Wabi and Kitsch:
Two Japanese Paradigms

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to look for a conceptual link between traditional Japanese aesthetics of *wabi* and the aesthetics of kitsch. I am not saying that *wabi* is kitsch but that *wabi* and kitsch share a common formal structure that makes use of a particularly immediate type of aesthetic perception. Both the aesthetics of kitsch and of *wabi* underline the necessity of direct, intuitive insight in aesthetic matters. My hypothesis is that though *wabi* and kitsch are very obviously dissimilar with regard to their *content*, the existence of such a formal principle of immediacy in traditional Japanese aesthetics is partly responsible for the extraordinary proliferation of kitsch in contemporary Japan.[1]

The Japanese term *wabi* has come to the attention of a wider public in the form of the apparently compact concept of *wabi-sabi* that Daitetz Suzuki and others spread in order to refer to a complex aesthetic system developed in proximity with Zen Buddhism. It represents a Zen-inspired idea of beauty manifested in traditional architecture and crafts valuing imperfection, simplicity, poverty, and naturalness. Beauty and authenticity are found in aged wood, cracks, asymmetrical forms, and decay, which makes *wabi-sabi* expressions compatible with the principle of impermanence central to Zen Buddhism. *Wabi* delights Japanese in the form of those things that remind us of the transient character of all things.

The word kitsch was probably coined in Germany in the 1860-1870s in order to designate cheap artistic stuff (Dorfles 1975: 234).[2] Kitsch proliferated during the Nineteenth Century and has since been examined from a variety of perspectives, among which is Clement Greenberg's kitsch as a too formulaic aesthetic expression (Greenberg 1961: 10), Gillo Dorfles' concept of kitsch as "artistic rubbish" (Dorfles: 10), and Matei Calinescu's more "culturalist" definition of kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon that

contradicts the "law of inadequacy" (1987: 257). While there is apparently no "classical" definition of kitsch (different approaches compete), there is still something like a most common understanding of kitsch as a tasteless copy of an existing style or a system of "bad taste" and artistic deficiency which almost always involves exaggerated sentimentality and superficiality. A systematic evaluation of kitsch is even more difficult because as a social – and furthermore globalized – phenomenon, kitsch has acquired a supplementary scope of cultural anesthesia (Lugg 1999: 4) that excels in falsification and serves as an aesthetically vulgar means to enter a consumer-oriented dream world. In the present article, which focuses on kitsch in Japan, these developments are of particular interest. However, all these manifestations must be seen in connection with the most general understanding of kitsch, which remains that of an aesthetic product depending on an exaggerated sentimentality, banality, and triteness.

1. The Situation

Traditional Japanese aesthetics is famous for its sobriety and its opposition to showiness and ostentation. Since World War II the world became aware of Japanese culture mainly through phenomena like tea ceremony, *ikebana*, and geishas. It would be wrong to suppose that today these manifestations of traditional Japanese culture have ceased to exist; some of their spirits are still alive, and are admired by tourists as much as they are examined by students of Japanese culture. Still, visitors as well as students cannot stop wondering about one fact: how is the coexistence in Japan of traditional aesthetic values like *wabi-sabi* and manifestations of the most exuberant kitsch culture possible? A walk through a Japanese city exposes a contradiction that, fundamentally, has never been explained. Traditional houses, temples and gardens side with pachinko-parlors and restaurants in the most fanciful architectural styles decorated with plastic flowers and imbued with artificial bird noises. Expensive tea bowls, monochrome ink paintings, *haikus*, as well as the tea ceremony are still appreciated by a part of the population which gives reason to suppose that in Japan the *wabi*-aesthetics has been conserved through centuries. This seems to be incompatible with the fact that here Hello Kitty pencil cases and pink teddy bears are desired by young women up to the age of thirty-five. In Japan, as has said Donald Richie "bad taste is a constant force to reckon with" (1992: 62) because nowhere in the "Kingdom of Kitsch" (ibid) can one "escape from the cartoon, the comic-book atmosphere, the cute" (Richie 2003: 53). And Frédéric

Kaplan defines Tokyo's city life like this: "To describe an exuberant patchwork like Tokyo City only one German word seems to be appropriate: 'kitsch'. Japan is a place where 'kitsch' is acceptable on a large scale" (Kaplan 2004: 7).

In Japan, kitsch as a "large scale" phenomenon becomes particularly obvious in the proliferation of youth culture for which the predicate "kawaii" (cute) seems to represent a sort of national aesthetic standard. The aesthetics of cuteness (kawairashisa) developed since the 1980s and has turned in the late 1990s into an explicit kitsch culture (Kinsella 1995). The cute is generally defined as childlike, sweet, innocent, pure, gentle and weak. However, the culture of the "cute" is not at all restricted to the field of youth culture. Today, not only middle-aged women let dangle fluffy stuffed animals from the bottom of their cell phones, but also *sarariman* wear Pikachu on key chains (Allison 2002: 3) and even (male) truck drivers "display Hello-Kitty figurines on their dashboards" (Augier 2006). Cute-kitsch culture is more than an aesthetic style but appears as a full-fledged way of articulating a subjective attitude that can become manifest in design, in language, in bodily behavior, in gender relations, and in perceptions of the self, or, as has said Brian McVeigh, "cuteness is not just a fad in the fashion cycle of Japanese pop culture; it is more of a 'standard' aesthetic of everyday life" (McVeigh 2000: 135).[3]

This is the conundrum that the present article attempts to solve: Anybody who has stayed in Japan for even a short period must have asked himself what it is that has made possible the shift from the sober and "good" taste of the past to the showiness of the present kitsch-aesthetics and architecture. Has, as Masabuchi Sôichi holds, the cute replaced the refined and if yes, why?[4] Is it just the preponderant influence of mass-culture, unavoidably coming along with a capitalist economic system that managed to erode traditional culture by sparking off an unstoppable process of decadence? While a part of the phenomenon can certainly be explained like this, another part will unavoidably be *explained away* if the analysis were limited to these conventional tools of anti-capitalist cultural criticism. The question that remains open is: How could the "kitschification" of Japan progress at such a quick pace, and why has it not been "braked" by the strong aesthetic potential that Japan could extract from her history?

2. Wabi vs. Kitsch

Though in Japanese colloquial speech as well as elsewhere *wabi* 侘 and *sabi* 寂 are commonly used together, in strict aesthetics terms each of them refers to different qualities. *Wa* signifies harmony and peace and *wabi* means "tranquil simplicity." *Sabi* can be traced to Chinese poetry of the mid- and late Tang dynasty and signifies the bloom of time and the patina of those things that are old and wear the traces of daily use.[5] The present article concentrates on *wabi*, and *sabi* is of lesser importance. As mentioned, the last thing that I want to bring forward is that *wabi* is kitsch. It is only all too obvious that it is not. *In the first place*, *wabi* and kitsch are directly opposed to each other, which becomes clear when comparing their most striking features. *Wabi* (as well as *sabi*) preach modesty while kitsch is boastful. *Wabi* and *sabi* cling to the ideal of non-perfection while kitsch likes the smooth surfaces of perfection. *Wabi* aesthetics prefers natural colors and materials and shuns decoration, while kitsch most often comes along with glaring colors. Even more, kitsch, as an attribute of petty-bourgeois taste, is mainly conservative, and looks for safety and certitude and, as has pointed out Matei Calinescu, is "unable of taking the risk involved in any true avant-gardism" (Calinescu 1987: 231). Also for Clement Greenberg kitsch is opposed to any concept of avant-garde thinking (or simply any genuine art) because kitsch is "mechanical and operates by formulas" (Greenberg 1961: 10). *Wabi* and *sabi*, on the other hand, manifest a real avant-garde spirit trying to undermine the safe patterns of human (aesthetic) existence by preaching even the attraction of deprivation and destitution. Above that, through their Zen-Buddhist valuing of spontaneity, *wabi* and *sabi* clearly refuse anything formulaic.

In spite of these oppositions, I would like to go as far as saying that the traditional Japanese aesthetic ideal of *wabi/sabi* and the aesthetic manifestations that we classify today as kitsch have "deep" psychological structures in common. These resemblances become manifest *not* in regard to both aesthetics' content but exclusively on a formal basis. Probably everybody will agree with Catherine Lugg when she says that kitsch "has an immediacy that art must avoid" (Lugg 1999: 4). The question is: how is it possible that the artistic manifestations of *wabi* and *sabi are* arts though they lay such a strong stress on immediacy? A research into these common structures pertaining to both kitsch and *wabi/sabi* will explain the phenomenon that makes the Japan visitors so dizzy: the development of an outspoken kitsch culture within a cultural sphere in which the ideal of *wabi/sabi* is still existent. As a guideline for the reader I suggest to keep the

following principle in mind: I contrast *wabi* and kitsch on all levels that concern their respective contents but draw parallels only between their *formal* characteristics. Nowhere do I claim that in terms of *content* these two phenomena bear any resemblance.

3. Different Models of Kitsch Production

So far I have suggested that *wabi/sabi* and kitsch have a formal structure in common and that this is also one of the reasons why kitsch could develop so quickly in Japan. This argument will be explained more closely below. First it will be necessary to look at another reason for the fast development which is, paradoxically, the fact that *wabi/sabi* is so different from kitsch. To understand this, one needs to realize an important difference between Japanese and Western kitsch culture.

In the first place, this difference has to do with the difference between Japanese and Western traditional elitist culture. Matei Calinescu, in a more recent fundamental writing on kitsch, defines the kitsch-man as one who attempts to "to experience as kitsch even non-kitsch works or situations" (Calinescu 1987: 257). Kitsch items can be represented by tourist attractions like the Eiffel Tower or sunsets at the seaside which, as such, are no items of kitsch. There are, in Japan, imitations of Hokusai-like woodblock print landscapes on the tile walls of hot spring baths, miniature Tokyo Towers and temples, as much as there are reproductions of Venus de Milo in wedding reception halls. With regard to these cases it is certainly right to say that there is no difference between the Western and the Japanese lover of kitsch.

However, when it comes to a reproduction of recognized, traditional "high class" art, an important difference between the West and Japan cannot be denied: More often than Japanese high culture, Western high culture contains kitsch in a *potential form*. Norbert Elias has pointed this out when writing: "The formal tendencies of the works of great artists, whether they were called Heine or Victor Hugo, Wagner or Verdi, Rodin or Rilke, were intimately connected to those revealed by the mediocre works, which we dismiss as aberrations, as products of disintegration and decadence, as 'kitsch'; one merges easily and imperceptively into the other" (Elias 1998: 28). In other words, in Western "high culture" one can "kitschify" almost everything. One of the greatest driving forces of kitsch culture in the West has indeed always been, as also Gillo

Dorfles states, the adaptation of "high culture" for the purposes of mass culture (Dorfles 1975). In Japanese kitsch,[6] this driving force has been much less pronounced. While it is relatively easy to transform the works of Rembrandt or Beethoven into kitsch-versions that are suitable for mass-consumption, or while one can even make kitsch versions of more abstract cultural entities like, say, Dostoevsky's "Search for God," or Hamsun's "Love for the Peasants" it seems to be difficult to "kitschify" an all-black Fourteenth Century Raku tea bowl. This object appears so much as a conscious manifestation of anti-kitsch that any attempt towards its adoption for mass culture appears to be hopeless.

One might object that the cheap cups in Raku style that can be bought at a 100 Yen shop represent such kitschified versions. I do not agree because here the typical Raku qualities (subdued color, rough texture, irregular glazing, etc.) are not *exaggerated* (as the classical definition of kitsch prescribes) but *watered down* until they are only vaguely reminiscent of Raku. As a matter of fact, such a tea bowl will most probably *not* be spontaneously perceived as a kitschified version of a Raku bowl but simply as a "black tea bowl." Mass-production does not necessarily imply kitschification. The same is true for other Japanese works of art that can contain *wabi*, like *haikus* or ink paintings of landscapes.[7]

I would like to argue that a large part of Japanese traditional culture could not be kitschified in the same way in which Western high culture could. "There is no high or low class Japan – it's a superflat culture – and its art reflects this," has written Rumi Jade (2002). This goes also for Japanese popular art. In spite of the amazing proliferation of kitsch in Japan, the Western idea of kitsch as a movement that "makes the significant trivial" (Relph 1976: 143), that debases the authentic and makes the elitist mediocre, does not apply to the dominant Japanese model of kitsch. For Norbert Elias, kitsch is "nothing other than the expression for this tension between the highly-formed taste of the specialists and the undeveloped unsure taste of mass society" (Elias 1998: 32). The largest past of Japanese kitsch culture, however, as we encounter it in everyday life, does not result from the embarrassing imitation of items of high culture by a misled consciousness, but is produced *as kitsch*, so to speak from scratch.[8]

I believe that while a cheap imitation of a Hokusai woodblock printing might more or less work along the schemes that are also valid for Western productions of kitsch, the existence of the kitsch culture that is most intrinsic to Japan must be

explained with the help of other models. Though there is more than one reason for the existence of Japanese cute-kitsch (and sociologists have been working on this since the mid-1990), I want to concentrate here on the question of how it has been possible that within this dramatic process of the "free invention" of a kitsch culture no historical material interfered in order to "brake"[9] the production of kitsch as it began to proliferate in modern Japanese culture. Or, in other words, how has it been possible that in Japan, kitsch could arise autonomously as a *parallel* culture?

One of the reasons is that Japanese kitsch culture had fewer reasons to *subordinate* itself to an already existing high culture than in the West. As becomes particularly obvious with regard to the omnipresent kitsch culture of the cute (though not only there), in Japan, kitsch has a more "innocent" existence; and one of the reasons for this is that this kitsch has not been derived from high culture. For Greenberg the principal strategy of kitsch is to use "for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture" (1961: 10). Roughly speaking we can say that while Western kitsch, at the moment it transforms high culture into mass culture, "denigrates" high culture, in Japan, kitsch is more likely to be perceived as just one form of expression, or one *style*, that is *morally* (though not *aesthetically*) on the same level as high culture. The result is that the Japanese consumer of kitsch feels less remorse or guilt because unlike Western kitsch, most of Japanese kitsch (especially cute kitsch) has never submitted items of high culture to an act of distortion, the singling out of one particular "emotional" element, or undue stylization. Typical Japanese kitsch – or rather the people who consume it – has less reasons to apologize to anybody but is able to live a kitsch-life in the form of a particularly innocent existence.

There is another reason why Japanese kitsch culture could develop as a parallel culture and is therefore distinct from Western kitsch culture. Though this sounds surprising today, historically, European kitsch is linked to the formation of the individual. After the Reformation, once the ubiquitous responsibility of the church for the individual had faded away, the man of the middle class was asked to create his personality, his taste, and his style, "on his own."[10] What he did in the first place, was imitating the aristocrats who managed to decorate their lives so splendidly. Still, no matter that, in the end, kitsch became a prison house of bad taste foiling all attempts to restore a proper degree of authenticity to things – in the first place it was meant to foster an adult, emancipated kind of individuality. Even at present this remains important. In

modernity, humans are threatened with the loss of their individuality because the density of urban life, the industrialized mass production, etc., are intrinsically *non-individualist*. Here kitsch could be reconfirmed as a vehicle for a – though inconsistent – search for individuality.

At least since the "invention" of cute-culture, Japanese kitsch definitely went into another direction. Many authors have linked the *kawaii* to the concept of *amae*. The psychologist Takeo Doi detected in the early 1970s a kind of "willful immaturity or childishness" among Japanese youths (Doi 1973) that testified, in his opinion, the desire to be indulged like children. Interestingly, he found in *amae* a structure of immediate perception that he was ready to call "telepathic:"

Amae itself is an emotion that is constituted tacitly. It is telepathic, prelinguistic, and does not need the medium of language. It is communicated directly from the heart. Certainly it is an emotion of intimacy, but it is also fundamentally related to secrets of the heart (Doi 1973: 138).

This immediacy comes close to the immediacy in observed in the perception of kitsch. Doi observes in *amae* a "sensitivity to minor things" (kodawari; Johnson 1993: 168) that are certainly also related to the aesthetics of kitsch. This desire to reenter childhood is, however, not to be equated with the desire of stepping back to a stage preceding the formation of adult-like individuality, but rather as its contrary. While in the West, adulthood symbolizes the discovery of individuality (even if that individuality is at times misled and can end up as kitsch), the Japanese would find the sphere of childhood much more "individualist" because here things that a strictly regimented Japanese adult generally rules out, are permitted. This means that while the promise of kitsch was, like in the West, that of a quick access to individuality, in the case of Japan this individuality was looked for in the sphere of pre-adult culture. In the West, once the fake character of this "individuality" is discovered, the person might reject the kitsch objects and look for items of *high culture* in order to confirm his/her individuality. In Japanese cute-kitsch culture, such a Platonic logic that leads the individual to always higher stages of more and more adult forms of individuality by *overcoming* kitsch does not exist.

4. Western and Japanese "High-Culture"

This argument is closely linked to a further difference between Japan and the West that is the already mentioned difference between Western and certain parts of Japanese high culture. There is a quality that makes Japanese high culture incompatible with kitsch. In Japan, the adoption of the Buddhist idea of "nothingness" produced an elitist art that was, so to speak, "insignificant on purpose;" sobriety as well as the self-negation of "positive" qualities cannot be rendered in the language of kitsch. Gillo Dorfles has said that kitsch means to put the "right thing at the wrong place." Such a definition implies that the "right thing" is, at least in some way, still able to identify with the wrong environment. Beethoven, Dostoevsky or Hamsun *do* contain kitsch elements. However, normally these elements do *not* appear as kitsch as long as they are – as is the case in the works of these artists – embedded in the "right" context. Once these elements are isolated and presented in a context of exaltation, sentimentality, ostentation, etc., they quickly become kitsch.

For the reasons quoted above, it would be very difficult to maintain the same idea about a Raku tea bowl. This object, when put into the "wrong" context, will not automatically spark off the emotional feelings in which like to indulge lovers of kitsch; on the contrary, it would rather suggest the sort of "banal nothingness" of an object that has been deprived of its sophisticated context and has therefore become unable to vibrate the "philosophical nothingness" that had once been invested into its being.

These are the reasons why *wabi* and kitsch, which are different from each other with regard to their content, manifest a whole range of *formal* similarities. I mentioned the content-oriented differences at the beginning of this article when establishing sobriety and self-negation as *wabi* qualities that will always remain incompatible with kitsch. I have also shown that in the idealistic but materially restrained atmosphere of *wabi* kitsch is not possible. However, these atmospheres concerns only the *content* of *wabi* expressions while on the purely *formal* level it is possible top spell out some similarities between *wabi* and kitsch objects:

1. Both are objects that arouse fascination in the first place *as objects* (and not as works of art).

2. Both excel in functional simplicity.

3. Both are intuitive and not reasonably constructed.

4. Both are individual and emotional, and seem to "speak."

5. Both inspire a focal attention on the *single* object (which was for Schiller the most typical characteristic of kitsch-like art).[11]

6. Both are objects that one would typically like "to live with" through the seasons.

7. Both strive to reduce the (emotional) distance between the observer and the object as much as possible and speculate with the "immediacy" of the aesthetic effect that can be appreciated "without effort."

8. Both display a lack of imagination that is consciously searched for by *wabi* artists, and an involuntary occurrence in kitsch.

9. If they are 3-dimensional objects, they are often round shaped and in most cases have the spatial, tactile effect of "pet objects."

10. Both "despise money" (though each in its own way).

11. With regard to *cute* kitsch we can say that the innocent, natural simplicity directed against industrialization is a common feature of *wabi* and kitsch.

5. Kitsch, *wabi*, and *suki*

I have pointed out the incompatibility of *wabi* and kitsch, an incompatibility that presumably contributed to an acceleration of the proliferation of kitsch in post-war Japanese popular culture. We now need to consider a supplementary aspect. It is certain that, in spite of the incompatibility of Japanese traditional culture with kitsch on most levels, a certain compatibility of kitsch and *wabi* could install itself on another, purely formal, level. And this did *also* contribute to an acceleration of the proliferation of kitsch in post-war Japanese popular culture. The slightly complicated constellation can be clarified by contrasting *wabi* with the concept of *suki*. The Japanese idea of *wabi* is strongly linked to the Way of Tea that cultivates values like loneliness and poverty. It is an aesthetic value putting forward a Zen-influenced idea of seclusion and freely accepted insufficiency. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu list a dozen of adjectives that characterize the spirit of tea aesthetics, among which there are asymmetry, crude plainness and deprivation (Izutsu & Izutsu 1981: 47). To the metaphysical austerity of *wabi* they oppose the aesthetic exuberance of *suki*, an aesthetic style preferred by court

people. The subtle elegance of *suki* was generally accepted as an aesthetic standard at the Momoyama époque. This was also the time when the tea master Rikyû (1522-1591) developed his alternative, avant-garde aesthetic concept of *wabi-sabi*. Rikyû reacted to the "parvenu extravagance" (Keene 1988: 16) that dominated the military society governed by the general Toyotomi Hideyoshi and tried to smash values that were so far regarded as well-established. Hideyoshi was a parvenu-leader and interested in arts such as tea ceremony and Nô mainly because he sought support of the political community around him.[12]

I want to take up the opposition of *wabi* and *suki* and formulate a theoretical model that includes the possibility of kitsch. The aesthetic indulgence practiced by the art of *suki* is different from that of *kitsch*. First of all, *suki* employs, like *wabi* real artistic ardor and does not fall into the register of bad taste. How then can be defined the difference between *wabi* and *suki* in regard to kitsch? Though at the basis of both *suki* and *wabi* resides a strong emotional saturation, an untransgressable limit still subsists. While *wabi*-aesthetics remains in the domain of the "negative," refraining from actualization (of nature, beauty, consciousness, etc.), *suki*-aesthetics attempts to articulate aesthetic phenomena "positively," not as a pure potentiality or as an inner accumulation, but as a much more straightforward aesthetic expression. In other words, *suki*-aesthetics has to renounce the "idealism" that remains the privilege of the *wabi*-expression, because such a spiritual component cannot subsist in the more pragmatic atmosphere of articulated consciousness. In parallel, also *wabi*-aesthetics has to renounce something. Being spiritual and idealistic, it cannot give in to any profusion of external expression.

It is clear that in this dual traditional model there is no place for kitsch. However, such a place can be artificially created. This place would be a kind of biotope for an eat-your-cake-and-have-it attitude eager to combine the idealist suggestiveness of *wabi* with the exuberance of *suki*. The result would be the realization of emotional saturation (common to *wabi* and *suki*) that manages to combine the spiritual wealth of *wabi* with the material wealth of *suki*. The result of such a strategy would be kitsch. This scheme is formal and speculative, but I think that one of the sources of Japanese kitsch culture can be explained exactly this way. The "spiritual" input of *wabi*, normally representing a philosophical component of nothingness, would have to be "kitschified."

I want to draw upon a rather odd example from Japanese cute-culture as a

culmination of generalized kitsch culture in Japan: Hello Kitty. I am not saying that this is the most typical model of Japanese kitsch and that one can generalize all components of this example. I only believe that Hello Kitty can lead to an interesting reflection on emotional saturation, articulation, and authenticity. Since the 1990, when a McDonald campaign fostered a genuine Hello Kitty craze in Japan, Hello Kitty stands out as one of the best known manifestations of Japanese cute-culture. Hello Kitty resumes in itself almost all attributes that Sharon Kinsella has established for the cute: it is round, without bodily appendages, non-sexual, and mute. Exaggerated as these attributes are, they often overlap with essential points made about kitsch. However, the case of Hello Kitty is particularly remarkable because here a *lack* of something has been elevated to the status of aesthetic quality. This conforms to one of kawaii's definitions which is "that the lack of outstanding features in the expression 'cute' appeals to the Japanese aesthetics."[13]

I would argue that, formally, there is a parallel with the "spiritual" input of *wabi* that represents a philosophical component of nothingness; and it is this nothingness that has been "kitschified." A passage from the Hello Kitty homepage very well illustrates this treatment:

> We are always delighted to hear from a Hello Kitty fan! The reason Kitty's mouth is not drawn is so that anyone looking at her can imagine their own expression for her. When you are happy, you can imagine a smile on her face; when you are sad, she's sad with you. Kitty always knows how you feel, and being your friend, she shares you feelings.[14]

In psychological terms, Kitty represents the typical case of kitsch defined by Ludwig Giesz in the 1960. Obviously it is a "self-enjoyment" in which the "enjoyer enjoys himself" (Giesz 1975: 41). However, did not also Rikyû suggest that in *wabi* tea bowls you will "see your own self?" In the case of Kitty, the "emotional saturation" is not only immediate (just like in *suki* and *wabi*) but it is also produced, like in *wabi* through the negation of some of the essential physical characteristics of the object itself. This negation strives (like *wabi*) to transcend the sphere of what is purely physical. However – and here is the difference between Kitty and *wabi* – kitsch reaches neither distress nor desolation but *suki*-like emotional fulfillment.

I would go even one step further. A production of kitsch like Kitty is not only the result of the curious combination of fake spirituality and consumerist emotionality whose anatomy can be defined with the help of the traditional concepts of *wabi* and *suki*. Even more, the *formal* structure of *wabi* itself is that of kitsch. Izutsu and Izutsu have defined *wabi* as the "the non-articulated self identifying itself with the subjectivity of the creative extentiating expression of Nothingness" (Izutsu & Izutsu 1981: 60). This formula would also be suitable for kitsch, with the only difference that instead of the word "non-articulated" one would have to put the word "articulated." In kitsch, this self is *articulated*, it is not the expression of a transcendental Nothingness but of "something." While *wabi* is filled with spiritual content, kitsch substitutes this very content with hedonistic emotions. In other words, while *wabi* art "reduces to a minimum the conspicuous external features" (Izutsu & Izutsu), kitsch tries to even exaggerate these features. This means that while *wabi* looks for the self by wrenching it from inauthenticity, kitsch looks for the same kind of authenticity in inauthenticity.

The priest Eishun of Nara was an opponent of Rikyû and insisted, in his own aesthetic approach, on the values of traditional Chinese culture. When Rikyû died Eishun said: "Rikyû was the worst of all charlatans. Any man who has performed as many evil deeds as he has deserves to be made to commit suicide" (Itoh 1993). Looking at the formal parallels between *wabi-sabi* and kitsch, we very well understand why Rikyû's approach must have appeared as outrageous to many of his contemporaries. Those tea bowls that Rikyû liked and put forward as works of art were, as a matter of fact, rather ordinary objects whose model had been Korean rice bowls. In the same way, Rikyû's teahouse was more or less a reproduction of a rustic peasant hut (which the Japanese contemporary artist Mariko Mori has called "a work of conceptual art"). Rikyû thus produced common objects (and sold some of them even at a high price), by attaching a "spiritual," non-physical value to them. And what is more outrageous than a charlatan who tells you that an ordinary rice bowl is able to "speak" to you about your own self? This is the reason why, according to Teiji Itoh, for Eishun, Rikyû's things could only have been kitsch (cf. Itoh).

Conclusion

I suggested that kitsch manages to combine the spiritual wealth of *wabi* with the material wealth of *suki*. As Japanese kitsch culture creates itself to a large extent out of

itself, it overlaps *formally* with the approach of *wabi* (though, contrary to *wabi*, Japanese kitsch is filled with a – too concrete – content). *Wab* lets emotions "freeze" in a state of non-articulation, that means it freezes nature (natural colors, materials) and avoids exuberance by willfully installing austerity. Kitsch simply freezes emotions in their state of exuberance. What both have in common is that they manage to install themselves at a non-place of relativity, or at an eternal present, in which the (present or historical) "real" no longer represents an obstacle for creation.

One might want to call this eternal present "postmodern" since, as John Whittier Treat has said about the contemporary Japanese cultural situation, "an experience of the 'present' without a real-life referent, one that makes sense only as the much-vaunted empty signifier associated with postmodernity" is responsible for many kawaii phenomena (Whittier Treat 1996: 296). The narcissistic attitude that follows from this pattern, and which could fuse with postwar consumer culture in order to produce such a large range of kitsch, has an uncanny echo in the aesthetics of wabi.

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[1] Other aesthetic terms like *iki, miyabi* or *yûgen*, each of it defining an aesthetic range related to distinct social classes, could, of course, serve the same purpose. It is even true that, given that mass production was well under way in Japan already in the 1600s, an inclusion of *all* aesthetic categories of the middle class would be interesting. At the same time I think that such an examination would blur the main argument that strives to establish the – rather provocative – parallel between *wabi* and kitsch.

[2] Etymological explanations put forward a Germanized pronunciation of "sketch" or, more likely, a street-cleaning machine called "Kitsche" in Southwest Germany, and whose sauce-like brown color inspired the name "Kitsch" for fashionable pictures. See Eduard Koelwel 1937: 58. The Southwestern dialect word "kitschen" means to smear.

[3] Cf. Mary Roach: "Cute Inc." in *Wired* Issue Dec. 12 1999: "Well-heeled city women are dropping yen by the millions on a Kansai Yamamoto couture line called Super Hello Kitty. Teenage boys tattoo themselves with Badtz-Maru, the Sanrio company's mischievous, lumpy-headed penguin. Salarymen, otherwise indistinguishable with their gray suits and cigarettes, buy novelty cell phone straps adorned with plastic charms of their favorite cute characters: Thunder Bunny, Cookie Monster, Doraemon the robot cat."

[4] Masabuchi Sôichi: *Kawaii shôkôgun* [Kawaii Syndrom] (Tokyo: Nihon Hôsô Shuppan Kyôkai, 1994), quoted from Shiokawa 1999, 94.

[5] *Sabi* beauty is fleeting and weathered and as an aesthetic ideal joined at the end of the Japanese medieval period notions like *yûgen* (sublime). It can be traced to Chinese poetry of the mid- and late Tang dynasty and can be found in the Manyôshû anthology where it means "to be desolate." Cf. R. Brower & E. Miner *Japanese Court Poetry* (London: Cresset, 1962), 260 and T. Bary et. al.: *Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 280.

[6] The Japanese have no word for kitsch. Donald Richie's comment: "Fish have no word for water" (1992: 63).

[7] Contrary to Greenberg, who points out that high-class kitsch "waters down" avant-garde art (Greenberg 1961: 11), I hold that to "water down" does not necessarily mean to produce kitsch. It is the boastfulness and pretentiousness enclosed to high-class kitsch that makes it kitsch, it is the not just the fact that the real art has been watered down. Low-class kitsch would not derive its expressions from avant-garde art. I also want to prevent another misunderstanding leading to the conclusion that comparing Beethoven with Raku is like comparing oranges with apples and that one should rather compare Raku with English Wedgwood china. In the West, pottery has the status of craft whereas in Japan it is art (or it is better to say that the distinction between art and craft does not exist in the same way as it does in the West). To compare Raku with Wedgwood would therefore mean to compare art with craft and that would really be like comparing oranges with apples.

[8] Interestingly, mass-produced replicas of tea sets, meditation pillows, miniature rock gardens, and ads for weekend retreats promising peace of mind with Zen meditation and short-lived asceticism are mostly found in Western countries which set out, since the 1970s, to kitschify much of Zen spirituality. (I thank Daniela LaSusa, Ph.D. student at Philadelphia University, for pointing this out to me).

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[9] I am using a concept that has been successfully introduced by the Russian formalists in order to explain the process of cultural creation.

[10] I do not contest that there exists a 2500 years old tradition of self-cultivation in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism and that the notion of "individuality." "Individualism" began to shape itself since the late 1800s with the importation of Western literature and political thought.

[11] Schiller is convinced that the "fashionable reader" (Modeleser) remains unable to perceive the parts of a work as a whole because they are "throughout only interested in the particular" (da sie durchweg nur für das einzelne Sinn haben). Schiller Nationalarchiv 22.253 (1941ff).

[12] Toyotomi Hideyoshi is one of the three feudal lords (daimyo) who attempted to unify Japan (the other two are Oda Nobunaga and Tokugawa Ieyasu). Hideyoshi invaded Korea in 1592 and in 1597 and is considered one of the greatest of the Japanese. He was even made a Shinto deity shortly after his death. Several conflicts arose between Hideyoshi and Rikyû and finally the general ordered the tea master to commit suicide (the official reason for this order is trivial and one assumes that political intrigues were behind it).

[13] Masabuchi Sôichi: *Kawaii shôkôgun* [Kawaii Syndrom] (Tokyo: Nihon Hôsô Shuppan Kyôkai, 1994), quoted from Shiokawa 1999, 94.

[14] Quoted from George Fogarsi: "All that is Solidu Melts into Kitty" in *CTheory: Theory, Technology and Culture* 20:3, Art. 55, 1997, no page numbers. There are other cute Japanese characters that have no mouth: Pochacco, Cathy the bunny, Nutz, Chococat, and Cookie-Bau.