Ethnic Populism and Bad Taste: Exploring the Kitschification of Slovak Folklore

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This study is a compilation of notes on the concept of folkloric kitsch, understood as a *secondary* aesthetic product of modernism that specifically participates in shared feelings of national pride in Central European countries. The aesthetic core of folkloric kitsch production involves the decontextualised and redundant use of elements borrowed from original folk art, aiming to communicate originality, authenticity, and national self-sufficiency. In Slovakia, the kitsch mode of presenting folklore is often used not only in the tourism sector but also to promote ideas charged with nationalism, particularly as part of populist political communication. Against the backdrop of reconstructing European and Slovak thought and writing on the relationship between kitsch and politics, this article attempts to reconstruct and explain folkloric kitsch in the realm of painting as a specific *aesthetic vehicle* for the powerful ethnic populism. | *Keywords: Folklorism, Kitsch, Modernism, Populism, Slovak Visual Art*

1. Introduction

Folkloric kitsch can manifest itself in various forms, ranging from cheap imitations of painted glass artworks to photographs of provocative models in traditional folk attire. The focus of the present paper will be on the use of folkloric motifs in nationally oriented painting which, through a fusion of impressionistic, expressionistic, and neo-academic techniques, seeks to create the impression of high art, thereby sacralising or, more accurately, monumentalizing rural and folkloric themes. This study is comprised of two parts: A) theoretical examination of the link between politics, ethnic populism, and kitsch; B) seeking for the origins of folkloric kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon, which in Slovakia serves as an effective tool for politically motivated persuasion of broader, multigenerational segments of the population.

2. Political kitsch

After 2000, re-editions of important and passionately discussed publications appeared in Slovak professional discourse – such as the book of worldwide significance *Art and Kitsch* by Tomáš Kulka (1994), translations of Umberto Eco's writings collected in the book *Skeptikové a tešitelé* (2006; Czech translation of *Apocalittici e integrati*, 1964) and Hermann Broch's essays in the collections of Milan Kundera (2009; published in Czech, edited by Milan Kundera). One of the stimuli of the 'passionate' narrative of kitsch, both professional and lay, was the massive increase in the popularity of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*[1], which was reissued in 2007 by Atlantis publishing house. It was in Kundera's novel that kitsch was metaphorically, but sharply, grasped and revealed in relation to *communist aesthetics*.

Kundera's intervention in the topic demonstrates that the Central European theory and sociology of art reflected the kitsch phenomenon specifically, also through the prism of the experience with totalitarian, dogmatic aesthetics, which is confirmed by the important contributions of the sociologist Miloslav Petrusek (2006), by the artistic practice and views of Milan Knižák, and finally also by the widely outlined treatise on kitsch by the Serbian sociologist of culture, Nikola Božilovič (2014). Nevertheless, Kundera's and Božilovič's thoughts on kitsch prove that intellectuals in post-soviet countries dispose a specific sensitivity to kitsch: they connect existence of artefactual kitsch with its deeper roots – *ethical kitsch* and *political kitsch*.

Nikola Božilovič examines kitsch from the sociological point of view and tries to move on from the field of aesthetics to the ethical area. In the paper *Conservative ideology and political kitsch*, Božilovič (2013, p. 12) reveals conservative ideology as "the basis from which grow a variety of kitsch creations and phenomena, among which the [sic] political kitsch dominates". Hermann Broch's and Milan Kundera's ideas clearly resonate in his text, especially in this important formulation: "Politics which is unethical in the sense that it deceives, sow[s] lies and manipulates people, denying them freedom and turning them into subjects of the regime, is kitsch in its essential sense" (Božilovič, 2013, p. 12).

From the sociological point of view, it is productive for the issue of the aspects of kitsch in the official production of socialist realism to read a lesser-known text on the sociology of art by Miloslav Petrusek (2006), who presented the

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[1] Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (originally published in 1984), which was reissued in 2007. The novel is set in the 1960's and the main leitmotif is searching for inner freedom in a state of ubiquitarian control. One of the heroines of the novel – the artist Sabine – is a strict opponent of kitsch. As she is described, her inner revolt against communism did not have a moral, but aesthetic, accent. She did not hate the ugliness of the *grey* communist world, she hated the mask of beauty which Communism was dressed in (Kundera, 1984, p. 210). Kundera realized that there can be only one aesthetic expression of totalitarian regimes – kitsch. There is always the possibility to run away from kitsch in a society with plurality of opinions, but one is helpless in a land of *totalitarian kitsch*. Most importantly, Kundera (1984, p. 212) defined kitsch by his well-known allegory of the *second tear*: "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".

thesis that aesthetic artifacts of official art in totalitarian regimes are not subjects to aesthetic study, since they do not carry a specific aesthetic function. The aesthetic norm of works of totalitarian art is not directed towards itself, but towards heteronomic, especially political, functions. We can partially agree with Petrusek – although the political function is behind the image of socialist realism as the main determinant (of course we cannot generalize), but the aesthetic function is extremely important here – a misleading message communicated specifically in an aesthetic manner – mostly by means of monumentalisation, heroization, and infantilisation, in eclectic stylistic compositions conceived in a utilitarian way.[2]

I consider Petrusek's search for parallels between Nazi kitsch and the kitsch of socialist realism to be his most significant contribution. Their common feature is the accent on realism (representative imaging), which has specific ideological functions: legitimising, translational, persuasive, and propagandistic (Petrusek, 2006, p. 18). Petrusek, therefore, indicated a path which is a task for the sociology of art and for cooperation between aesthetics and politics. It is increasingly desirable to examine populist political acts in connection with 'kitschy' political speeches or election performances. A similar focus on kitsch can be found through a prism of the experience with totalitarian regimes in (mentioned above) Nikola Božilovič's thought:

> Kitsch in politics is associated with the moral categories of truth and falsehood, in which the author of this article argues that kitsch is a deliberately designed and programmed lie. The political kitsch serves for manipulation of the masses and represents the basis of totalitarian consciousness, which is an introduction to the repression and crime. (Božilovič, 2014, p. 5)

In post-Soviet countries, this issue is associated mainly with nationalist efforts and the related abuse of folklore (Migašová, 2018). Various types of simplified and emotionalised folklore performances were instrumentally used for ethnocentric and ethno-nationalist political representants in the first half of 20th century Central European republics, and after the 2nd World War for the benefit of communist propaganda in the *Soviet part of the world*. Folklore, theatrical, musical, and visual forms still have a stable position as the equipment for so-called conservative parties' persuading and propaganda, especially during election campaigns.[3] As Nikola Božilovič (2013, pp. 9–10) says: "Political lies tend to turn into the ideology of the whole society or the state, so that one can speak of a kind of 'nationalization of kitsch'". The important principle of such a demonstration of folklore is the stereotypic

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[2]   For example, the painting by Mária Medvecká *The Contingent Transfer in Upper Orava* (1951). At first sight, it is a harmless painting of a rural scene, which is quite well elaborated in a regressive manner similar to post-impressionism and luminism. We have to look twice, and we realize that the motif is actually tragic and a criminal moment in the history of Czechoslovakia – violent confiscation of small farmers' private properties by the newly emerged socialist republic. Considering the painting in the political context, we can see it as almost *vulgar kitsch*. Despite Mária Medvecká being a highly rated artist, she instrumentally used an eclectic mixture of styles in order to fabricate an idyllic visualisation of a non-existing scene: not fiction, but a lie.

[3]   A rich contribution to the explanation of so-called pseudo-folk culture and the phenomenon of *fakelore* is the study by Juraj Janto (2023), which was written, tellingly, at a time when a strong wave of abuse of folklore for political purposes was rising in Slovakia.

and conventionalised collection of artistic forms, which are presented as ahistorical and isolated from the original context of religion, rural habits, and cult practices. These performances are pulled out of the whole structure of functions, they operate as aesthetic references, metaphorically said – *postcards* from the domestic ethnic tradition. The most powerful tool for ethnic populism is sanctified folklore.

The aim of this segment is to demonstrate that thinking about kitsch is specific to our culturally and historically defined region. This is a consequence of the mental settings and sensibilities (of intellectuals) emerging against the background of the experience of socialism. In this experience, the perception of kitsch as an aesthetic tool of ideology and politics comes to the surface. The intellectual tradition of the post-Soviet part of Europe, especially its Czech lineage, supported by the philosophy of phenomenology and existentialism, is an important contribution to the understanding of the relationship between politics and kitsch. That is this was adopted as a methodological starting point in this text. Building on the framework of understanding the relationship between political populism and kitsch, when and through what mechanisms the instrumentalization of folklore for kitsch messages occurs in our country will be further investigated.

3. Populism and sanctification of folklore

The situation in interwar Slovakia can be characterized by the tension between rural (agrarian) culture and urban (industrialized) spaces, as well as between Czechs and Slovaks, who struggled to establish their *modus vivendi* within the new state entity (The First Czechoslovak Republic 1918–1938). These tensions culminated in political populism, both from the nationalistic side and from the coalition *agrarians*. Into this situation emerged a growing intellectual substratum, largely fostered by the multicultural and progressive environment of Prague. Representatives of the modernist and internationally oriented intelligentsia were associated with the radical left and Marxist positions.

The fundamental and interwoven themes of political discourse in interwar Slovakia were the so-called Czechoslovak question, the call for Slovak autonomy, the issue of church funding, and finally, the problem of economic development linked to the processes of industrialization in a predominantly agrarian country. The idea of a *Czechoslovak nation*[4] was met with objections on the Slovak side, while the Czech side held the belief that they should elevate Slovaks to a higher cultural level, a process that undoubtedly took place (Arpáš, 2011, pp. 14–15). The introduction of Czech cultural values, however, naturally provoked resistance from a "modernity-unprepared, rural Slovakia" (Abelovský, 1997, p. 317). Such discontent enabled the creation of populist discourse, particularly in the programs of the Hlinka Slovak People's Party (HSĽS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS)[5]. An example of this

[4]   Articulated in the Martin Declaration (proclaimed on October 30, 1918). (See further https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Declaration.)

[5]   On the side of Czechoslovakism stood the Social Democrats, and initially, the agrarians also supported this idea. However, from 1922 onwards, their stance began to change, and by the 1930s, this party also became a moderate proponent of autonomy.

discourse is the slogan: "The nation is more than the state" (Arpáš, 2011, p. 275). The Czechoslovak question became a driving force of agrarian populism.[6]

The contemporary views of the Slovak politician and writer Vladimír Clementis (1967 [1922], p. 64) also reflect a sharp criticism of the agrarians' statements and programme. Clementis demonstrated how the agrarians constructed their theoretical program of antinomies around the key concept of *the soil*, in which the former is subordinated to the latter: *organic vs. mechanical*; *rural vs. urban*; *natural vs. artificial*; *ours vs. foreign*. This conceptual framework elevated agrarianism as the alleged antithesis to industrialism. According to Clementis (1967 [1922], p. 64), this is a conservatism based on "eclecticism and programmatic naivety". At this point, it should be stressed that the mechanism of antinomies, of emotional singling out of the *stranger* or the *other*, is the very basis of any successful populism. Slavoj Žižek (2017, p. 287) states that the natural tendency of populism is to construct the enemy as an *internal invader*.

It would be immensely challenging to delve into the intricacies of Slovak ethnic populism in detail – an entity that continues to re-emerge and prevail even today. However, one should attempt to follow the key idea by using the sociologist and philosopher Tibor Pichler's (1999) concept of *sacralised folklore*. According to Pichler (1999, pp. 51–58), Slovak collective memory is part of Central European collective memories, which are based on *pain*. A specific characteristic of the Slovak perspective – as a space of perception where past events are evaluated – is the notion that a new beginning should not draw on the immediate past but rather on the historical eve (i.e., the period of Great Moravia). Selective memory, which deliberately *forgets* the recent past, creates *a fantastic historicism* where the main role is played by oppressed, sacralised people. In both nationalist and communist narratives, the people are revered as heroes, thus forming what is known as ethnic populism, which later evolved into social and communist populism (Pichler, 1999, p. 53). The social culture built on this memory is, as Pichler argues, a so-called *culture of plebeianism*, in which state consciousness is absent or not dominant. In interwar Slovakia, the nation preceded the state, and Pichler (1999, p. 54) adds: "the nation prides itself on, but also suffers from, monumentalized and sacralized folklore". From this, it follows that if the modern Slovak political discourse is characterized by ethnic populism, the medium for communication with the masses and the aesthetics of ethnic populism is a modified form of folklore. Folklore, or more precisely folklorism[7], still represents an escape to an unchanging tradition.

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[6]   *The nation is more than the state* is a slogan that reveals an appeal to a religious relationship to the idea of the nation, to an almost sacred reverence for one's own nation, which, however, like any cult, demands its own aesthetic medium.

[7]   As has been indicated, there is a fundamental difference between folklore and folklorism. Folklorism refers to the "demonstrative presentation of folk traditions, which fundamentally differs from the natural functions of folk culture" (Luther, 2005, p. 10). According to Daniel Luther (2005), essential concepts characterizing folklorism include *second existence, mediation, imitation,* and *unnatural function*.

Arguably, the most prevalent area for the occurrence of folkloric kitsch would be the souvenir shop or pre-election folkish dance performances. However, in this text, an attempt is made to highlight certain aspects of folkloric kitsch within the realm of painting, including the work of some acclaimed Slovak painters who were followers of a significant figure in Slovak modern art – Martin Benka (1888–1971). A somewhat controversial claim is proposed that Benka was the principal architect of the visual language through which nationalist sentiments are still communicated. This is not to suggest, by any means, that he was a creator of kitsch himself, but rather that his artistic, aesthetic, and stylistic innovations influenced output characterized by kitschy solutions, especially post-1949.

Although he adopted the process of monumentalization and folkloric themes from earlier authors (such as Jozef Hanula, Emil Pacovský, or the Czech, Joža Úprka), his innovation lay in the eclectic modernization of these methods. He drew upon Art Nouveau, luminism, and gradually embraced a more expressive style. The fundamental shift came after 1918, when the painter began working on the "heroic-monumental stylization of the life and myths of his native land" (Abelovský, 1997, p. 303). He managed to create the visual identity of Slovakness, and therein lies the myth-making essence of his contribution – he forged a model of the Slovak person. Martin Benka employed layered pictorial planes (three-plane composition), pyramidal form, preferential selection of rest-after-hard-work situations, and a decorative arabesque in browns, purples, and whites. He elevated the image of the rural dweller and the Slovak countryside into a powerful symbol.

Benka's concept fits seamlessly into the discourses surrounding the search for a national style. He developed a style that became a means of expressing the idea of the people's heroism. In doing so, he created a visual language that could support and represent the populist discourses of interwar Slovakia. His followers (Ján Hála, Štefan Polkoráb, Štefan Straka, Ján Ladvenica, etc.,) continued with genre painting of a folkloric type, depicting the morally pure rural world and patriarchal relationships, while simultaneously sanctifying rural figures (e.g., J. Hála: *Madonna from Važec*, 1928; see Fig. 1). Štefan Polkoráb aimed in his work to capture the archetypal image of the Slovak woman (e.g., Š. Polkoráb: *Spinner*, 1937; see Fig. 2) in portraits of mothers, brides, and widows. Štefan Straka illuminated the national myth through paintings of patriarchal elders, into which he projected the inseparability of Slovak identity and Catholic faith (e.g., Š. Straka: *Praying Farmer*, 1928; see Fig. 3).

It is evident that the paintings of J. Hála, Š. Polkoráb, and Š. Straka were not intended for the small-scale farming class or factory workers. The audience for these paintings was the urban middle class and the nationally oriented intelligentsia. One might refer to this group, using the words of Umberto Eco (2006), as a *midcult*. This problem was addressed by Eco (2006, pp. 98–99) when, following McDonald's (1953) theory of mass culture, he identified another type of kitsch besides the easily recognizable kitsch of mass culture, the so-called Boldinian kitsch in visual culture (as a perfect example of

midcult kitsch), which can easily find itself even in respectable galleries. It is the type of kitsch that is not so much an aesthetic deception as a calculation of aesthetic communication. Umberto Eco views Boldini's painting, or Boldinian *giclée*, as a blend of traditional and impressionistic styles. It features a classic portrait of a woman mixed with a lively, fragmented technique that hints at Impressionism. The painting is *gastronomic*, engaging and appealing, while also reminding the viewer he/she is seeing art – the impressionistic elements assure them of this. This leads the viewer to believe he/she is experiencing genuine (modern) art, even if it is a mix of styles (Eco, 2006, pp. 98–99). Eco suggests that this approach targets the middle-class audience, catering to their tastes and preferences.

A primary characteristic of *midcult* is its use of figures meant to symbolize universal symbolic values, giving the recipient the impression of receiving so-called *high art*. According to Eco (2006, p. 86), the message of midcult is coded redundantly – the author introduces elements of reinforcement and reiteration that unmistakably aid in identifying the semantic references of terms and the syntactic relations between them. The illusionism of the depiction is central to the midcult aesthetic – for ease of reading and reference to *artfulness*, the code employed is not one that is newly emerging or long past, but rather one that has recently been established and has become comprehensible to the masses (Eco, 2006, p. 43). In other words, the *code of yesterday*.

The idea of *Boldinian kitsch* helps us understand the deeper meaning behind the paintings of Benka's followers that we have examined. The eclecticism of forms in the paintings of the *post-Benka cohort* (Abelovský, 1997) primarily connects luminist and post-impressionist forms with expressionist interventions and the ethnographic precision of folk motifs (J. Hála, M. Benka); in some cases, it delves even deeper into the 19th century, employing the colour and light of Courbet-style realism (Š. Straka).

A prime example of this intentional eclecticism is Štefan Polkoráb's painting *Spinner* (1937, Figure 2). Unlike the subversive depiction of the female body in a *gastronomic context*, as analyzed by Umberto Eco in Boldini's painting, Polkoráb employs composition, light, and symbolic attributes to reference images of young, beautiful female saints. The serene expression of the face, the isolation of the figure, and the undisturbed work environment imbue the painting with a religious character. Simultaneously, Polkoráb *assures the viewer* of the painting's modernity through expressive, relaxed brushwork. Differing from typical Expressionist works, he avoids sharp contrasts and distortions, adhering instead to the Art Nouveau palette of pastel tones in harmonious relationships. In contrast to Ján Hála's *Madonna from Važec* (1928, Figure 3), which focuses on the intricate colour rhythms of folk art, Polkoráb utilizes a modernist visual language to refresh the *sacred image*. In employing this strategy, modernity loses its core attributes, such as innovation and authenticity, and becomes merely a decorative sticker applied to traditional, well-understood, and marketable themes.

4. Conclusion

By introducing Umberto Eco's concept, it might seem that the aforementioned group of paintings are labelled as lacking in taste or as kitsch. However, given the conceptual diversity, variability, and current problematic nature of this category, one cannot (nor wish to) afford such a characterization. Nevertheless, in the present paper, the aim is to demonstrate that both the works of the so-called *post-Benka cohort of the folk genre* and the agrarian or nationalist populism conveyed similar notions of history, tradition, and the present. It is the assertion of the present paper that the patterns of this discourse—which might be called political and aesthetic populism – with its fundamental strategy of reduction and sacralization of the traditional through the aesthetic communication of an eclectically composed monumental and sentimental style, remain a part of contemporary Slovak populist discourses.

With this article, an attempt is made to highlight the recurring phenomenon of the intersection of politics and aesthetics in our country. In Slovakia, there is currently an ongoing process of cultural modification through the intentional and government driven degradation of experimental and high art and the re-establishment of a discourse prioritizing nationally oriented art and folklore. The narratives and rhetorical style of the currently ruling populist parties resemble the model of nationalist and autonomist parties from a hundred years ago. A notable observation is that century-old aesthetic mechanisms remain remarkably effective.

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Figures

Figure 1. Ján Hála (1928) *Madonna from Važec*. Oil / canvas. (c) Slovak National Gallery.

Figure 2. Štefan Polkoráb (1937) *Spinner*. Oil / plywood. (c) Slovak
National Gallery.

Figure 3. Štefan Straka (1928) *Praying Farmer*. Oil / canvas. (c)
Slovak National Gallery.

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