**Aesthetics in Kitsch art: the aesthetic ideology and teleological purpose behind the charged sentimentality.**

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**Abstract:**

This article addresses the problem of perceiving Kitsch art and elaborates on the philosophical approaches taken to better understand all intellectual contexts surrounding the term, aiming to endorse its aesthetic aspect and assert its rightness to be subsumed under the notion of high art, the researchers sought to argue that besides the claim that the main issue of reading Kitsch was laid on miss-perceiving it, by means it was a problem of perception, we add to this assertion that it was also a problem of *misinterpretation*, that critics have constrained their judgments on Kitsch art by narrowed and prejudiced contentions while many aesthetic theories can ascertain its aesthetic existence at the time, and the most crucial one is the theories on aesthetic emotions, for it was the emotional charge of Kitsch paintings which the critics used to reject and vastly criticize to deny its ability to conceive any aesthetic features.

**Introduction:**

This essay examines Kitsch as classical paintings and their replicas, as well as any art forms aimed at reviving classicism in the twentieth century. One can apprehend that critics of the twentieth century approached Kitsch art as a sociocultural dilemma that lacked any prospect of aesthetic value, stating that its characteristic features only served to be classified as a representation of bad taste, Corruption of taste, false truth and evil in art’s value system as Hermann Broch claimed. Therefore, Kitsch entailed aesthetic deficiencies enough to exclude it from being part of high art. The dilemma here relies on the allegation that Kitsch did not possess any aesthetic features, yet the critiques given by critics and art historians were pretty defined, they have observed the exaggerated sentimentality of Kitsch's artworks, the directness of themes and objects portrayed in their works, which in contrast, Thomas Kulka had determined them in his book “ *Kitsch and art* “ as the distinctive criteria for artworks to be labelled as Kitsch art.

In addition to the previous factors, Martim de Almeida noted that Kitsch constitutes two crucial elements as well, which are immediateness and imitation to be the core of its philosophy, [[1]](#footnote-1) they were also rejected fiercely for supposedly giving fake aesthetic responses and fake precepts. Imitation appeared by using former aesthetics and traditional themes or objects, it was perceived as a repetitive system that offered no novelty nor originality. And immediateness rose from the easiness to recognize the objects portrayed in the artworks of Kitsch, the works did not conceive any symbolic or iconographic semantics to perceive and interpret, and the beholder was in no need of effort to comprehend them. It may exist due to the utilitarian aspect that Kitsch art entails, for the artworks were being sold in the art markets to various social ranks after it was only limited to a certain elite, the proletariat and the middle classes began to purchase kitsch art for its cheapness and its representation of the taste of the elites. They were attracted to its appeal which the critics defined as a cheap emotional charge.

**The problem of perception and interpretation of Kitsch art:**

The impoverished emotional charge usually elicits an instant response to what is presented in the artworks, whether it is depicting familiar themes, objects of daily life or re-portraying historical or mythological vistas. The critics argued that this kind of instant response is often temporary and momentary because the beholder perceives its beauty from a functional artwork that offers trite sceneries from classical heritage, Max Ryynänen and Paco Barragán have best explained this issue by stating that “*kitsch academic interpretations of the past that revolve around old-fashioned dichotomies of art history versus the art market”*,[[2]](#footnote-2) the art market may have a certain vision of what art is, though Kitsch did connect the spirit of classical revival and commercial ends, maybe in a trivial way. However, this representation does not revoke its aesthetic value, unlike what critics alleged. Current philosophers have responded to this contention by claiming that kitsch's main problem was perception.

Kulka explained that the assumption of Kitsch’s aesthetic deficiencies is inaccurate because some of the artworks were executed properly and with refined mastery,[[3]](#footnote-3) so the proposed dilemma is not about the showcased skills and the utility of the works, it is simply that this period had a different aesthetic aspiration than what was presented by the kitsch artists. In addition, the sociologist Janet Wolff has stated that what art is can differ from time to time based on sociological contexts. [[4]](#footnote-4)

Though it seems indeed a problem of perception, yet one could also claim that Kitsch faced a problem of interpretation, the critics had failed to interpret its intrinsic nature and tended to analyse the relation between its formal and intellectual elements with the commercial aspect prejudicially, and notably the emotional charge which was perceived as an excessive cliché. One could argue that the preconception was embarked on ideological interests, for it is impracticable to state that any form of art can lack aesthetic value because it is in the primitive nature of art to be an entity that possesses aesthetic essence and requires an aesthetic response respectively. And insofar as any art has an audience, it is consequently logical to state that it conceives an aesthetic value. In proving so, one can conclude that the misinterpretation of Kitsch lay in misanalysing its aesthetic ideology.

We argue that the misinterpretation of Kitsch originated from its aesthetic ideology rather than solely its aesthetic value for certain reasons. firstly, there is an ancient relation between aesthetics and ideology. The two notions were not separable until the emergence of the notion of *genius* and *the disinterestedness of art* in aesthetics in the eighteenth century. However, one could say it wasn’t a total separation because art by nature is not separated from its creator “the artist” and its audience, it expresses their thoughts and existence through ideas and precepts. Secondly, art is undetachable from social and political circumstances, which create ideologies, affect cultural taste and form aesthetic preferences, for that reason, we can find diverse artistic styles that relate to the spectrums of social classes.

Art as a human production embodies social structures and certain ideologies, and it reflects the time and environment in which it was created, though it does not necessarily express every social class, we can find that any emergence of an artistic movement had its particular audience who encouraged the production of such artworks, because it entails the imprints of their values and thoughts whether the ideology behind it was based on commercial aspects, psychological needs or meeting other demands. In each condition, the ideology presented in the works of art has its specific semantics that assist in delivering its aesthetics and purpose. Usually, those semantics are applied in two manners, one is conducted in a direct composition that requires no effort to comprehend it and the other implements some kind of ambiguity due to using semiotic tokens, and it takes a level of awareness to perceive this kind of art, it normally does not attract the masses, for they tend to appreciate the works that reflect their reality or their needs in simple forms and seem familiar to their knowledge and experiences.

 Philippe De Montebello the director of the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art, has stated that art is a sort of language and means of communication,[[5]](#footnote-5) in believing so, it is normal to see divisions in the art field, because the diversity in artistic languages will differ based on the level of awareness, intellectual backgrounds, social conditions and aesthetic preferences. In addition, economic factors have a great influence on creating and perceiving art. The commercial imprints also arose to shape some of the art movements and so do institutions and educational schools of art. Therefore, it is difficult to find an artistic movement that does not conceive any aesthetic ideology, for some can be perceived as an act of conformity or a rebellion and in the case of Kitsch art, one can claim that its aesthetic ideology is clear and definite.

 Paul Duncum defined the meaning of aesthetics as visual appearances and their effects and interpreted ideology as a style of thinking, [[6]](#footnote-6) by this definition, we find that the essential feature of Kitsch's works depends on the principle of Familiarity in the aesthetic and ideological sense. Kitsch provides familiar sceneries of classical heritage and experiences of daily life, it imitates the actual world and the past in the same approach, basing its appeal on generating an ambience of remembrance and an act of belonging. What recalls the sense of familiarity in psychological means is usually the memory of an event, whether this event is an action, an emotion or anything that impacts the senses, it is engraved in the mind as a *habit* which means in broader definition, the repetition of certain experiences for long periods. Hence, one could argue that reusing traditional approaches in art was a form of *habit* that offered reassurance to the Kitsch beholder. The repetition of such aesthetics does not revoke its value, for it is a case of *co-existing alternative ideology*, which Raymond Williams defined as an ideology from the past but still active in the current cultural process.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Bourdieu discussed the idea of habit that is created by authorities and dominant institutions, he explained that the environment in which one grew up develops behaviours subconsciously and habits as well as aesthetic preferences, so the case of European societies where schools, universities, and other cultural institutions promoted a certain taste based on classical heritage, this taste became a habit according to the principle of familiarity, [[8]](#footnote-8) which was better explained by the American social psychologist Robert Zajonc in his theory “mere-exposure effect”,[[9]](#footnote-9) it says that if a person was repeatedly exposed to definite aesthetic appearances from a young age, he would get used to them over time to the extent that he would replicate them unconsciously in his daily usage. Hence, when some of the proletariats gained higher social class, they expressed themselves in a way they already knew, by what they were familiar with since infancy, and what they were exposed to, used to be high art, the taste of upper bourgeoisie and the aristocrats, and also the official taste of the state, but what is problematic here is that the principle of familiarity has two opposing sides, one explains that the aesthetic preferences are a prior experience that makes one choose something because he is just familiar with, and the other argues that the amount of exposure to something for some time can make this thing lose its appeal to the viewer, and that describes the attitude of the critics towards kitsch art when they rejected those kinds of paintings for giving known sceneries

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

In the traditional approach to appreciating beauty, not all forms of art would be valued and would share the same degree of beauty, for there is the sublime, the transcendental, and the beautiful…. etc, and in modern conceptions, the notion of beauty became too broad that it embraced all kinds of formal patterns and embodiments. Ugliness is perceived as beautiful chaos; terror is sublime and delightful as Edmund Burke states for one can feel the danger and pain without being in such conditions. Hence, they all engage in requiring aesthetic appreciation which is based on aesthetic preferences. [[10]](#footnote-10)

**The notion of beauty in kitsch:**

The notion of beauty had always been a dread over centuries, from Plato to the current era, there were many and various theories and definitions, enough to impose that every form of art has its own conditions that set its philosophy and aesthetics. Arthur Berndtson pointed out that beauty is an object of value and a process of valuation,[[11]](#footnote-11) in believing so, the comparison that the critics made between Kitsch and Avant-Garde was totally misplaced because each of the two arts contains different philosophical structures that shaped the aesthetic elements, and one cannot compare two aspects that extremely differ in all contexts to evaluate which has the prospect to be high art. Every movement had its distinctive ends and was efficient in achieving them. For Kitsch, the functional aspects of its works well served its audience, it met their needs of owning precepts of high art at an acceptable cost, offering them an escape from the dullness of reality as Matei Calinescu highlighted, and also, provided contemporary precepts of classical works by corresponding to the commercial style that spread over the world in the twenties.[[12]](#footnote-12) At the same time, the Avant-Garde served its purpose of novelty and uniqueness, presenting diverse artistic experiments that formed new aesthetics and widened the definition of beauty, allowing its audience to experience life with novel artistic notions.

Leibniz and Christian Wolff argued that art having its own ends concludes with possessing its own perfection, and Paul Guyer explained that the perfection that Leibniz and Wolf discussed has space for utility as a sort of perfection.[[13]](#footnote-13) One could presume that considering utility as a kind of perfection is an adherent approach to appreciating beauty, by means that the functional aspect of a work of art emphasises its aesthetic value for it is in the nature of the works to be displayed and get validated by viewers whether the work is sold, collected or even shown at galleries and shops. This approach also asserts the psychological side derived from the utility of the artwork, the latter proves the existence of aesthetic features by observing theories on emotions, aesthetic response and the conception of pleasure in all its forms.

When the viewer contemplates a work of art, this contemplation evokes emotions, for it is a process of interaction and communication between the beholder and the artwork, creating an aesthetic experience for the viewer. Even when aware of its functional aspect, he still tastes its aesthetic value because he can apprehend what the work presents from emotion, concept or visual form. In the case of Kitsch art, the beholder was drawn to its subject matter and its embodiment into formal and sensual aesthetics because it was familiar to him. He can relate to its emotional charge because it provided a sense of nostalgia and a haven from life by reviving traditional classicism. Sam Binkley argued that Kitsch conveys the conception of embeddedness which he defined as a *“condition of daily life in which uncertainties, existential questions and a sense of the freedom and creativity of human action are bracketed by reassuring traditions and habits of thought which penetrate the deepest crevices of the quotidian”*, [[14]](#footnote-14) the spectator faced existential dilemmas that emerged due to the severe changes that occurred in the age of modernity. These political and social changes required an outlet that expressed their artistic aspiration and aligned with popular aesthetics, thus, Kitsch emerged as a release of life difficulties and provided reassurance that the world remains unchanged from years past.

Critics have declared that the aesthetic response made by Kitsch's works is false and not entirely an aesthetic experience because it derived from imitated precepts that belonged to previous periods and created an instant and immediate sense of pleasure. However, one could not make such acute judgments solely on the duration of the aesthetic response and the imitation aspect because the immediate and instant response does not mean the lack of aesthetic value or a false response. The aesthetic judgment should be established on the deepness of the impact on the beholder, which is based essentially on the state of the *event* of direct encounter with the work. This event generates a reflective impact that makes the beholder resonate with what the artwork presents, whether this reflective impact’s duration takes a short period or a long one the viewer can still have a genuine aesthetic response. Moreover, this aesthetic response could be spawned by traditional connotations and old-fashioned styles, depending on the aesthetic preferences of the beholder, and most of the Kitsch audience was drawn to its repetitive aesthetics because it offered a sense of belonging and a kind of sensual purification.

This feature of purification was attacked vastly by critics, saying that the beholder’s response elicited by this purgation is also not a true aesthetic response, but rather fake because it was founded on an immediately accessible pleasure. though one could contend that purgation is a conventional trait of Catharsis and that a major side of art’s nature conveys such notion as Aristotle claimed. The aesthetic response here is a form of aesthetic Catharsis, which purifies the audience's ability to feel pity and fear, it releases emotional pressures and generates pleasure in some sort, therefore, the pleasure that emerges from Kitsch even if it is instant still fills its purpose of creating emotional balance for the viewer. Alan Paskow noted that the purification traits are the deepest and most notable kinds of aesthetic experience. It is the most significant because it prevents emotional repression and emphasises the role of imagination. [[15]](#footnote-15)

**The interpretation of Kitsch ‘s aesthetic purpose:**

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

The presence of this form of purpose does not diminish its aesthetic worth, and in consequence, artworks are being produced not for accumulation nor their demise in the history of art but rather for ensuring their existence in the world of both the artist and the beholder and therefore remain vigorous in history. In the case of selling and collecting the works, its utilitarian end may present the works as commodities, and some are indeed commodities. Yet, they have a major audience from different ranks of society that can appreciate their aesthetics. Moreover, history explains this argument by clarifying that most of the old masters had sold their works whether they were works of art or commissions, and many amateurs and apprentices made replicas of the masters’ works. Yet no one doubted their worth, and they remained aesthetically and intellectually valuable in the eyes of scholars and spectators. The most well-known example of this is the artist Albrecht Dürer, his paintings were copied and some artists painted and created new designs in his style, Otto Kurz noted that they excelled in imitating Dürer’s approach and vision, drawings were replicated as paintings, to the extent it was considered to be a forgery because they were sold enormously through Europe, even his monogram was imprinted in various works all over Italy, Germany and the Flemish region[[16]](#footnote-16). However, the aesthetic value of Dürer’s works has never decreased after these fake reproductions.

John Berger has also noted that paintings had a special connection with the notion of *property*, *[[17]](#footnote-17)* in 1500 up till 1900, every ruling class dominated the art sphere and set certain ideologies for the artists to follow under the art market’s surveillance. Hence, painting became a visual expression of cultural visions, and the most crucial one was the culture of consumerism. After the Industrial Revolution, the culture of consumerism reached its peak, in addition to the transformation of *exhibition value,* it became possible for all social ranks to purchase artworks. Critics assumed that the aesthetic value of those works would be affected terribly by the previous determinants, although the value of art, notably Kitsch art, lies in the eye of the beholder and if it was exposed to external changes that let it gain functional aspects, it does not necessarily lose its aesthetic value, instead, it either gains a new identity or one of the features will be more apparent than the other, it is usually the aesthetic aspect that maintains the appeal of the works and the functional aspect is generally considered to be a secondary factor that serves a specific purpose for a limited duration.

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

There are spectrums of emotions that the human being navigates throughout the day, though regarding the perception of art, one experiences an ambience of aesthetic emotions, which may be called *Aesthetic Hedonism*, Clive Bell has noted that *aesthetic emotions are a special kind of emotion that is evoked by visual artworks* [[18]](#footnote-18). They are a mode of experience that does not pertain solely to the experienced object, but to what it projects to the beholder from imprints, whether those imprints were embodied as concepts or sentiments. Hume has differentiated those imprints which he called perceptions into two categories, the first perception is “*impressions*” which are associated with feelings and the second perception is “*ideas*” which are concerned with thinking, he has divided impressions into “*sensation* “and “*reflection*” one derives from senses and the other from the experience of mind. [[19]](#footnote-19) He made such distinctions to assert that emotion is a faculty of cognition and a part of the perceptions of the mind, that can be used for reasoning and making judgments.

 P.S. Sastri has demonstrated that aesthetic emotions, as refined experiences, can play a role in forming aesthetic judgments. He has shown that feelings and emotions are mental states that involve cognitive processes and awareness of external objects. [[20]](#footnote-20) And is also sufficient to prove the aesthetic value of a work of art. However, every artwork generates a specific emotion, such as pleasure, pain, relief…etc, and it differs according to the kind of beauty presented in the work. we find that in the case of Kitsch, beauty in the repetitive and familiar sceneries of traditional art, evoked an emotion of both pleasure and pain simultaneously. It portrays a nostalgic feeling that mourns the loss of something and the contentment of remembering a fulfilling emotion or a desire. Kitsch indeed contemplates the past and glorifies its presence, and as Sastri has mentioned the revival of previous experiences is controlled by the demands of the mind. Thus, the critic’s objection to the intense sentimentality is no longer valid as the sentimentality evoked in the artwork is actually a product of cognitive faculty.

Robert C. Solomon has explained the rejection of such sentimentality by stating that the critics of the twentieth century did not reject sentimentality itself rather they refused the exaggeration of those sentiments, [[21]](#footnote-21) in addition to what they visually and intellectually express. However, the beauty of Kitsch remains in this exaggeration which provides the beholder a sense of feeling centred. People admire Kitsch's work for the energy it provokes in them, and the fantasised reality it creates. Hence, to elaborate more on this argument, one should notice that the perception of art conveys a distinctive relation between understanding and imagination which helps in creating emotions. The viewer ‘s ability to assimilate the beauty of the work depends on the act of engagement between the beholder and the work, the more he observes cognitively the artwork the greater he feels the pleasure of its aesthetic appeal, and observation here is an act of imagination associated with perceptions of mind. In the process of contemplating an artwork, the main source of the aesthetic experience is the imaginative awareness of what is presented, the mind as a faculty tries to articulate the object into conceptions and imageries, and feeling as another faculty of cognition is fulfilled by the play of imagination, evoking the sense of pleasure.

**Conclusion:**

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

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