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The Aporias of Kitsch

Abstract

The text is based on the standpoint that the indeterminateness of the term of kitsch understood as pseudo-art feeds upon the indeterminateness of art as its correlate term. However, as the author perceives, that does not reduce the theoretical efforts aimed at establishing, on this slippery and unsafe “field”, some firmer demarcation lines, some more reliable discrimen rerum between those categories, which are, at least on the phenomenal plane, very close to each other. This paper attempts to do that by viewing kitsch from the angle of the aesthetics of reception, then from the angle of the sociology of art and, finally, from the axiological point of view.

Keywords

kitsch, art, aesthetics of reception, sociology of art, axiology

There is hardly any person today, even if they are not well versed on the subject of aesthetics or philosophy of culture, who has not, at least once in their life, used the term *kitsch* to qualify certain objects in their cultural setting, being more or less sure of not having exceeded the scope of its meaning; there is also hardly any theoretician of this phenomenon who believes that this scope can be established at all as a complete and definitive one. That fact, however, does not obstruct either of them in their efforts – it does not prevent the former from using that term without limits or the latter from making a personal analytic contribution towards increasing the textual production which aims, at least nominally, to take a step closer towards the term’s integral and definite content.

In such attempts, they may be supported by the fact that similar or almost identical qualifications could be applied to almost every aesthetic category. “Every philosophy amounts to juggling clouds and the situation in the philosophy of art is no different at all”, claimed Hermann Broch,¹ with whom it is not difficult to agree in this respect. Moreover, this opinion of his would have withstood any criticism even if it had been expressed in a more radical form – that every philosophy is juggling clouds and that the philosophy of art is most so. It seems that there is no philosophical discipline the subject of which eludes so much the rational instrument, with which that discipline is trying to master it theoretically and to penetrate the *quidditas* of all its manifestations. “In spite of the many aesthetic theories, we seem no nearer our

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Hermann Broch, *Dichten und Erkennen*, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1955, p. 238.

goal today than we were in Plato's time", writes Morris Weitz.² It is probably, therefore, as Hartmann claimed, that aesthetics is not written for the artist or the observer of a work of art, but exclusively for the thinker, to whom the action and attitude of the two represent a mystery.³

It is upon such a vagueness of art as its correlate in meaning that the vagueness of the term *kitsch* feeds. "As long as the truth of art remains a mystery to us, the untruth of kitsch will continue filling us with unrest", writes Ludwig Giesz.⁴ However, as we have said, that does not reduce the theoretical efforts aimed at establishing, on this slippery and unsafe "field", some firmer demarcation lines, some more reliable *discrimen rerum* between those categories, which are, at least on the phenomenal plane, very close to each other. To add up to the paradox, the term of *kitsch*, no matter how incomplete and open its content may be, can be established, to the extent to which it can be established at all, only *vis-à-vis* the term of art, the content of which is equally unreliable and difficult to define. For, as Hume claimed:

"... a slap-dash painting may contain a certain glow of colours and accuracy of imitation; these are beauties, as far as they go, and would affect the mind of a peasant or an Indian with the highest admiration. A very crude popular song may have a certain amount of harmony (in its music) or of nature (in its words), and its music would be found harsh or its lyrics uninteresting only by someone who is familiar with superior beauties."⁵

Kitsch from the angle of the aesthetics of reception

Searching for the narrower aesthetic context within which the act of treating and speaking of the problem of kitsch could be situated, for the closest aesthetic *a quo* of that complex phenomenon, other theoreticians as well have mostly halted when coming across the term of *taste*. Such a constant psychological and aesthetic point, which marks a predisposition for the reception and assessment of a subject striving for an artistic status as a success or failure is everything but reliable and founded on objective standards. More precisely, the phenomena which that psychological term implies are so variable and susceptible to will, affinities and individual mood that we could speak of taste as an inconstant, rather than a constant aesthetic point. Hence Gillo Dorfles claims that there is no unique way of enjoying a work of art which is equivalent to an immanent and transhistorical value of that work, but that there are

"... truly different ways of enjoyment and interpretation, which suit different personalities observing a work of art and which change according to a period, the psychological state of the observer and the sensoriality of the object itself."⁶

That constant fluctuation in aperceptual schemes with which one approaches works of art, the schemes that change from person to person or, if understood through a collective psychological instance, from epoch to epoch – ultimately, that cultural and historical dimension of taste has been confirmed many times throughout history. For instance, Broch claimed that Wagner's works were nothing but an example of kitsch of genius (according to Broch, there is bad kitsch, good kitsch and kitsch of genius), whereas today the artistic status of Wagner's works is almost indisputable. Fritz Karpfen expressed a similar view when speaking of Rodin's bust of a woman in terracotta, in which he saw a pseudo-art created in the moments of the artist's irresponsibility as it was made for sale.⁷ Today, this work is valued as a slightly less successful product of a confirmed genius. The judgement of a generation is evidently "a fragment of the consensus of many generations, one vote in the parliament of history".⁸

When speaking of modern times, the difficulties of this type are emphasized by the fact that new forms of expression, new media keep appearing (radio, television, film and, more recently, the Internet), the role of which in the current artistic situation should by no means be underestimated. Laws believes that the confusion in attitudes towards the cultural situation of modernity is due to the underestimation of the fact that the social context from which the works of art emerge and in which they are valued has changed essentially.⁹ The aesthetic reflex of modern technological rationality is the depriving of the very foundation of aesthetic judgement and the obsolescence of pre-technological aesthetic principles. The modern culture and modern art, with all their controversies, are *sui generis* phenomena and only as such can they be understood and interpreted.

Such a complex artistic and cultural situation of modern times should also incorporate the problem of kitsch as a pseudo-art since a considerable number of authors associate its emergence with the period of the birth of modern society. The fact that the word's etymology has several meanings makes the situation even more difficult. Some associate it with the English word *sketch*, which signified a sketch of an expensive painting ordered by Anglo-American clients instead of the original. Others believe that the word is derived from the German verb *kitschen*, which was used in everyday life and which meant *to make something hastily, to pick up mud from the street or to make new furniture look like antique one*. The verb *etwas verkitschen*, which as well is related to the term *kitsch*, means *to do something sloppily, to sell something off, to sell something under its value or to intentionally sell something else instead of what was meant to be sold*. Sternberg, however, is quite right when claiming that the original meaning of the word *kitsch* cannot help us a lot in our further research.¹⁰ Whether situated exclusively in the area of aesthetics or within a broader area, this word has no longer a clear or precise meaning. Hundreds of essays, books or lectures published worldwide, mostly in Germany, Italy or the USA, keep convincing us of that fact. However, it seems that Moles is right when emphasizing the evident ethical insufficiency of ac-

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Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics", in: Melvin Rader (ed.), *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, Holt, Reinehart and Winston INC., New York 1973, p. 510.

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Nikolai Hartmann, *Ästhetik*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1955, p. 5.

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Ludwig Giesz, *Phänomenologie des Kitsches: eine Beitrag zur anthropologischen Ästhetik*, Fisher Taschenbuch, Frankfurt am Main 1994, p. 5.

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David Hume, "The Standard of Taste", in: *Four Essays*, pp. 13–14. Available at: <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hume1757essay2.pdf> (accessed on January 10, 2018).

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Gillo Dorfles, *Le oscillazioni del gusto e l'arte moderna*, Collana Forma e vita, Lerici, Milano 1958, p. 24.

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Fritz Karpfen, *Der Kitsch. Eine Studie über die Entartung der Kunst*, Weltburg-Verlag, Hamburg 1925, p. 89.

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Bernard Rosenberg, "Mass Culture Revisited", in: Bernard Rosenberg, David Manning White (eds.), *Mass Culture Revisited*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York 1971, p. 7.

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Frederick Laws, "Introduction", in: *Made for Millions: A Critical Study of the New Media of Information and Entertainment*, Contact Publishers, London 1947, p. 5.

10
Jacques Sternberg, *Kitsch*, Academy Editions, London 1972, p. 3.

tions marked by the verb *verkitschen*, which, as we saw, is narrowly linked to the modern term “kitsch”.¹¹ In all its manifestations, kitsch is going to preserve the property on which Broch will build his entire theory of kitsch as a prevalently *ethical* non-value.

The languages of Latin origin have no term the scope of meaning of which would be identical to the one of the German term *kitsch*, or to a compound word based thereon (*kitschen*, *verkitschen*). Therefore, it is impossible to precisely locate the occurrence of kitsch in its semantic fields – that occurrence is *connotative* rather than *denotative*, intuitive rather than explicable. The etymological imprecision, however, need not prevent the use of the term in its one meaning only, which is exactly the case with kitsch and which implies a conclusion that the multiple terminological significance is just a reflex of the multidimensional content of the phenomena itself. For, no matter how many definitions of kitsch we may mention or how many examples we may quote, we will not be able to tame its phenomenal “shorelessness”.

Painting, the field of art in which kitsch was originally established, very soon ceased to be its exclusive domain – moreover, authors have disagreed on the time in which kitsch emerged, which depends on the theoretical angle from which they approach this phenomenon. Thus, for example, sociologists of art date it back to the 19th century, to the time of the so-called “*belle époque*” (between 1889 and 1914). According to Poggioli, it is only from that time on, from the period of the emergence of *avant-garde* art as a culmination point of the European artistic modernity, that one can speak of kitsch.¹² All the great works of art in the past brought something new with them, abolishing the already existent art canons, but it was only in the late 19th century that novelty in art assumed the character of a revolution, of an absolute discontinuity with everything seen before, of the establishment of a quite different “order of things” in art. “Modernism requires more than the production of variations in style and new themes, it seeks to sever the continuity linking us to the past, to establish an absolutely new work of art”, writes Lipovetsky.¹³ That is the paradoxical “tradition of the new”, perhaps a “dogmatics of the new” (Sloterdijk) established by modernism.¹⁴ It is only in that period, in the period of emergence of *avant-garde* art, which is the child of that aesthetic of the original and the new, that, according to Poggioli, one can locate in time the phenomenon of kitsch or a *stereotype* (which is a translation of the French synonym for kitsch) as a conservative, mimetic, *déjà vu* art. Art historians, however, have found examples of kitsch in the ancient art as well and, according to the aestheticians who regard kitsch as an epiphenomenon of art, kitsch is as old as art itself. Thus, for example, Broch believes that there is no art without a drop of kitsch, that kitsch accompanies art inevitably and that a work of art becomes art and transcends the borders of mere kitsch only through the act of overcoming, in a manner peculiar to art, the omnipresent layer of kitsch in itself. An almost identical view can be perceived in the following words of Theodor Adorno:

“It [*kitsch*] is like a poison mixed in any art; to pour it out of itself represents today one of the most desperate efforts of art.”¹⁵

However, even if the word *kitsch* had never been used, one could not deny, according to Sternberg, that the idea of kitsch was clearly present throughout centuries. We can find it in art manifestos, in the statements of many artists and art critics, who, even if they ignore the term *kitsch* itself, still, maybe unknowingly, speak of kitsch or of something very close to it. For:

“Romanticism has run out of fashion, Symbolism has become obsolete, Surrealism has always addressed those few members of the elite – it is only kitsch that is omnipresent and eternal.”¹⁶

It seems that Giesz was right to claim that the word “kitsch” is quite recent, but that what it denotes is not.

Kitsch – the art of happiness or the “art” of “happiness”?

Even the authors who observe kitsch as a phenomenon omnipresent in time or as an aesthetic phenomenon which is as old as art itself, implicitly, or even quite explicitly, support the standpoint that its expansion and penetration into all the spheres of human existence chronologically correlate with the big industrial revolution which urbanized the huge masses of the village population of the Western Europe and America, thereby marking the beginning of the creation of a modern, bourgeois society. Large urban centres assumed social and economic prevalence over the life of the entire country, with an enormous power of influence on all the other segments of society. The traditional links among people were broken, the solidarity of groups destroyed and atomised individuals “were left to their solitude, to fight for the satisfaction of their own needs in the jungle of towns, the desert of factories, the greyness of offices”.¹⁷ The *community* was replaced by *society*, as Tönnies would put it, and the emerging epoch gradually became recognised as “the age of the crowd” (Moscovici).

In the cultural field, those processes reperculated as a suppression of the folk culture, which could not longer serve as a form for the emergence of new cultural content. The new life circumstances which the hitherto village population found themselves in required a new type of culture that was to meet the old cultural needs in new social conditions. Thus, as a by-product of the industrial revolution, a new, so-called *mass culture* or the culture of mass society emerged with three key determinants – a) mass production, b) standardization of the cultural product and c) its diffusion through mass communication means, which provided a large number of potential consumers with the speed and simultaneity of the reception of a cultural content.

A work of art that strove for the artistic status took on the character of a *product*, i.e. an object of mass, industrial production, and, as such, it necessarily lost the dimension of creativity, originality and uniqueness. Objects

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Abraham Moles, *Psychologie du kitsch*, Denoël, Paris 1977, p. 32.

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Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Belknap Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 123.

13

Gilles Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide: essais sur l'individualisme contemporain*, Gallimard, Paris 1983, p. 50.

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“It is true, of course, that the idea of change dominates the modern economy and modern technology as well. But changes in the economy and technology are constrained by available resources and financial cost. In politics, too, innovation is constrained by existing

institutional structures, by the veto power of contending groups, and to some extent by tradition. But the changes in expressive symbols and forms, difficult as it may be for the mass of people to absorb them readily, meet no resistance in the realm of culture itself.” Cf. Daniel Bell, *Cultural Contradiction of Capitalism*, Heinemann, London 1976, p. 20.

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Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 1995, p. 383.

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J. Sternberg, *Kitsch*, p. 1.

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Serge Moscovici, *L'Age des foules : un traité historique de psychologie des masses*, Fayard, Paris 1981, p. 37.

of suspicious aesthetic quality become prevalent in mass culture production, and the human environment became definitely and irrevocably artificial, full of serially produced standardised forms which were to constitute a person's everyday aesthetic life. This was substantiated by the fact that, owing to the increasingly automatized production process, the time spent on productive work became insignificantly short as compared with the infinity of leisure, the time of consumption in which a depersonalized individual member of civil society recognized a possibility for the realization and satisfaction of a very important part of their personality – the emotional one, which had been suppressed and left unsatisfied by the dehumanized production process. Thus, production is mass and impersonal, whereas consumption is personal and subject to the imperative of emotional pleasure. “What determines a bourgeois society is not needs, but desires. And desires are a psychological, not a biological category, and are unlimited in their nature”, writes Daniel Bell.¹⁸

Thus the challenge for the establishment of a kitsch relation as a prevalent type of the relation of a member of a highly developed bourgeois society towards their environment becomes insurmountable. One should not disregard the role of the significantly increased economic, i.e. purchasing power of consumers which, in combination with a low cultural level, necessarily led towards choosing kitsch over true artistic and cultural values.

“Perhaps the chief difference between society and mass society is that society wanted culture, evaluated and devaluated cultural things into social commodities, used and abused them for its own selfish purposes, but didn't ‘consume them’ (...). Mass society, on the contrary, wants not culture, but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just as are any other consumer goods.”¹⁹

Moles pinpoints two big epochs of kitsch. One is linked to the period of the rise of the bourgeois society, to the moment when it becomes aware of its power and begins imposing its coffee spoons and sugar pegs across Mexican deserts and Central Asian steppes, a society the symbol of which becomes a department store as an economic and cultural *topos* constituting and shaping an “art of living”. The other epoch is a period of neo-kitsch, its symbol being the *prix unique*, i.e. a department store with goods sold at a uniform price (unification at all the possible levels!) and the supermarket as its historical successor. Both institutions are sustained on a consumption mechanism incorporating the idea of self-renewal. Each object, despite its perfect form, has a precisely programmed and limited shelf life, i.e. has been projected to cross the path from the factory to the wastebasket very quickly, which enables a continual renewal of the production cycle. Therefore Moles concludes that kitsch is a phenomenon of a consumer civilisation, which manufactures to spend and spends to manufacture, throughout a cultural cycle the basic element of which is acceleration.

One should not ignore the role of the so-called “hidden persuaders” (Vance Packard), whose task, in the individual psychological field, is to make one conclude that they need “just that” and thus provide a rationalisation of the global consumer tendency (“I need each of those things.”). That fact compels the consumer of such goods to allow, in their home, the objects of various ages, which belong to different generations of forms, to co-exist. For the modern interior, by the way, one could say that it represents a privileged position of kitsch, i.e. so-called applied arts (souvenirs, decorations, furniture), the production of which prevalently consists of almost ideally typical examples of kitsch. “The slogan ‘to live more beautifully’ turns the most ordinary consumer products into the requisites of that general festival in which the fetishist

character of goods totally prevails over its use value”, writes Enzensberger.²⁰ It is also important to bear in mind the importance of fashion, which, through its fast changes and the continuous launching of novelty contributes to the obsolescence of forms and encourages consumption. However, as Lipovetsky rightly points out, this constant quest for novelties, which is characteristic of the outer appearance of mass culture, has nothing in common with the “tradition of the new”, which characterises modern art.

“Just like a dream or a joke, mass culture as well essentially dwells here and now and its dominant determinant in time is precisely the one that runs fashion as well.”²¹

The reasons for that should be sought in the fact that an object for use is no longer defined with the function it performs in everyday life and even not primarily therewith, but is imposed with its non-functional, decorative aspect as an indicator of the social status and as a factor of the social prestige of its owner. That element of emphasised decorativeness which occupies the place of at least intentional, i.e. nominal functionality, takes such objects, as it were, through a shortcut into a kitsch zone. With that non-functional aspect of its, kitsch could be said to, apparently, approach art to some extent. However, whereas art exhausts itself in that non-functional dimension and, if it is real art, never strives to overcome it, such a dimension in kitsch is incidental (but no less transparent for that matter!) and, as such, it becomes an inadequacy factor (e.g. china coffee cups as a shelf decoration) which, as we are going to see, is one of the key constitutive principles of kitsch and of what it represents. In such a context, kitsch has a *social* function prevailing over the useful function, which ought to be the primary one. For, if at a certain moment it loses its use value (e.g. a cup with a broken handle), the object remains a *decoration* on the shelf, i.e. it preserves its decorative function.

Generally speaking, every exhibitionist exaggeration, either in terms of decoration and decorativeness, or in terms of sole and forced functionality, which we may recognize in a *gadget* (an object intended to perform several small functions of everyday life, for instance, a set consisting of a penknife, a corkscrew and a can opener, or a watch and a thermometer), moves along the edge of kitsch if not crossing it. Any life orientation towards objects, any fetishisation of objects, whether their purpose is decorative or functional, open the door towards kitsch wide. Kitsch generally feeds on exaggeration and overemphasis, they suit it, “they run in its veins” (Sternberg). According to this author, that could be the reliable and eagerly sought for discriminating line between kitsch and what does not deserve to be named as such. Even if we can argue about the level of bad taste or banality which deserves to be named kitsch, we can hardly deny that exaggeration lies in its very core. Therefore, kitsch very often accompanies the bizarre, the fantastic, the abnormal. Negating this element of exaggeration could lead us to a wrong conclusion that everything around us is kitsch – a shop window, almost every painting, most movies and plays. Sternberg claims that it would be dull to create a catalogue of all the products of bad taste which make a considerable profit. Kitsch al-

18
D. Bell, *Cultural Contradiction of Capitalism*, p. 22.

19
Hannah Arendt, “Society and Culture”, in: B. Rosenberg, D. M. White (eds.), *Mass Culture Revisited*, p. 96.

20
Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Deutschland, Deutschland unter anderm – Äußerungen zur Politik*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 1967, p. 111.

21
G. Lipovetsky, *L'Ère du vide*, p. 207.

ways has an extra dimension. It moves further from profanity, from a superficial cliché or everyday ugliness.

“The modern interior, the overdecorated façades, the postcards in many colours, the rococo glitter of music halls, the *fin-de-siècle* paintings, the ‘Biblical’ movie epics, the souvenirs, the religious ‘ironware’ – there are so many products marked with exaggeration, and with sentimentality and false splendour – the other two conventional components of kitsch.”²²

Abraham Moles perceived and formulated several key principles on which kitsch is constituted. First, there is the *inadequacy principle* (deviation from the nominal goal – the coffee cup as a shelf decoration which we have already mentioned illustrates this constitutive principle of it very well). Therefore, kitsch, as Moles underlines, always misses its target a little and even deceives, as it substitutes the “unclean” for the “clean” (or *vice versa*, as in our example) even when it simulates cleanness. Like others, Moles quotes the *principle of cumulation of sensory qualities* (a music clock on the wall, a scented book), which implies the third principle – *the principle of synesthetic perception* (the sensory totalitarianism of kitsch expressed through an imperative that both the eyes and the ears, and very often some other senses, should be mobilized in the process of its perception). Such an imperative, as an intentional property of the so-called “total art” (the opera and the operetta are typical in that respect), brings it dangerously close to kitsch. Therefore, *gigantism* as well as one of the most common properties of kitsch, which makes it a mark of those cultures that Moles calls erudite ones, i.e. those that express an affinity towards amassing, *multiplying cultures*, rather than synthesising them. “It [kitsch] removes less and collects more”, claims Moles. Therefore, ultrafigurative painting, Romanticism and fantastic art are the forms of art to which kitsch attaches most easily and on which it most frequently parasitises.

The fourth principle of kitsch is the *principle of mediocrity* – kitsch always remains halfway on its journey towards the new and, in that respect, it is an antipode to the avant-garde, which sets the principle of novelty, originality and artistic revolutionism as the primary one. That property is also implied by the fifth principle of its order, *the principle of comfort*, which makes kitsch the aesthetic everyday life of mass society, the aesthetic food of the masses.²³ Kitsch is the art of everyday life – it is there that it acquires its “authenticity”. Being primarily “democratic”, it is acceptable for most people as it does not offend the spirit with sublimity – an effort that surpasses our powers by demanding of us to surpass ourselves, our human weaknesses on which kitsch survives. It is difficult to live every day in the vicinity of the works of true art, which awake one from one’s slumber, which warns us and calls us to action. “An average person, who strives to earn a living from seven o’clock in the morning till eight o’clock in the evening cannot listen to Parsifal after that – they need a spiritual recovery obtained through light enjoyment”, writes Friz Karpfen.²⁴ This idea is shared by Lefebvre as well, who formulates it as a request for breaking with everyday life – a request that a modern person sets before art.

“Skillful suppliers will produce the pictures of everyday life from day to day – the pictures in which what is ugly becomes beautiful, what is empty becomes full, what is odious becomes great. And what is horrible becomes fascinating.”²⁵

That psychological need of modern man for an artistic perversion of everyday life is so skillfully used that it is very hard to resist those who do that and their products unless one wants to stay rigid in puritanism by rejecting, with the “sensational”, life itself and “current events”. The difference between a

work of art and a work of kitsch is the difference between an “open work” (Umberto Eco), which calls on its recipient to take an active, critical stand, and a closed work, which stabilizes the recipient in its passive, uncritical and comfortable position of a mere consumer. For Leo Lowenthal “differences between spurious gratification and a genuine experience as a step to greater individual fulfilment (...) is the meaning of Aristotle’s *catharsis*”.²⁶ Kitsch, unlike art, could be said to parody catharsis. A true work of art demands of its recipients to confront themselves and the circumstances of their own life – its imperative is “to be here and to be here at this moment”. A modern person from a dehumanised social setting, however, will rather opt for the imperative that the mass culture sets before them, which is “to be elsewhere” and which turns them into a being of distance whose spirit, according to Morin, eternally wanders across the horizons of its life. On that fictitious journey, kitsch is represented as an ideal and irreplaceable companion.

Kitsch is the art of “happiness” (hence its universality), which, if not present in the lives of the majority of individuals, ought to be simulated, whereby a person is paralyzed in their attempt at changing the established order in things in which happiness might never occur. The entertainment offered by kitsch is truly an escape – not only from the harsh reality but also from any idea of resistance to that reality such as it is. The liberation promised by such entertainment is liberation from the “opinion as a negation” (Horkheimer & Adorno). Almost all the theoreticians of this phenomenon point to this escapist and, ultimately, the psychotherapeutic dimension of kitsch. This is the dimension which makes kitsch a precious ally of all the totalitarian political regimes, which see in it a powerful means of maintaining the *status quo*.

The phenomenon of kitsch from the axiological perspective

The expansion of kitsch in modern, industrial society is by no means accidental. Kitsch, as Hermann Broch claims, is a sensory reflexion of time, an aesthetic reflex of its ethical constitution. And modern times, speaking in Heideggerian style, are the times of escaped gods and of forgetting what is important, the times in which the oblivion itself has been forgotten, i.e. in which the awareness of oblivion has vanished. That is a scant time of the night of the world which only art could bring to what is important as it is art itself that cherishes the truth of the important. The pseudo-aesthetic attitudes characteristic of most people of modern times, according to Hartmann,²⁷ are dangerous because they bring confusion into the very place where the essence

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J. Sternberg, *Kitsch*, p. 5.

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According to Leslie Fiedler, the lower middle class reacts with equal fury to art which overcomes their powers of understanding (Joyce, Kafka) and to art which remains below such a level (Superman). Thus it chooses the middle against both ends as “the fear of the vulgar is the obverse of the fear of excellence, and both are aspects of the fear of difference: symptoms of a drive for conformity on the level of the timid, sentimental, mindless-bodiless genteel”. Cf. Leslie Fiedler, “The Middle Against Both Ends”, in: B. Rosenberg, D. M. White (eds.), *Mass Culture Revisited*, p. 547.

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Fritz Karpfen, *Der Kitsch*, p. 73.

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Henri Lefebvre, *Le Matérialisme dialectique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1990, p. 48.

26

Leo Lowenthal, “Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture”, in: B. Rosenberg, D. M. White (eds.), *Mass Culture Revisited*, p. 51.

27

N. Hartmann, *Ästhetik*, p. 485.

of the conception and establishment of what is important, as a human gift and power, can be found and recognized and made transparent.

Every epoch in which values were undermined and overrated, at the same time, was a period of the expansion of kitsch. Such were the epochs of ancient Alexandrism and Roman Hellenism and such is the modern epoch as well, whereby the process of the deconstruction of the medieval image of the world ended. In that period, kitsch assumed the tasks of art, but performed them in accordance with the supreme aesthetic maxim of a positivist, anti-Platonist world – “What is beautiful is what one likes”. “The system of kitsch requires of its supporters to ‘do beautifully’, whereas the system of art emphasizes ‘doing good’. Kitsch is the evil (*das Böse*) in the value system of art”, writes Broch.²⁸ The one who creates kitsch is not someone who creates a less valuable art, nor are they someone who, in the creative sense, can do just less or nothing. No aesthetic standards can be applied to them at all. As Broch, a little too emphatically, concludes, such a person is an *ethical* renegade, a criminal striving for radical evil. Thus, as evil manifested in kitsch, according to Broch, is a radical evil, an evil in itself, which, as such, is connected with any value system, but as its negative pole, kitsch must be identified as an evil not only from the angle of art but also from the point of view of any other value system (Broch primarily means ethics as one of those “value systems”) which is not an imitation system. For, the one who creates only to create a beautiful effect, a radical aesthetic, will believe that the end justifies all the means and will resort to them without hesitation.

“That is exactly the gigantic kitsch which Nero arranged in his garden when playing the lute to the fireworks of Christian bodies set ablaze.”²⁹

Every system, even the system of art, can be undermined or depraved if its autonomy is affected from without. Kitsch affects both Christianity, the priests of which are compelled to bless cannons and tanks, and poetry trying to immortalise a glorified leader. The so-called “engaged art”, for instance, is an example of that external undermining and depraving of art, the external attack on its autonomy. However, an even greater danger is the one that, as an inherent possibility, is structurally contained in any system, and that is the dialectical necessity of the development of one’s anti-system, of one’s negation. The danger is even bigger as the measure of similarity between them is huge, so it is very difficult to distinguish one from the other. Speaking of art and kitsch as a system and an anti-system respectively, Broch proposes the criteria of authenticity. Authenticity is a *differentia specifica* of art, while imitation is a *differentia specifica* of kitsch. Kitsch may be the very image of art, but even when created by supreme masters, its imitative aspect is dominant.

Kitsch, as such, is a reactionary phenomenon in the aesthetic sense. It is subject to the dogmatic influence of what has already happened, taking the already formed syntagms from reality which are petrified in it into the form of a cliché, which proves that *nolitio* of its, “that absence of good will, its abandonment of the divine creation of the world of values”.³⁰ Even though kitsch, as an imitational system, is compelled to harmonise its each move with true art, a work of art, as such, cannot be imitated methodically. It is only the simplest forms that can be imitated. What is characteristic, according to Broch, is that kitsch, due to its very lack of imagination and inventiveness, has to resort to the most primitive methods every time.

“Pornography, the realistic syntagms of which, as it is already known, consist of sexual acts, mostly represents a mere series of such acts; detective kitsch, again, represents a series of the

very same victories over a criminal, pulp fiction again consists of a mere series of identical acts of virtue rewarded and vice punished.”³¹

That is the “stereotype stone” (Horkheimer & Adorno) with which kitsch feeds its consumers.

In the works of kitsch, the association systems are automatic, reduced to the most frequent groups. As Moles suggests, kitsch could be measured with the degree of the banality of its association. As such, it is shameless, but not only in the superficial sense of the shamelessness of an erotic association awakened by a kitsch postcard, but in a deeper sense of shamelessness that roughly denies what Broch called a poignant dialectic of the freedom of man’s being, offering an “imperial path towards art” (Kloskowska), a path leading to inauthenticity, falsehood, fakery. It was for that very reason that the Catholic theologian Egenter brought kitsch into a firm connection with Satan as the forefather of the lie.³²

It is not only the aesthetic, but also all the other values immanent to a true work of art that kitsch is trying to reach in an inadequate manner. Thus, attempting to prevail over death, that absolute non-value, a non-value *per se*, kitsch resorts to the glorification and hypostatization of life, but in its most destroyable and, in terms of value, the most disputable dimension – the hedonistic one. And it is exactly the life into the service of which kitsch has entered that is the most susceptible to the devastating work of death – it is exactly such life that is so easily obliterated and annulled by kitsch as if it had never existed.

Understanding the essence of life, a true artist is trying to have it prevail over death with its creative dimension, a dimension of authentic values which, through their trans-epochal duration, overcome man’s short and transient physical existence.³³ The essence of life eludes kitsch to the same extent as the essence of death. Therefore, kitsch is not able to recognise death in its true meaning for man, but it treats it “arbitrarily and anecdotally, from a quite wrong perspective, such as the one observed in crime and detective novels, sadomasochistic thrillers and films and in similar low-rank products”.³⁴

It is also the integrity and essence of the human universe as such that eludes kitsch. Kitsch, actually, does not care about them but is sustained and fed on their idyllic projections (the *happy end* technique, in which justice, truth and goodness always win), or on their horror hypostases (the world as a permanent source of evil, violence and brutality). A creator of kitsch does not reach the knowledge of that paradox of human existence, of that tragic state of being torn between strength and weakness, greatness and misery. For the man, as Goldmann claims:

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H. Broch, *Dichten und Erkennen*, p. 262.

29

Ibid., p. 302.

30

Ibid., p. 298.

31

Ibid., p. 300.

32

Richard Egenter, *Kitsch und Christenleben*, Buch-Kunstverlag Abtei Ettal, Ettal 1950, p. 82.

33

“The only nonsocial and authentic criterion for judging these specifically cultural things is their relative permanence and even eventual immortality. Only what will last through the centuries can ultimately claim to be a cultural object.” Cf. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Culture”, in: Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, Viking Press, New York 1961, p. 202.

34

Miloš Ilić, “Kič kao umetnička i duhovna tautologija” [“Kitsch as an art and spiritual tautology”], in: Abraham Mol [Abraham Moles], *Kič: O umetnosti sreće [Kitsch: The Art of Happiness]*, Gradina, Belgrade 197 p. 34.

“... lives in a world which, like himself, consists of opposites, of antagonistic forces waging war one against the other with no hope of a truce or victory, of elements that complement each other, but which are permanently incapable of forming a whole. The greatness of a tragic person lies in the fact that they see and recognise those opposites and opposite elements in the clear light of absolute truth.”³⁵

Kitsch, however, speaks to a happy person and a “happy consciousness” (Marcuse), or at least to the one that is willing to bring itself into the state of false happiness, of light and merry self-oblivion although, as Giesz emphasizes, the right place of man should be that of a guardian.

* * *

Kitsch always expresses an evident *defect of meaning*. Thus, for example, the kitsch pastry products of Christ, the apostles and the holy family made of chocolate, when eaten, provoke a gastronomic pleasure, which is quite contrary to their nominal goal – to provoke a religious fervour. The same applies to toys in the form of crucifixion on wheels or to handkerchiefs or neckties decorated with an image of the Blessed Virgin. It is Moles’s *principle of inadequacy* as one of the constitutive principles of kitsch that is in action here. By the way, religious kitsch is one of the most frequent manifestations of kitsch. “Religious art is constantly under the threat of kitsch, it is situated on the verge of kitsch and, for a considerable part, is subject thereto”, claims Moles.³⁶ That is mainly because it is permeated with the element of inadequacy, of the disharmony of means serving the end to which it aspires (divinity in an anthropomorphic form, angels in the form of winged boys...)³⁷

Such an element is also visible in the decontextualization of a work of art, i.e. in its dislocation from its authentic setting into a totally inappropriate one, which happens when a great work of art, such as Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, is used as a cheese commercial, as a greeting card or as an illustration for a beauty contest. What is also inadequate is the use of a work of art for purposes different to the original ones, which is the case, for example, with the alabaster copies of the Leaning Tower of Pisa. As Dorfles points out, they are not kitsch just because they are made of another material, but they are kitsch mainly because they insist on the deviation of form as a rarity and an attraction, whereby the entire Cathedral Square complex has been reduced to a *curiosum*, to a simplified kitsch imitation. In general, every insistence on and search for curiosities, which is, for instance, characteristic of tourists travelling abroad, is an expression of an affinity for kitsch and the kitschy.

What also appears kitschy is the disproportion of dimensions as compared to the represented object, which is recognisable in the examples mentioned by Moles.

“The Triumphal Arch in the form of a key holder, a miniature china elephant or a huge stylized mouse made of bronze are objects of kitsch (...). The same applies to the microscopic beer jug from Munich, which is made of plastic and is meant to be worn on a necktie, or a pendant in the form of Asterix with a huge stone on the key holder.”³⁸

* * *

Attempting to stay “in harmony with reality” (Lukács), kitsch, at the same time, renounces the attempt at reaching anything situated on the other side of the visible.

“It is satisfied with one, basically rudimentary description, remaining at the level of perception and registration in everyday consciousness the closest and the best-known, but at the same time the most trivial phenomena.”³⁹

Kitsch, therefore, does not aspire to bring phenomena to a synthetic totality, to structure and transcend them in the direction of the discovery of their immanent values and meanings.

The absence of ambitions of that type is founded on its creator’s aspirations towards the ordinary, the mediocre, an average measure of things which inevitably leads to the seductive paths of kitsch. Such an aspiration gives birth to “the wistful glance of the creator towards the world of banality, their melancholic sigh for a natural and direct experience, the outbursts of hysteria and a tendency towards excesses of any kind”.⁴⁰ It is exactly that exaggerated or artificial sensitivity that is the fundamental convention of kitsch, due to which and by which a work of kitsch acquires the properties of a neurotic work that falsifies reality by imposing on it an entirely unreal and sentimentalist dimension and by hypostatizing it as such.

According to Agnes Heller, the axiological insufficiency of kitsch lies in the fact that not only is it an art of lower rank, but it is also an art of the system of norms and hierarchies of values which do not express anything substantial, anything *indigenous* to a person of that time. Kitsch, therefore, is a pseudo-art which satisfies in a wrong way the requirements of particularity for rising to the level of the genus.

“Kitsch is not elevated to the true goals of the genus, but only to those that represent a particularity’s extended dream, so the extended particularity is surrounded with the halo of the genus. Therefore the disturbance caused by kitsch is always a pseudo-catharsis.”⁴¹

Taking into account that substantial difference between kitsch and art, a considerable number of authors claimed that the relation between them was not a relation between the points of a continuum which are more or less distant from each other, i.e. that kitsch is not a bad art, but that it builds within itself a closed system of its own, which, like an alien body, stands in the entire system of art or, more precisely, parallel to it. Kitsch and authentic art are, therefore, according to the authors of similar opinions, immeasurable and incompatible phenomena. For the most of its meaning, the term “kitsch” does not denote works of no value and with aesthetic aspirations, but a special type of activity at the specific level of the total value. It is claimed that there is an essential difference between an aesthetically unsuccessful, but an aesthetically ambitious work of art and a work of kitsch. In the former case, banality is said to

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Lucien Goldmann, *Le dieu caché ; étude sur la vision tragique dans les Pensées de Pascal et dans le théâtre de Racine*, Gallimard, Paris 1955, p. 203.

36

A. Mol [A. Moles], *Kič* [Kitsch], p. 73.

37

Cf. Karl Pawek, “Christian kitsch”, in: Gillo Dorfles, *Kitsch, An anthology of bad taste*, Studio Vista, London 1963, pp. 143–150.

38

A. Mol [A. Moles], *Kič* [Kitsch], p. 78.

39

Sreten Gagić, *Kič i avangarda – kulturna korelacija i antiteza* [Kitsch and Avant-garde – Cultural correlation and antithesis], Master’s Thesis defended at the Faculty of Political Sciences, Belgrade 1979, p. IV.

40

Zoran Gluščević, *Mit, književnost i otuđenje* [Myths, Literature and Alienation], Vuk Karadžić, Beograd 1974, p. 102.

41

Agnes Heller, *Everyday Life*, translated by Richard Wolin, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, Boston, Melbourne, Henley 1987, p. 172.

result from an unsuccessful creative attempt at overcoming it aesthetically, whereas, in the latter, it results from an attempt at organising it in a more conjunctive manner. For an artist, art is a mode of living and self-expression, whereas, for a kitsch maker, their production is just a professional means of self-support and commercialisation. Therefore one should not approach their products aesthetically, nor expect of them to meet aesthetic criteria and needs. Such an opinion would be quite right if kitsch did not manifest both concealed and open aspirations towards counterfeiting authentic aesthetic values and towards falsifying the results of the true creative efforts of confirmed artists.

Most authors agree on one point – there can be no kitsch at all without such pretensions, without such a gap between desires and potentials. However, according to sociologists of culture, the period of neo-kitsch of the past several decades has been characterised by quite a different tendency. The production of kitsch has been openly and clearly self-determined as an industry, *business* – therefore, a non-art. It does not have to act as art any more, as it has elevated a common business to the rank of an ideology the purpose of which, according to Horkheimer and Adorno,⁴² is to legitimise kitsch, which is now being intentionally produced for a particular purpose. That view is confirmed by an opinion of Giesz of an earlier date – that kitsch is not dealt with by dilettantes, but by refined psychologists of masses, who have a clear awareness of kitsch. They even systematically study the techniques of the production of kitschy experience although they do not form part of the mass for which they create nor do they like kitsch itself. They occasionally even sponsor what they believe to be true art, but even so, they continue producing kitsch.

It is only such, deliberately produced and planned kitsch, that Dorfles regards as true kitsch. Thus conceived, in Dorfles's optics kitsch should prove to be a phenomenon of the modern era. "Before that, there were examples of mediocre art, works of epigones, of the followers of arts, works which were not supreme works of art, but which, nevertheless, belong to authentic art", emphasizes Dorfles.⁴³

Even if one could contest this opinion of Dorfles at some points, one thing is certain – the creativity of the past knew nothing of the culturally systematic, i.e. planned and deliberate production of aesthetic pseudo-values. It is, undoubtedly, only in modern times that the production of quasi-art and artistic surrogates acquired the properties of a *business*.

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Aporije kiča

Sažetak

U tekstu se polazi od stajališta da se neodredivošću umjetnosti kao svog pojmovnog korelata hrani i neodredivost pojma kiča shvaćenog kao pseudoumjetnost. No time, uočava autorica, nisu reducirani teorijski napori estetičara i filozofa kulture da na ovom skliskom i nesigurnom »sterenu« uspostave neke čvršće demarkacijske linije, neki pouzdaniji discrimen rerum između, makar na fenomenalnoj razini, vrlo bliskih kategorija. U ovom se radu to pokušava učiniti sagledavanjem kiča iz perspektive estetike recepcije, potom iz ugla sociologije umjetnosti i kulture i, najzad, iz aksiološkog rakursa.

Ključne riječi

kič, umjetnost, estetika recepcije, sociologija umjetnosti, aksiologija

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Aporien des Kitsches

Zusammenfassung

Im Text wird von dem Standpunkt ausgegangen, dass sich die Unbestimmbarkeit des als Pseudo-kunst ausgelegten Begriffes Kitsch mit der Unbestimmbarkeit der Kunst als seinem begrifflichen Korrelat nährt. Doch dies hat, wie die Autorin bemerkt, keinen hemmenden Einfluss auf die theoretischen Bemühungen von Ästhetikern und Kulturphilosophen, auf diesem rutschigen und unsicheren „Grund“ einige solidere Demarkationslinien, als zuverlässigeres discrimen rerum zwischen diesen, zumindest auf der phänomenalen Ebene, äußerst nahestehenden Kategorien aufzustellen. In dieser Arbeit wird ein entsprechender Versuch unternommen, dies durch die Erörterung von Kitsch aus einer Perspektive der Rezeptionsästhetik zu erreichen, darauf folgt die Blickrichtung aus der Warte der Kunstsoziologie und Kultursoziologie und schließlich, aus einer axiologischen Sichtweise.

Schlüsselwörter

Kitsch, Kunst, Rezeptionsästhetik, Kunstsoziologie, Axiologie

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Les apories du kitsch

Résumé

Ce texte part du principe que le caractère indéfinissable de l'art, en tant que corrélat théorique de l'art, nourrit le caractère indéfinissable de la notion du kitsch, perçu en tant que pseudo-art. Néanmoins, observe l'auteure, cela ne réduit pas les efforts théoriques des esthéticiens et des philosophes de la culture d'établir sur ce » terrain « ambigu et vacillant des lignes de démarcation plus précises, un discrimen rerum plus fiable entre des catégories très proches, au moins sur le champ phénoménal. Dans cette article on essaie de le faire en examinant la notion du kitsch du point de vue de l'esthétique de la réception, puis de l'aspect de la sociologie de l'art et de la culture et, enfin, du plan axiologique.

Mots-clés

kitsch, art, esthétique de la réception, sociologie de l'art, axiologie