

# Kitsch and contemporary culture

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This paper addresses the question of kitsch by interpreting it as “bad” art of a particular kind. It draws mainly, but not exclusively, on Karsten Harries’s phenomenological exploration of kitsch to provide a framework from which to approach kitsch in contemporary (postmodern) culture. It is shown that, by uncovering attributes of kitsch such as the self-enjoyment of the spectator and lack of reflective distance, Harries provides valuable pointers for assessing what is ultimately the anaesthetizing political function of kitsch in contemporary culture.

Kitsch is one of the major problems of the present. This claim may seem far-fetched to some people, especially to those who take a certain delight in “art objects” which do not hide their status as “kitsch”, like a “retro”-telephone in the shape of a 50s pink Cadillac whose roof serves as the receiver.<sup>1</sup> But this is not really surprising – those objects derive their charm from the aura of nostalgia which surrounds them, something that is paradoxically reminiscent of a more “authentic” era, despite the artificiality of the “art object”. Hence, what is charming about the pink Cadillac-cum-telephone is what it represents - its “bygone” referent, as it were, namely the historical era which it evokes so powerfully on the part of people who are old enough to be transported to their rock “n roll youth by its sight. There is another reason why it is paradoxical, however. There is no doubt that the sentimentalism with which people may regard the miniature Cadillac-phone marks it as kitsch, but the memories of authenticity evoked by it tend to undermine its kitschiness precisely because these are probably memories of excitement and desire - desire that can be attached, in memory, to specific individuals, like lovers and friends. Conversely, the sentimentalism so typical of kitsch tends to subvert the authenticity of the memories in question. The paradox, then, consists in the tension between what is

remembered and the sentimentalism which pervades it (that is, the wallowing in the feelings that accomp-any the memories).

The point is that kitsch manifests itself whenever feelings seem to have lost their correlates, their “objects”; whenever the world, objects, and even other people, seem to have retreated, to be out of reach, so that “enjoyment” is ultimately enjoyment of one’s feelings and sensations for their own sake instead of for the sake of communicating with others or with things in the world. When Fredric Jameson (1993: 10-16) talks about the “waning of affect” in postmodernity, and reminds readers that this does make room for experiencing feeling in a different register, namely that of “intensities”, I believe he is on the same terrain, although he does not mention kitsch by name. Perhaps this is because kitsch has become the rule in popular culture from painting to television soapies and mainstream Hollywood movies.

But what, precisely, is kitsch? Answering this question would certainly clarify what was said above, and Karsten Harries (1968: 73-83; 149-152) is an invaluable source of insight in this regard. I shall try to give a succinct account of Harries’s fairly extended phenomenology of kitsch, because it dates back to the late 1960s and I would like to expand on it by relating it to the present. Harries reminds

one that a theory or philosophy of art should make room for the recognition of bad art as well as of good or “great” art – so-called “masterpieces”; otherwise there would by implication only be great art and non-art. His analysis of kitsch as “bad” art of a certain variety places it in a broader context than what might be expected, by showing that it involves moral considerations as well, rather than merely aesthetic ones.<sup>2</sup> In fact, one might say that Harries’s interpretation of kitsch reveals that it is an index of the impossibility of isolating art from ethics.

Harries discusses the historical provenance of the term “kitsch” in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is linked to the English verb “sketch”, on the one hand, and the unfamiliar German word, “kitschen” (to play with mud), on the other. He gives more credence to the latter derivation, pointing to the similarities between smoothed-out mud and the texture or colour of many 19<sup>th</sup>-century academic paintings. The term “kitsch” was probably first used to refer to certain genre paintings such as those which, with the tourist market in mind, represented “pure”, unspoilt Alpine mountain scenes. Importantly, Harries (1968: 75) observes that:

The word soon acquired overtones of moral disapproval: those paintings were called Kitsch which seemed to show a lack of integrity and which catered to the longings of the sentimental bourgeois. It is in this sense that the word appears in art criticism today...Kitsch is considered bad art; on the other hand, Kitsch is not simply bad art, but bad art of a particular kind. Here ‘bad’ is used not so much in an aesthetic as in a moral sense. Kitsch is perverted art, and to understand this perversion, we have to relate art to a standard of truth or morality. If aesthetics conceives itself to be only an autonomous discipline, divorced from ethics and ontology, it must fail to understand Kitsch, for Kitsch is a hybrid.

This may appear incongruous, given the startling fact – as Harries (1968: 75) points out – that kitsch often strikes one as being

aesthetically exemplary by being “harmonious”, unified and technically faultless, even “perfect” – as Canaday observed about Bouguereau’s paintings and Kerman about Richard Strauss’s operatic music (specifically *Salome* and *Der Rosenkavalier*). The nature of this “perfection” is hinted at in Canaday’s description of Bouguereau’s work as “perfectly false”, and as perfection of “a perverse kind” (quoted in Harries 1968: 76). Kerman’s description of Strauss’s *Salome*, namely that it has been composed with the “greatest skill”, and that it “carries harmonic audacity farther than ever before” (quoted in Harries 1968: 76) is similar. Even though he recognizes Strauss’s masterly technique, however, he denounces it for “the most banal sound” in opera, and for its “sugary orgasm”.

If these epithets do not yet convey what is distinctive about kitsch in art and music, Kerman’s insistence, that these two operas by Strauss “are false works in which everything goes depressingly right” (quoted in Harries 1968: 76) must surely strike a familiar chord with early 21<sup>st</sup>-century viewers who have been overexposed to mainstream Hollywood movies and television soaps of the “Everything-will-and-does-work-out-in-the-end”-variety. I am referring to the kind of movie that was ruthlessly parodied in Aronofsky’s recent critical film, *Requiem for a Dream* (2001).<sup>3</sup> Goethe’s well-known dictum comes to mind, that nothing is as depressing as a succession of good days. Why? Because in human life as it is, full of trials and tribulations, everyday experience teaches one to “expect the unexpected”:<sup>4</sup> mishaps, accidents, unanticipated debts, illnesses and so forth. Hence, as Goethe keenly observed, when things have been going smoothly for longer than usual, one tends to wonder, semi-superstitiously, when the “inevitable”

mishap will occur. And the point about kitsch is that it covers up this salient trait of human experience under a layer of sentimentalism, illusion and falsity which functions like an anaesthetic or worse, a powerful narcotic, inducing a kind of stupor that consists in a denial of these inescapable features of human finitude. Is it at all surprising, then, that so many people whom Marxists would call bourgeois adorn their lounges and dining rooms with kitsch paintings or reproductions suffused with sentimentalism, such as a picture of a wide-eyed, vulnerable-looking child whose eyes are filled with tears – an act that offers no guarantee that such people are capable of bestowing genuine care or love on their own children.

This is not to argue that an unmitigated existential pessimism should, ideally, be reflected in art. After all, if mishaps are to a greater or lesser degree inescapable, it is also true that pleasurable, fulfilling experiences are usually intertwined with these in those human lives that are fortunately not subject to conditions of utter material deprivation or poverty. Accordingly, good art recognizes the interbraidedness of the good and the bad in life, but kitsch offers one a false totality, a saccharine utopia which, at best, alludes to intermittent scandal and intrigue as foils for ultimate, implied unity or supposed “harmony”. The impression of harmony is reinforced by the frequency with which kitsch displays superb technique – those critics who regard excellence of technique as a sufficient condition for great art, would, Harries observes, probably hail such works as masterpieces (Harries 1968: 76).

Harries provides a valuable criterion for distinguishing between kitsch and good art when, following Bullough, he (Harries 1968: 76-77) contrasts the “cloying sweetness” of kitsch with the sense of distance experienced when confronting a great artwork.<sup>5</sup> Great art

is accompanied by a bracketing-out of everyday, practical concerns, matched by a fleshing-out of the experience (as “aesthetic”) on a new perceptual basis created by the “distance” in question.<sup>6</sup> Phenomenologically speaking, this distance varies from person to person according to their ability to sustain it, as well as regarding the kind of object depicted and the manner or style in which it has been done. A still life of food may remind someone of his or her hunger, while a nude may arouse someone sexually because of an inability on the spectator’s part to sustain the “distance” required for an aesthetic experience.<sup>7</sup> Needless to say, in these instances the works would not succeed as art.

But what is the relevance of this for the dubious moral status of kitsch? As Harries (1968: 77) suggests, one might conclude that kitsch is art without the proper “distance”, keeping in mind the dependence of such distance on the individual’s distancing ability as well as on formal qualities of the artwork itself. That the matter is more complex than Bullough’s treatment of the concept allowed, however, is shown by his own example of ecclesiastic art, such as altar pieces. These were originally not seen as art at all, but as images or icons of direct religious significance. Such religious art may sometimes be experienced as art, and sometimes evoke a much more immediate, devotional response (Harries 1968: 78). Yet, in no way could one fittingly refer to such paintings as kitsch – distance or its absence is therefore not germane to kitsch alone. Hence Harries’s important qualification of the role of distance (Harries 1968: 78-80): what is at stake here is not one, but *two* senses of distance (which Bullough distinguished without realizing the significance of the distinction; Harries 1968: 80). These are, firstly, the distance that obtains *between* viewers or audience and the

artwork in question, and secondly, the distance (usually of a reflective nature), *within* the subject (viewer/listener). It is the latter that is decisive in distinguishing between good art and kitsch, or bad art. “Kitsch”, Harries (1968: 80) says tersely, “is essentially monological; it is self-enjoyment”. By implication, good art is dialogical.

To understand what this means, it is instructive to look at the example that Harries (1968: 78) adduces by drawing on Canaday’s work. The latter compares the critical reception of Manet’s *Olympia* with that of Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus*. While the critics were able to point to redeeming “refinements” or features of the “wanton” Cabanel nude which mitigated its “lasciviousness”, they charged that *Olympia* was a “dirty picture”. This apparent anomaly becomes intelligible in light of Canaday’s remark (quoted in Harries 1968: 79), that “*Olympia* is not only a representation of reality but a revelation of it”. What does this mean? Simply that, in contrast with Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus*, which uses clichés such as “studio waves” and an inviting pose to “disguise” the goddess’s nudity, *Olympia* uses no such disguises – “she lies revealed in her nakedness” (Harries 1968: 79). The observer is not distracted by extraneous, platitudinal devices, but recognizes the nude for exactly what it is. Another way of putting it is that Manet’s treatment of *Olympia* demands an “encounter” on the part of the viewer, enhancing reflective “distance”. On the other hand the platitudes surrounding the Cabanel nude, rather than engendering “distance” or an encounter, effectively preclude it by their familiarity.

What makes the Cabanel painting kitsch, in the end, is the fact that the viewer does not really “confront” anything at all, because all that is left is a mood or an atmosphere. Following Kierkegaard, Harries

(1968: 79) reminds one that kitsch is precisely an occasion or stimulus for the evocation of such a mood – the pictured object or subject becomes irrelevant, or at least peripheral, because interest is no longer focused on it as “desired” object, but rather on the desire or the concomitant feeling itself. This is where the historical significance of kitsch becomes apparent (Harries 1968: 79-80):

The need for Kitsch arises when genuine emotion has become rare, when desire lies dormant and needs artificial stimulation. Kitsch is an answer to boredom. When objects cannot elicit desire, man desires desire. More precisely, what is enjoyed or sought is not a certain object, but an emotion, a mood, even, or rather especially, if there is no encounter with an object which would warrant that emotion. Thus religious Kitsch seeks to elicit religious emotion without an encounter with God, and erotic Kitsch seeks to give the sensations of love without the presence of someone with whom one is in love ... Kitsch creates illusion for the sake of self-enjoyment.

I referred earlier to Jameson’s observation that there has been a “waning of affect” in postmodernity, that is replaced by “intensities”. Given Harries’s analysis of kitsch, if Jameson is right, and it would appear that postmodern culture is conspicuously addicted to kitsch. This belief is strengthened, not only by ubiquitous, addictive television soapies and lugubriously saccharine “feel-good” mainstream Hollywood movies (of the *How to lose a guy in 10 days*-, or, in a somewhat different register, *Matrix*-variety). It is further reinforced especially by the realization that what Harries refers to (in 1968) as the shift from “objects” to feelings of self-enjoyment, manifests itself today in the guise of the “withdrawal” of things and objects to make way for a universe of images without apparent referents – Baudrillard’s so-called hyperreality or simulacra (Baudrillard 1996; Olivier 2002:84-87).<sup>8</sup> Feeling in the guise of “intensities” would then be experienced

in relation to the kind of image-sequence that typically has the effect of what is nowadays termed a “rush” on the part of the spectator – intense, ephemeral feelings without a “real”, lifeworld-object. Think of the neatly choreographed, pseudo-balletic fight-sequences or car chases (in many instances computer-generated) in *Matrix Reloaded* that leave audiences gasping with thrill after intense thrill.

It should now be clear what Harries means when he claims that kitsch is essentially monological, in the sense that it lacks a specific kind of distance, namely reflective distance “within a subject” (Harries 1968: 80). On the topic of reflection, Kathleen Higgins (1992: 570) remarks that, typically, kitsch does not require viewers or an audience to reflect on the presented image(s) because, as Greenberg observed, the “reflected” effect has already been incorporated in the image-configuration so that viewers may enjoy it unreflectively. What she calls “sweet kitsch” – such as a greeting card with two (unspecified) people gazing into each other’s eyes against a “fuzzy” (unspecified) background of natural beauty – would fail to achieve its typical effect of “touching” or “inspiring” viewers if it encouraged reflection (Higgins 1992: 570):

One needn’t reflect on the romantic greeting card image in order to be moved by it. One would suspect, in fact, that reflecting on the image would have a counterproductive effect on the ‘touched’ response.

Besides, the obvious reason why kitsch images include a “prereflected” or “predigested” aspect that obviates reflection is that a critical stance is impossible without reflective distance. Kitsch can only “touch” or move viewers on its own sentimentalist terms on condition that no critical thought is engendered through reflective distance. And yet, the “self-enjoyment” that Harries

attributes to kitsch as its effect is not synonymous with simple, completely unreflective enjoyment of, say, the smell of the sea on the breeze and the warm sand underfoot while walking on the beach on a summer day. Finely nuancing his analysis, he points out that kitsch is more reflective than such “simple enjoyment” insofar as it “detaches itself from the original emotion in order to enjoy it” (Harries 1968: 80). Should this modicum of reflectiveness be heightened significantly, the self-enjoyment triggered by kitsch may just be seen for what it is, namely self-deception. The reason for this, Harries (1968: 80) observes, is that an increase in reflective “distance” destroys the illusion on which kitsch relies for its effect.

As one may expect, then, such an increase in reflective distance – which, as pointed out earlier, occurs (“dialogically”) within the perceiving subject – passes beyond the self-deceiving illusions of kitsch, enabling the subject “...to play with illusion, knowing that it is only illusion” (Harries 1968: 80-81). It is in fact only this distance and the space that it clears for play, which enables some modern art to evade the pitfall of kitsch, according to Harries (1968: 81).<sup>9</sup> (He mentions Klee, Kandinsky and Schoenberg in this regard.) Play is an antidote to boredom, of course, as remarked earlier and as Kierkegaard showed so convincingly in *Either/or* (cf. Harries 1968: 80-81). But if boredom is associated with the world receding from the subject, which is what Harries, following Kierkegaard, suggests, is it at all surprising that contemporary (postmodern) culture is saturated with kitsch? Doesn’t the following excerpt seem to apply with uncanny accuracy to the contemporary world, despite having been written before 1968? (Harries 1968: 81-82):

Wherever we find boredom, an inability to discover enjoyment in the world, we can expect a

movement away from the world to the pleasures of self-enjoyment... If the world does not satisfy our demands, what remains except to enjoy ourselves? In Kitsch man strives for an immediate relationship to himself which offers an escape. Man strives to regain paradise, not by returning to what has been lost, but by building a substitute and by forgetting that it is his own invention. Man enjoys himself, his illusions, and even his anxieties and thus escapes from the problems posed by his being cast into a world which ultimately seems to make no sense. That this project is built on illusion does not matter ...

The aspect of contemporary culture that I have in mind is, as indicated before, its pervasively mediated, iconic character, theorized in different ways by several thinkers.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality or of simulacra, referred to earlier, captures best what is at stake here, namely an experience of the world as constituted by a self-enclosed, self-referential universe of images without referents. This is the kind of experience which testifies to the retreat of "world" in the everyday sense, but more importantly, to the ease with which the illusory, substitute "world" of images (on television and video, in cinemas, on computer screens) seduces individuals to lose themselves in or identify with those images. "Postmodern" kitsch is therefore more pervasive and ubiquitous in the culture of "developed" (as well as of some "developing") countries today, I believe, than the kitsch of any earlier era. The anaesthetic properties associated by Harries with the capacity of kitsch to provide the self-enjoyment of wallowing in illusions, is more conspicuous (to reflective observers) than ever before.

Moreover, today such kitsch, which masquerades as popular or mass art, serves an economic and political purpose. Think of films like *The Matrix* and *Matrix Reloaded*, or the recent James Bond movie, *Die another Day* (the most sustained "infomercial" I know of). These films are kitsch-delicacies for the "rush"- or feel-good

movie junkies who relish the vicarious thrill imparted to them by, for instance, the "actions" of the violently "neo-messianic" Neo – "The One" – in *The Matrix*. Here, as well as in the sequel, *Matrix Reloaded*, Neo is shown liberating the intra-cinematic, oppressed masses in perfectly choreographed hyper-karate style. The quasi-political and economic trait of (contemporary) kitsch reveals itself here. Cinematic kitsch of a certain kind has the effect of allowing the audience to relish vicariously, or wallow in, feelings of liberation from some fictitious oppressor. In this way it relieves viewers of the obligation to identify the real oppressive forces in the world today (notably the multinational corporations which produce politically anaesthetizing films such as the *Matrix* movies and many others). Seen in this light, the *Matrix* computer programme in the film-narrative, which creates the illusion that people are free, while they are in fact incarcerated and "programmed", is a metonymy for the multinationals which increasingly manipulate people's needs on a global scale.<sup>11</sup>

"Postmodern" kitsch thus serves the ever-expanding and strengthening interests of the multinationals - interests which are ostensibly purely economical, but on closer inspection are seen to be inextricably intertwined with political interests and power.<sup>12</sup> Such kitsch provides the fictional space for self-enjoyment as well as vicarious illusions of liberation or liberty on the part of the viewing public, in the process castrating them politically. As Adorno might have said: they pay docilely, even enthusiastically for their movie tickets, unaware that the slick, glitzy, "cool" production anaesthetizes them politically and holds them captive with its promise of unreflective self-enjoyment and illusory, vicarious striving for (and attaining of)

freedom. For example, the recent Shayamalan film, *Signs*, offers a “predestinational” explanation for catastrophic events and makes an empty promise of salvation. It aims to bring about (political) solidarity in the face of a putatively “alien” threat that turns out to be a metaphor for an alien culture that Americans seem to fear most after September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In this way popular cinema manipulates audiences via kitsch images on a global scale.

In the final analysis this should surprise no one, though. It was Milan Kundera (1984: 251) who drew attention to the political function of kitsch in *The unbearable lightness of being* when he famously described it in terms of “two tears” (also discussed by Kathleen Higgins 1992: 569-570) which flow successively at the sight of children “running on the grass”. While the first tear signals the viewer’s pleasure in beholding such innocence, it is the second one, claims Kundera, which introduces kitsch proper, because it universalizes the individual pleasure of the beholder, assuming that all of humanity is “moved” by “children running on the grass”. Kundera (1984: 251) highlights the political when he continues as follows:

The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch...And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing, they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements.

“Postmodern” kitsch – that is, kitsch in contemporary culture – serves precisely this function of uniting humanity under one umbrella in believing that, “just like in the movies” (or soapies), “everything will work out in the end”, everything will be all right (as it is in *The Matrix* and in *Signs*). Everything that is a source of pain and

suffering, or which stresses that, although everyone naturally strives for happiness and fulfilment, there is no guarantee that it will be attained (or, when attained, that it will last), is banished from the scope of kitsch. In this way kitsch unites millions of consumers into the fabricated pseudo-solidarity of those anaesthetized into believing that all is well with the world and with humanity. And while that belief lasts, no serious or significant challenge to the power of the mutually sustaining multinationals and their political affiliates will emerge.<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1 Or a red velvet Madonna money-box; something pointed out to me by a colleague, Max Rayneard.

2 This should not be regarded as being that unusual, if one remembers that Kant (1952: 223) brings the aesthetic and the ethical together when he claims that beauty is the symbol of the ‘morally good’.

3 From time to time some of the four main characters in Aronofsky’s *Requiem for a Dream* (2001) assure other characters that everything will ‘work out’. But instead of getting better, things go from bad to worse, until the film ends on an apparently hopeless note, or rather, on one which seems to suggest that it is up to the audience to see to it that things change for the better in present-day society. This appears to be the case because the four characters all adopt a foetal position, lying down, at the end of the film-narrative. This is also the end of the part entitled “Winter”, having been preceded by “Summer” and “Fall”. Hence, both the foetal position suggesting the time before birth/rebirth, and the absence of “Spring” raise the question: will there be a (re-) birth? Moreover, the (re-) birth in question seems to be that of Western culture itself, and not simply of the four characters’ lives. This film is “good” cinematic art, as opposed to kitsch.

4 This saying (“Expect the unexpected”) has been attributed to Heraclitus, a presocratic ancient Greek philosopher. Needless to say, the “unexpected” would also include the unexpected “gift” of good tidings and events.

5 In cinema one could compare the all-too-perfect love-narrative of a film like *The Blue Lagoon* with Lina Wertmüller’s *Swept Away*, where not only gender differences, but also class differences are dissected in a tale of conflict and desire involving an unapologetically masculine peasant Sicilian deckhand marooned on an island with a beautiful, sophisticated and wealthy woman. By refusing the spectator easy identification via pleasurable, narcissistic looking, Wertmüller maintains

distance and prevents the film from degenerating into cinema kitsch.

6 In different ways, Kant and Schopenhauer also acknowledged this “distance” characteristic of an aesthetic experience. For Kant (1952: 42-44) it manifests itself as “disinterested pleasure”, while Schopenhauer (1969: 185) articulates the “bracketing out” of everyday cares as the “wheel of time” standing still.

7 A perceptive critic has remarked that this is not so obvious at all, even though such a distinction is sometimes drawn, e.g. between art and pornography. I would want to add that, for iconographic (or literary) representation to be pornographic, what is represented has to include relations of subordination (usually of women by men), and not merely nudity. She also pointed out that “ideology sensitive and ideology critical art often aims at “moving” spectators in this way”. Although this touches on something that is related to my present theme, it merits an investigation in its own right and will not be pursued here.

8 Although I am convinced that the September 11<sup>th</sup>-attacks in the US have seriously dented the credibility of Baudrillard’s thesis concerning the status of the image as simulacrum (that is, his claim that the image has become self-sufficient and no longer has a referent), it is still undeniably the case that most people in advanced capitalist or “developed” countries live in a media- and therefore image-saturated culture. By its very structure, this culture encourages kitsch in so far as the objects of people’s desires are, to a large extent, media-images or icons, and not lifeworld-objects. (Cf. in this regard Olivier 2000 and 2002a, as well as, regarding kitsch as *icon*, Higgins 1992: 572).

9 Harries (1968: 81) claims, surprisingly, that this kind of art “shares with Kitsch its monological character”, apparently because for it, “objects are ... occasions for play” (instead of for self-enjoyment, as is the case with kitsch). This linking of play in modern art with its putative “monological character” seems questionable to me. The reflective distance characteristic of art is surely not limited to representational art. Abstract expressionist or cubist works are just as likely to be “dialogical” in so far as they address or instantiate intellectual themes of a wide variety, ranging from the social (Picasso) and the mathematical-physical (Pollock) to the natural (Marc).

10 Some of these are: Baudrillard (1996), Harvey (1992), Kearney (1988), Lyon (1994), and Thompson (1990).

11 Intra-narratively, the scene-sequence in *Matrix Reloaded* between Neo and the “Architect” of the “Matrix” (programme) is an uncannily clear statement of the way in which the global system of multinational capital functions today. Briefly, the Architect informs Neo that he is not the first “liberator” – there have been others before him, who have perished and who, like himself, were created by the system itself to test it to the optimal degree. Without such an ostensibly system-transcending agency, intent on destroying the system, it would not be able to perfect itself. Freedom has to remain a promise, a beckoning ideal, albeit

an illusory one, otherwise there would be no way to improve the system on a thoroughgoing basis. Extra-narratively, however, the film functions in an analogous way by assuring viewers of the attainability of freedom from an oppressive system, while simultaneously testing the extent to which viewers are willing or able to bring about true emancipation from the ever-increasing web of needs-manipulation constructed by multinational capital. See in this regard Hardt & Negri 2001:59.

12 Jacques Derrida has written eloquently on the dangers of premature triumphalism in the face of the contemporary marriage between liberal democracy and advanced capitalism in *Spectres of Marx* (1994), while Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2001) is a sustained analysis of hegemonic political and economic (capitalist) developments in the age of globalization.

13 If this seems unclear, consider that multinational companies are interdependent (for instance in the shape of conglomerates) and keep one another going by sustaining the global economic system. This, in turn, sustains the political regime(s) that benefit from, and reciprocally protect the multinational companies. (Cf. also note 12, above.)

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