



## Introduction

Cyril Besson

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudeseccossaises/3568>

DOI: [10.4000/etudeseccossaises.3568](https://doi.org/10.4000/etudeseccossaises.3568)

ISSN: 1969-6337

**Publisher**

UGA Éditions/Université Grenoble Alpes

**Printed version**

ISBN: 978-2-37747-275-8

ISSN: 1240-1439

**Electronic reference**

Cyril Besson, "Introduction", *Études écossaises* [Online], 21 | 2021, Online since 31 March 2021, connection on 31 March 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudeseccossaises/3568> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudeseccossaises.3568>

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This text was automatically generated on 31 March 2021.

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It is easy to sympathise with Fordyce Maxwell [in a *Scotsman* article from 30 Nov. 2000] in his lament over the amount of kitsch used to promote Scotland and its products. However, whatever we think of it, it is there, as it has been since we can remember, because people furth of Scotland buy it, either as advertising or as kilted dolls to take home as souvenirs. It is likely that other nations dislike the concentration on their perceived icons as promotional material as much as we do. And there remains the question: if not that, what?" (R. J. McLean, *The Scotsman*, December 2001, <[www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-kitsch-1-588261](http://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-kitsch-1-588261)>)

- 1 In the popular imagination, clichés about Scotland abound. One particularly persistent notion is the association of Scotland, the land of ghosts and storm-battered castles and landscapes, with a perceived Gothic character.
- 2 But to judge from a not-so-recent preoccupation with the tourism industry and the widespread dissemination of a national imagery and paraphernalia sometimes cut off from their historical or geographical contexts, one could think that if its “perceived aesthetics” are Gothic, Scotland has had, for some time already, a far more evident susceptibility to and affinity with kitsch.
- 3 It is all too easy to be dismissive of a purported artificiality of “Scottish Kitsch” when a considerable part of Scotland’s economic prospects, and a good deal of its international image, depend upon it. A reassessment might prove a productive challenge for the specialist.
- 4 Of course, inseparable from the imposition of aesthetic categories like the Beautiful, the Sublime, the Picturesque, or kitsch in a modern sense, is the opposition between good taste and bad taste and the attendant, often self-imposed, responsibility of the proponents of such categories to educate the public through the senses. There is a political side to aesthetics, as the sociology of taste demonstrates, and normative tastemakers of all kinds are always exponents of a view of the public good; aesthetic pronouncements are acts of power. Who determines what is kitsch, for what purposes and to what effects? What are the social, political and economic implications of controversies over the nature of Scottish Kitsch, at home or abroad?

- 5 “Scottish Kitsch” conditions the perception of Scotland, within and without. Several positions are possible: resisting Scottish kitsch is a political act, as is the tolerance for it, or even the fact of embracing it to reconfigure Scottishness, in a postmodern gesture. As the quotation above exemplifies, Scotland’s negotiation of its self-image through its abrasive relationship to kitsch problematizes both its relation to itself and its integration in the alliance of nations (“if not that, what?”), and has done so for quite some time. In opposition to nationalism’s assured rhetoric of authenticity, this uneasiness and sense of alienation proves helpful in understanding the problem that is “Scottish Kitsch”, initially the focus of a full issue of *Scottish Studies / Études écossaises*, that had to be shortened into a section for this year’s issue, as the subject did not prove as appealing to potential contributors as one might have expected.
- 6 Regardless, the two contributions presented here are particularly enlightening on the subject, although they deal with different objects.
- 7 Lauren Brancaz-McCartan examines how the deer, which stereotypically represents Scotland, became a national, albeit kitschy, symbol which contributed to the shaping of a collective memory bringing Scotland closer to the rest of the UK from the nineteenth century onwards. However, the ecological crisis caused by the exponential growth of deer populations in the Highlands throughout most of the twentieth century has challenged the symbolic image of the deer, engendering a competing collective memory which allows Scotland to express its willingness to distance itself from the UK and from kitschy clichés.
- 8 Emerence Hild examines how the development of the tourism industry rests on several factors, including its ability to define a territorial identity, reduced to a brand image that is to be immediately identifiable and easily reproducible. The cultural policies undertaken by the city of Glasgow mean to distance the city from this tendency and, while reinstating local particularisms, the uniform perception of an “authentic” Scotland. Street art then becomes the means to convey a new identity, local yet resolutely urban.
- 9 One can only hope that the topic will lead to more developments in the future.
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