

The Antinomy of Kitsch

Kitsch as an Aesthetic Category and an Aesthetic / Art-Critical Property

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The antinomy of kitsch comprises two conflicting yet widely accepted claims: first, kitsch and art are incompatible; secondly, some art is kitsch. The key to solving this contradiction is distinguishing between kitsch as an aesthetic category and an aesthetic, art-critical property. As an aesthetic category, kitsch is an artifact, performance, or practice whose dominant function is to enable emotion-based self-enjoyment in a large group of people. Based on this definition, kitsch and art are two mutually exclusive aesthetic categories. As an aesthetic property, kitsch is the disposition to enable emotion-based (self-)enjoyment in a broad range of people by supervening on the kitsch typical features. So, everything kitsch is also kitschy, but not vice versa. Therefore, art can be kitschy, although it is not kitsch. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Art, Aesthetic Categories, Aesthetic Properties, Art Evaluation*

1. Introduction

The question “Is this art or kitsch?” – popular among art critics, journalists, and feature writers – implies a dichotomy between kitsch and art. In the same spirit, many aestheticians and philosophers consider kitsch and art antipodes. This observation supports the assertion that something cannot be art and kitsch simultaneously. However, laypeople, art critics, and aestheticians judge some works of art as kitsch and some art genres prone to kitsch. This observation leads to another claim: something can be art and kitsch. Combining both observations yields the antinomy of kitsch:

Thesis: Kitsch and art are incompatible.

Antithesis: Kitsch and art are compatible.

The antinomy of kitsch prompts whether and how one can solve this contradiction. In the background stands another question: What is the relationship between art and kitsch?

This article aims to resolve the antimony without straightforwardly rejecting its thesis or antithesis. The key to doing so lies in distinguishing between

kitsch as an aesthetic category and as an aesthetic or art-critical property, a distinction often overlooked in the debate: art and kitsch are two different and mutually exclusive aesthetic categories. Still, art can possess the aesthetic and art-critically relevant property of being kitschy.

This paper proceeds in three steps. The first part elaborates on the antinomy of kitsch, showing that one should take both the thesis and antithesis seriously. The second part supports the thesis of the antinomy without accepting the classical definition of kitsch as pseudo- or anti-art. Instead, the argument rests on the assumption that kitsch is an (art-)independent aesthetic category and on a functionalist, effect-based definition of kitsch. The third section defends the antithesis as a statement about the aesthetic property of being kitschy: art can be kitschy without being kitsch. Additionally, this section illustrates that kitsch is an art-critical property that typically reduces the value of art across most, though not all, art categories.

2. The Antinomy of Kitsch

The debate about kitsch intertwines with the discussion about art. Authors traditionally discuss kitsch against the backdrop of a theory, or at least an idea, of what (good) art is: “Kitsch and art – both concepts belong together, and one can only differentiate them with the help of their counter-parts.” (Thuller, 2006, p. 6 MT) Thuller’s statement already hints at how art and kitsch supposedly relate: We need a concept of (good) art to say what kitsch is because kitsch is opposed to (good) art: “Kitsch is not art; kitsch is virtually the counter concept of art” (Baumgart, 2002, p. 2 MT).

Two classical conceptions of kitsch support this claim. The first understands kitsch as pseudo-art, and the second as anti-art. Both agree that kitsch might appear as art at first glance or for non-experts, but not upon proper inspection. For those who understand kitsch as pseudo-art, kitsch only pretends to be art and dresses up as art without being genuine (e.g., Crick, 1983, p. 50; Deschner, 1991, p. 23; Eco, 1994). The essence of kitsch lies in its deceptive nature (e.g., Călinescu, 1987, p. 229; Scruton, 1999). Proponents of the approach that kitsch is anti-art point out that “art” is not a purely descriptive, classificatory concept but a normative one. Something must be good enough to be art. It must meet art standards, whether aesthetic, epistemic, moral, ethical, or political. Kitsch does not meet these standards: it is too bad to count as art (e.g., Broch, 1955; Harries, 1991; Pazaurek, 1912).

If one reads or listens to art, film, theater, or literature reviews, one can find proof that art critics, journalists, and feature writers also consider kitsch and art antipodes. In 2017, when *Lala Land* was the talk of the town, the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published, for instance, a piece with the title “Musicals—kitschy commerce or great emotion?” (Britzelmeier and Rietzschel, 2017). Two authors discussed whether musicals like *Lala Land* can count as art or are simply kitsch. In 2022, two Austrian journalists debated whether Netflix’s successful series *Bridgerton* was great cinema or unbearable kitsch (Priesching and Siebert, 2022). The German art podcast *Augen zu (Close your eyes)* asks, “Is Gustav Klimt great art or great kitsch?” in its episodes on Klimt¹

¹ I understand “artifact” in Dickie’s (2004, p. 49) sense.

(Illies and di Lorenzo, 2022). As these examples illustrate, the academic and broader public debates deeply entrench the dichotomy between kitsch and art.

However, one can tell another story leading to the antithesis of the antinomy of kitsch, namely that kitsch and art are compatible. We sometimes believe that a work of art is kitsch without doubting its art status. We might be standing in front of Klimt's famous painting *The Kiss*, thinking that it is kitsch without doubting that it is art. To mention other examples, many people see works of Romanticism or the Art Nouveau movement simultaneously as art and kitsch. So, we judge some works of art, perhaps even whole art movements, as kitsch.

Furthermore, in the second half of the twenty-first century, kitsch found its way into the art world with the birth of the art movement of kitsch-art as Fuller (1992) describes it: just as pop art makes the everyday and trivial its subject, kitsch-art, as the name suggests, makes kitsch its subject. Works of kitsch-art obviously appear to be kitsch. Some of the most famous (and economically successful) contemporary artists, like Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Banksy, produce kitsch-art. So, one might agree with Liessman (2002, p. 15): "It is no longer true that kitsch cannot be advanced art. On the contrary, since Jeff Koons at the latest, we know kitsch itself is now avant-garde." Generally, the lines between high and popular art became blurry in the 1960ies. The whole idea of high art came under attack, and thereby also, the dichotomy between art and kitsch.

So, we can find support within and outside the academic debate for the thesis and the antithesis of the antinomy of kitsch. Although one might be more sympathetic to either the thesis or the antithesis, one should not resolve the emerging antinomy by just rejecting either one. Instead, one should take both claims seriously and think about whether and how one can do justice to the just-made observations.

3. Kitsch as an Aesthetic Category: Defending the Thesis

The thesis of the antinomy of kitsch states that art and kitsch are incompatible. One way to concretize this claim is that kitsch either falls within the aesthetic category of kitsch or that of art, and both categories are mutually exclusive.

Broadly defined, an aesthetic category is a set of artifacts reasonably grouped together with reference to shared or similar modes of production, artistic and aesthetic features, functions, and/or modes of reception. Examples of aesthetic categories are paintings, sculptures, theater, literature, architecture, cinema, and music. Further, aesthetic categories can capture additional and more fine-grained distinctions as Walton (1970, pp. 338–339) writes: "Such categories include media, genre, styles, forms, and so forth—for example, the categories of paintings, cubist paintings, Gothic architecture, classical sonatas, paintings in the style of Cezanne, and music in the style of late Beethoven—if they are interpreted in such a way that membership is determined solely by features that can be perceived in a work when it is experienced in the normal manner."

As these elaborations show, classical categories of art are aesthetic categories. However, not every aesthetic category is also an art category. Something might fall within the aesthetic categories of paintings or sculptures without being considered a work of art. Additional aesthetic categories, such as design objects or decorative postcards, have an even looser connection to art.

When it comes to some works and some aesthetic categories, categorizing is comparatively easy. With others, it is more complicated. Expert knowledge might be required, and some categories and/or their membership criteria are not as clearly defined as others. Furthermore, a work can belong to different aesthetic categories. Aesthetic categories can overlap, or one aesthetic category can also be a subcategory of another. Some aesthetic categories are mutually exclusive, however. Something cannot be both a painting and a sculpture, for example. The momentarily crucial question is whether art and kitsch are mutually exclusive aesthetic categories.

The previous section mentioned two approaches to defining kitsch: kitsch as pseudo-art and kitsch as anti-art. Both define the aesthetic category of kitsch in dependence on and in comparison with the aesthetic category of art. Thus, they are art-based definitions of kitsch. One central feature of these art-based definitions is that art and kitsch are incompatible qua definition. So, is one of the art-based definitions persuasive?

The pseudo-art definition rests on two assumptions. First, kitsch resembles art to such an extent that it might pass as art. The default idea about who confuses kitsch with art is that a naïve, uneducated, and artistically unschooled audience believes kitsch is art (e.g., Killy, 1978, pp. 30–31). Some identify this demographic with the working class (e.g., Greenberg, 1939), while others identify it with the (lower) middle class (e.g., Broch, 1955; Călinescu, 1987, pp. 244–245; Dorfles, 1969, p. 26; Killy, 1978, p. 33). Most authors agree that this group is extensive, and they contrast it with the small group of educated art connoisseurs (e.g., Dorfles, 1969; Eco, 1994, p. 81; Greenberg, 1939; Pazaurek, 1912, 1912). Secondly, kitsch producers intend to deceive their audience about the aesthetic category of their works. The intended audience should think that what they consume is art and not kitsch, and the intended audience is the naïve group of people whom one can deceive.

Beginning with the second assumption, are all works of kitsch made to deceive? This question first leads to an epistemic problem. One must know the producers' intentions when deciding whether something is kitsch. Perhaps one can talk to them, or one has (reliable) statements about their intentions. One often does not have access to this information. Still, one can tell whether something is kitsch or not.

Furthermore, kitsch producers can have different intentions. They can start their creative project to produce art but fail because of bad luck, a lack of necessary artistic abilities, or a misguided concept of art. In the first two cases, they might be unsatisfied with their artistic endeavors; in the third, they might be pleased with the result. Either way, they produce kitsch without any deceptive intention.

Furthermore, the intention to deceive their audiences about the aesthetic category of their works is not among the primary intentions associated with the commercial production or political use of kitsch (e.g., Grau, 2019; Greenberg, 1939; Pazaurek, 1912, pp. 349, 355; Scruton, 1999). Kitsch producers might want to create something to entertain their audience, earn money, or influence them for marketing or propagandistic purposes. One might object that successfully deceiving the audience about the art status of their works is instrumental to achieving the other goals. People purchase kitsch objects because they believe they are art, for instance.

However, some goals associated with kitsch might be reached independently of what the audience thinks of the aesthetic category of the objects they consume. For instance, the audience might be well entertained while being indifferent to which aesthetic category the object belongs. Additionally, the knowledge that what one consumes is kitsch does not have to interfere with being entertained or the willingness to purchase the kitsch work. As Küpper (2022) points out, the awareness that something is kitsch sometimes even helps to fully engage with the object in question and truly enjoy it.

The observation that some kitsch producers are open about the aesthetic status of their works supports the previous point. For example, Netflix labels *Bridgerton* as “swoon-worthy, emotional, romantic” on its homepage. They might not use the term “kitsch,” but do not hide that the series is kitsch. In the musical *Elisabeth*, the song “Kitsch” is about the kitsch nature of “Elisabeth”-memorabilia. Thereby, the song also makes a self-reference to the kitsch nature of the musical itself. If kitsch producers so clearly hint at the aesthetic status of their works, it seems implausible that they seriously intend to make their audience believe that they consume art.

Someone who wants to defend the pseudo-art definition’s basic idea might argue that kitsch appears as if its producers wanted it to be regarded as art, irrespective of their actual intention. If one could show that most people treat and consider kitsch as art, this would offer good support.

Some people indeed consume kitsch while believing they are engaging with art. This is not the only way to approach and enjoy kitsch, however. Some people seem to genuinely engage and enjoy kitsch without thinking they are consuming art. They might not care about the aesthetic categories of the objects they enjoy. Others can be aware that they consume kitsch. From those, some of them might enjoy kitsch with an ironic attitude (e.g., Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p. 307), resembling Sontag’s camp attitude (Sontag, 1964). Others might enjoy kitsch as kitsch while genuinely engaging with kitsch. If one doubts this group of kitsch recipients exists, one should consider that people often cite kitsch as an example of their “guilty pleasures.” Without the awareness that something is kitsch, one would not think it is a “guilty pleasure.” So, kitsch audiences do not always consume kitsch based on the belief that kitsch is art. I would even go so far as to claim that the naïve recipient is not the typical kitsch recipient.

If kitsch is neither always nor typically produced to be taken as art nor consumed with the belief that this is art, it becomes hard to defend the pseudo-art definition of kitsch.

The second art-based definition sees kitsch as anti-art. Although kitsch might resemble art, it is too bad to count as art. Importantly, not every bad work of art is also kitsch. Additionally, kitsch is sometimes of extremely high artistic quality, especially from a technical standpoint (e.g., Giesz, 1971, p. 21; Harries, 1991; Solomon, 1991). So, if anything, kitsch is, in a specific regard, inferior, low-quality non-art (e.g., Deschner, 1991; Harries, 1991). So, what aesthetic-artistic failures make something kitsch and not simply bad or failed art?

Authors mention different stylistic and content-related characteristics to explain the inferiority of kitsch compared to characteristics of good art, such as the following: Narrative and representational works of kitsch are often about love and heartache, family stories, friendship, and the love of home and country. Kitsch also loves to depict sweet babies and children, beautiful (and sexualized) women, strong and handsome men, cute animals, and idyllic landscapes. In summary, kitsch explores emotionally charged topics (e.g., Kulka, 1988, pp. 20–21; Higgins, 2009; Solomon, 1991). Although plenty of works of art have the same themes and topics, the range of artistic topics is broader. Furthermore, how kitsch deals with its topics differs from art, leading to the following features.

Kitsch often simplifies reality, falsifies it, and idealizes it into an “ideal world” (e.g., Higgins, 2009; Killy, 1978, p. 23). It also tends to beautify and aestheticize what it depicts (e.g., Binkley, 2000, p. 142; Călinescu, 1987, p. 250). By contrast, art authentically depicts the complexity of the world and the diversity of human experience and leaves room for the ugly, the disturbing, the disgusting, and the shocking. Thereby, art offers the chance to expand one’s spectrum of experience and knowledge. Art can give us a more profound insight into the world and human life. Kitsch does not show us the world’s complexity, with all its positive and negative sides (e.g., Crick, 1983, p. 49). Therefore, it does not broaden our experiences or knowledge (e.g., Kulka, 1988). It may even give us a false and possibly dangerously deceptive picture of the real world (e.g., Giesz, 1971, p. 39; Killy, 1978).

Furthermore, kitsch is simple and easy to understand (e.g., Kulka, 1988, p. 23; Baumgart, 2002, p. 19). Kitsch’s poetic message is clear (Eco, 1994). In contrast, art is often difficult and complex, partly inaccessible, and not easily understandable. Additionally, the interpretative process barely ever stops. Art repeatedly opens itself up anew, which makes it exciting and challenging. Kitsch is straightforward to understand, among other things, because it is usually exaggerated, artificial, and theatrical. There seems to be too much of everything without a work-immanent, content-related, or aesthetic reason for this. Kitsch thereby violates a classical art standard of unity and harmony between form and content (e.g., Killy, 1978, pp. 22–26).

Kitsch is typically predictable and schematic and often works with stereotypes (e.g., Călinescu, 1987, p. 253; Greenberg, 1939, p. 40; Scruton, 1999). Art may

play with established modes of narration and representation, but it breaks through and expands them. Thus, art is new and surprising, whereas kitsch is the same old, as kitsch copies and reproduces what already exists. It relies on established, tried, and tested cultural, mythical, and artistic themes and modes of representation (e.g., Binkley, 2000, p. 142; Greenberg, 1939, p. 40). Thus, it does not fulfill a central demand on art: kitsch is not original and does not strive for originality.

The last feature worth mentioning is that kitsch can be mass-(re-)produced on an industrial scale (Dorfles, 1969). Whether something is an authentic work or a forgery does not make sense when it comes to kitsch. In contrast, such questions typically arise regarding some art categories, like paintings or sculptures.

The just-mentioned kitsch features should not be understood as necessary or sufficient kitsch features. I want to defend a weaker claim: they are only typical for kitsch. Still, no matter whether one wants to speak about necessary and sufficient or only typical kitsch features, why are precisely these aesthetic-artistic deficits characteristics of kitsch?

As Killy (1978) emphasizes, kitsch aims primarily at emotional stimulation. So, looking at the reaction evoked by kitsch reveals a connecting element. The stylistic and content-related features typical for kitsch are well suited to easily and immediately evoke an emotional experience of a particular sort in a broad range of people if they get involved in kitsch and do not distance themselves either ironically or critically.

The typical kitsch reactions usually encompass a range of emotions, often described as “soft” or tender emotions, stereotypically associated with femininity (e.g., Harries, 1991; Solomon, 1991). For example, kitsch makes us feel compassion, joy, affection, love, sadness, pity, or sorrow. Furthermore, the experimental quality of these emotions tends to fall within the “sweet,” “sticky,” or “sugary” spectrum (Giesz, 1971, p. 40). However, this emotional spectrum is only characteristic of one type of kitsch: sweet kitsch (e.g. Solomon 1991). As Glaser (2007) points out, some works of kitsch—he calls them “sour kitsch”—distance themselves from the overly sweet. Nevertheless, as kitsch objects, they appeal to the emotions. They evoke “harder” and stereotypically more masculine emotions, such as patriotism, courage, bravery, and thirst for revenge or justice (e.g., Friedländer, 2007). Just think of a typical *James Bond* movie. Still, most people think of sweet kitsch and “softer” emotional reactions while speaking about kitsch.

No matter whether the emotional responses evoked by kitsch belong to the “soft” or “hard” (or “neutral”) emotional spectrum, they share certain similarities. They tend to be little differentiated (e.g., Killy, 1978; Kulka, 1988, p. 21; Richards, 1930, pp. 258–258). The kitsch audience typically does not feel a particular kind of sadness but just sadness. So, the emotional reactions to kitsch are, in a way, prefabricated; we already know them, and they are already part of the repertoire of our emotional experience. The object triggers emotions without being indispensably connected to them (Harries, 1991;

Higgins, 2009; Killy, 1978; Tanner, 1976). Another object might elicit the same emotion. So, kitsch typically evokes little differentiated, previously well-known emotional responses.

Furthermore, the emotional kitsch reaction is pleasurable easily and relatively straightforwardly. First, the emotions themselves might be enjoyable. One enjoys having these emotions because they feel pleasant to have, or one feels moved and alive (e.g., Harries, 1991). Genuinely unpleasant, unsettling, or disturbing emotions are thus not part of typical responses to kitsch.

Secondly, pleasure also arises from a reflexive element. Kitsch enjoyment is partly a form of self-enjoyment (e.g., Harries, 1991; Higgins, 2009). One is moved by one's emotions and emotional capabilities (e.g., Binkley, 2000, p. 142; Giesz, 1971, p. 38). Kundera (1987, p. 244) famously writes: "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass!" One might enjoy being able to react emotionally because one thereby feels reassured that one is an empathic, morally reactive person (Kupfer, 1996, p. 545). One may also find pleasure in the ability to respond emotionally because one thereby comes to believe that one is the type of person who feels the "right" kind of emotions at the right moments. Believing this provides a sense of assurance that one cares for and values what one desires to cherish and uphold. So, kitsch makes one feel good about oneself based on one's emotions and emotional abilities.

Furthermore, one might also enjoy observing others' emotional reactions or thinking about how they react because one feels connected and believes in the good of humankind and the world—or at least a group of people and a part of the world to which one feels a sense of belonging.

Kitsch evoking emotional experiences that enable such a (self-)enjoyment can also be assessed as an artistic deficit because the experience and how we come to have it are markedly different from art experience(s) and our engagement with art (e.g., Baumgart, 2002, p. 20; Crick, 1983; Greenberg, 1939; Giesz, 1971). Art is said to provoke genuinely new and complex experiences. The art experience is new insofar as unknown, unfamiliar, and fine-grained emotions are involved. It is complex insofar as it might have different layers in which genuinely unpleasant and perhaps disturbing emotions also find their place. Therefore, it can also be challenging or even disturbing. Furthermore, one needs to engage with the art object actively and reflectively. Reason and imagination are actively involved in the art experience. Additionally, the experience centers on and focuses on the art object, making the experience intrinsically tied to the artwork. The work is, therefore, not interchangeable. This short overview is enough to explain why the kitsch experience is different and may also be judged inferior from the art perspective. It is too easy to come by, clearly pleasant and agreeable, one-sidedly emotion-based, and self-indulgent. In summary, stylistic and content-related features triggering this kind of (self-)enjoyment make up the specific aesthetic-artistic failure of kitsch.

Does this mean that we have found a convincing art-based definition of kitsch? The just-mentioned evaluation criteria support a normatively loaded definition of art. The questions of what art is, as well as of what good art is, are notoriously tricky questions. Apart from the fact that it is questionable whether art can be defined at all, the characteristics of good art are highly controversial. Thus, one could agree with Giesz (1971) that one should not define kitsch as a function of art because one tries to capture one ambiguous concept over another.

This is not the point I want to make, however. The critical point is another, namely that one can highlight the kitsch features without contrasting them with art features. As just outlined, one can explain them by referring to the emotional effect of kitsch. There is no need to speak about art. This leads to the fundamental question of any art-based attempt to define kitsch: Why should one always see kitsch in dependence and comparison to (good) art?

One might argue that kitsch is no independent aesthetic category because it developed out of the aesthetic category of art. However, even if kitsch emerged from the aesthetic category of art, it might have become an independent aesthetic category over time.

If people always or mostly compare kitsch to art or consider it art, this would support the claim that kitsch is no art-independent aesthetic category. When it comes to literary, musical, representative, or cinematic works, the temptation to think of them in art terms is indeed remarkable. This is because the aesthetic categories of literature, music, painting, photography, and cinema significantly overlap with the aesthetic category of art. As many works of kitsch also fall within these aesthetic categories, one can explain the close connection between kitsch and art.

However, the art-based kitsch definitions must go one step further. They must assume that all kitsch is typically considered dependent on art. Here, one should think of the wide variety of objects, performances, and practices that can count as kitsch: coffee mugs, postcards, sofa cushions, Christmas baubles, wedding dresses, marriage proposals, love confessions, political speeches, obituaries, and so on. When it comes to these kinds of objects, performances, and practices, we do not think of them primarily in terms of art. We do not consider them art or even bad art, although we might consider them kitsch. Moreover, these examples are not at the periphery but belong to the paradigmatic kitsch examples. So, the reference to art breaks down. Thereby, the support of art-based kitsch definitions becomes shaky.

How can we define kitsch without referring to art in the definition? Based on the previous elaborations, the definition starts by pointing out that kitsch primarily aims at emotional stimulation. To repeat, kitsch easily evokes emotional reactions through its stylistic and content-related features. These emotions are not unsettling and, overall, pleasant and enable self-enjoyment. These considerations can be summed up in the following effect-based functionalist definition of the aesthetic category of kitsch: *Kitsch is an artifact, performance, or practice whose dominant function is to enable emotion-based*

(self-)enjoyment in a large group of people. It relies on well-established artistic and cultural themes, styles, and forms of expression to achieve this effect.

Some remarks about “function:” First, something can have a function, although nobody created it to fulfill this function. What is crucial is that it is suited to fulfilling it, and people use it in this way or agree that it could be used in this way (Schmücker, 2001, p. 22). So, following the effect-based definition of kitsch, one does not have to determine the intention of the kitsch producers to tell whether something is kitsch. Secondly, a function is an object’s dominant function if it is *best* suited and/or *primarily* used to fulfill it. An object can, thus, have different functions without all of them being its dominant functions. Thirdly, an object can have more than one dominant function. So, kitsch objects can have other dominant functions besides enabling (self-)enjoyment. Fourthly, one must distinguish between an object’s dominant and ultimate functions. An ultimate function is not instrumental to fulfill another function. To make it more concrete, I do not claim that kitsch’s function to enable (self-)enjoyment is every kitsch object’s ultimate function. Ultimate functions might be providing entertainment, conveying propaganda, or generating profit. Enabling *self*-enjoyment might be instrumental for these later functions.

This effect-based definition of the aesthetic category of kitsch has at least three advantages. First, it does not rely on any definitive concept of (good) art. Second, it incorporates the previous analyses of the stylistic-content characteristics of kitsch and its emotional impact. At the same time, openness comes in because what is established, tried, and tested can change. Third, it locates kitsch in popular culture and mass art, explaining its remarkable mass appeal (Kulka, 1988, p. 18).

One immediate objection against this proposal might be the following: Labeling something as kitsch often carries negative implications (e.g., Călinescu, 1987, p. 235). Based on the art-based definitions, one can straightforwardly explain the unfavorable associations. It is more challenging to do so when adopting an effect-based definition. Labeling something as kitsch implies it belongs to a specific aesthetic category, a description with no immediate negative connotation.

However, the effect-based definition also offers avenues for explaining the negative connotations. Most importantly, one might use the statement “This is kitsch” negatively because one approaches kitsch with art expectations and measures it based on art standards. In that case, one can understand why kitsch is inferior to art. In a context in which the comparison to art is to be expected or presupposed, to claim that something is kitsch thus comes with negative connotations.

Crucially, however, one does not nor must always look at kitsch through art lenses. Hence, sometimes saying that something is kitsch has no negative undertone. One might just state that it belongs to the aesthetic category of kitsch. Approaching kitsch with such a reflective, though not pejorative, stance opens a way to a conscious and non-ironic kitsch enjoyment. So, upon

reflection, it is an advantage of the effect-based definition that it allows viewing something as kitsch without necessarily assigning a negative value.

If we accept the effect-based definition of kitsch, how does the aesthetic category of kitsch relate to the aesthetic category of art? What has been demonstrated thus far is that kitsch is an aesthetic category distinct from and independent of the art category. To further clarify the relationship between kitsch and art, one should reflect upon art's dominant function(s) as the effect-based definition builds on kitsch's dominant function.

One might object that art does not fulfill any function. However, as Schmücker (2001, p. 13–14) illustrates, denying art any functions does not make sense. Following Schmücker, dominant functions (normatively) ascribed to works of art include, among others, the following: First, art might have an aesthetic function, that is, providing aesthetic experiences. Secondly, it might have an expressive function; it might be about (idiosyncratically) expressing the artists' emotions and experiences or expanding the audience's emotional world. Thirdly, there might be a reflective function. Art might question existing patterns of perception, explanation, and understanding. Fourthly, the cognitive function of art might be to impart knowledge, for instance, about the world, human life, moral problems, and their solutions. Fifthly, art's tradition-building and innovation function might involve developing and expanding artistic forms (Schmücker, 2001, pp. 22–30).

The dominant function of kitsch is not part of this list, and one cannot subsume it under any of art's functions. The kitsch experience is not a classic aesthetic experience, as mentioned above. Kitsch expresses emotions but does not expand the emotional space of experience. By drawing on already established themes, styles, and forms of expression and being schematic and predictable, kitsch fulfills neither the function of reflection nor the function of tradition-building and innovation. One could argue that kitsch fulfills the cognitive function, as one can learn that one is emotionally receptive by engaging with it. However, kitsch does not train our emotional sensitivity, as it makes it too easy for us to react accordingly, but only assures us that we possess this sensitivity (to some extent). So, the dominant functions of kitsch and art fundamentally differ.

Furthermore, the aesthetic sensitivities required to appreciate kitsch as kitsch and art as art are also different (see for a similar point Binkley, 2000, p. 146). Taste in art is more demanding than taste in kitsch: it requires more background knowledge, cognitive skills, and a willingness to reflect. Ortlieb and Carbon distinguish between two different types of aesthetic appreciation: “a fluent one, consisting of a spontaneous, inherently pleasurable affective response and general accessibility (kitsch); and a disfluent one, that may yield new insights but requires previous knowledge and cognitive elaboration (art [...])” (Ortlieb and Carbon, 2019, p. 1). If one now tries to view kitsch with a taste for art, it not only becomes more challenging for kitsch to realize its function but (very likely) prevents it. The tension between kitsch and art taste speaks for the thesis that kitsch and art are incompatible aesthetic categories.

Hence, something is either art or kitsch, but not both, just as the thesis of the antinomy of kitsch claims.

4. Kitsch as an Aesthetic and Art-Critical Property

Let us now turn to the antithesis of the antinomy of kitsch, according to which kitsch and art are compatible. The observation that some works of art are said to be kitsch supports the antithesis. Understood as a statement about aesthetic categories, such a thesis is not tenable if one agrees with the above-made elaborations. However, another way to understand it is as a statement about kitsch as an aesthetic property. If so, the antithesis claims that works of art can possess the aesthetic property of being kitschy. Let us consider whether this statement is tenable.

We should understand being kitschy in a way that preserves the connection to kitsch as an aesthetic category, as everything that is kitsch should also be kitschy. So, let us define the aesthetic property of being kitschy in the following way: *x* is kitschy if *x* possesses the disposition to enable emotion-based (self-)enjoyment in a broad range of people who take *x* seriously and are open to engaging with *x*. This disposition depends on *x*'s ability to easily evoke emotional reactions often, though not always, of the "soft" emotional spectrum with a "sweet" phenomenological quality.

Defined in this way, being kitschy is a response-dependent aesthetic property that ascribes an emotional quality. One might wonder whether one can attribute the aesthetic property without experiencing the relevant *self-enjoyment*. First, it might be possible if one observes that a suitable audience, that is, an audience that takes kitsch seriously and is open to such an experience, is enjoying the object in question. Secondly, nothing possesses the disposition just on itself. The aesthetic property of being kitschy supervenes other aesthetic and non-aesthetic features as it is characteristic of aesthetic properties (e.g., Levinson, 1984; Sibley, 1959). Typically, it supervenes on features described above as kitsch features or resembling those. So, if one recognizes such features, one may assume that they evoke a suitable response in an appropriate audience.

Following this definition of kitsch as an aesthetic property, everything falling within the aesthetic category of kitsch also possesses the aesthetic property of being kitsch. If *x*'s dominant function is to evoke a kitsch experience in a large audience, *x* must possess the disposition to evoke such an experience.

However, not everything kitschy is also kitsch. First, according to the effect-based definition, only something manufactured or performed can be kitsch, excluding natural objects from the kitsch category. Still, to mention two examples, we sometimes say that a landscape or sunset is kitsch. It might be because they are typical topics of kitsch; hence, the natural object is also incorrectly categorized as kitsch. Alternatively, one might say that although it is not kitsch, it is still kitschy as it possesses the disposition relevant to the aesthetic property of being kitschy.

Secondly, some artifacts, performances, or practices can also be kitschy without being kitsch. Although they tend to trigger the relevant emotional reactions easily, it is not one of their dominant functions to enable *self-enjoyment* based on these emotions. The artifact, performance, or practice might not be best suited to fulfill the function to enable this kind of *self-enjoyment* due to other features interfering with this function.

This point is relevant to whether art can be kitschy. Some works of art are kitschy (see also Seel, 2013, p. 238). They have the disposition relevant to being kitschy. One might now object that these works must also fall within the kitsch category if this is the case. Here, I beg to differ. To make it more concrete, think of a Thomas Mann novel. Some elements and passages might effortlessly evoke emotional reactions, enabling easy (self-)enjoyment, and thus make it kitschy. Still, evoking the kitsch response is not a dominant function of this novel. Other aspects of the novel, such as its overall narrative setup, writing style, or depth of insight, might interfere with this function. The whole novel is thus not best suited to fulfill the function characteristic of kitsch. It is thus kitschy without being kitsch.

One might object that this does not fit at least one art category, namely kitsch-art. As the name already suggests, kitsch-art is kitschy. To use Walton's terminology, being kitschy is a standard aesthetic property of this art category (Walton, 1970, p. 339). Regarding kitsch-art, the whole work, or at least a significant part, is responsible for its kitschy disposition. One might say that some prominent works of Jeff Koons do a perfect job of fulfilling the dominant function of kitsch.

One might react to this observation by agreeing and insisting that this strongly suggests kitsch-art is not genuine art (e.g., Scruton, 1999). As argued in § 2, this answer is not satisfying, however. The way in which some authors and artists speak about kitsch-art points to another way to react (e.g., Fuller, 1992; Giesz, 1971, p. 65; Koons, 2021; Liessmann, 2002). For example, Fuller (1992, p. 25 MT) writes: "Basically, he [Koons] answers the question of what makes kitsch-art art: it is the same aesthetic phenomenon as Duchamp's, the highlighting." Kitsch-art's dominant function is not to enable *self-enjoyment* but to comment on, reflect on, or ironize being kitschy. So, if kitsch-art is art, it still fulfills the typical dominant functions of art, mainly reflective and tradition-building functions.

One might object that although these might be kitsch art's ultimate functions, evoking a kitsch response might still be a dominant function of kitsch art. As argued above, a dominant function does not have to be an ultimate function and can be beneficial to fulfilling an ultimate function. So, the case of kitsch-art might prove that kitsch's dominant function is compatible with art's dominant functions.

This is not the case, however. Let us compare the case of kitsch-art with a work of kitsch whose ultimate function is to be political propaganda. In the latter case, the audience's genuine and thorough kitsch experience might be instrumental in fulfilling this ultimate political function. Kitsch art,

in contrast, hinders its audience from truly and fully experiencing the kitsch experience, for instance, by exaggerating, alienating, or contextualizing kitsch features. The audience recognizes and partly feels the kitsch experience but, at the same time, distances itself from this experience and reflects upon it. Put differently, fully diving into the kitsch experience would interfere with the critical, reflective, or ironic stance that kitsch-art claims for itself. So, even kitsch-art being kitschy does not imply that the work of art is also kitsch.

In the previous section, I mentioned that “x is kitsch” is often a negatively loaded statement. Thinking of kitsch as an aesthetic property offers another explanation for this negative evaluation. “x is kitsch” can mean that x possesses the aesthetic property of being kitschy. One can explain the negative undertone by highlighting the close connection between aesthetic and art-critical properties. Not all aesthetic properties are art-critical or vice versa, but a considerable overlap exists. Many aesthetic properties point to properties relevant to art evaluation. Being kitschy is one of them. Whether a work of art is kitschy is often relevant for its overall evaluation. Being kitschy is, in most cases, a negatively connotated art-critical property. As many stylistic and content-related kitsch features can be seen as art deficits and evoke a kitsch experience, one can understand why. Thus, being kitschy interferes with aspects that tend to be considered relevant for art evaluation. For most art categories, being kitsch is even a contra-standard aesthetic property, endangering its membership in the art category, to use once again Walton’s terminology (Walton, 1970, p. 339).

Still, one should not generalize this claim. For some art categories or specific works of art, being kitschy might be irrelevant to the overall evaluation. Furthermore, we should not forget the already discussed art category of kitsch art. As argued, being kitschy is a standard feature of this art category. Thus, it is likely also a positive art-critical feature for works of kitsch art.

To conclude, one can defend the antithesis of the antinomy of kitsch by reading it as a statement about an aesthetic and art-critical property. Art can be kitsch insofar as art can possess the aesthetic and art-critical property of being kitschy. In this respect, art and kitsch are compatible.

5. Conclusion

As an aesthetic category, kitsch is an artifact, performance, or practice whose dominant function is to enable emotion-based (self-)enjoyment in a large group of people. Based on this definition, kitsch and art are two different and mutually exclusive aesthetic categories. As an aesthetic property, kitsch is the disposition to enable (self-)enjoyment by effortlessly evoking emotional reactions, often of the “soft” emotional spectrum with a “sweet” phenomenological quality, frequently supervening on typical kitsch features. So, everything kitsch is also kitschy, but not vice versa. Hence, art can also possess the aesthetic and art-critically relevant property of being kitschy, although it is not kitsch. This line of thought helps us to understand why the thesis and the antithesis of the antinomy of kitsch have a point and to get a clearer picture of the relationship between kitsch and art.

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