Emotions Guaranteed: On the Kitsch Contract

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Kitsch is usually described as overwhelming – as if it captivates the audience, almost inevitably taking hold of them and manipulating emotions. Such assumptions are influenced by aesthetic positions like Kant's, who claimed that 'pure' aesthetic judgments are independent of emotions, a position out of which a traditional defensive attitude towards emotions in the aesthetic sphere emerged. While steadfast in this defensiveness towards kitsch, the question arises whether theories in this lineage have not in fact overestimated the directness and completeness of kitsch's effect on and power over the audience. The paper argues that emotionalizing kitsch is based on a more complex set of presuppositions: for kitsch to function at all, a contract with the audience is required, the audience granting kitsch the right to temporarily steer their feelings, a means that allows them to – paradoxically – still maintain a hold over their loss of control. | *Keywords: Being Moved, Emotionalization, Happy End, Kitsch Contract, Regression, Romance*

1. Introduction

Critics often view kitsch as intrusive, an imposition stimulating strong emotional reactions that can hardly be evaded or demands enormous effort to keep them at a distance. Accordingly, Umberto Eco (1994a, pp. 25–26) observes in many condemnations of kitsch "a repressed sensuality, similar to that of the moralist who, in the very act of denouncing the obscenity of an image, pauses at such length and with such voluptuousness to contemplate the loathsome object of his contempt" that it suddenly becomes obvious how little he can resist the gravitational-like pull of its appeal. Eco's description resonates with an analogy formulated by Karl Markus Michel:

> […] even one who believes to be immune against each and every infection feels the tears running down their cheeks now and then, although keenly aware of the pathetic melodrama that is overwhelming them: "Throw the guy out, he's breaking my heart" – so the wealthy man, badgered by a supplicant, says exasperated to the butler, a gesture replicated by the intellectual when he feels afflicted by kitsch (author's translation). (Michel, 1959, p. 46)

The metaphor of "infection" casts kitsch as an illness that one cannot stave off with any real certainty. So too verbs like "overwhelm" and "afflict" present kitsch in a way that makes it seem as if it is poised to forcefully intrude and usurp the audience, to assault and subjugate it. The scene Michel imagines of a "badgered wealthy man" (cf. Freud, 2002, p. 110) appears – at first glance – to have two possible endings: either the intrusive supplicant will be curtly and brusquely rebuffed ("throw the guy out") or one runs the risk of succumbing to him, ingested and unable to offer any resistance ("he's breaking my heart").

The question that now arises, however, is whether kitsch is principally about fully captivating – and thus by extension capturing – its audience, disarming any resistance it may encounter. Perhaps the usual recipients do not feel that kitsch is an intruder who suddenly breaks in; instead, kitsch is welcomed as a guest, for the recipients know that certain agreements are in place, and these will be adhered to. In contrast, fixated on defense against kitsch, Michel's imagined intellectual is oblivious to such agreements. Given the extreme harshness of the reaction kitsch triggers in him, it seems apposite to ask if it is not an overreaction.

Overtly cautious and defensive, this stance seems to be dictated by traditional ideas about good taste: in 1959, at the time Michel's scene was published, anyone claiming to have a cultured and noble taste, could not afford to have their feelings activated and appropriated so methodically and then steered according to some predefined plan. As Pierre Bourdieu (1984, pp. 486–491) has shown, 'pure' taste as construed by philosophical aesthetics in the lineage of Immanuel Kant (1987, esp. pp. 68–72) is not allowed to be dependent on emotions. One principle of 'pure' taste is that humans quite simply should not surrender unreservedly to the intrusive charms of what is 'light' or 'facile', otherwise we lose nothing less than our very freedom: this freedom rests on maintaining a distance from objects. Criticisms of kitsch opposing how – as they see it – one can be caught unawares and have stimulated feelings seized and manipulated to follow a predetermined course, and thus be instrumentalized, stem from these kinds of principles (cf. Schulte-Sasse, 1976, pp. 7–12).

This may explain the harsh reaction of Michel's imagined intellectual towards kitsch. But it is doubtful whether this suffices to determine how the reception of kitsch usually unfolds. Is it really so that we have to imagine the audience in general to have feelings forced upon them to the degree that resistance is impossible and that they, disarmed, inevitably succumb? If so, then the effect of kitsch on feelings would not be just powerful but literally overpowering: it would be tearjerking in the fullest sense of the word. Or is the relationship between kitsch and its audience different – and dependent on further prerequisites?

Two arguments in particular indicate that kitsch does not simply overwhelm its audience. Firstly – and quite obviously – kitsch is sought out by the audience. Touching love stories for example are chosen precisely because of their subject matter and the expected effect – the audience is not helplessly

exposed to any perceived machinations. In this way, one of the "constitutive components [...] of emotional communication" (Anz, 2012, p. 167, author's translation) is brought to bear in kitsch. Emotional communication in general entails "the ability to recognize the emotionalization intentions of the communicative partner, as well as the possibility to open up to or refuse these intentions" (*ibid*.). Kitsch in particular provides this possibility to choose: reading the dustcover blurb and discovering that the book is described as 'moving', one can either accept or refuse this emotionalization offer. Thus, the audience is not simply overwhelmed by kitsch but *allows* itself to be overwhelmed.

Secondly, the question is whether any kind of direct force takes effect in this process. Once the audience allows itself to be overwhelmed, then the reception of kitsch takes on the character of a game. Accordingly, to tune into the emotional world of kitsch thus means to enter a field of play, one defined by boundaries and subject to rules. Under the rules of a game, the audience can even control and influence the process of becoming overwhelmed (similar to being overwhelmed by agreement in children's games, in sport, and not least in erotic play, which for outsiders it is not always easy to distinguish from the grave use of violence).

If the audience has to concede kitsch only a limited and clearly-defined domain to unfold its effects – or to play the game –, then the scene Michel envisages with the wealthy man and the supplicant needs to be significantly changed for it to be cogent to the usual reception of kitsch. The audience does not face the alternative to completely succumb to the persuasive power of the kitsch that has already broken in, allowing the "heart to break", or to muster all their strength to brusquely throw out kitsch. It would be conceivable instead that the audience allows the supplicant to enter only a specific predetermined room for a limited time. Or, to adjust Michel's scene in a different way: the money the wealthy man gives the supplicant is already decided on, allowing him to maintain control of the situation.

Such preliminary or predetermined establishing, securing and limiting of kitsch's effects fits the model of a contract. The hypothesis to be examined here would thus claim that kitsch presupposes a pact with the audience – a contract in which both sides grant and receive concessions. Genres placed under a wholesale suspicion of kitsch like romances are ideal for discerning how an audience is offered such a contract (cf. Küpper, 2022, for more details).

2. What is at stake in the kitsch contract

Hedwig Courths-Mahler, an author of romances adored by her readers but disparagingly labelled kitsch by critics, offers her audience a well-established version of the kitsch contract. Even her name has been cast into an adjective – "courthsmahlerisch" – synonymous with "kitschy" (Krieg, 1954, p. 18). The great success Courths-Mahler nonetheless achieved is explainable precisely because she reliably kept the conditions of the kitsch contract. What is this contract about and what are the conditions set out in its paragraphs?

The kernel of this contract is to be found in an open letter Courths-Mahler addressed to a mocking critic, Hans Reimann. In this letter she defends her romances as "harmless fairy tales" with which she tries to provide her audience with a "few carefree hours" (Courths-Mahler, 1990, p. 148, author's translation). Here Courths-Mahler gives her audience a guarantee, promising them untroubled entertainment in their leisure time ("few carefree hours") and explaining precisely why the readers can expect to eventually feel light-hearted and trouble free – just like "harmless fairy tales", her novels hold out the prospect of happy endings. In general, fairy tales are a genre wherein Cinderella turns into a princess, the ugly duckling into a swan (cf. Graf, 2000, pp. 121–122). Courths-Mahler takes up these trusted schemata in her novels and clearly signifies them to the reader – titles like *The Beggar Princess* (*Die Bettelprinzeß*, Courths-Mahler, 1914) are obvious signposts that the storyline will follow these fairy-tale schemata. This means the audience is promised that the narrated reality deviates considerably from everyday travails, the novel offering something extraordinarily beautiful, marvelous, a happiness scarcely found in routinized life. In line with this, Courths-Mahler once said in an interview that she "never writes about what is real" but fairy tales – "everything around me has to be rosy" (Dux, 1932, author's translation).

The writer's offer to her audience is not limited to this unilateral promise of the rosy; it also entails something in return, a *quid pro quo* (cf. Tan, 1994, p. 15). She demands from her readers that they open up to and become involved with a fictive world, even if the happiness that is to be encountered there is not an everyday occurrence and borders on the miraculous. This paragraph of the kitsch contract stems from the more general contract of fiction. Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1834, p. 174) gives an early and prominent formulation of this contractual basis: "poetic faith" resides in a "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" (cf. Degler, 2009, pp. 546–547; Haferland, 2014; Paus-Hasebrink and Trültzsch-Wijnen, 2016, p. 148; Wulff, 2005, pp. 379–380). Following Coleridge, Umberto Eco (1994b, p. 75) set out this basis for fictional narrative texts: "The reader has to know that what is being narrated is an imaginary story, but he must not therefore believe that the writer is telling lies". Courths-Mahler doubtlessly builds on this principle of the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment" when speaking of "fairy tales" which are to provide for a "few carefree hours" – the reader need not put aside their sense for the real permanently but for just a limited time. The reward is to be able to savor the fairy-tale happiness and the feelings it produces.

This paragraph of the kitsch contract also has a special clause – kitsch may reflect the extent to which the "rosy" world with its happy ends differs from the audience's everyday existence; aware of precisely this difference, the audience can consciously enjoy and appreciate the fairy-tale reality. This clause is discernible in the Courths-Mahler quote when she mentions the "few carefree hours", which implies that concerns and worries are all too familiar to the audience.

While the opening paragraph of the kitsch contract could be titled the "fiction paragraph", a fitting heading for the second – particularly typical of kitsch – would be "emotionalization". The audience must be willing to be moved by kitsch and, relinquishing control over their feelings, let kitsch take the lead, albeit here this is again necessary only "for the moment". When kitsch – for example through book covers or movie posters – signals what mode of emotionalization is being aimed at, then it remains up to the individual to decide if they wish to accept the offer or not. It may be assumed that both the fiction and the emotionalization paragraphs presuppose that kitsch moves within enclosed boundaries and has a fixed framework. The lines of demarcation indicate to the audience the specific domain for which it has to suspend its "disbelief" of the fairy tale-like miracle and wonder; and at the same time, these lines mark out in what framework the reservations towards the stirring of strong emotions need to be dropped. Precisely when it is claimed that the kitsch will evoke strong emotions and provoke tears, then it can be expected that the framework is clear and distinct. For the audience to agree to take the plunge into kitsch's sea of emotions, then it may demand a safety guarantee – to resurface and find the shore again, or put more formally, reference points indicating the type, the intensity, the course, and the limits of what they are plunging into.

As the fiction paragraph presupposes that doubt is suspended for a short time, the emotionalization paragraph requires the willingness of the audience to temporarily dispense with its reservedness towards the evoking of feelings. This reservedness is no less prevalent than doubt, making the second paragraph also indispensable for kitsch to be successful. As an attempt to move or reduce an audience to tears, kitsch is bound especially to the final paragraphs of the proposed contract – it has to rely on the audience adopting a role of extreme passivity, a passivity characterized by sympathetic sorrow for suffering, for the enduring of hardships, and for being exposed to the fickleness of fate. The more this pronounced passivity deviates from the usual attitudes in other contexts, the more important this paragraph becomes, which not only regulates the adopting of the role but also pulling out of it: one relinquishes distance, freedom, agency, and so on for just a moment – secure in the knowledge and trust that these return afterwards, and once regained we are now ready again to face up to the rigors of working life.

How intertwined being moved, a feeling typical when experiencing kitsch, is with passivity is immediately obvious through its passive construction. As Ed S.-H. Tan (2009, p. 74) notes, "being moved is hard to combine with agency", going on to describe "being moved" as akin to "the feeling of being conquered" (*ibid.*). Tan also accentuates the moment of passivity when reflecting on the origins of this feeling:

> The adaptive function of being moved may originate in submission upon being overpowered: we yield to something bigger than ourselves. […] A favourable turn of events can render one helpless, perhaps because coping and negative expectations have abruptly become idle or have given way to what we unconsciously cherished all the time (*ibid.*).

But if being moved involves a submission brought about in this way, then external observers may easily overlook or miss that a contract exists between kitsch and the audience. One is literally blind to the contract when one proceeds from the usual notion that submission on the one hand, and the agency needed to conclude pacts on the other, are incompatible. A touched audience appears to be powerless, affectively overwhelmed by the force of the effects kitsch has on them, unconditionally open and vulnerable – it is thus hardly possible to appreciate that this relationship could be based on an agreement. But the contract is fundamental to kitsch that touches and moves, because it requires that the audience sets aside this power of agency for a time.

The indispensability of this contract for the kitsch audience becomes particularly clear when consideration is given to how far-reaching the concessions kitsch demands of its audience are in some of its *regressive* variants. Kitsch not only awakens a nostalgic longing for simple, childlike, paradisical worlds, but also invites the audience to figuratively let go and fall back into these worlds (cf. Gelfert, 2000, pp. 65–66); and such a kitsch presupposes a temporary desisting from an array of qualities, adultness, maturity, accountability, responsibility, and critical acumen. This means that the audience must not relinquish these once and for all, but only for a specific time, in effect leaving them aside. Such a temporary regression (cf. Spode, 1995, pp. 119–120) requires a corresponding pact that guarantees the return to adulthood. The emotionalization paragraph, in other words, assures the audience that the loss of emotional control or restraint is itself controllable. One melts away, as it were, but with the certainty to regain or reassert at any moment the solidity society demands elsewhere.

As far-fetched as it may seem at first glance, indeed much like an odyssey of argumentation, to shift the perspective from this contemporary phenomenon to Homer's *Odyssey*, the manageability of the regression situation guaranteed by the pact echoes the episode of Odysseus navigating a passage past the Sirens. In their reading of the episode, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno (2002, p. 25) note that the "allurement" of the Sirens "is that of losing oneself in the past", and that this "promise of a happy homecoming is the deception by which the past entraps a humanity filled with longing" Adorno (2002, p. 26). While "only unfailing presence of mind wrests survival from nature, anyone who follows the Sirens' phantasmagoria is lost" (*ibid*.), it is only fitting that it is Circe who has warned Odysseus of this danger, for she is the "divinity of regression to animal form, whom he has withstood and who therefore gives him the strength to withstand other powers of dissolution" (*ibid*.). For Odysseus, tightly bound to the mast, the song of the Sirens has no consequences, "their lure is neutralized as a mere object of contemplation, as art" Adorno (2002, p. 27). From the many differences identifiable between the allure of the Sirens and that produced through kitsch, one stands out for our purposes here: Odysseus must be bound to ensure that he is not dragged under by the pull of regression and straight into the vortex of disaster, or in other words, to ensure that the hero does not literally run

aground and become shipwrecked. It is only through his own resourceful precautions that Odysseus is protected from the force of the singing. In contrast, kitsch offers such a protection as a contractual partner: it concedes to the audience that it needs to surrender to the evoked emotions only under reservations; the audience is guaranteed that the regression is without danger and remains harmless. In other words, the allurement radiating out of kitsch presents itself as already "neutralized" – similar to the allurement of art as mentioned by Horkheimer and Adorno.

To sum up, the key aspect of the second paragraph of the contract is how kitsch assures the audience that the emotionalization stays within 'reasonable bounds'. This gives the audience the certainty that it does not have to fully relinquish self-control and agency, or at least not for any prolonged period, even when it opens up to kitsch with the necessary passivity. It is not directly touched or moved by kitsch – they are mediated through the emotionalization paragraph.

A third paragraph still remains to be discussed, one that underlines how much the kitsch contract relies on the principle of *quid pro quo*: the increased dependency on one side is compensated for by dependability on the other. When kitsch aims to touch or move the audience with an unrealistically happy ending to a story – for example two lovers come together at the end, overcoming a series of seemingly unsurmountable hurdles, and become a happy couple – then not only the respective figures in the fictive world are dependent on the hoped-for happiness coming their way; the audience also makes its feelings dependent on the outcome. It is therefore decisive for both the figures and the public that the happy end – as improbable as it would be in everyday life – occurs in the fictive reality. For their invested emotional commitment, the recipients must be able to count on their contractual partner kitsch for some kind of payback: the latter cannot afford to disappoint them when they expect the happy end promised by the "rosy" poster. The audience with its feelings relies on the happy end promised by paratexts actually eventuating. It all comes down to the uniqueness of the fictive reality and how it diverges from everyday experience. Once emotionalized by kitsch, the recipient longing for the happy end has surrendered to the fictive reality and now searches for pointers that all their wishes will be fulfilled.

One could call this component in the kitsch contract the "confirmation paragraph". It is precisely this paragraph that shows how pertinent it is for the audience that kitsch describes its own terms and conditions while signalizing the safe ending in advance. When, for example, it is expressly mentioned in the popular magazine *Die Gartenlaube* that the featured novels by E. Marlitt follow the Cinderella schemata (*Ein Urtheil Rudolph Gottschall's über E. Marlitt*, 1876), or when Courths-Mahler's forementioned *The Beggar Princess* clearly indicates its orientation on these same schemata, then resorting to the familiar is not solely about making reception easier and more comfortable for the audience, the reading experience less arduous (cf. Karpfen, 1925, pp. 62–70); rather, more is at stake, namely the reader's own feelings, which are determined by the text adhering to the schemata, including the happy end. In this respect the

recipients surrender to the text, giving themselves over to the emotions to be evoked, and thus need the signs pointing to a positive outcome.

3. A "head full of honey"

Next, I would like to briefly examine a contemporary example of the kitsch contract. The movie *Honig im Kopf* (2014, remake *Head Full of Honey*, 2018, both directed by Til Schweiger) holds such a contract ready for the audience. The title refers to the hero's Alzheimer disease, and thus from the outset the film shows the impending loss of control over the mind. He is presented to the audience as no longer possessing the capabilities to think and behave like an adult; only good fortune prevents him from causing or suffering unintentional harm. In turn, the audience, engrossed in and excited by events and how they develop, are now reliant on the fortunate coincidences in the fictive world. In this way the audience is invited to take part in a game that entails an imminent loss of control, but also provides them with the opportunity to be touched emotionally, which, pursuant to the emotionalization paragraph, requires relinquishing – in part and for a time – the control over one's feelings. In this respect, the film uses the topic of Alzheimer's to mirror (no matter how fragmentary and distorted) aspects of its own program of kitschy entertainment. The behavior of the old man suffering from Alzheimer's in the film reveals regressive tendencies – he seems more like a cute child, shown in a few scenes with big wide "puppy-dog" eyes (Reis, 2014, author's translation) and a cuddly plush animal. Through these childlike schemata the seriousness of the disease is played down (Herwig, 2016, p. 160); and through the hero's cuteness Alzheimer's is largely reduced to having "a head full of honey", i.e. something sweet. The regression of the figure towards the childlike is not just one of the kitsch motifs of the film; it also resonates with a distant echo of the kitsch experience itself – the audience is allowed to safely pass through a kind of regression for the duration of the film and let their heads fill with honey. The audience transfers its power over itself in part to the film – and the film is permitted to evoke and channel feelings, and eventually reduce the audience to tears; all the while however, the audience has attached conditions to this power by making a pact with kitsch.

What the contract guarantees the audience is, in the first instance, that, measured by everyday standards, a quite improbable happiness comes about: although suffering from Alzheimer's, luck will come the old man's way, as well as to the members of his family. In *Honig im Kopf* there are a whole series of fortunate coincidences. To give just one example: While traveling with his 11-year-old granddaughter to Venice, the two get caught up in a precarious situation and the girl wishes that her parents would be on hand to help – and by chance the parents find them just in time. When it is so obvious that such luck is unlikely in real life, then the audience realizes that the film has its own rules in relation to reality, and these rules guarantee that things always turn out well. The audience finds it far easier to hinge its feelings on the course the plot takes when it can trust the film, its contractual partner, to deliver on the promise of a happy ending – in accordance with the confirmation paragraph. To be able to emotionally savor the happiness, one has to submit to the

contractual partner and let the film determine when this happiness occurs in the fictive world. In other words, one must be willing to let oneself be moved or touched. *Honig im Kopf* marks out very precisely these tearful moments: the moment the parents suddenly arrive at the scene and save the girl and her grandfather in Venice is shown in slow motion and the figures cry, offering the audience the opportunity to cry along.

For its willingness to surrender to the contractual partner to such a degree, the audience receives in return the aforementioned assurance that the story, with its complexities resolved, ends well. *Honig im Kopf* gives this guarantee by presenting a fictive world that is quite conspicuously idealized. This is even evident in the film's aesthetics with its "bronzed, overexposed high-luster shots" (Reis, 2014, author's translation). Through this visual effect, its toning as it were, the world represented is not merely embellished; rather, the embellishment itself is distinctive and contrasts, if not separates, the fictive from any conventional sense of reality. Appearing to be irreal, it is uncoupled from the usual principles of probability. Also contributing to this effect are the "postcard motifs" (Hill, 2015, author's translation) and the "storybook settings", foremost that of "romantic Venice" (Hesse, 2015, author's translation): they are not only there to offer the audience beautiful views but also serve as signs that the film will adhere to the rules set out for kitsch until the very end. The audience thus continuously receives confirmation that the happy end will take place and that the contractual partner can be trusted – there is no need to have any qualms about transferring power over one's feelings to the partner. Down to the present day Kitsch has thus continued to promise extraordinary happiness – albeit in the framework of an ordinary contract.

4. Closing remarks

Taking this contract on emotionalization into account, then traditional ideas about kitsch need to be reassessed – in particular the assumption that through kitsch the audience's feelings are directly and forcefully controlled. The widespread view of an overwhelming kitsch fits the old cliché that admirers of kitsch are clueless and naïve, and they cannot understand what is happening to them when experiencing kitsch – according to Walther Killy (1961, p. 32), for instance, consumers of kitsch do not know what they are consuming. Presupposing this, for a long time critics believed the experience of kitsch to be non-reflective and thus juxtaposed it to the reflective experience of art – parallel, kitsch allegedly coerced the audience, and so was the very opposite of art, which grants its recipients freedom. The construction of these opposites was all too forced. Misled by them, one was blind to those forms of reflectivity intrinsic to kitsch or the experience of kitsch. The blindness that follows from thinking in opposites, its stolid rigidity, is noted by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human* (1996, p. 326): "The general imprecise way of observing sees everywhere in nature opposites (as, e.g., 'warm and cold') where there are, not opposites, but differences of degree" or "transitions". This "bad habit has led us into wanting to comprehend and analyze the inner world, too, the spiritual-moral world,

in terms of such opposites" (*ibid*.). A spectrum exists between reflectivity and non-reflectivity, and along it are gradings and nuances, transitions and intensifications (cf. Maase, 2011, p. 260). For example, when the cover of a romance warns to "keep your tissues close by!" (Prinz, 2019, author's translation), then this already encapsulates a moment of reflectivity, it describes the intended emotionalization. And in turn, the playful warning can be understood as part of the kitsch contract: on the one hand, the audience is promised that it will be moved to tears, while on the other the audience can decide whether it is willing to accept the terms and conditions, and it can reflectively verify if the novel adheres to the contract and keeps its promise. Examining such contracts in greater detail, then what comes into focus is the unique and specific play of complementary give and take between kitsch and its audience.

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Author's Note: This article is based on my book published in 2022, *Bewusst im Paradies: Kitsch und Reflexivität* (Consciously in Paradise: Kitsch and Reflectivity). Bielefeld: transcript.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14764897