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The Ambiguity of the Relationship between Children's Art and Kitsch

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This paper identifies the problematic relationship between children's art and kitsch from the perspective of the differentiation of the two fields. In general, the complex problem lies in identifying signs of high and low quality in works addressed to children. This paper begins with the rather troublesome formulation of who the addressee is, and what constitutes the artistic field addressed to children. Furthermore, what complicates some of the signs of aesthetic communication with children includes the simplicity of the message and the conservatism of creative methods. This paper attempts to outline different approaches to these areas of art and kitsch and demonstrates how hard, but also how necessary it is to identify both parts of the creation, considering the nature of the present children's world.

Keywords: art, child, children's art, children's literature, children's book, kitsch, reception

From an aesthetic perspective, the demarcation of the relationship between children's art and kitsch should emanate primarily from the concepts of art and kitsch in general, i.e., the principles on which the aesthetic ratio of humanity to the world depends, and which is reflected specifically in the creative field. However, the relationship between children's art and kitsch cannot be seen unless we resolve some basic questions first: what is children's art, who is its audience and what constitutes its status, what is kitsch, and how particularly does kitsch affect its child addressees when it pretends to be art as well? Instead of clear definitions, we will attempt to formulate several questions that complicate the entire subject and make it difficult to understand, especially for the general public, but others as well. Our paper is based on real situations in the space of a home, school, and the education of teachers. We respond here to

practical experiences (incertitude) of teachers, educators, and students of pedagogy, who collide with similar difficulties during their work with children and books.

During our reflections, we leave aside the issue of why kitsch is popular and so widespread. We work on the assumption that: (1) the children's world is overloaded with non-quality and kitsch; (2) the child does not choose kitsch intentionally; (3) adults make an effort to offer children work impacting comprehensively on their progress, including the aesthetic relation to the world. We will not overcomplicate the whole problem with the hypothesis that adults intentionally present kitsch to children; for that matter, kitsch itself declares its best intentions for children and says indirectly that it shares its aim of children's care with adults. We are interested in factors that complicate the orientation, and what to consider quality or lack of quality in the area of children's art.

Our preferred terms are children's book, children's art and its status, children's literature, and kitsch. We are conscious of an ambiguity or duality in the question of what a book is (Šmejkalová 2000). In this paper, we understand and use the term "children's book" as: (1) a medium of art representation; (2) a medium in possible comparison with other artistic representations; (3) an object with specific formal features which are important for meaning in the commercial sphere and, potentially, by its textual, visual, graphic, and paratextual parts in relation to quality or value.

We intentionally extend the term of children's literature in the sense of children's art, in the actual trends of intermediality (cf. Rippl 2015), because the contemporary children's book is a space of notable dialogue between literature, image, comics, or film. Children's books mediate kitsch at the same time, and as the Austrian author Hermann Broch (2009) says, kitsch is not a kind of low art, but a specific system, which is a parasite on art by imitating the simplest forms of art: the "essentially parasitic nature of kitsch" (Kulka 2010: 41). Our reflections on kitsch are based on an aesthetic concept of the Czech aesthetician Tomáš Kulka and his three points on how to identify kitsch (2010: 37–38):

1. Kitsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions.
2. The objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable.
3. Kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

However relevant all three conditions are in the area of working for a child audience, our paper does not have the goal of formulating a definition of kitsch in children's art on this basis. We will focus on some of the signs of kitsch in relationship to a work of art. Our consideration of children's art and literature seems known and clear. We suggest it in view of possible barriers, of something that makes the differences between quality and non-quality, between art and kitsch, less visible.

The quality of the field of children's art not only influences children's emotionality, but also the general impact of the work on children's personality, including rational, aesthetic, and ethical areas. This specification is needed with regard to the existing research on empirical aesthetics, which refers to the positive influence of kitsch

on perceivers (Ortlieb and Carbon 2019a, 2019b). Besides, it follows the theoretical considerations of why kitsch is popular, of kitsch in its connections with the natural human need for harmony, familiarity, safety, and even the need to avoid everything displeasing and inevitable, including death (Broch 2009; Kundera 1984). According to the actual accelerated rhythm of social life and the demands laid on an individual, as Jiří Přibáň puts it (2008: 16):

In the world, where everything is changing and moving, kitsch works by trying to stop and find a steady certainty, which is not corrected by a critical conclusion. Like one of the many forms of cultural clichés, kitsch tries to create an illusion of rules and arouses a sense of stability and commonness.

For a better understanding of the differences between our perspectives and this one, Kulka's definition of kitsch needs to be added to his newer definition of art, which helps us better comprehend artwork and its influence. Kulka (2019) suggests a term for art with two components: aesthetic value and artistic value. He demonstrates its relation mathematically like a multiplication. If one or the other is zero, the work is not art. The identification of aesthetic and artistic values should lead towards a better identification of art, or, more precisely, to identify what is not art.

It is not possible to reduce the view of art to only one of these values. The aesthetic value, which in Kulka's opinion is "extremely overestimated" in comparison to artistic value (2019: 244), refers to subjective perception, to the concept of beauty, being more easily accessible, building on the fulfilment of or exceeding aesthetic norms. More fulfilment means more expectancy, which means more pleasure, but nothing was said about artistic value, nothing about the identification of art: "The artistic value reflects 1) the meaning of innovation exemplified for the art world; 2) the potential of this innovation for its other aesthetic-artistic use or development" (Kulka 2019: 176). Let us set aside how this thesis can be modified by the image of art for children, for, now, a postulate of originality together with the plurality of potential perspectives of the world is evident. So, research on perception concerns one part of fluency that does not actually relate to the difference between art and kitsch, but perhaps more to the difference between aesthetic value and pretended aesthetic value.

If kitsch does not aim to go beyond aesthetic norms, on which artistic value is based, this is not just due to creative inability, but also on account of the effort to be convincing and to keep the positive effect. This paper aims to point out the benefit of art in the sense of its artistic value, too; kitsch requires no effort to produce, but it is difficult to identify its presence/absence depending on many factors, including its relation with aesthetic value, including the relation with other values that the work for children has at its disposal. Without taking these questions seriously, without any matter for mediating art for children by adults, the whole interest in creation should narrow down to its efficiency, to the influence at an emotional level, and this is certainly not the point of the contribution of art. Its potential is much more extensive and universal. In the whole problematic, we should rest on one perspective, setting to one side the factors of quality, non-quality, artistic creation, and commerciality, just as manipulative

ways in the sphere of the theme and the idea, the ethical sphere, etc. According to Kulka (2019: 238):

If artists should just go after maximising aesthetic value, if they should try to achieve generally respected beauty or what people like, then the best strategy would be to duplicate favourite artworks. Artistic and aesthetic values reflect two fundamental artistic impulses creating the artist's credo or ethos of art, too.

Who is the audience of children's art?

More recent professional reflections on children's art indicate that a child's perception is determined by many factors, which include the cultural environment, social influences (including the contemporary social view of education and the role of the child in society), child-adult relationships, historical experience, and the like (cf. Lesnik-Oberstein 1998; Rudd 2005). It is therefore inconstant in time and space. The variability of a child's perception as the addressee of an artistic (not only literary) testimony is further complicated by something rather overt, but perhaps less emphasised: the fact that the creators of children's works are primarily adults. The discrepancy between an adult author and a child addressee as that of two unequal partners in an aesthetic dialogue shifts our question to the notion David Rudd (2005) describes as a construction of childhood. The one to whom the creator speaks falls into a certain, specifically formed idea of the addressee. It is not a living child, but a precondition, a summary of certain traits that characterise him or her as a whole and ensure the expected impact of the work – a specific reception that the author already takes into account in his or her own work. In this sense, Rudd differentiates the terms of “a constructive and constructed child” (2005: 17). The term “constructive” means a real child as a source for creation, but also as an active factor in the creative process (neither the child in the role of the addressee nor the child in the role of the creator can be overlooked). The notion of a constructed child is a theory based on empiricism, but it still remains a theory. So, there is a certain space between the two entities, which, according to Rudd, calls for investigation, because it shapes and influences the nature – and, we can possibly add, the quality – of children's art.

The given accounts of the design of a presumed addressee – who is expected to possess a definite set of psychological characteristics, mental maturity, along with a combination of rational and emotional acceptance, breadth, a nature of imaginativeness – can be extended from the singular to the plural. This results in a degree of generalisation, a notion of collective perception rather than individual conception. Although the author, scientist, or critic speculates about the child's reception more often in the singular, they think also of the plural, they generalise in the earnest quest to find the receptor's common features. Furthermore, many critical reflections (Chambers 1977/2018; Strouse, Nyhout and Ganea 2018) simulate the idea of some kind of unity of reception, or the hypothesis of how children will doubtlessly accept a work, and how they will react to it. Michael Benton claims (2005: 86):

Much critical theory seems to be remote from actual books, actual readers, and individual reading events. Reader-response criticism – which approaches “the Loch Ness Monster of literary studies” – in contrast, engages directly with the knotty problems of how readers understand texts, and how we can elicit and interpret individual response.

Relatively less often is there speculation about the various possibilities of a child’s acceptance of a work, as in Christine Wilkie-Stibbs’ view (2005) or, for instance, in papers on specific topics in writing for children, such as that by Milena Šubrtová (2007). It is as if one were to eliminate the concept of the child as a unique perceiver, who – like any other addressee of art – responds on the basis of his or her current needs, mood, and nature, in addition to the already rather differentiated aesthetic experience of children, given the cultural background of his or her family. Does not this, from an adult perspective, cast off that essential feature of art itself, namely, that it addresses individuality, that it helps the perceiver to intensely sense and strengthen their uniqueness by encouraging their unique perception of a work? Children’s art should be one and the same with art itself. Nevertheless, it is easier for theory to resort to the general hypothesis (supported by developmental psychology) regarding who the audience of children’s art is.

There is the first opportunity of comparison between art and kitsch. Kitsch possesses a rather popular plurality in the recipient’s imagination. The viewer consciously suppresses their unique reception, reinforcing generalising tendencies in their viewpoint: “Kitsch thus does not work on individual idiosyncrasies. It breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone” (Kulka 2010: 27). In the case of a child recipient, this especially resorts to a particularly simplifying vision of a collectively perceived children’s audience. Its characteristics result from the traditional (conservative and also quite anachronistic) understanding of the child in the submissive role of an inexperienced, naïve, spontaneous, emotionally engaged reflector who needs to be shaped, given knowledge, led to follow certain ethical patterns, and to adopt settled thought constructs. Kitsch generally places the recipient in a distinctly passive role (Kubeczková 2016). Besides passivity, there is the problem of underestimating the child’s abilities and also of infantilisation. It is with this that the child is forcibly held in a blockade of ignorance, naïveté, and therefore simple conformity. Kitsch eliminates the view of the child as a personality to be developed who requires functional impulses for all-around growth.

A very transparent example is presented by the editions of fairy tales. Many literary adaptations of fairy tales eliminate the genre’s ability to influence children’s development, as some theorists and psychologists comment critically (Bettelheim 2000; Černoušek 1990). Likewise, the original writing reflects a similar image of the child recipient: the picturebook series *Martine* (by the Belgian author Gilbert Delahaye) presents a perfect little girl in a perfect, lovely and mostly idealistic milieu. Books like these hinder a child’s endeavours to think independently when they are presented to the child with an immediate emotive effect and only one possible interpretation. Otherwise, these works gratify children via implicit charm over how clever they are when they immediately understand the subject matter. Nonetheless, they present the child with completed and

indisputable thought constructs and premises regarding expression; at the same time, they do not allow for different interpretations, but explicitly formulate the only possible meaning, or rather evaluation. "The instant identifiability" of kitsch's theme (Kulka 2010: 39) goes hand in hand with its tendencies about the reactions of the audience: "Typical consumers of kitsch are pleased not only because they respond spontaneously, but also because they know they are responding in the right kind of way" (27). The collective nature of the recipient of kitsch simultaneously conveys the tractability and the attractiveness of kitsch in that it emphasises a psychologically valuable shared experience and allocation in the same manner and intensity.

The question regarding who the intended audience of children's art is can be answered from a broader perspective of relationships that arise in a cultural space, where different fields of art encounter and influence each other, including art and media, but also art and the non-artistic sphere. Czech aesthetician Květoslav Chvatík points out "the mutual permeating of the art and non-artistic sphere" (2001: 55), permeating what is happening and intensified by mass communication. The idea of economic conditions that intercede in all of this also comes into play. It is evident that children's art today cannot be severed from these relations and be perceived in isolation. To illustrate, a children's book contains a potentially artistic statement, it is simultaneously a commercial product, it may also be bound to another artistic representation, or it may influence/be influenced by a form of media (being thematically similar), or it may be bound to another non-artistic commercial product. The relationships between book and film are demonstrated, for example, by the works of an Australian artist, Shaun Tan. He manifests his artistic intention or theme continually in both formats, for instance in *The Red Tree* (2002), even in two different book formats, as in *Eric* (2012) and *Dog* (2020). The relationships between printed media and internet representation are relevant to the reception of the work of British author Alice Oseman and her comic series *Heartstoppers*, which began in 2018 (cf. Oseman 2019). The contemporary reception of a book is determined by the relationships between literature, image, comics, film, and animation. Even a toy, a toy set (e.g. Barbie, Monster High, Sylvanian Families, My Little Pony) becomes a starting point for book editions (Kubeczková 2020). If we view a book's format and its variable character, then a different subject matter (or subject matters) pertaining to the notion of the child addressee is shown in a contemporary light. The child can be understood as a player, listener, reader, co-creator, activated agent, viewer, media user, consumer in the broadest sense, and customer. It is clear that not all of these roles are perceived as equally intense from the sides of art and kitsch. Art traditionally prefers an activated and dynamic agent of aesthetic communication; it strengthens the role of the individual and the role of the perceiver with unique qualities. Very often, contemporary art involves a child perceiver in the reception process by activating several named roles at the same time. A range of books encourage a child not only to view, read, or play with their formats, but also to actively participate in the creative act, to complete it, to perceive some portion of the statement as a gaming platform, or to respond to its explicit calls with specific activities.

The commercial interests concerning kitsch production naturally place more emphasis on the role of the consumer. It is again clear that being considered a consumer indicates the characteristic of collectivity, i.e., the identification of a more universally defined field of possible effects. Other roles that particularly appeal to kitsch are those which are linked to the concept of the consumer and simultaneously implicitly refer to a sphere outside art, i.e., to the sphere of a child's lived reality. Kitsch not only intensively attempts to occupy positions belonging to art; it also strongly permeates a child's world via other channels. This is furthered through the things children come into contact with on a daily basis; aside from toys, this includes candy wrappers, toiletries, clothing prints, etc. It would be a mistake to think that we have gone beyond the horizon of children's art, because kitsch, in its commercial campaign, reinforces the interrelationship of the creative sphere and life. It increases its attack on the addressee to such an extent that it convincingly gives the impression of something normal, banal, every-day, and legitimate in a child's world. In this way, its approach does not expose itself to a clear and strict confrontation with art, but instead creates the impression of a correspondence between the creative sphere and life.

Is children's art really only for children? Although it is not a contemporary trend, theories and criticism of children's art took note of this in the previous two decades. The language used is about the conscious intersection of the bounds of reception from child to adult observers. This is referred to in different ways in various cultures; internationally, it is referred to as crossover literature or crossover fiction (Beckett 2008, 2013; Falconer 2009). This concept of creation reflects two aspects: (1) such a creation is based on the original idea of one type of art – whether good or bad – but without extricating its addressability, and that this aesthetic impulse genuinely applies primarily to relevant artistic creative attempts; (2) such a creation is also commercially appealing, perhaps even more so in terms of commercial success than what is closely associated with a particular limited circle of recipients. In this sense, the commercial objective becomes an important impulse for both kitsch and art.

Under the influence of these considerations, we could label contemporary children's art in a better way – as “art for, but not limited to, children” – or we could speculate about a unique artistic interspace, the definition of which, however, could be problematic due to the nature of the work.

Kitsch does not thrive on receptive ambivalence. This is certainly the case in the field of children's books; kitsch does not even substantially strive for it there. More often than not, a kitsch book asserts a clear idea of a child addressee, or, more precisely, a certain circle of child addressees. In the sense of commercial strategy, it specifies on its cover for whom the product is intended, and who is supposed to discover it. It tends to be explicit (by stating in the title whom the book is for, e.g., “for little princesses”) or implicit in the choice of the subject, its interpretation, or its visual representation (for example, a specific choice of colours). Such are, for instance, branded books, which – because of the function of commercial brands themselves – are based on a specific image of the consumer (e.g., My Little Pony or Barbie stories try to appeal to girls of

a certain age). In the eyes of kitsch, the children's book form is meant entirely for the child. This conservative idea, which perhaps rather conceals creative incompetence and helplessness especially in the literary field, is underlined by kitsch's tendency to infantilise, which relates to the use of representational conventions to make the received meaning unequivocal and at the same time undemanding. According to Kulka (2010: 31):

Any departure from the accepted conventions is undesirable for kitsch, as it may make unnecessary demands on the spectator. [. . .]. Kitsch should speak the most common language understandable to all. [. . .]. Kitsch cannot afford to be, and hence never is, confusing.

What is confusing could be an aspect of the attempts to interest a dual audience. In the case of kitsch, we note only very little variation in creative practices that reflect the fact that a child grows and develops.

The most conspicuous attempt to make kitsch enjoyable for everyone lies in the creative realm of film. The difference in reception between book media (types of literature) and film can be noticed quite well in kitsch creations that share the same story, especially when the film is the basis of a book adaptation. That being said, kitsch views the book as a medium in a very traditional and conservative manner. According to kitsch, among its essential attributes are its didactic efforts. A book is supposed to be a source of knowledge and instruction for a child. Perhaps this is why even the loose format of a film story in the form of a children's book is unequivocally transformed into definite acceptance among a designated child audience. While kitsch interprets a film as a family spectacle, the book format endeavours in various ways to deliberately influence the child audience (Kubeczková 2020). The proceedings of book versions of film material include not only the synopsis of a plot with the explicit intention of evaluating it, but also the use of the material to create assorted and loosely connected statements of a didactic, stimulating, or educational nature. (For example, books created in the franchise of the film series *Frozen* demonstrate these proceedings very extensively.)

Despite the approaches of kitsch, receptive ambivalence or openness is a trend highlighting the notion of one type of art. Therefore, perhaps reflection on who the audience of children's art is can be radically concluded with a generalisation: despite the different approaches and possible views on whom children's art is intended for, we must always place the aesthetic demands of a work in first place in order to count it as art at all. Only then should we take interest in the other conditions of successful aesthetic communication into which the work enters. Considering how kitsch is such an extensive, powerful, and manipulative competitor to children's art, we see aesthetic and artistic criteria as the most important in the given creative space.

A problematic topic

The question of who the audience of children's art is can also be grounded on the idea of childhood. Is there a difference between what childhood seen as a life stage means for art and what it means for kitsch? The concept of art aims *a priori* at a multiplicity of

meanings in each of any topic; kitsch, on the other hand, aims at the fixation of a single possible interpretation. Whereas the concept of art demonstrates a stronger tendency towards the variability given by the social and cultural conditions of a work, kitsch adheres to a distinctly conservative idea – it is a question of what actual content(s) the idea presents. Kitsch maintains and presents a sentimental, idealised adult idea of childhood as a stage of happiness, joy, carefreeness, and unconditional love, but also a strong dependence on adults. In no way does it try to reflect its view of childhood from the inside, i.e., from the position of children themselves. If we perceive its reception in the spirit of a collective whole, then this collective whole is characterised precisely by the dominance of adult attitudes, opinions, and especially stereotypes.

Art, too, conveys mostly adult ideas about childhood. When Margareta Strömstedt, the author of Astrid Lindgren's biography, commented approvingly on Lindgren's work, she quite naturally moves from childlike perceptions to adult ones, emphasising the quality of the uniqueness of childhood (2006: 283):

There are hundreds of millions of us around the world, especially children, but also all of us adults who, when we listen to Astrid Lindgren, feel the child in us suddenly come to life. This is the moment which all of us half-dead adults have been waiting for: to come alive again, to feel the strong and creative child in us awaken and set itself in motion, to ask questions that we no longer dare to answer as adults.

One can agree that Lindgren's work successfully demonstrates how the highest standards of children's art are achieved: when an author takes childhood seriously and takes it as a part of his or her own experience, not as a stage that is already alien. Hence, the most convincing speech is made by the creator who takes the audience and their life situations seriously to the extent that, in focusing on them (i.e., on the age of childhood), this creator indulges in a return to experience, which the writer creatively reconstructs and re-creates out of his or her own inner need to maintain contact with it, because the author perceives this contact as self-preserving, valuable, and stimulating for his or her adulthood.

The interpretation of childhood is as an underestimated but contrarily vital and irreplaceable value and commodity. What may be missing in this idea, however, is a lively confrontation, a tension between creative approaches, between the mature, experienced expression and the enthusiastic, spontaneous, childlike one. Even though it is children's art, it is an area governed by adults. There is very little critical and theoretical observation of how children themselves create things. The authenticity of their creative experiments could create the necessary aesthetic impulses that govern the work of mature artists. Exceptionally, we can discover a creative dialogue between adults' and children's authors, e.g. in *A Good World* by the Czech author Alena Ježková (2012). It could draw attention to how children think, formulate, form ideas and dream, and how their peers respond to these expressions.

We have already touched upon the question of what children's art is by identifying the image of childhood in the acknowledgement of art and kitsch. We have mentioned one of the essential signs, which is the topic of childhood itself. Let us look at them

again in a more problematic way. Children's art naturally conveys a certain image of childhood. When an aesthetician or art theorist defines what kitsch is, they point, among other things, to the topics kitsch chooses and what the characteristics of them are. According to Tomáš Kulka, these are topics that are clearly identifiable as well as evenly and clearly accepted. They naturally include the child as well as childhood (Kulka 2010). If we add other topics, such as love, family, or nature, then we have a set of topics that can also be considered traditional topics of children's art. It is then difficult to distinguish the good from the bad on the basis of topics alone. The discrepancy will be in the interpretation of the topics. Nonetheless, the topic itself plays a major role in whether or not the inexperienced child will come into contact with a work. The purpose of art is, among other things, for it to surprise its perceiver both by the possibility of different interpretations and by its abruptness and originality. Even traditional topics, such as the relationship between a parent and a child, or a child and a young animal, are presented by art in an imaginative and novel way, with the intention of activating the perceiver's thought processes, imagination, and aesthetic interest in how to look at things (even common and familiar ones from his or her own experience). In doing so, art counts on a different reaction from each perceiver, and it is not afraid of being rejected or critically confronted.

Kitsch, on the contrary, relies on certainty. It responds to expectations based on a child's naïve experience and on stimuli given by a child's contact with adults, which in many ways correspond to their idealising perspective: "There is no place as a kitsch, where the hunger for a better and a safer world is so forcefully satisfied" (Broch 2009: 183). The tendencies kitsch embodies may be seen as sentimental whilst simultaneously infantilising the initial experience of a young child who needs to be reassured of basic certainties such as security, care, love, joy, and happiness. As children develop, they learn about different aspects of life and the relationships that they gradually cultivate, yet kitsch reflects little of this. With its view of the world, it encloses a child in a particular circle of false ideas with a strongly affective and concurrently positive resonance that distracts the child from the reality in which he or she lives. An exemplary concept in this sense may be several editions that rely not on the mere attractiveness of thematic spheres, but chiefly on the unambiguous, unproblematic interpretation of them. The edition of *Stories with Happy Endings* (Hawkins 2015; Mongredien 2014) introduces the topic of the relationship between a child and a baby animal to young readers. It presents it schematically and in a perpetual, identical perspective. The child always plays the role of the rescuer and caregiver, or is initiated into the care of the animal; the animal always plays the role of the needy, wounded, vulnerable, and submissive creature. The relationship is plainly portrayed as beneficial to both parties. The persuasiveness of the image of childhood itself stands deep in the shadow of the story of their relationship, a story anticipating a positive ending. It is no wonder that this editorial approach presupposes that hired authors are behind it: they must fulfil the editorial intentions with their writing, adhering to the topic, its interpretation, the poetics of the story, and its extent. The originality of a creative concept is stifled by a multitude of demands, to

which the limits of the authors themselves can be added. This promotes a pattern. In the texts of different authors, we find similar scenes, plot moments, style, and vocabulary. The aesthetic value is replaced in this edition by the value of authenticity and factuality. The edition proclaims the reality of the subjects while building on zoological facts, which are, of course, unquestionable. Kitsch here diverts attention from the artifice to the effect of knowledge about animal species, while emphasising that the story actually happened. Although kitsch ultimately admits that it is only loosely inspired, in this way it professes a certain connection to the real world. It seems that it might well enough give the impression of truthfulness, and thus no one should suspect it of manipulating its audience when it is in fact only presenting real events. However, this is precisely where its manipulateness lies: the candidly formative, idealised, and hyperbolically emotive image is masked by authenticity. Furthermore, kitsch calculates on the assumption that authenticity will be reflected by the audience as a *sui generis* value.

The relationship between a child and an animal is an appealing topic for a child. In many ways, the animal's defencelessness reminds the child of himself or herself. Nevertheless, the child is not a completely equal partner, but in his or her development, the child acquires a perspective that puts him or her in the role of protector, in the role of a more experienced, responsible person. The fact that such an interpretation is not, *a priori*, the only unequivocal one – that the relationship is formed in a complicated way – is suggested by an artistic work. The Swedish author Henning Mankell in *The Cat Who Liked Rain* (1992) treats the topic in an interesting way. Mankell's child protagonist experiences the painful loss of an animal friend and must find self-preservation mechanisms to cope with the situation with the help of both others and himself.

Although the characteristics of kitsch often reflect its conservatism, kitsch follows current trends in art and society, follows the lifestyles as well as world trends regarding children, and gradually connects them with its stereotypes. Subsequently, kitsch does not abandon those images that have already proven themselves and are even guaranteed success with perceivers, but tries to demonstrate that it is contemporary. It tries to demonstrate that it is sensitive to current events, and thus sensitive to its audience, because it is aware of how they live and what preoccupies them. In doing so, kitsch indirectly shows an interest in its audience and gives the impression of false value that accompanies such an agenda. What both traditional and contemporary topics have in common in the expression of kitsch is their unproblematic nature, positivity, and sentimentality, reinstating a convincing emotional effect. New topics themselves emanate from what for some reason is at the centre of attention and interest in contemporary society, namely for children. On the other hand, these are new phenomena whose meanings are not yet established and accepted indubitably within social dialogue. Therefore, kitsch manipulates them in the sense of suppressing their potentially problematic nature and, on the contrary, promoting for the addressee what are positive, understandable, beneficial meanings and values that the addressee easily accepts with the topic. Given how crucial a deciding factor in the subject itself is in the audience's choice of work, this fact can play a problematic role in its identification and differentiation of high and low quality.

A more recent topic touches on children's partiality for computer games. Kitsch takes hold of this in an expectedly unproblematic way. In the Barbie "movie storybook" series, the heroine is introduced as a passionate and successful computer gamer (Anon. 2018). When she discovers a problem whilst playing, the heroine is magically transported to a virtual gaming reality to battle a virus. The new thematic impulse is an opportunity for kitsch to exploit it and portray it as an appealing, exotic space in which the heroes (and with them, the readers) can experience unexpected, new adventures. Here, kitsch makes attractive and interprets computer gaming (in word and image) in the spirit of fun and action, but also as a new platform for attesting to the heroine's qualities.

Be it traditional or recent topics, it is important for kitsch to advance its uncomplicated interpretation and positive reception. The idea of a happy childhood remains the defining characteristic of kitsch, which always magnetically draws subjects to itself via this pole, no matter their meaning in the real world of childhood.

A problematic nature of expression

We have already touched on the question of what children's art is by pointing out the image of childhood in the reception of art and kitsch. However, the ideological estimation of the age of childhood and the topics that correspond to it do not themselves make a work of art valuable (even if it is the positive perspective that kitsch would like to pass off as valuable). Value – meaning aesthetic and artistic worth – must be conveyed by adequate artistic expression. In spite of this, or perhaps because of how intelligible and identifiable it may appear, it is difficult to differentiate artistic endeavour from kitsch. What specifically makes this distinction difficult?

First and foremost, it is a sign of simplicity, clarity of expression, and ease of reception. It is often challenging to decide when a statement is simple but thoughtful, and when it is infantile, superficial, and simplistic, supported by the absence of thought and the inability to employ adequate artistic expression.

The choice of a simple expression, even in terms of its extent, is most evident in books created for pre-readers, where, moreover, the word relies heavily on the effect of visual accompaniment. Naturally, the picturebook is a format that treats both verbal and visual components in a delicate fashion, the word trusting the image, the image supporting the heard word. Where the interplay between the two parts of the statement – visual and verbal – is most apparent, simplicity can appear to be the most effective. The minimalism of expression caters for the perceptual possibilities of a young child, yet it does not portend a random simplification of expressive matter. The work of American artist Arnold Lobel is a perfect example of the thoughtful handling of expression in such a way that it is economical, remains comprehensible and effective, and simultaneously does not lack aesthetic effect. His dynamically narrated stories do not fear the principle of repetition, which not only comes from the need to be understandable, but brings the necessary impetus to the plot or comic effect, and is often fulfilled by the synonymy of expression, helping the child to better grasp the language itself when the same situation

is expressed with some variation. Even a simple story does not signify a poor punchline, and Lobel all the while takes care to delight, amuse, and surprise his audience, for example in (the Czech edition of) *Frog and Toad Are Friends* (Lobel 2007).

Verbal art also meets the demand for simplicity via thoughtful work with visual effect. Although simple verbal messages are used, authors manage to combine aesthetic impact with understanding by focusing a child's attention not only on the heard word but also on the depicted word. Different combinations of fonts, font sizes, and the distribution of the verbal component in page layouts are used in such a way as to emphasise some accessible, mostly sensory character of a statement as, for example, in Petr Horáček's *Silly Suzy Goose* (2006). It is not only about efficiency and playfulness, but about a more significant involvement and activation of the child in the act of artistic communication, forcing the child not only to read the image as a curative to the heard word, but also specifically to read the word itself in its formal meaning.

Kitsch interprets simplicity in a different way. It, too, is concerned with clarity, not only in relation to young children, but also to the audience in general, with the intention of being understood and interpreted by everyone in the same manner. In the case of a statement addressed to children, kitsch generally relies on an expression based on a child's early experience. The conservatism of kitsch in expression is reflected in the perspective of cajoling, affectionate vocabulary that accumulates diminutive forms and familial expressions, as if speaking in a language that simulates that of a loving parent. This practice also encourages infantilism and sentiment and works for kitsch's intention to be conflict-free, intensely beautiful, and with a happy ending (Kulka 2010; Kubečzková 2016). Kitsch treats language and image in a way that does not develop a child, but inhibits the child. In an attempt to be both universally understood and positively received, kitsch favours linguistic clichés, phrases, and stereotypes, all of which have a certain sentimental effect, which nevertheless mask the emptiness of the message. The predilection for clichéd vocabulary masks a low sense of language in general, and an inability to use it thoughtfully and imaginatively.

Another important indication that adequately identifies poor quality emerges especially in the small area of the verbal expression of books for pre-readers, and that is a very poor concern for linguistic correctness. Authors (also including editors, redactors, and proofreaders) take very little care in the final editing of texts, and so in these books we find many typos, unnatural relics of the original language in translations, etc.

The problem of good orientation in what is and what is not of good quality is amplified by the conservatism of the means of expression. After all, to achieve their creative intent, authors use a greater proportion of practices that may be somewhat expected and proven, and which are only cautiously combined with innovative ones. This stands in contrast to art for adults. The conservatism of children's art can easily be mistaken for the sterility and unoriginality of kitsch, but it can also inversely be misunderstood and unappreciated where the author is trying to sensitively reflect the audience and offer them a valuable artistic statement.

Recently, the problematic nature concerning the indication of simplicity can also be seen against the backdrop of current movements and tendencies in a culture that favours the decisively visual. A type of this trend in the field of children's art is the greater involvement of artists who are also becoming secondary literary artists and creating alleged authorial works. In these works, they always give more space to careful artistic fruition and pictorial expression, and decidedly less to the effect of literary messages. It may be that their creative confidence is simply tied primarily to the image, but in any case, carefully attending to details in a book's artwork can sometimes lead attention away from the book's words. On the one hand, such a trend would seem to lead to a simplistic reception of contemporary children's books, which would be evidence shaped by respect for the child. On the other hand, the trend of little attention to the word would lead to a gradual absence of literariness, and this would not only weaken the relationship between the child and literature, but would especially weaken the potential to discover language in its poetic function. Picturebooks, pictorial narratives, and comics build on the effectiveness of the visual level even in traditional literary genres, taking the core of the narrative and diluting the aesthetic effect of the word and its weight by drawing attention to the image through the narrative line (Kubeczková 2020). Understanding an image, or respectively its reading, may nonetheless be ostensibly simple (in the case of art), but it is certainly easier for it to achieve some more straightforward and accessible effect on the addressee (in the case of kitsch).

Kitsch productions disparage the word in other ways as well. The effect of the literary component is lost through publishing practices. Often the publisher adopts only the visual component from the extrinsic version and has a new textual commentary created at home. Does it follow that the original commentary is therefore not considered as valuable as the image, or that it is not essential? In any case, such a procedure creates the idea that literary expression is undervalued and is perceived as interchangeable.

What are the advantages of children's art?

As stated above, the features of various works (both artistic and kitsch) are also based on certain demands made on them, especially by adults as mediators in contact with children. As general characteristics of children's works, the aforementioned simplicity, clarity of message, and convenience of reception are reflected in its predominant social and critical reflection – or, better said, its lack of reflection. Roderick McGillis puts it in an exaggerated yet fitting way (1998: 202):

How can we take seriously books written for an audience of juveniles who have hardly acquired the skills to read anything beyond the most rudimentary stories, written in the most rudimentary language, and dealing with the most rudimentary subjects! If we have a children's book in front of us, many people assume, then we must have something simple, transparent, and hardly worth more than passing consideration in any intellectual way. This prejudice is still with us.

Furthermore, if children's art is not taken seriously – is not reflected as art – then it is no wonder that even the general public finds it very difficult to distinguish high quality

from low quality, let alone kitsch. More precisely, if professional, critical attention to art is not given enough weight, neither is kitsch given sufficient attention as a threatening pseudo-cultural system that parasitises this artistic field. Indeed, very little attention is paid to the reflection of even good books for a wider readership, even for less patient, weaker readers, or to the active analytical approach of critics to works that fall short of high artistic quality or even impersonate it. It is as if the public is being presented with an image of children's art that on the one hand is not worth paying attention to, since at best it highlights socially essential works, but otherwise there is no distinction between high and low quality, art and kitsch. The general public, even under this assumption of little professional attention, gets a false impression, perhaps reinforced by its own naïve ideas about children's books, or about children's art in general, which are *a priori* high quality in themselves.

The fact that this artistic field is not adequately evaluated or critically observed as a component of art is sometimes due to the artists themselves who place more emphasis on the pragmatic considerations that lead them to the process of creating. The works are deliberately conceived with an aspect of purpose, while at the same time they unequivocally declare that they can be of use to a child, such as the French picturebook series *Gaston's Emotions* by Aurélie Chien Chow Chine (2018a, 2018b). They may more or less suppress the aesthetic level of a statement. Moreover, the given opinion about children's works is abundantly supported by social demand and the majority opinion that this is what is expected of children's works. Even though the part of children's art that prefers a certain purposefulness has its own meaning in the reception of these works, it should not reduce contact with actual art, whose role is irreplaceable and, above all, complex – i.e., it can combine enjoyment, need, and knowledge.

According to Kulka (2019), the high degree of other values (didactic, moral, informative, therapeutic, entertainment, etc.) can do artwork a disservice. In other words, these values can damage aesthetic and artistic values. This is connected to the previous question, which is the addressee of works for children, too: there is not only the creation of the original relation between the work and the listener, the work and the reader, but other bonding, reflecting values other than the artistic and aesthetic in the work.

The entire problem is already reflected in what a children's book represents. Its contemporary form is not *a priori* something that automatically conveys an aesthetically intentional statement. It does not definitively become the preservation of art. Its very physical existence, which may not show significant differences – whether the work is predominantly aesthetic, purposive, or even mobilising – makes it difficult to understand what the medium precisely is, how to understand it, and what it actually offers the recipient. It is as confusing for children as it is for parents in their roles as buyers or intermediaries. There has already been talk of a lack of attention given to children's art via art history. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in terms of its relation to the nature of childhood, children's art is the focus of attention

of a larger range of social disciplines, each of which, however, "utilises," applies, and evaluates this art in considerably different ways. In the approaches of pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and other disciplines, art loses its autonomy and is not reflected as independent creation; rather, it is a matter appropriated, depending specifically on the intention and speculation of a given discipline. In its approach to children's art, pragmatism indirectly questions the artistry and aesthetic value of a work, because it makes different demands on it and emphasises other functions instead of that which is aesthetic. With similar thinking, Perry Nodelman critically reflects on bibliotherapy or didactics and their intentions to show children how to read (1981).

Such professional and critical attention weakens the role of children's art in its elemental essence and obliquely relativises – especially in the eyes of the general public – the meanings that should belong to it in a child's cultural life.

The interest of various disciplines in children's art that diverts from its aesthetic qualities corresponds with the progress of kitsch production. This, too, often highlights, at least in addition to the feigned aesthetic function, other possible capacities that a good work should dispose of. As has already been stated, it is based principally on outdated but often persistent ideas in the minds of adults about art that is educational, informing (mentoring), and much less entertaining, yet beneficial. Nonetheless, this advantage is very often confused with the clearly defined roles that art is supposed to fulfil in a child's life, and restricts the inner potential of a work, to which each individual reacts differently and which is inherent in art. The benefit, contribution, and didactic intention presuppose a controlled reception, controlled by useful aims, which creates clear boundaries concerning expected reactions for the addressee. In contrast, McGillis (1998) emphasises the need for critical reading as a liberating activity as well as entertainment. While the prevailing social opinion foregrounds rationalism and pragmatism in its vision of the meaning of children's art, McGillis rightly turns attention back to the need for emotional involvement that is actually required if art is to be successful in its contact with a child.

Conclusion

In exploring the issues of art, kitsch, and the child addressee, we have largely focused on the medium of literature and the literary medium in general, where quality is mirrored in formal, visual, verbal, textual, and paratextual levels of expression. We have identified several problematic areas of differentiation between art and kitsch, especially in works aimed at small children, where the presence of kitsch is the most pronounced and the most widespread, as small children are the most vulnerable and easily influenced addressees.

Giving heed to the issue of art and kitsch in works for children implies discovering many other considerations that we have not pointed out here, and to which we do not yet have clear answers (e.g. the problematic nature of emotionality or sensory play in children's art).

In the end, we return to the beginning; as we have posed the question of the relationship between art, kitsch, and children, we need to add yet a fourth element, which significantly modifies the problematic nature of this relationship. This is the contemporary world of children in general, the entire sphere of a child's world outside art, with which both artistic and kitsch works make visible contact. Today, kitsch permeates all possible dimensions of a child's experience (whether it be play, the reception of media, the reception of the creative sphere – films, books, comics, music, etc. – or whether it is the utilitarian objects a child comes into contact with and uses on a regular basis). The extent of kitsch in this sense is wide, and its ubiquity gives the impression of ordinariness, normality, and naturalness. If kitsch is not particularly subjected to open confrontation by art (e.g., as in the selection of a book), then its characteristics evoke the universally recognised attributes of childhood (positivity, cheerfulness, optimism, clarity, simplicity, poignancy, charm, etc.) and simply confirm to perceivers (both children and adults) the jointly and uniformly felt reception of childhood. Here, too, the kitsch effect of the fulfilment of the commonality of experience, the clear and uncomplicated awareness of the meaning of used phenomena, asserts itself.

The problematic nature of the said relationship, which can be viewed more generally as a ratio of high quality to low quality in the creative field addressed to children, is formulated in the present text not only from the perspective of a research procedure with the aim of applying an artistic, scientific, or aesthetic approach but perhaps even more so as something that makes it difficult for the general public to orient themselves to in their efforts to convey to children the kind of work that makes sense to them. What is that meaning? This is related to the question of a societal debate that makes certain demands on the work itself.

As adults, we can appreciate art as kitsch in a way. Kitsch art shows us both ways (Thullerová 2007). But the tolerant, forthcoming approach of the actual audience and the science of kitsch need to be relevant to an adult, not to a child. To evaluate art or kitsch, we require experience with both: the experience of encountering different works and of understanding the ways a work may influence (or manipulate) the addressee. Our day-to-day life, especially the day-to-day life of a child, is in the domain of kitsch, which is why it is important to demonstrate the benefits and disadvantages of using art or kitsch. It is relevant to be concerned more about the adult's own familiarity with the stated problematics, and some can still live in misapprehension of books (especially children's books) as an indisputable value *sui generis* (Šmejkalová 2000). Even more crucial is looking for the didactic tools to enable children to distinguish one from the other (Kubeczková 2022). It will be their choice what they use.

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Neodređenost odnosa dječje književnosti i kiča

Svrha je rada upozoriti na problematičan odnos između dječje umjetnosti i kiča s obzirom na razlikovanje tih dvaju područja. Općenito govoreći, taj se problem može shvatiti kao složenost identifikacije znakova visoke i niske kvalitete u djelima namijenjenima djeci. Rad započinje načelno problematičnim pitanjima o tom tko je primatelj i što određuje umjetničko područje usmjereno djeci. Nadalje, ono što komplicira neke znakove estetske komunikacije

s djecom uključuje jednostavnost poruke i konzervativnost kreativnih pristupa. U radu se nastoje opisati različiti pristupi područjima umjetnosti i kiča te pokazati koliko je teško, ali i nužno, prepoznati obje strane, pritom uzimajući u obzir značajke suvremenoga dječjega svijeta.

Ključne riječi: umjetnost, dijete, dječja umjetnost, dječja književnost, dječja knjiga, kič, recepcija