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Editors’ Closing: Comic Relief

Diana Samu-Visser  
*Department of English*, dsamuvis@uwo.ca

William Samson  
*University of Western Ontario*, wsamson@uwo.ca

Mélissa LeBlanc  
*University of Western Ontario*, leblanc.melissa@gmail.com

Nahmi Lee  
*Western University*, nlee93@uwo.ca

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Here at *Word Hoard*, we do not much care for repetition, empty sentiment, or the prison industrial complex, for that matter. Looking back at the call for submissions for “Pop/Corn,” we may have also appeared to be a deeply suspicious bunch of curmudgeons who approach even the tastiest of offerings with equal measures of concern, scepticism, and general unease. We were tired of hearing about the redemptive power of pop, camp, corniness and kitsch, and we wondered (perversely) if our suspicions about fluff had any substance to them. The call itself was peppered with wordplay—an unusually comic turn for a journal whose previous two issues were concerned with graver material—and when we playfully tasked our contributors with adding gravity, depth, and weight to our dialogue we were, as always, treated to a diverse collection of unexpected responses and an entirely new set of questions. Much to our delight, these responses also deftly interrogated the original presumptions that shaped the call for papers. Our good-natured teasing about fluff’s pernicious underpinnings and hefty consequences becomes, in retrospect, yet another response to the topic of “Pop/Corn” worthy of cross-examination.

Why were we suspicious? Why did our call for papers point to comedy and innocuousness, and demand that our submitters cater to our taste for the tragic? Allan Pero’s discussion of Camp reiterated our reservations, suggesting that “there is persistently . . . a sense in which art is engaged in deception, in playing a joke on the wide public” (10). As self-reflective as it purports itself to be, academe nevertheless tends to foster certain ubiquitous impressions about taste, truth, and criticism; academics are capable of spotting the punch line and can mark the joke and the joker for what they are. This also allows us to believe that we can anticipate the effect (and affect) of our own jests should we feel inclined to make them, effectively imbuing our humour with a degree of intellectual and social utility. Perhaps this was why the topic of “pop corn-ography” made us uncomfortable: where comedy exists as an instrument that helps us identify bullshit, Camp is “the enemy of

“Pop-Corn”

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**Editors’ Closing**

**Comic Relief**

Kitsch is the most pernicious of all prisons. The bars are covered with the gold of simplistic, unreal feelings, so that you take them for the pillars of a palace.

Pascal Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*
identity . . . the enemy of utility” (Pero 11). Unlike Camp, kitsch is almost overwhelmingly utilitarian. Mobilizing sentimental excess in order to reduce affective labour, kitsch’s prime directive is to diminish the distance between object and subject. Yet even given the “absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption” (Benjamin 395) that should make kitsch the target of easy laughs, here, too, comedy becomes a stale counterpoint and inadequate mechanism for grounding kitsch in an analytical framework. Ashlee Joyce proposes that kitsch may have simply beaten us to the punch—an acute awareness of kitsch’s failure to compensate for missed connections with authenticity and, indeed, the suggestion that “authenticity” is itself preposterous is built into kitsch objects, experiences, and aesthetics (9). In other words, while Camp and kitsch evoke suspicion, they may be the one kind of fluff that is not trying to fleece us, and not trying to pull the wool over our eyes.

When Joyce invokes Michel de Certeau’s panoptic vantage point from the one-hundred-and-tenth floor of the former World Trade Center in her discussion of kitsch, my mind does not race to join de Certeau in his Icarian vision of Manhattan. Instead, I accompany Joyce on her search for souvenirs and immediately think of the outrageously garish decorative cheese plate that was, for a short time, available at the 9/11 Museum Gift Shop. Long since pulled from the shop by museum officials after being deemed crass and inappropriate by patrons, the plate took the shape of the United States as it would appear cartographically and bore three hearts to mark the sites at which the September 11th attacks took place (Chung). Tourists looking for such a souvenir today may instead purchase instead a smaller rectangular tray and matching gift box patterned with the World Trade Center’s signature architectural tridents. At only thirty-five square inches and with the implicit reminder that this object is a “commemorative tray,” this souvenir has less room for cheese (literally and figuratively) and is meant to be more tasteful (“Tridents”). Is there a time and place for this particular brand of kitsch? It is tempting to think that we could discern the harmful from the harmless, the repulsive from the redemptive, and I do hope that we have not lured you into this issue under the false pretence of making such distinctions clear or even extant. Despite our initial preoccupation with the dangers of short-term satisfaction at the expense of long-term value, a symptom of academe that Laura Penny points to in her interview, we do not find this “missionary position” (28) and others like it especially seductive.

Instead, I encourage you to flirt with the various responses to “Pop/Corn” found within the pages of this issue and on its cover. Created by artist Hinson Calabrese, the three images that introduce our issue—microphone, ear of corn, and burning cigarette—stand alone without context save for their juxtaposition with one another. I tend to join Penny on “Team Nietzsche” in that I take the desire for meaning-making as an unavoidable compulsion, particularly in academic settings (31). If the gilt prison of kitsch
can be mistaken for “the pillars of a palace,” as Mercier suggests, I find myself approaching the vertices on our cover as Sally Colwell’s article approaches bachelor pads: what kind of erections are these, anyway? Are they restraining our interpretations? Do they interfere with our ability to read these symbols within a kitschy or campy aesthetic? Do they still leave a bad taste in our mouths? I am intrigued by the possibility that the “Pop/Corn” issue functions as a sort of microphone, which, as Calabrese reminded me, both invented and amplified pop culture. We seem to have broadcasted, loud and clear, that a broad spectrum of times and places for kitsch, corn, and camp exist across disciplines and genres. Jokes and mischievous call for submissions aside, the “Pop/Corn” issue walks the line between low- and high-brow, between “Miles-Davis-casually-smoking-yet-another-cigarette” cool and “B-movie” corny, and between “cultural kale” (Penny 37) and guilt-less pleasure.

Is the issue itself kitschy? Would it be such a bad thing if it were? It is not for those of us at Word Hoard to have the last word on “Pop/Corn,” or to put words in your mouth. We look forward to meeting you again in our upcoming fourth issue.

Diana Samu-Visser, Managing Editor
with
Will Samson
Mélissa LeBlanc
Nahmi Lee

“Pop-Corn”
Works Cited


