



# Consumers, Commodities & Consumption

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## **Kitsch Me If You Can, Doughboy**

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Back in the day, kitsch got a bad reputation as bad art. Not only those dogs-playing-poker paintings by C. M. Coolidge, immortalized on black velvet, or Mona Lisa t-shirts, but any stilted work would qualify. The epitome of this tendency was expressed by Clement Greenburg, who once stated of academic painting, "All kitsch is academic, and conversely, all that is academic is kitsch." Now this seems to me an overly restrictive view of academic painting, even though I like it as an apt description of academic life. But kitsch is worse than bad art; it is a whole way of being.

It tends to be underappreciated how kitsch is one of the system requirements of the Great Dehumanization Machine of globalizing capitalism. In America, Big Zombie merrily ingests kitsch in the varieties of ways it is constantly beamed at him and her: eat•kitsch, ad•kitsch, franchise•kitsch, mall•kitsch, Big Zombiemobile •kitsch, lawn•kitsch, Big Sport•kitsch, War kitsch, Holiday kitsch, and let's not forget Academic kitsch, with its textbooks and bureau-indoctrination techniques, also known as graduate school.

Kitsch, as Milan Kundera has put it, is the denial that shit happens: "the absolute denial of shit." Of course all that kitsch is invisible to Big Zombie. The beauty of the dehumanized living•dead is found in their faint smile as they are pulverized by advertisements. It is the look of unaware as ads creep ever more deeply into schools and homes, undoing their local life, softly gutting their souls with minidramas projecting one's basic inadequacy until the magical commodity is consumed, undoing their bodies as they widen into what I term *the doughboy complex*. The doughboy complex is that puffy, rounded pre-pubescent face, visible in someone like Karl Rove, but by no means limited to males. It is the materialization of the smiley face, "livin' large" as the living dead.

The consumptive culture of American automatism is a much greater threat to American democracy than terrorism: Big Zombie on auto•pilot overeating, overdriving, overconsuming, overtelevisioning, undersleeping, heavily medicating, does not a democracy make. Quite the contrary. Smiling doughboys and girls do not happiness make either. Beneath the doughboy and doughgirl's smiley face lays the fear, the insecurity, and the dread of being vulnerable to life. Doughboy and doughgirl incarnate the mask of the absolute denial of shit.

But whoever said that propaganda can't be fun! The old style communism, with its grim and earnest face, its punishing negative re•enforcement methods, lost out to the smiley face, not to democracy. Now China has put a smiley face on its grim party apparatus, not yet understanding that you do not need the communist party to exert rigid control over people, you only need the smiley face, seemingly perpetually partying. The *appearance* of humanity makes the best substitute to induce the disappearance of humanity.

Beneath the smiley face of globalizing capitalism, however, is the unsmiling face of the rational schizoid automaton, manifest not only in rational systems and technical devices, but also in the generalized

mechanical other internalized: Automaton-R-Us.

The alien automaton we have been busily building is the great social construction of our time, intent on colonization, neutralization, and eradication of humanity. And we're almost there.

***HAVE A NICE DAY!***



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