Regional Kitsch

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I hereby raise a new subdivision of kitsch to become an object of philosophical reflection. While a broad variety of objects is mentioned in studies on everyday kitsch – i.e. knickknacks, to here mark a difference towards bad 'art' called kitsch – there are no notes on regional kitsch per se. There is a difference between regional kitsch, anchored to regions and broader geographical wholes, and the type of 'urban' kitsch, which scholars have been discussing more, i.e. kitsch that presents kitschified versions of famous statues and architecture, objects of cultural heritage that represent their cities (e.g. Michelangelo's David represents Florence). While miniature David statues and Eiffel Towers are for tourists only, and often detested by the locals, regional kitsch seems to have a more positive meaning for the inhabitants. Regional kitsch also focuses more on local culture through its everyday objects and atmosphere. Could it have a bigger role in building identity than what we have so far realized? The main aim of this article is to describe and present the phenomenon in the framework of kitsch research, and to provide a basis for further study of regional kitsch. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Aesthetics, Popular Culture, Mass Culture, Mass Art, Knickknacks*

> A region, like the Paris basin [...] is far larger than any city. It is far too big to be
> directly experienced by most of its people. The region is therefore primarily
> a construct of thought, the most active mode of human experiencing.
> (Yi-fu Tuan, 1975, p. 158)

1. Regions and Kitsch – an Introduction

There is a 'genre' of micro-geographically motivated kitsch, which is connected to extraordinary cities, their landmarks and artistic treasures. Think of the miniature gondolas of Venice. Even Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's father bought one. Seeing it inspired Goethe. He had the object in mind when he arrived in Venice on his *Italianische Reise* (Goethe, 1976, p. 87). Although mass tourism was considered a problem in the city, roughly speaking, already a century later, in the 1870s, when the locals started to speak of tourist hordes (Pemble, 1995, p. 15)[1], Goethe's hand-manufactured gondola was still an early product in the same tradition, which later became an entire industry, magnified by the huge acceleration of tourism (by the way, Goethe

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[1]   Talking about architecture, and e.g. fake ruins, see e.g. Zoltan Somhegyi (2020).

was also sold a fake antique (i.e. kitsch) in Naples (Goethe, 1976)). This genre of kitsch is very much at the forefront of discussions by theoreticians regarding the everyday side of kitsch (see e.g. Kulka (1988)) (kitsch as bad art is a different story, with a slightly different cultural logic (see Barragán and Ryynänen (2023)).

While these days, in the midst of an absolute inundation of consumer objects, we would not necessarily gain that much interest in a place according to knickknacks that reproduce its iconic objects (I am thinking of Goethe here), we still anchor our own memories through the objects we buy from cities geographically meaningful for us or just sites where our travels, meaningful breaks between work and the everyday, take us. Naturally, it does not have to be a kitsch object that we bring home. We might buy a hat in France or a yoga mat in India which has a special significance because we bought it in Paris or Mysore, but the objects of kitsch, which are associated with geographical places, represent a peculiar case of culture which we anchor to a place, a very strict tradition with not much alteration. The objects refer to the point in question, aiming at a light, folkly and 'popular' experience, mostly without fear of being banal, and almost never with an intent to borrow 'aura' from great artwork.

The matchbox-sized canal houses of Amsterdam and the red double-decker buses of London – ending up on windowsills – are icons of famous cities. They help people to connect to something that once happened in a certain place, even decades later. The objects in question might have been manufactured in China or Thailand, far from the place where they were sold (David and Marvin, 2004) (and so also they traveled to the location, and sometimes their journey was longer than that of the tourists), but selling them makes sense only at the appropriate site, the geographical location, where the micro (the souvenirs) and the macro (the real objects) are present, side by side.

Pocket-size Statues of Liberty and replicas of the Gateway to India, which travel around the world in suitcases, are a bit different, pointing to certain landmarks, of course still representing their respective "homes" (New York, Mumbai), but geographically embodying a double intent. Among other objects which carry memories, the way in which these objects iconize a site, by representing central icons like Michelangelo's *David* or the Burj Khalifa of Dubai, their production, distribution, and logistics, is a big business on its own, which distinguishes it from local fashion, spices, and olive oil, also sold for tourists; but what is even more important for understanding what I call 'regional kitsch,' the iconic object portrayed often overshadows the feeling of the place. The significance of the object of art portrayed is mostly as big or bigger than the city referred to.

Like objects of modern art, both of these groups of objects are non-practical, and not-withstanding emotions, they are useless – like most kitsch. They mean something only for the people who buy them and travel back home with them. They visually represent the object pictured, and symbolically the place visited, and continue in a tradition that extends all the way to craft objects sold to

early modern travelers, and a whole industry of colonial knickknacks and cute, cheesy (see Anderson, 2010), and sentimental (Solomon, 2004) objects sold to tourists hand-in-hand with the rise of tourism in the 19th century[2], without forgetting the echoes of the colonies, which were brought to the markets of colonial rulers. As Celeste Olalquiaga shows in her *The Artificial Kingdom* (2001), many historical kitsch objects had a central role in communicating colonial fantasies (Olalquiaga, 2002). Our inflatable banana or plastic pink flamingo in the yard might echo age-long geographical power-relations, and of course, often, in the gray north, the colors of the south side of the globe were happily welcomed through these (often of course one-way) cultural exchanges (Ryynänen and Sysser, 2021).

2. Urban Kitsch and Regional Kitsch

Together with (fake) indigenous craft[3] the classics of kitsch research refer to this type of everyday kitsch in the same breath as more art-driven kitsch (such as sleazy erotic paintings and portraits of crying clowns, see e.g. Kulka 1989). Often, they are connected to art objects or something heritage-driven, and a dialectics of originality and copying is visible, which has often been discussed by kitsch-theorists (see e.g. Kulka, 1989 and Calinescu, 1986).

As I said, however, in the manner embodied by the examples mentioned at the beginning, the gondola, canal houses and the double-deckers, there also exists another form of kitsch, where the geographical limits are broader, and the focus blurs even more, from the objects to the broader cultural context and the set of landscapes of the region.

To cite an example: While driving north from Helsinki, I stop at every café and gasoline station starting from Ostrobothnia, to see where the kitsch sales begin[4]. Past Oulu, on my way to Rovaniemi and the polar circle, nothing happens for a long time, until in the evening, just 70 miles from the capital of Lapland, suddenly, the roadside shop is full of soft Christmas decorations (many like to think Santa Clause is from Finnish Lapland), furry arctic foxes and reindeers, and reindeer fur, not to mention small puppets which portray the indigenous Samí people (a constant debate on appropriation surrounds these toys, of course), and replicas of famous mountains, like the Saana. Rovaniemi is all kitsch, offering Christmas practically every day for tourists, but its kitsch is very regional, all related to the self-image and understanding of the area – from cheesy, plastic Christmas trees to soaps portraying Santa's helpers. It is not about the city of Rovaniemi itself, though, but about Lapland, both real and imagined. On the way down, this time far from the

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[2] Even the whole invention of the concept seems to relate to selling stuff to tourists. See "Kitsch", in Matei Calinescu (1986), based on the text *The Benevolent Monster: Reflections on Kitsch as an Aesthetic Concept* (Clio VI, 1).

[3] Although Clement Greenberg's notes on kitsch are conceptually so broad that they cover all consumer culture and non-avantgarde art, and do not really make much sense today, as a whole, while he of course sometimes refers to really kitschy objects, he discusses fake indigenous craft in a way which makes sense in the context of kitsch. See Clement Greenberg (1986).

[4] I am thankful for Svenska Kulturfonden for their support for my study of kitsch in Lapland, a trip, which I took in the fall of 2022.

coast, through Kuusamo, along the east side of Finland, close to the Russian border, the selling of kitsch continues for a longer time, further south, maybe even 100 miles after Rovaniemi, but the material is the same. Then, suddenly the commerce disappears. I have driven out of the territory of Lapland kitsch.

We are really talking about regional kitsch, a set of objects, topics and topoi (mountains), which extend to a broad geographical area, with a commerce which must have a huge impact on the otherwise relatively poor (by Finnish standards, of course) area. It embraces a wide geographical whole.

But Lapland is not the only region which has a life in the world of kitsch. Think of Alpine knickknacks, miniature mountains, beer pints, and plastic deer, which together with Tirolian hats, travel the globe with both backpackers and luxury travelers. Bavarian kitsch is about small pints of beer (plastic, or ceramic), lederhosen, images of men in moustaches, and puppets representing women in Dirndlgwand (a traditional dress, often eroticized with semi-exposed breasts, together with images of excessive beer glasses). The Tatra mountain range with its "virile" symbolical natural purity (analogous to Lapland) and miniature mountains, the Amalfi coast with its lemons paired with picturesque seascapes, and the sheep of Wales, which come in various sizes, forms, and materials – flags and neon lights included – all testify to another, geographically broader type of kitsch.

There seems to exist a cluster of meaningful differences between these types of kitsch, although the boundary is not always clear. Urban kitsch seems to seize on important (singular) objects which tourists are supposed to gaze at (although one might find e.g. a miniature-sized plastic parmesan cheese close to Parma), and it works on two levels, referring to the 'cult' object (to paraphrase Benjamin's ideas on the *hic et nunc* of original works of art, or, if one wants to think like that, having an 'aura'), and through this, referring to the city where the object, statue, or piece of architecture is based. It is more about originals, a statue or an architectural treasure, and the city is the site where this remarkable thing exists – although then, as stated above, some urban areas also have everyday objects and atmospheric indicators of the broader lifestyle in their kitsch arsenal.

Regional kitsch refers more generically to culture, e.g. the cultivation of lemons (Amalfi) or sheep (Wales) in an area, to landscapes – Alpine mountains, windmills (Holland) – or nature; Lapland's local kitsch brings out a variety of wild animals (furry in sales) from the reindeer to the polar fox. They also come in plastic models and landscapes coronated with the Northern Lights (which stands for maybe the only regionally symbolized celestial kitsch in the world), but also Alpine, and the kitsch of the Tatras features, mountains, trees and deer with majestic horns, even boars and birds.

One could say that the regions are portrayed via animals (deer in the Alps, reindeer in Lappland), as they are more about nature and the countryside, but on the whole, by being more generic, and more birds-eye in its approach, this type of kitsch lacks a clear place, a clear object of praise, and this is what I feel, turns more towards environments and atmosphere. It also is not a lower take

on a highbrow object, but something mundane and/or related to the everyday, thus accentuating the difference between the kitsch of urban centers. It is everyday kitsch about the everyday, which is something to note in everyday aesthetics.

When discussing the non-urban or broader areas (with an urban area inside it) as 'regional kitsch', it is important to note that not all regions have regional kitsch. It is much more usual, for a city to have its own array of objects. Think of any bigger city with some history, and they have it. But when regions have their own kitsch, it has probably been harder to look at it critically. People in arts, aesthetics, and criticism have often have looked on kitsch with urban site-specificity in a critical manner, as we can see from the classics in the kitsch debate. They have not probably seen regional kitsch as an issue, as it does not have any dialogue with art, although there has not been much consciousness of separating these issues in the old kitsch debate[5]. Of course, sometimes there are heritage classics on the countryside too, but when they are not situated in big cities, they can represent the region even less than what kitsch, which derives its meaning from art in cities do.

These features referring to culture, environment and atmosphere do not appropriate high culture, rather the opposite; many 'works' of regional kitsch underline their nature as 'folk' and/or somewhat popular, belonging to the 'people,' which makes regional kitsch different. They do that stereotypically, of course, but the direction is different, which is something that kitsch research has yet to take notice of.

In 1964, Umberto Eco wrote hinted at the 'dialogue' of highbrow art and kitsch in his *La struttura del cattivo gusto*. He said that kitsch copied art, and art tried to evade it and to find new ways of getting rid of kitsch (Eco, 1964), which might have been true of some modernist and avant-gardist work. Of course, the history of knickknacks considered to be kitsch has some interesting examples of this, some, where even the dialogue between art and kitsch leads to artistic comments. The endless banal reproduction of *Mona Lisa* resulted in Marcel Duchamp's famous *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), where Mona Lisa had a mustache.

However, the way in which a different kind of approach to material culture is accentuated in regional kitsch makes an interesting difference. There is nothing that could anger a conservative modernist or highbrow heritage enthusiast[6], and of course, today this concerns all kitsch, as the one-sided cultural war between highbrow and kitsch is somewhat over. It's just that regional kitsch seems to have been better accepted by highbrow thinkers early on, which is interesting to note. One does find any rage on kitsch, which does

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[5] In current kitsch research, the situation is, of course, different. For research with an accent on (contemporary) positive reactions to kitsch and with a clear separation of everyday kitsch and kitsch in art, see e.g. Max Ryynänen and Paco Barragán (2023). For a broad idea of the historical presentation of the history of kitsch research, see especially the introductory chapter *Kitsch: From Rejection to Acceptance*.

[6] For more on anger and cultural hierarchies, see Andreas Huyssen (1989). See also C. E. Emmer (1998) and Herbert Gans (1974).

not represent or refer to culture heavily labeled as 'authentic' or legitimate (art, indigenous). Today's more positive relationship towards kitsch has so had its precedent in this type of kitsch.

Culturally, it is significant that while many forms of kitsch appropriate a traditionally more valued form of culture to sell the idea of it to the masses (not forgetting its geographical meaning), with one original object to focus on (Michelangelo's *David*, etc.) miniature beer pints and furry wolves with a regional aura simply refer to the masses of these objects and/or animals in a certain area, often with an invisible tag saying 'folk,' the 'people,' or even (national/local) 'nature', somehow belonging to the people who inhabit it. There are probably millions of beer pints in Bavaria, and having the kitsch item representing one type of them, is not, in the end, about cherishing this object, but about cherishing a culture, or an atmosphere typical for it, a *Bierstube*, and a culture with the *Oktoberfest* and a tradition of drinking wheat beer and talking and singing, the relaxed atmosphere of Bavaria. Even more, while a *Mona Lisa* is not even Paris, but Michelangelo's *David* is about Florence (at least to some extent), even the latter is not about life in Florence.

3. Uses of Regional Kitsch

Seeing the miniature beer pint on the bookshelf in the evening, just before going to sleep, one might, for a moment, feel the atmosphere of a beer house in some cozy Bavarian town. Even Munich feels like a cluster of happy villages, and wherever you look you can find a lovely place for a beer, where people come together. It's not that memories like this could not pop up while watching a shrunk, banalized version of *Manneken Pis* – maybe good beer memories again? – but that one could ask if the everyday objects of a certain cultural region are more icons of a lifestyle, a way of living, an atmosphere, condensed into one object, as the object in question is not in the end what is represented, as it is too generic, and too much about a way of life. The tradition of regional kitsch calls for new thinking about kitsch.

Where does atmosphere hide? In his philosophy of atmosphere, the 'half-things,' as he calls them, Tonino Griffero lays out countless examples, from the police asking to see your passport, to the 'cool' atmosphere which surrounds Barak Obama, but there is not much about everyday objects (Griffero 2006). Atmosphere is hard to catch. How to show that Latvia's capital Riga has a very open type of energy or that Delhi feels somehow toxic (while Mumbai not)? Still, people share these experiences. This 'half-thingness' of atmospheres is present, and never visible, but of course, like most cultural depth, it builds through a cluster of small things, many of which are reproduced in kitsch objects. And, while openness and toxicity are hard to turn into cute, sentimental kitsch, other atmospheres are certainly not. Anything pleasurable can be reproduced in a surface-scratching way, and of course this does not only happen in regional kitsch, although it seems to be a quintessential feature of it. But the Londoners – here large cities with their kitsch can resemble regional kitsch – and the porcelain lemons of Amalfi bring about atmospheric qualities in these regions. It is the everyday aesthetics, which regional kitsch touches on much more.

According to Yuriko Saito, everyday aesthetics is represented by a certain set of objects which form the everyday (Saito 2007). While the collection of everyday objects that regional kitsch presents as miniatures and useless copies might be outdated (historical) and/or focus on the most peculiar, things one does not find in other regions, or which are very much symbolical in the region, it still focuses on a set of objects, which relates to seeing the everyday though its mundane material culture. What it brings forth is partly an identity, an idea of the everyday, where current culture and historical culture, and maybe fantasies of what a historical culture of the area might have been, come together.

At the same time, it is not unusual for locals to buy regional kitsch and feel a sort of local identity connected to it. While it would be hard to find a Venetian who has been on a Gondola (David and Marvin 2004) and one does not probably find kitschy miniature gondolas in their apartments, in Lapland, many people buy the same furry animals that the tourists buy, as well as the trash related to Christmas that is sold everywhere for Santa-hungry tourists. Also, Alpine kitsch seems to hit many places where locals gather, and homes where they exist with only an inch of camp attitude included. But one does not find people building a local, site-specific identity through a miniature Eiffel tower or a pocket-sized David. At least there seems to be more accent on this in regional kitsch.

The environmental and landscape-driven side of the practice is also interesting. Montmartre is not portrayed 3D in miniature kitsch, but Alpine mountains and Lapland's hills are. Venice and Amsterdam exist as miniature buildings, but the kitsch does not dive deep into the water or any other natural side of these sites – or other cities. While kitsch has been criticized for nearly two centuries (although I need to reiterate that today the situation is different (see Ryynänen and Barragán (2023), especially Chapter 1)), often for cheap copying, its imitations of nature of the regions it kitschifies in the 'genre' of regional kitsch are mostly first-hand portrayals. They remind us about experiencing nature, or the appreciation of animal life in the natural environment of the region, and they've done that for a long time. Kitschy furry reindeers and arctic foxes greet travelers as soon as they step off the plane at Rovaniemi Airport Lapland, like proud manifestations of the extraordinary natural and cultural nature of the area. Unique local kitsch! Interestingly, they are (mostly) made in Lapland, not in Thailand or Taiwan, which is the main paradigm in kitsch, and they are not even very cheap to buy. This is also more typical for Alpine kitsch than kitsch sold in and about Rome or Paris. Venice sells its original local glass objects with a document confirming local production, but the kitsch glass items sold around the originals are Asian imports.

Without any attempt to borrow the aura from highbrow objects, regional kitsch objects are pioneers of the more positive feeling of kitsch for the intelligentsia, which today is commonplace – and so it has survived the kitsch wars without focused portrayals showing its existence, although it is probably as old as other types of kitsch. Of course, one can ask if any kitsch should have ever come under attack – who's afraid of sentimentality, as Robert C. Solomon

asks (Solomon, 2004), and why bother if other people have other approaches to culture; but one has to understand that when mass-produced and mass-distributed cheap objects first hit the cultural sphere, and when icons of the art system were appropriated, it must have felt like a sort of attack against craft and art (Calinescu, 1986). Although old theorists do not really distinguish between different types of kitsch, their critical comments are based on the relationship between high and the low, reproductions of objects of cultural status, mainly (Kulka, 1989, Calinescu, 1986), while stereotypical expression and repetition have also been attributed kitsch, and these estimates and judgements easily apply to regional kitsch. It is stereotypical, it reinforces stereotypes, and its endless repetition of them can make one who lives in a region where local kitsch is strong, crazy in the end.

Interestingly, regional kitsch cannot be found everywhere. Not all regions have it. In fact, one really has to think of the regions that would be meaningful for this discussion. Not many regions offer an identity which easily lends itself to kitsch, or many regions lack symbols which somehow make a positive difference to the urban centers that exist inside of them or in their vicinity. Of course, for a kitsch production to make sense there must also be tourists. In any case, Lazio is overshadowed by Rome, and Brandenburg is overshadowed by Berlin. And, of course, the nature portrayals are not 'innocent', though they would not copy highbrow. It can change our way of looking at real nature if we see too many sugary copies of it (see Ryynänen, 2019), of course. After one thousand sunsets in mountain sceneries seen on postcards and digital images, a real one in the Alps might feel like kitsch, even if it is real and we would view it for the first time. This is of course how kitsch can both give identity to not just landscapes but cities and regions (Venice and its sunsets, Northern Lights in Lappland) and somewhat give a kitschified feeling to their life too, not through referring to unique objects, like the Eiffel Tower, but through distributing local symbols and cultural highlights which come in masses. And regional kitsch probably has an effect often on the culture regions, which it portrays, in a way, which might be seen as more positive than in the urban cases mentioned. For sure, the way people of Lapland look at themselves must echo a bit the quite positive relationship to regional kitsch, which is present in the region.

Weirdly, although enormous sums are spent on art, to provide a better identity to regions, often ending up being enjoyed by a small margin of people (like me), regions have yet to fund and employ kitsch for their benefit. No region has a conscious approach to kitsch, although it represents a livelihood for some. What if Lapland had a kitsch strategy? It seems that kitsch, however visible and usual, has somehow escaped the attention of people working with cultural policy and branding. There are no projects about expanding the variety of kitsch objects anchoring the region; additional furry animals haven't appeared on the shelves (I'm still looking for a furry Wolverine in Lapland), and other parts of the everyday which could be more cherished have yet to go into kitsch production. And, as regional kitsch so praises the region it portrays, how would you e.g. sell equality or democracy, which definitely are part of

Lapland's legacy together with its broader context, Finland? The cultural wars of modernity (as I said, although one-sided) continue to have too much of an effect on how things are viewed. While historical landscape painting is considered meaningful and portrays places in the regions, we have not found regional kitsch important, despite the fact that it is enjoyed much more extensively. The atmospheres that these objects show, support and help visitors to remember could be studied and enhanced by local production supported by the regions. Whatever, understanding regional kitsch better, and even just noting that it exists, is a step in the right direction, and I hope this article has been able to contribute to that. As Bavaria is the home of the concept, where it was developed in the 1860s to refer to sketches sold to tourists (Calinescu 1986), and Munich does not host many cultural treasures, which as singular fetish objects of art would easily overshadow regional qualities, Bavaria could cherish both the invention of the concept, and the strength of regional kitsch in the area, and build upon contemporary features, which we who visit this wonderful area in the southeast of Germany, remember from our visits, like the surfers of the Eisbach Wave (and the Wave itself) or the incredible food culture, which has settled side by side with local delicacies, and made the area the most frequently-starred Michelin restaurant region in the world.

4. Conclusions

"The region [...] is far too large to be known directly. It has to be constructed by symbolic means," Yi-fu Tuan writes (Tuan 1975, 159). He claims that it "has to have sentimental identity" (ibid. 163). Philosophically speaking, finding the idea of regional kitsch will not change much, but thinking about the philosophy of kitsch will surely remind us of the fact that more positive takes on kitsch from the highbrow side have existed for a long time in the philosophy of kitsch, and that there is a difference between kitsch, which is in dialogue with highbrow culture, including most urban kitsch, and kitsch which embraces regions, stemming from their cultures and arsenals of everyday objects, however banal their folkly and/or popular nature and its celebration would ever be. Regional kitsch, as noted, stands also more for environment and nature, which is a perspective still unstudied by kitsch scholars. Important to note, kitsch, often hated for its sentimentality, could also stand for Yi-fu Tuan's idea of sentimental identity (quoted in the beginning of the paragraph). Whether really needed or not, kitsch might actually build identity more than we understand, and for sure, regional kitsch at least looks like doing that more than most other types of kitsch. While there is a lot to study, and this article has only scratch the surface, we should at least not underestimate the meaning and role of regional kitsch. I hope this text supports our growing understanding of this less discussed form of kitsch, and not just for the sake of understanding kitsch, but also for understanding regions, identity, and culture more generally.

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