish and corpselike women featured in the paintings of Jenny Saville, another of the New Old Masters (though not one affiliated with the Kitsch Movement), also play with this tension. The question that arises in either case is whether or not a skillful rendering automatically elevates its subject. Put a different way, is remarkable skill always enough to equate transcendence? *Twilight* may be admirably *painted*, but it is unlikely that many laymen would accept the skillful rendering as sufficient means to transcend the "distasteful" subject matter. On the other hand, as Kuspit himself has argued in the supplemental texts of several Nerdrum compilations, the skillful rendering of the subject underscores the "unexpected beauty" in the body's natural processes.[85] This seems to be the key role of skill in the return to aesthetics sought by the New Old Masters and the painters of the Kitsch Movement: skill seeks the aesthetic in the subject. It is a means of revealing dimensions to the subject that otherwise might not have been possible.[86] Whatever the viewer might make of *Twilight* as an image, it must be admitted that it presents an audacious opportunity to consider the dynamics of technique and how technique remains relevant in contemporary painting.[87]

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[85] "The is the happiness and eternal life implicit in the rising sun, which makes an unexpected appearance in a number of works […] Even the natural functioning of the body has a certain beauty, as [*Twilight*] suggests, whatever its perverse, Swiftean overtone." Kuspit, "Old Master Existentialism," vi.

[86] While Kant may serve as a point of contention for Nerdrum's philosophy, this has interesting parallels in the following passage from *Critique of Judgement* concerning fine art: "Where fine art manifests its superiority is in the beautiful description it gives of things that in nature would be ugly or displeasing." Kant, *Critique of Judgment,* 141.

[87] A quote from Nerdrum: "Kitsch is a horrifying picture painted so beautifully that people take pleasure in it. When you say my paintings are not representations of beauty, it's because you're hung up on the motif." Mekjan, "Kitsch—Heart and Soul, Blood and Guts," 15.

Figure 13: Odd Nerdrum, *Twilight*, 1981

5.4 Replication

The final point to be confronted is the nature of replication, which is perhaps the most intriguing case to consider in relation to the masterpiece. The word replication is selected here due to its use in art historical discourse to describe the relationship of an "original" form or object and its antecedents. Put another way, most artworks that are studied in art history can be tied in terms of style and production to works that were produced at an earlier stage in history.[88] The word replication, as used here, does not necessarily suppose a direct simulacrum or forgery of a particular work, but rather a newer work that is formally connected to an older one. Within visual culture, this is a ubiquitous occurrence—indeed, art historian Whitney Davis once

[88] "Everything made now is either a replica or variant of something made a little time ago and so on back without break to the first morning of human time." (George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 2008), 2.) This might be seen as especially true in the contemporary art world, which Baudrillard once characterized as "infinite retrospective analyses of what happened before." Jean Baudrillard, "Objects, Images, and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Illusion," in *Art and Artefact*, ed. Nicholas Zurbrugg, (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997), 7.

described "culture" itself as "socially coordinated replicatory histories."[89] The Kitsch Movement fits nicely into this mold by looking back to the works of the Old Masters, thus creating contemporary replications that descend directly from the works of the past. The question that arises here is this: even if "originality" is dismissed to allow for the use of archetypes and familiar elements, can a stylistic replication be a masterpiece?

The interesting thing about considering replication as an integral part of culture is that it instantly turns the traditional connection of artmaking and the demiurgical Vasarian genius on its head. American historian George Kubler's *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the Histories of Things*, in particular, deems the study of the individual "great" artist or artwork to be an inadequate model for studying art; rather, Kubler proposes that the genius is simply "a fortuitous keying together of disposition and situation into an exceptionally efficient entity."[90] Instead of placing emphasis on such instances, Kubler proposes that art history is better viewed as a chain of "formal sequences"[91] characterized by prime objects and their replications.[92] From this standpoint, we might say that Nerdrum is in a formal sequence that descends from Rembrandt van Rijn, with Rembrandt's work discussed as "prime objects" rather than "masterpieces." In this case, questions of *style* and replication begin to arise as alternative to questions of the masterpiece. Whitney Davis also wrote on the replicatory nature of style in his work *Replications*, stating that "To identify a style is […] to present a particular replication

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[89] Whitney Davis, *Replications: Archaeology, Art History, Psychoanalysis,* (University Park, PA: University Press, 1996), 4.
[90] Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, 6.
[91] A passage from Kubler worth quoting at length: "A pleasure shared by artists, collectors, and historians alike Is the discovery that an old and interesting work of art is not unique, but that its type exists in a variety of examples spread early and late in time, as well as high and low upon a scale of quality, in versions which are antetypes and derivatives, originals and copies, transformations and variants. Much of our satisfaction in these circumstances arises from the contemplation of a formal sequence, from an intuitive sense of enlargement and completion in the presence of a shape of time." Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 40.
[92] Kubler, *Shape of Time,* 32-43.

relationship—namely, that a group of artifacts descend from the same system of production."[93] Kubler himself connects style to iconology, a "study of iconographical types as symbolic expressions of historical change."[94] But if this is the case, then what does it mean to place a kitsch painter like Nerdrum in the same family tree as a traditionally-canonized artist such as Rembrandt?

The most revealing outcome of considering replication in connection to the Kitsch Movement is the situating of high kitsch as an entity that is bound by art history. That is to say, high kitsch not only draws inspiration from the Old Masters, but shares direct "DNA" with them. However, one might well ask whether this bridge goes both ways. Does tracing the lineage of high kitsch to a canonized prime object have the effect of raising that kitsch to the status of art, or does it retroactively cause us to reevaluate the original as having elements of kitsch itself? This might seem to be reaching, but it is brought up here in connection to a point that has not yet been considered: as Nerdrum himself has argued, Rembrandt's work would be likely be deemed kitsch if Rembrandt were painting today (even if we forego his hypothetical placement in an elevator at the hands of Calinescu).[95] The point is intriguing, and perhaps even valid, but it does not take into consideration a key factor that separates Rembrandt from the Kitsch Movement: Rembrandt is already canonized by history, and much of his canonization—his "prime" or "master" status—comes as a direct result of imitation and replication by others.

Replication is intimately tied to the notion of canonization, an integral part of any of art history's masterpieces. One can easily argue that replication of a work has the effect of

[93] Davis, *Replications*, 16.
[94] Kubler, *Shape of Time*, 3.
[95] Odd Nerdrum, "Kitsch—The Superstructure of Sensuality," in *Kitsch: More Than Art*, (Oslo: Schibsted Forlag, 2011), 30.

increasing the fame and "aura" of the original.[96] The marble sculptures of the ancient Romans were dug up, studied, and written about by the Italians of the Renaissance, and artists living during that time would often visually cite these works—for example, the Belvedere Torso or the Laocoön group—in their own production. Likewise, the works of the Italian Renaissance were often copied and studied by artists working during later periods, which is how they maintained cultural authority and agency. The Kitsch Movement simply becomes another link in this chain by citing Rembrandt and Caravaggio. However, in light of the points made above, this only serves to reinforce the role of the Old Masters' work as masterpieces rather than automatically making the work of Nerdrum and his students into Kitsch Masterpieces.

So can a replication become canonized at all, or is this solely the domain of the prime object? The answer, as Kubler would have it, is yes. Many prime objects are themselves replications that build on a previous prime object—what designates an object as prime is not the fact that it does not trace its lineage back to earlier objects, but rather that it places a significant variation on the things it descends from to warrant replications of its own.[97] By this reasoning, it is conceivable to say that Nerdrum—with his students and fellow kitsch painters—has become another prime instance, though on a smaller scale. This is sufficient to mark him as significant for now, but his ultimate goal of "masterpieces" will require a demonstration of further endurance.

Ultimately, a work is not necessarily a masterpiece merely because it is skillful, emotionally resonant, or emulates the style of one of history's most famed paintings. Designation as a

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[96] Anthony Hughes, "Authority, Authenticity, and Aura: Walter Benjamin and the Case of Michelangelo," In *Sculpture and Its Reproductions*, ed. Anthony Hughes and Erich Ranfft, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 1997), 40-42.

[97] "Prime objects correspond to prime traits, or to mutant intentions, while replicas merely multiply the prime objects." Kubler, *The Shape of Time*, 38.

masterpiece, if such a thing is indeed still possible, is something that cannot happen at the moment of a painting's conception, but rather must be retroactively bestowed. To be a masterpiece, it is not enough to simply appear old and grand; a work must stand the test of time by demonstrating enduring significance and influence. This is the challenged faced by the Kitsch Painters and the New Old Masters. Their aspirations may be romantic and noble, but only time will tell the degree to which they have succeeded in their goals.

6 CONCLUSION

In *The Curatoriat*, a short play by Nerdrum in which he discusses the nature of art and kitsch with an imagined Edvard Munch, Nerdrum's Munch utters the phrase, "In art, the masterpiece is without meaning, in kitsch it is a necessity."[98] The masterpiece he refers to is a work of beauty and catharsis, something clearly tied to the notion of aesthetic transcendence. In the preceding pages, we have addressed the New Old Masters as discussed by Donald Kuspit, and have seen that among these painters Odd Nerdrum remains a singular and interesting case because he so directly engages with the concepts of master and masterpiece today in the sense of the old world. He is practically a man out of time, a sort of modern-day analogue to the Rembrandt he so fervently admires and emulates, but one who must contend with a world that first abandoned Rembrandt, and then simply subsumed Rembrandt into one of countless different artistic styles to be sampled and remixed by the engine of postmodernism. Nerdrum's Kitsch Philosophy presents a particular reworking of the terminology of art and kitsch in order to revalidate figurative painting, sincerity, and the search for beauty. Having explored this Philosophy and the problems faced by would-be masterpiece-makers in today's world, one question remains: are Nerdrum's work and philosophy actually artistic in nature?

[98] Odd Nerdrum, "The Curatoriat," in *Kitsch: More Than Art,* (Oslo: Schibsted Forlag, 2011), 303.

Interestingly, Kuspit himself wrestles with a similar point by briefly considering the possibility that Nerdrum is being ironic with his work:

> Is then, Nerdrum's contradiction in terms—Old Master style as a salve on the wound of modern depression—simply another ironical postmodern invention? But such inventions are themselves the bitter products of depression. They are deadends that bespeak the sense of futility they attempt to break out of. We are faced with a dilemma: Nerdrum's Old Master style may be another postmodern "hoax", that is, an ingenious intellectual construction that seduces us with its paradoxicality; or the only emotionally reliable, widely communicative way of conveying the depth of contemporary depression.[99]

Kuspit's conclusion is that the work must be taken seriously—not as a tongue-in-cheek ploy—in order to fully function on the level Nerdrum requires to address his themes.[100] Even outside of Kuspit's consideration, however, there is nothing anywhere to give away any sort of joke in Nerdrum's work. Irony, decried numerous times by the painter himself, is not something that could contribute anything to painting of this nature. Irony, however, is hardly tantamount to art.

Having said that the work is not artistic on an ironic level, I must argue that it *is* artistic in a very straightforward and sincere level. The trouble is that sincerity and beauty have long held little capital in the art world, so in order to function a work that bears these qualities cannot be labeled as "art." Art—the concept as we hold it today—has been gradually polluted and molded

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[99] Kuspit, "Old Master Existentialism," viii.
[100] "Nerdrum's […] theatre of the absurd is a therapeutic, spiritual response to the post-catastrophic period we live in, a period which brings with it a different kind of anguish, the anguish of self-defeat and self-destruction." Kuspit, "Old Master Existentialism," ix.

into a paradigm that embraces everything at the expense of transcendence. Again, as Nerdrum's Munch says, "In art, the masterpiece is without meaning." One person might utter "high art," another, "high kitsch." What is easy to overlook is that both suppose an elevated state of culture—one that points to the embodied meanings of Arthur Danto and the conceptual/critical schema of Greenberg. By this reasoning, both terms can logically be included under the word art—not the specifically modernist/postmodernist art written of within the Kitsch Philosophy, but the greater, more transcendent scope of art that is unified by the history of things that humans have made in the name of signifying higher meaning. Art is something that seeks the human condition, answering riddles in the dark and pointing to something beyond the mundane and callous (or, at least, elevating them to new levels of symbolic significance). If it must take the form of figurative painting, which directly signifies the human body and the human experience, then should this really come as any surprise? If art supposes embodied meanings that speak to the nature of human existence, and the "masterpiece" is the ultimate height of this practice that can be achieved by visual culture, then surely any attempt to reclaim the masterpiece must be art—not in the contemporary sense, but in the transhistorical sense.

All things said, it would be ridiculous to suppose that Nerdrum and his students are in any way the Saviors of Painting, or that high kitsch can singlehandedly "redeem" art. If nothing else, however, these painters may serve as a very potent reminder of the power once achieved by the Old Masters. The Kitsch Masterpiece, whether or not it actually exists, gives us occasion to reevaluate the potential of beauty, emotion, and mimetic skill in figurative painting. Is it art? This writer, with all heartfelt sincerity, says yes. Are these works masterpieces?

Again, that is not for the present to decide.

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