Kitsch: New Perspectives on a Controversial Aesthetic and Cultural Phenomenon

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Let me begin by stating something obvious: kitsch is a diverse and ever-present aesthetic and cultural phenomenon of our time. This claim comprises two observations.

First, kitsch comes in various shapes, forms, and sizes. You can encounter it while reading a book or poem, listening to a song, watching a movie or series, or admiring a painting or photograph. But kitsch is not only at home in different art genres (e.g., Szostak, 2024). Coffee mugs, postcards, or little figurines can also be kitsch. A political speech might be kitsch, just like a sermon, an Instagram post, or a declaration of love. Kitsch might even surprise us in scientific writings or news broadcasts. Hence, a wide range of artefacts, human performances, and practices can fall into the kitsch category, perhaps even nature (e.g., Ryynänen, 2020). This diversity of kitsch leads to the question of what distinguishes kitsch from non-kitsch. And one might also ponder how to categorise kitsch into various subcategories. Setting these questions aside, the point is that kitsch is a diverse phenomenon.

Secondly, kitsch is everywhere. Undoubtedly, some places are more inclined towards kitsch than others. If you want to be sure of finding kitsch, I suggest visiting a gift or museum shop or the baby's and children's section of a department store. At certain times of the year, the kitsch density significantly increases. At least in Europe, Christmas marks the peak of the annual kitsch cycle: twinkling lights, snowy Christmas trees, shiny baubles, golden angels, cute Christmas elves, and romantic Christmas movies are ubiquitous. Still, few spaces and times exist without kitsch nowadays. Even if you attempt to escape kitsch by hiking in the Alps, you might think, "Wow, this lake with the snowy mountains in the background looks kitschy."

Already in 1939, Greenberg started his elaborations on kitsch by pointing out how widespread kitsch has become since the Industrial Revolution:

> True enough – simultaneously with the entrance of the avant-garde, a second new cultural phenomenon appeared in the industrial West: that thing to which the Germans give the wonderful name of kitsch: popular, commercial art and literature with their chronotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc. (Greenberg, 1939, p. 39)

Greenberg does not only underscore the omnipresence and diversity of kitsch. He considers kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon of industrial modernity. In alignment with this perspective, Călinescu (1977, 266) identifies kitsch as one of the five faces of modernity. Similarly, Moles (1972) designates kitsch as a fundamental trait of contemporary performance and consumer society. Friedländer (2007, p. 36) asserts: "The paradox of kitsch and modernity is that kitsch often is the antimodern face of the modern." These scholars articulate a recurring thesis positing kitsch as a typical, perhaps even defining, aesthetic and cultural characteristic of modern life.

An objection may arise at this juncture, contending that industrial modernity has concluded, regardless of whether one characterizes the present era as late or postmodern. If kitsch is considered an expression of industrial modernity, one might speculate that the kitsch era is over (Scheier, 2002). Nevertheless, the persistent ubiquity of kitsch in our cultural and everyday life speaks against this thesis. Kulka (1996, p. 16) stresses, "Kitsch has become an integral part of our modern culture, and it is flourishing now more than ever before." Additionally, Călinescu (1977, pp. 7–8) argues that kitsch is characteristic of both modernity and postmodernity. Emmer (1998, p. 70) thinks that "[…] the kitsch object is best understood as a tool in a struggle against the particular stresses of the modem world, insofar as that struggle is understood as an attempt to provide (at least) temporary relief, a place for recovery." Blinkley (2000, p. 149) refers to Giddens' sociological theory and analyses kitsch as "[…] a general corrective to a general modern problem, that of existential and personal misembeddedness, loss of assurance in the continuity of life and one's place in the world." According to Botz-Bornstein (2019), the pattern of deculturation accelerated by globalization determines kitsch. These authors associate different attributes of the present with kitsch. Still, they (and others) agree that kitsch remains a central contemporary aesthetic and cultural phenomenon.

So, the manifold nature and pervasive presence of kitsch, coupled with the idea that kitsch may constitute a central aesthetic and cultural phenomenon of (post/late) modernity, provides reasons to think about kitsch philosophically. Those thinkers exploring aesthetic, cultural, and societal themes, delving into the realm of kitsch becomes a compelling pursuit.

Another observation motivates the academic and philosophical interest in kitsch: kitsch is a *controversial* aesthetic and cultural phenomenon. To elaborate on the controversial status of kitsch, one can first point to another obvious observation: people like kitsch. Greenberg (1939, p. 41) speaks

of kitsch's "irresistible attractiveness." Kitsch has a unique mass appeal (Kulka, 1996, p. 19). One can (at least partly) explain the omnipresence of kitsch by its appeal: people buy kitsch, decorate their homes with kitsch, and willingly spend their time watching, reading, and listening to kitsch because they like it. Admittedly, sometimes we encounter kitsch involuntarily, such as during a Christmas visit to the city centre. Nevertheless, the pervasive presence of kitsch suggests a collective inclination towards it. Kitsch's production and consumption hinge on people liking kitsch and thus buying it. Pointing to kitsch's mass appeal raises the question of what people like about it.

Yet, before delving into an analysis of the appeal of kitsch, one might be surprised that kitsch is so pleasing in the first place. Although many people like kitsch, many others decidedly dislike it and openly criticize kitsch and the pleasure many people take in it. The dislike even seems entrenched in the meaning of "kitsch." "Kitsch" appears to be a derogatory term. Saying that something is kitsch typically means expressing a negative attitude towards it. Furthermore, one seems to imply that one should not enjoy kitsch or, at least, that there are better things to take pleasure in.

The academic literature about kitsch reflects this ambiguous attitude towards kitsch–the liking and disliking of kitsch. The debate started in the early 20th century. It could not have started earlier (at least not under the heading "kitsch") as the term "kitsch" emerged only in the late 19th century in the southern part of Germany. From there, "kitsch" entered the English and French vocabulary. The etymological roots are unclear, however. According to Avenarius (2007), Munich artists established the term by mispronouncing the English "sketch" when making quick money with simple landscape sketches for American and English tourists. Koelwel (2007) traces "kitsch" to the South German expression "Kitsche." A Kitsche was an instrument to remove mud and excrement from streets. Best (2007) believes that "kitsch" has its roots in the Swabian "verkitschen," which means "to engage in petty trading cunningly." Despite the disagreement about the etymological roots, it is noteworthy that "kitsch" takes on negative connotations in every etymological story. Kitsch pays homage to the filthy mammon of (quick) money and is artificially smoothed and without depth.

The negative stance towards kitsch becomes even more apparent in the academic treatises about kitsch. In one of the first works from 1912, Pazaurek (1912, p. 349) describes kitsch as the anti-pole to true and ingenious art, as tasteless rubbish for the masses, as ignorant of any ethical, logical, or aesthetic demands, as indifferent to any crimes committed against the material, technique, or art form, and as cheap while pretending to be valuable. He sets the tone for how others write about kitsch in the following years. They heavily criticize it on aesthetic, epistemic, moral, ethical, and/or political grounds. For them, kitsch is tasteless, cheap, banal, trivial, naïve, simple, overly emotional, and sentimental. Furthermore, kitsch is said to be dangerous, manipulative, false, deceptive, immoral, evil, just to mention some examples. Deschner (1991, p. 24) writes, for instance: "Unfortunately, kitsch is not only ridiculous but highly dangerous, infectious, epidemic, the most murderous

drug in the world." Broch (1955) famously claims that kitsch is the evil in the value system of art, and Egenter (2007) traces kitsch back to the original sin.

Also, more recent writings reflect this negative thinking about kitsch, as the following examples illustrate. Scruton (1999) speaks of kitsch as a pretense, links it to fake emotions, sentimentality, and clichés, and accuses kitsch of being cheap. Another twenty years later, not much has changed, it seems. In his book on political kitsch, Grau writes:

> But kitsch is a highly infectious pathogen, especially in times of enormous change and uncertainty, when people are susceptible to everything that promises security, nest warmth, and safety. Then, there is a danger that not only aesthetic but also moral and political kitsch will increasingly determine the discourses of society and paralyse it intellectually as kitsch is one thing above all: a narcotic of the mind. It numbs the mind and sedates the ability to judge. In the kitschy mind, clear reflection is replaced by the befogging opiate of sentiment. (Grau, 2029, pp. 11-12 MT)

The psychoanalytic Mätzler connects kitsch with pretense, lies, sentimentality, and perversion. At the end of her book, she summarises her thoughts: "Kitsch denies reality, curtailing our possibilities of experience and shrinking our horizon to the size of a cinema screen. […] In its most abysmal form, kitsch is the tilting image of perversion" (Mätzler, 2019, p. 225 MT). So, over the past approximately 125 years, numerous scholars and authors have regarded kitsch as highly problematic.

Not everybody agrees with this critical stance towards kitsch, however. A more favourable view of kitsch emerged in the 1960s (see for an overview of the development Barragán and Ryynänen, 2023). Some became rather indifferent towards kitsch, and some argued that we should give up the (negative) concept of kitsch together with the whole idea of "high" and "low" art (e.g., Selle and Nelles, 1984). Others started to defend kitsch against aesthetic, epistemic, moral, ethical, and/or political criticism (e.g., Congdon and Blandy, 2005; Baumgart, 1997; Küpper, 2022; Liessmann, 2002; Lyell, 1979; Olalquiaga, 2002; Schmalzried, 2022; Solomon, 1991). Still, others point out various attitudes towards kitsch, some more, some less problematic (e.g., Botz-Bornstein, 2016; Küpper, 2022; Sontag, 1964). Furthermore, traditional critics of kitsch are now accused, for instance, of cultural pessimism, conservatism, arrogance, eurocentrism, or sexism (e.g., Holliday and Potts, 2012; Ryynänen, 2018; Solomon, 1991). Liessmann nicely summarises the changes in the attitude towards kitsch:

> What has long been regarded as kitsch is now the spearhead of aesthetic awareness. […] Anyone who dared to polemicize against kitsch today would not only be suspected of cultural pessimism but of aesthetic philistinism in general. Only the latter has not yet realized that bad taste today is actually good taste. (Liessmann, 2002, pp. 15–17 MT)

Listening to those who defend kitsch and criticize the kitsch critics makes one rethink the negative stance towards kitsch. Even the question of whether "kitsch" per se is or should be a pejorative term becomes more pressing.

These elaborations show that kitsch is controversial: some people like it, some dislike it, authors strongly criticize it, while others vehemently defend it. This special issue aims to gather new and diverse perspectives on kitsch as a controversial contemporary aesthetic and cultural phenomenon. The papers delve into the complex and multifaceted world of kitsch, challenging conventional perceptions and exploring its varied implications across different contexts.

In their paper *Aesthetics in Kitsch Art: The Aesthetic Ideology and Teleological Purpose Behind the Charged Sentimentality*, Yasmine Abdrabbo and Cherine Abdrabbo argue that kitsch art, often dismissed due to its emotional intensity, deserves recognition as high art. Critical evaluations of kitsch art have often been limited by narrow and biased perspectives, failing to recognize its legitimate place within aesthetic discourse. Key to this discussion is the role of aesthetic emotions. The authors contend that the emotional intensity of kitsch paintings—frequently dismissed by critics—constitutes an essential aspect of their aesthetic and intellectual value, warranting a reevaluation of kitsch as a meaningful artistic form.

In his paper *Kitsch and Morality*, Aziz Alfailakawi challenges the validity of the claim that kitsch is immoral. Traditionally, kitsch is often regarded as inherently immoral, primarily due to kitsch's perceived sentimentality and manipulative nature. Alfailakawi suggests that condemning kitsch on ethical grounds is an oversimplification. By exploring different interpretations of kitsch, he highlights its moral ambiguity and the need for a nuanced understanding.

Darío Hernández Guerra reframes kitsch as a means of expanding our perception of the world in his paper *Kitsch as an Experience of the World*. He points out that kitsch generates a compelling allure that captivates spectators, drawing attention in a uniquely powerful way. This magnetic quality stems from its aesthetic appeal, which, despite its simplicity, offers a space for social critique and reflection. By fostering a radically relativistic perspective, kitsch bridges the gap between reality as it is and as it could be, achieving a harmonious balance. Thus, kitsch's true significance lies in its ability to shape and enrich our experience of the world, Guerra argues.

In his paper *Emotions Guaranteed: On the Kitsch Contract*, Thomas Küpper calls into question a standard criticism of kitsch as being emotionally overwhelming and manipulating the audience's emotions almost irresistibly. This criticism has its roots in aesthetic traditions, which emphasize that 'pure' aesthetic judgments must remain independent of emotions. Küpper argues that this criticism overstates the immediacy and extent of kitsch's influence over its audience. He suggests that the emotional power of kitsch operates through a more intricate dynamic. For kitsch to be effective, it relies on an implicit "contract" with its audience, in which individuals grant kitsch permission to steer their emotions temporarily. This arrangement paradoxically enables the audience to retain a sense of agency and control even as they surrender to the emotional experience.

Tibor Máhrik's and Roman Králik's paper *Theology of Creation and Beauty: Kohelet 3:11* is dedicated to a theological perspective on kitsch. The authors examine the relationship between beauty, creation, and kitsch within the theological framework of *Kohelet 3:11*, which portrays beauty as a defining feature of creation. Beauty is a spiritual value that reflects God's essence and inspires humanity while remaining an elusive ideal beyond human grasp. In a narcissistic culture, kitsch emerges as humanity's attempt to express beauty, but through oversimplification, it often results in superficiality, mediocrity, and a loss of beauty's transcendent essence. Máhrik and Králik argue that a theology of beauty tied to kitsch provides a lens to reflect on the modern world and offers a unifying framework that deepens understanding of human relationships and the spiritual dimensions of life.

In her study *Ethnic Populism & Bad Taste: Exploring the Kitschification of Slovak Folklore*, Jana Migašová compiles observations on folkloric kitsch. In the context of Slovak folklore, she shows that kitsch serves as a vehicle for national pride and populist politics. Through its decontextualized use of folk art, folkloric kitsch blends aesthetic appeal with political messaging, fostering a shared cultural identity while inviting critiques of its authenticity and intention. Against the backdrop of re-evaluating European and Slovak perspectives on the intersection of kitsch and politics, Migašová seeks to reconstruct and elucidate the role of folkloric kitsch in painting as a distinct "aesthetic vehicle" for potent ethnic populism.

In his paper *Regional Kitsch*, May Ryynänen proposes a new kitsch category to be examined through philosophical lenses: regional kitsch. Unlike 'urban' kitsch, which includes kitschified versions of renowned statues and architecture associated with specific cities, regional kitsch is distinctively tied to regions and larger geographical areas. Unlike urban kitsch, regional kitsch often holds positive connotations for locals, suggesting its deeper significance in cultural representation. Ryynänen seeks to describe and explore the phenomenon of regional kitsch within the context of kitsch research, laying the groundwork for further investigation into the implications and significance of regional kitsch.

In my own paper *The Antinomy of Kitsch: Kitsch as an Aesthetic Category and an Aesthetic / Art-Critical Property*, I draw attention to what I call the antinomy of kitsch. This antinomy involves two opposing yet commonly held beliefs: firstly, that kitsch and art are incompatible, and secondly, that some art is kitsch. The resolution to this contradiction lies in differentiating between kitsch as an aesthetic category and an aesthetic, art-critical property. As an aesthetic category, kitsch refers to an artifact, performance, or practice primarily designed to facilitate emotion-based self-enjoyment for a large audience. In this sense, kitsch and art are mutually exclusive aesthetic categories. On the other hand, as an aesthetic property, kitsch is the disposition to provoke emotion-based (self-)enjoyment in a broad audience by utilizing typical kitsch features. Thus, while all kitsch is kitschy, not everything kitschy qualifies as kitsch. Consequently, art can be kitschy without being kitsch.

Anastasiia Tormakhova, Tovmash Dmytro, and Grechkosii Ruslan point to a notable correlation between political memes and kitsch in their paper *The Influence of Artistic Kitsch on the Formation of Political Memes*. As a potent communication medium, memes reach a broad audience and significantly influence society. Their origins can be traced back to the rise of kitsch and its proliferation in 20th-century art and culture. Kitsch, transitioning from 'low' art to camp, laid the groundwork for the widespread adoption of visual forms that serve essential communicative purposes. Political memes, in particular, function both ideologically and as a source of entertainment, often exhibiting a distinct comedic element.

As this first brief overview already shows, these papers invite readers to re-evaluate kitsch in its many forms, encouraging a broader and more nuanced appreciation of its place within aesthetics, culture, and society. This special issue thus aims to spark further discussion and scholarship on kitsch as a controversial aesthetic and cultural phenomenon of our times. We hope our readers enjoy immersing themselves in the fascinating field of kitsch.

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