

Aesthetics in Kitsch Art: the Aesthetic Ideology and Teleological Purpose behind the Charged Sentimentality

Yasmine Abdrabbo – Cherine Abdrabbo

This article addresses the problem of perceiving Kitsch Art and elaborates on the philosophical approaches taken to understand better the intellectual contexts surrounding the term. It aims to endorse its aesthetic aspect and assert its right to be subsumed under the notion of high art. The researchers argue that, besides the claim that the main issue with reading kitsch lies in misperceiving it as a problem of perception, it is also a problem of misinterpretation. Critics have constrained their judgments on Kitsch Art with narrow and prejudiced contentions, while many aesthetic theories can ascertain its aesthetic existence. The most crucial of these theories are those on aesthetic emotions, as it was the emotional charge of kitsch paintings that critics used to reject and vastly criticize. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Aesthetics, Beauty, Interpretation of Art*

1. Introduction

This essay examines kitsch in the form of classical paintings and their replicas, as well as any art forms aimed at reviving classicism in the twentieth century. Critics of the twentieth century approached Kitsch Art as a sociocultural dilemma that lacked any prospect of aesthetic value. They stated that its characteristic features only served to be classified as representations of bad taste, corruption of taste, false truth, and evil in art's value system, as Hermann Broch claimed. Therefore, kitsch entailed aesthetic deficiencies sufficient to exclude it from being part of high art. The dilemma here relies on the allegation that kitsch is devoid of aesthetic merit or entails blemished aesthetics. Yet, the critiques given by critics and art historians were quite defined; they observed the exaggerated sentimentality of kitsch's artworks and

the directness of themes and objects portrayed in these works. In contrast, Tomas Kulka determined these characteristics in his book *Kitsch and Art* (1996) as the distinctive criteria for artworks to be labelled as Kitsch Art.

In addition to the previous factors, Martim de Almeida (2017) noted that kitsch constituted two crucial elements: immediacy and imitation, which form the core of its philosophy. These elements were also fiercely rejected for supposedly giving fake aesthetic responses and fake precepts. Imitation appeared through the use of former aesthetics and traditional themes or objects, perceived as a repetitive system that offered no novelty or originality. Immediacy arose from the ease of recognising the objects portrayed in Kitsch Artworks, which did not contain any symbolic or iconographic semantics to perceive and interpret, requiring no effort from the beholder to comprehend them. This may exist due to the utilitarian aspect that Kitsch Art entails, as the artworks were sold in the art markets to various social ranks after being limited to a certain elite. The proletariat and middle classes began to purchase Kitsch Art for its affordability and its representation of the taste of the elites. They were attracted to its appeal, which critics defined as a cheap emotional charge.

2. The problem of perception and interpretation of Kitsch Art

The impoverished emotional charge usually elicits an instant response to what is presented in the artworks, whether depicting familiar themes, objects of daily life, or re-portraying historical or mythological vistas. Critics argued that this kind of instant response is often temporary because the beholder perceives its beauty from a functional artwork that offers trite sceneries from classical heritage. Max Rynänen and Paco Barragán (2023, p. 24) best explained this issue by stating that “kitsch academic interpretations of the past revolve around old-fashioned dichotomies of art history versus the art market”. The art market may have a certain vision of what art is, though kitsch did connect the spirit of classical revival and commercial ends, perhaps in a trivial way. However, this representation does not revoke its aesthetic value, unlike what critics alleged. Current philosophers have responded to this contention by claiming that kitsch’s main problem was perception.

Kulka (1996) explained that the assumption of kitsch’s aesthetic deficiencies is inaccurate because some artworks were executed properly and with refined mastery. Therefore, the proposed dilemma is not about the showcased skills and the utility of the works; it is simply that this period had a different aesthetic aspiration than what was presented by the Kitsch Artists. Additionally, the sociologist Janet Wolff (1984) has stated that the definition of art can differ from time to time based on sociological contexts.

Though it indeed seems to be a problem of perception, one could also claim that kitsch faced a problem of interpretation. Critics failed to interpret its intrinsic nature and tended to analyse the relationship between its formal and intellectual elements and the commercial aspect prejudicially, notably the emotional charge, which was perceived as an excessive cliché. One could argue that this preconception was based on ideological interests, as it is implausible

to state that any form of art can lack aesthetic value or be flawed, particularly when it has an audience. It is in the primitive nature of art to be an entity that possesses aesthetic essence and requires an aesthetic response. Consequently, it is logical to state that it possesses aesthetic value. In proving so, one can conclude that the misinterpretation of kitsch underlined a misanalysis of its aesthetic ideology.

The aesthetic ideology of kitsch resided in the idea of being a shared visual language that allows individuals to express themselves, it succeeded in embracing specific individuals with common needs and desires, for it fulfilled the absence of certain needs on both the aesthetic and ideological levels. Kitsch's ideology was established in sociological contexts that elicited psychological and utilitarian reasons for its appeal. It developed as a cultural phenomenon that sought to address the feelings of alienation prevalent among many individuals. By offering a sense of belonging and connection during a period of rapid change across all aspects of life. Hence, kitsch presented a solution for this existential dilemma through a vision that regarded art as a reflection of reality and an escape from it in conventional and affordable forms.

On the aesthetic part, kitsch relied on classical heritage to derive its value within the boundaries of ideal precepts. The beholder is drawn to its subject matter and its embodiment into formal and sensual aesthetics because it is familiar to them. They can relate to its emotional charge because it provides a sense of nostalgia and a haven from life by reviving traditional classicism. Sam Binkley argued that kitsch conveyed the conception of embeddedness, which he defined as a

condition of daily life in which uncertainties, existential questions, and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought which penetrate the deepest crevices of the quotidian. (Binkley, 2000, p. 135)

The spectator faced existential dilemmas that emerged due to the severe changes that occurred in the age of modernity. These political and social changes required an outlet that expressed their artistic aspirations and aligned with popular aesthetics. Thus, kitsch emerged as a release from life's difficulties and provided reassurance that the world remains unchanged from years past.

Critics have declared that the aesthetic response elicited by kitsch's works is false and not entirely an aesthetic experience because it derives from imitated precepts that belonged to previous periods and creates an instant and immediate sense of pleasure. However, one could not make such acute judgments solely based on the duration of the aesthetic response and the imitation aspect because an immediate and instant response does not imply a lack of aesthetic value or a false response. The aesthetic judgment should be established on the depth of the impact on the beholder, which is essentially based on the state of the event of a direct encounter with the work. This event generates a reflective impact that makes the beholder resonate with what the

artwork presents. Whether this reflective impact's duration is short or long, the viewer can still have a genuine aesthetic response. Moreover, this aesthetic response could be spawned by traditional connotations and old-fashioned styles, depending on the aesthetic preferences of the beholder. Most of the kitsch audience was drawn to its repetitive aesthetics because it offered a sense of belonging and a kind of sensual purification.

This feature of purification was heavily criticized, with critics arguing that the beholder's response elicited by this purgation is not a true aesthetic response but rather a fake one because it is founded on immediately accessible pleasure. However, one could contend that purgation is a conventional trait of catharsis and that a major aspect of art's nature conveys such a notion, as Aristotle claimed. The aesthetic response here is a form of aesthetic catharsis, which purifies the audience's ability to feel pity and fear, releases emotional pressures and generates a certain kind of pleasure. Therefore, the pleasure that emerges from kitsch, even if it is instant, still fulfils its purpose of creating emotional balance for the viewer. Alan Paskow (1983) noted that the purification traits were the deepest and most notable kinds of aesthetic experience. It is the most significant because it prevents emotional repression and emphasizes the role of imagination.

Art, as a cultural production, embodies social structures and certain ideologies, reflecting the time and environment in which it was created through private precepts. It may seem that art is a direct representation of political and social ideologies, though art is an autonomous monad, as Theodor Adorno (2002) claimed in his aesthetic theory. Art can be executed in such contexts without resorting to direct imitation; that is what differentiates ethical art from commodities and high art. High art serves intrinsic truth; it is autonomous through its particular modes of expressing ideas while deriving its material from reality. Adorno regards art as possessing an enigmatic characteristic that defies easy interpretation, stemming from the inherent negativity that resists dominant political and social orders. Kitsch, through its visual representation, can be considered high art due to its appropriation of the classical heritage, which embodies transcendent and timeless values that developed European visual identity.

The relationship between aesthetics and ideology is complex; it affects cultural tastes and forms aesthetic preferences. For that reason, we can find diverse artistic styles that relate to the spectrums of social classes because they entail the imprints of their values and thoughts. Some theorists considered aesthetics a framework for defining the political significance and function of culture. Terry Eagleton (1988) observed that aesthetics constituted a program for social and political reconstruction, grounded in the belief that, in Baumgartenian thought, aesthetics is not confined to art and life, but encompasses the relation between the material and the immaterial, senses and ideas, and how the sentient life of a society is shaped through a kind of perception and cognition. Baumgarten viewed aesthetic cognition as a sensuous analogue of reason. It facilitates a transition from the general principles of reason to the particularities observed through sensory

perception, leading to the creation of ideas, meanings, and ideologies. Alireza Pourmanouchehri (Pourmanouchehri, n.d) regarded aesthetics as ideological, given its capacity to shape our understanding of reality through imagination and perception. He noted that these aesthetic ideas necessitated engagement with thoughts that defy easy categorization or predefined concepts. This enables human beings to understand their existence and appreciate its beauty through new concepts.

Aesthetics demand a sort of selection, which Jacques Rancière (2004) has discussed under the notion of *the distribution of the sensible*. He argued that this was a shared regime consisting of invisible boundaries or unspoken rules within a community or society that define what counts as valuable, perceptible, and articulable. It is a political notion that is equally applicable to aesthetics. Rancière argued that the aesthetic regime is a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making. It re-evaluates the norms and inherent standards regarding perceiving a work of art in order to differentiate between true art and other representations by challenging conventional aesthetics and presenting alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Hence, it creates new forms of collective visions and tastes.

The ideology presented in the works of art has its specific semantics that assist in delivering its aesthetics and purpose. Usually, those semantics are applied in two manners: one is conducted in a direct composition that requires no effort to comprehend, and the other implements some kind of ambiguity due to the use of semiotic tokens, requiring a level of awareness to perceive. This kind of art normally does not attract the masses, as they tend to appreciate works that reflect their reality or needs in simple forms and seem familiar to their knowledge and experiences. Philippe De Montebello, the director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, has stated that art is a sort of language and means of communication (Houghton, 2009). Believing this, it is normal to see divisions in the art field because the diversity in artistic languages will differ based on the level of awareness, intellectual backgrounds, social conditions, and aesthetic preferences. In addition, economic factors have a great influence on creating and perceiving art. Commercial imprints also arose to shape some of the art movements, as did institutions and educational schools of art. Therefore, it is difficult to find an artistic movement that does not conceive any aesthetic ideology, as some can be perceived as acts of conformity or rebellion. In the case of Kitsch Art, one can claim that its aesthetic ideology is clear and definite.

Paul Duncum (2008) defined the meaning of aesthetics as visual appearances and their effects and interpreted ideology as a style of thinking. By this definition, we find that the essential feature of kitsch's works depends on the principle of familiarity in both the aesthetic and ideological sense. Kitsch provides familiar sceneries of classical heritage and experiences of daily life, imitating the actual world and the past in the same approach. It bases its appeal on generating an ambience of remembrance and a sense of belonging. What recalls the sense of familiarity in psychological terms is usually the memory of an event, whether this event is an action, an emotion, or anything

that impacts the senses. It is engraved in the mind as a habit, which, in a broader definition, means the repetition of certain experiences over long periods. Hence, one could argue that reusing traditional approaches in art was a form of habit that offered reassurance to the kitsch beholder. The repetition of such aesthetics does not revoke its value, as it represents a case of co-existing alternative ideology, which Raymond Williams (as cited in Wolff, 1984, p. 53) defined as an ideology from the past but still active in the current cultural process.

Bourdieu (2020) discussed the idea of habit created by authorities and dominant institutions. He explained that the environment in which one grows up develops behaviours, habits, and aesthetic preferences subconsciously. In European societies, where schools, universities, and other cultural institutions promoted a certain taste based on classical heritage, this taste became a habit according to the principle of familiarity. This was better explained by the American social psychologist Robert Zajonc (1968) in his theory of the *mere-exposure effect*. It states that if a person is repeatedly exposed to certain aesthetic appearances from a young age, they will get used to them over time to the extent that they will replicate them unconsciously in daily usage. Hence, when some of the proletariat gained higher social status, they expressed themselves in a way they already knew, by what they have been familiar with since infancy. What they were exposed to used to be high art, the taste of the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocrats, and also the official taste of the state. However, the principle of familiarity has two opposing sides. One explains that aesthetic preferences are based on prior experience, making one choose something because it is familiar. The other argues that prolonged exposure to something can make it lose its appeal to the viewer. This describes the attitude of the critics towards Kitsch Art when they rejected those kinds of paintings for presenting known sceneries.

We see that the ideology behind rejecting kitsch and misinterpreting its strong appeal was based on shifting the dominance of European classical culture to let Avant-Garde be the main aesthetic representation of the era, notably the American Avant-Garde. It offered the novelty that critics sought and aligned with their philosophy of exploring the unconscious, abstracting reality from firm connotations and traditional precepts, and approaching life with spontaneous improvisational stances. Some of its movements took inspiration from contemporary mass culture, expressing materialist and consumerist taste characteristics in a new objective art form. These movements spawned as a reaction to social events, mostly the wars' aftermath and their impacts on the masses, artists, and intellectuals. Yet, the rejection here is quite prejudiced because, throughout the twentieth century, there was a cumulation of diverse notions of visual appearances and preferences of taste, showcasing a significant openness to embrace conflicting tastes at the same time, such as those presented in Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art. They all offered kinds of aesthetic ideology, and each succeeded in delivering its own purpose and expressing its intrinsic beauty.

In the traditional approach to appreciating beauty, not all forms of art would be valued or share the same degree of beauty, as there is the sublime, the transcendental, and the beautiful, among others. In modern conceptions, the notion of beauty became so broad that it embraced all kinds of formal patterns and embodiments. Ugliness is perceived as beautiful chaos; terror is sublime and delightful, as Edmund Burke (1757) states, for one can feel the danger and pain without being in such conditions. Hence, they all engage in requiring aesthetic appreciation, which is based on aesthetic preferences.

3. The interpretation of kitsch's aesthetic purpose

When discussing the discourse of evaluating art, Kant's premises on assessing art through the lenses of disinterestedness and purposelessness emerge as the main foundation, which successive philosophers and critics have followed acutely. They rejected the apparent purpose of kitsch, accusing it of creating a false reality. However, we find that the critics have misinterpreted its teleological value and were intentionally trying to exclude kitsch from the art scene to maintain the ambience of novelty by retaining one broad form of beauty, which is modern aesthetics. Kathleen Higgins (2000) argued that the disappearance of traditional beauty in the twenties was incomprehensible because some modern art was aesthetically similar to certain kinds of kitsch. Yet, the misinterpretation of the purpose behind kitsch lies in the conception of the existential essence of artworks. Broadly speaking, works of art should indeed be made without purpose, but what kind of purpose are we seeking? Artworks usually gain their existence by being displayed, and without the feature of the exhibition, the artwork only exists in the realm of the artist. Thus, the idea of the display is itself a purpose, and the continuum of showcasing the works and perceiving them is another end.

The presence of this form of purpose does not diminish its aesthetic worth. Consequently, artworks are produced not for accumulation or their demise in the history of art but rather to ensure their existence in the world of both the artist and the beholder, thereby remaining vigorous in history. In the case of selling and collecting the works, their utilitarian end may present the works as commodities, and some are indeed commodities. Yet, they have a major audience from different ranks of society that can appreciate their aesthetics. Moreover, history supports this argument by clarifying that most of the old masters sold their works, whether they were original pieces or commissions, and many amateurs and apprentices made replicas of the masters' works. Yet no one doubted their worth, and they remained aesthetically and intellectually valuable in the eyes of scholars and spectators. The most well-known example of this is the artist Albrecht Dürer. His paintings were copied, and some artists painted and created new designs in his style. Otto Kurz (1948) noted that they excelled in imitating Dürer's approach and vision. Drawings were replicated as paintings to the extent that it was considered forgery because they were sold enormously throughout Europe. Even his monogram was imprinted on various works all over Italy, Germany, and the Flemish region. However, the aesthetic value of Dürer's works has never decreased after these fake reproductions.

John Berger (1972) has also noted that paintings had a special connection with the notion of property. From 1500 up until 1900, every ruling class dominated the art sphere and set certain ideologies for the artists to follow under the art market's surveillance. Hence, painting became a visual expression of cultural visions, with the most crucial one being the culture of consumerism. After the industrial revolution, the culture of consumerism reached its peak, and with the transformation of exhibition value, it became possible for all social ranks to purchase artworks. Critics assumed that the aesthetic value of those works would be affected by these determinants. However, the value of art, notably Kitch Art, lies in the eye of the beholder. If it is exposed to external changes that let it gain functional aspects, it does not necessarily lose its aesthetic value. Instead, it either gains a new identity, or one of the features becomes more apparent than the other. Usually, the aesthetic aspect maintains the appeal of the works, while the functional aspect is generally considered a secondary factor that serves a specific purpose for a limited duration.

As discussed in previous pages, the aesthetic purpose of kitsch is to be a source of conformity and reassurance. Thus, the utilitarian factor in the works does not impact their aesthetic purpose; on the contrary, it reassures the sentimentality derived from the artworks, showing its strength in proving that feeling can be considered a condition or an act of cognition, and therefore, it can be a legitimate factor for aesthetic judgment.

There are spectrums of emotions that humans navigate throughout the day. Regarding the perception of art, one experiences an ambience of aesthetic emotions, which may be called Aesthetic Hedonism. According to Clive Bell as cited in Robison (2020), the aesthetic emotions are a special kind of emotion evoked by visual artworks. They are a mode of experience that does not pertain solely to the experienced object but to what it projects to the beholder from imprints, whether those imprints are embodied as concepts or sentiments. Michael Lacewing mentioned that Hume (2009) differentiated these imprints, which he called perceptions, into two categories. The first perception concerns the notion of *impressions*, which are associated with feelings, and the second perception is related to *ideas*, which are concerned with thinking. He divided impressions into *sensation* and *reflection*, with one deriving from the senses and the other from the experience of the mind. He made such distinctions to assert that emotion is a faculty of cognition and a part of the perceptions of the mind that can be used for reasoning and making judgments.

Subrahmanya Sastri (1954) has demonstrated that aesthetic emotions, as refined experiences, can play a role in forming aesthetic judgments. He has shown that feelings and emotions are mental states that involve cognitive processes and awareness of external objects and are also sufficient to prove the aesthetic value of a work of art. However, every artwork generates a specific emotion, such as pleasure, pain, relief, etc., and it differs according to the kind of beauty presented in the work. In the case of kitsch, beauty in the repetitive and familiar sceneries of traditional art evokes an emotion of both pleasure and pain simultaneously. It portrays a nostalgic feeling that mourns the loss of something and the contentment of remembering a fulfilling emotion or desire.

Kitsch indeed contemplates the past and glorifies its presence, and as Sastri mentioned, the revival of previous experiences is controlled by the demands of the mind. Thus, the critic's objection to the intense sentimentality is no longer valid, as the sentimentality evoked in the artwork is a product of cognitive faculty.

Robert C. Solomon (1991) explained the rejection of such sentimentality by stating that the critics of the twentieth century did not reject sentimentality itself; rather, they refused the exaggeration of those sentiments and what they visually and intellectually express. However, the beauty of kitsch remains in this exaggeration, which provides the beholder with a sense of feeling centred. People admire kitsch's work for the energy it provokes in them and the fantasized reality it creates. To elaborate more on this argument, one should notice that the perception of art conveys a distinctive relationship between understanding and imagination, which helps in creating emotions. The viewer's ability to assimilate the beauty of the work depends on the act of engagement between the beholder and the work. The more the viewer observes the artwork cognitively, the greater they feel the pleasure of its aesthetic appeal. Observation here is an act of imagination associated with perceptions of the mind. In the process of contemplating an artwork, the main source of the aesthetic experience is the imaginative awareness of what is presented. The mind, as a faculty, tries to articulate the object into conceptions and imageries, and feeling, as another faculty of cognition, is fulfilled by the play of imagination, evoking a sense of pleasure.

4. Conclusion

It is evident that kitsch has evolved into a prominent concept, impacting various forms of art. Certain critics have perceived it negatively as a representation of poor taste, while others have sought to delve deeper into the origins of Kitsch Art and its influence on artistic concepts and cultural theories. In response to criticisms regarding kitsch's aesthetic deficiencies, we have presented arguments to prove that kitsch possesses aesthetic value, contending that the issue lies in the misinterpretation of its aesthetic ideology and biases against its exaggerated sentimentality. By highlighting the effectiveness of aesthetic emotions in demonstrating aesthetic worth, various theories put forth by different philosophers serve as evidence to refute these objections.

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Yasmine Abdrabbo
University of Alexandria
Painting department, Faculty of Fine Arts
625 Janaklees Abu Qir street, Alexandria, Egypt
Yasmine.Gamaleldin@alexu.edu.eg

Cherine Abdrabbo
University of Alexandria
Painting department, Faculty of Fine arts
625 Janaklees Abu Qir street, Alexandria, Egypt
Cherine.Gamaleldin@alexu.edu.eg

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