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Kitsch: New Perspectives on a Controversial Aesthetic and Cultural Phenomenon

Lisa Schmalzried

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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Aesthetics in Kitsch Art: the Aesthetic Ideology and Teleological Purpose behind the Charged Sentimentality

Yasmine Abdrabbo – Cherine Abdrabbo

This article addresses the problem of perceiving Kitsch Art and elaborates on the philosophical approaches taken to understand better the intellectual contexts surrounding the term. It aims to endorse its aesthetic aspect and assert its right to be subsumed under the notion of high art. The researchers argue that, besides the claim that the main issue with reading kitsch lies in misperceiving it as a problem of perception, it is also a problem of misinterpretation. Critics have constrained their judgments on Kitsch Art with narrow and prejudiced contentions, while many aesthetic theories can ascertain its aesthetic existence. The most crucial of these theories are those on aesthetic emotions, as it was the emotional charge of kitsch paintings that critics used to reject and vastly criticize. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Aesthetics, Beauty, Interpretation of Art*

1. Introduction

This essay examines kitsch in the form of classical paintings and their replicas, as well as any art forms aimed at reviving classicism in the twentieth century. Critics of the twentieth century approached Kitsch Art as a sociocultural dilemma that lacked any prospect of aesthetic value. They stated that its characteristic features only served to be classified as representations of bad taste, corruption of taste, false truth, and evil in art's value system, as Hermann Broch claimed. Therefore, kitsch entailed aesthetic deficiencies sufficient to exclude it from being part of high art. The dilemma here relies on the allegation that kitsch is devoid of aesthetic merit or entails blemished aesthetics. Yet, the critiques given by critics and art historians were quite defined; they observed the exaggerated sentimentality of kitsch's artworks and

the directness of themes and objects portrayed in these works. In contrast, Tomas Kulka determined these characteristics in his book *Kitsch and Art* (1996) as the distinctive criteria for artworks to be labelled as Kitsch Art.

In addition to the previous factors, Martim de Almeida (2017) noted that kitsch constituted two crucial elements: immediacy and imitation, which form the core of its philosophy. These elements were also fiercely rejected for supposedly giving fake aesthetic responses and fake precepts. Imitation appeared through the use of former aesthetics and traditional themes or objects, perceived as a repetitive system that offered no novelty or originality. Immediacy arose from the ease of recognising the objects portrayed in Kitsch Artworks, which did not contain any symbolic or iconographic semantics to perceive and interpret, requiring no effort from the beholder to comprehend them. This may exist due to the utilitarian aspect that Kitsch Art entails, as the artworks were sold in the art markets to various social ranks after being limited to a certain elite. The proletariat and middle classes began to purchase Kitsch Art for its affordability and its representation of the taste of the elites. They were attracted to its appeal, which critics defined as a cheap emotional charge.

2. 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 depicting familiar themes, objects of daily life, or re-portraying historical or mythological vistas. Critics argued that this kind of instant response is often temporary because the beholder perceives its beauty from a functional artwork that offers trite sceneries from classical heritage. Max Ryynänen and Paco Barragán (2023, p. 24) best explained this issue by stating that "kitsch academic interpretations of the past revolve around old-fashioned dichotomies of art history versus the art market". The art market may have a certain vision of what art is, though kitsch did connect the spirit of classical revival and commercial ends, perhaps 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 (1996) explained that the assumption of kitsch's aesthetic deficiencies is inaccurate because some artworks were executed properly and with refined mastery. Therefore, 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. Additionally, the sociologist Janet Wolff (1984) has stated that the definition of art can differ from time to time based on sociological contexts.

Though it indeed seems to be a problem of perception, one could also claim that kitsch faced a problem of interpretation. Critics failed to interpret its intrinsic nature and tended to analyse the relationship between its formal and intellectual elements and the commercial aspect prejudicially, notably the emotional charge, which was perceived as an excessive cliché. One could argue that this preconception was based on ideological interests, as it is implausible

to state that any form of art can lack aesthetic value or be flawed, particularly when it has an audience. It is in the primitive nature of art to be an entity that possesses aesthetic essence and requires an aesthetic response. Consequently, it is logical to state that it possesses aesthetic value. In proving so, one can conclude that the misinterpretation of kitsch underlined a misanalysis of its aesthetic ideology.

The aesthetic ideology of kitsch resided in the idea of being a shared visual language that allows individuals to express themselves, it succeeded in embracing specific individuals with common needs and desires, for it fulfilled the absence of certain needs on both the aesthetic and ideological levels. Kitsch's ideology was established in sociological contexts that elicited psychological and utilitarian reasons for its appeal. It developed as a cultural phenomenon that sought to address the feelings of alienation prevalent among many individuals. By offering a sense of belonging and connection during a period of rapid change across all aspects of life. Hence, kitsch presented a solution for this existential dilemma through a vision that regarded art as a reflection of reality and an escape from it in conventional and affordable forms.

On the aesthetic part, kitsch relied on classical heritage to derive its value within the boundaries of ideal precepts. The beholder is drawn to its subject matter and its embodiment into formal and sensual aesthetics because it is familiar to them. They can relate to its emotional charge because it provides a sense of nostalgia and a haven from life by reviving traditional classicism. Sam Binkley argued that kitsch conveyed 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. (Binkley, 2000, p. 135)

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 aspirations and aligned with popular aesthetics. Thus, kitsch emerged as a release from life's difficulties and provided reassurance that the world remains unchanged from years past.

Critics have declared that the aesthetic response elicited by kitsch's works is false and not entirely an aesthetic experience because it derives from imitated precepts that belonged to previous periods and creates an instant and immediate sense of pleasure. However, one could not make such acute judgments solely based on the duration of the aesthetic response and the imitation aspect because an immediate and instant response does not imply a lack of aesthetic value or a false response. The aesthetic judgment should be established on the depth of the impact on the beholder, which is essentially based on the state of the event of a 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 is short or long, 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. 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 heavily criticized, with critics arguing that the beholder's response elicited by this purgation is not a true aesthetic response but rather a fake one because it is founded on immediately accessible pleasure. However, one could contend that purgation is a conventional trait of catharsis and that a major aspect of art's nature conveys such a 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, releases emotional pressures and generates a certain kind of pleasure. Therefore, the pleasure that emerges from kitsch, even if it is instant, still fulfils its purpose of creating emotional balance for the viewer. Alan Paskow (1983) noted that the purification traits were the deepest and most notable kinds of aesthetic experience. It is the most significant because it prevents emotional repression and emphasizes the role of imagination.

Art, as a cultural production, embodies social structures and certain ideologies, reflecting the time and environment in which it was created through private precepts. It may seem that art is a direct representation of political and social ideologies, though art is an autonomous monad, as Theodor Adorno (2002) claimed in his aesthetic theory. Art can be executed in such contexts without resorting to direct imitation; that is what differentiates ethical art from commodities and high art. High art serves intrinsic truth; it is autonomous through its particular modes of expressing ideas while deriving its material from reality. Adorno regards art as possessing an enigmatic characteristic that defies easy interpretation, stemming from the inherent negativity that resists dominant political and social orders. Kitsch, through its visual representation, can be considered high art due to its appropriation of the classical heritage, which embodies transcendent and timeless values that developed European visual identity.

The relationship between aesthetics and ideology is complex; it affects cultural tastes and forms aesthetic preferences. For that reason, we can find diverse artistic styles that relate to the spectrums of social classes because they entail the imprints of their values and thoughts. Some theorists considered aesthetics a framework for defining the political significance and function of culture. Terry Eagleton (1988) observed that aesthetics constituted a program for social and political reconstruction, grounded in the belief that, in Baumgartenian thought, aesthetics is not confined to art and life, but encompasses the relation between the material and the immaterial, senses and ideas, and how the sentient life of a society is shaped through a kind of perception and cognition. Baumgarten viewed aesthetic cognition as a sensuous analogue of reason. It facilitates a transition from the general principles of reason to the particularities observed through sensory

perception, leading to the creation of ideas, meanings, and ideologies. Alireza Pourmanouchehri (Pourmanouchehri, n.d) regarded aesthetics as ideological, given its capacity to shape our understanding of reality through imagination and perception. He noted that these aesthetic ideas necessitated engagement with thoughts that defy easy categorization or predefined concepts. This enables human beings to understand their existence and appreciate its beauty through new concepts.

Aesthetics demand a sort of selection, which Jacques Rancière (2004) has discussed under the notion of *the distribution of the sensible*. He argued that this was a shared regime consisting of invisible boundaries or unspoken rules within a community or society that define what counts as valuable, perceptible, and articulable. It is a political notion that is equally applicable to aesthetics. Rancière argued that the aesthetic regime is a mode of articulation between ways of doing and making. It re-evaluates the norms and inherent standards regarding perceiving a work of art in order to differentiate between true art and other representations by challenging conventional aesthetics and presenting alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the world. Hence, it creates new forms of collective visions and tastes.

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, and the other implements some kind of ambiguity due to the use of semiotic tokens, requiring a level of awareness to perceive. This kind of art normally does not attract the masses, as they tend to appreciate works that reflect their reality or 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 (Houghton, 2009). Believing this, 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. Commercial imprints also arose to shape some of the art movements, as did institutions and educational schools of art. Therefore, it is difficult to find an artistic movement that does not conceive any aesthetic ideology, as some can be perceived as acts of conformity or rebellion. In the case of Kitsch Art, one can claim that its aesthetic ideology is clear and definite.

Paul Duncum (2008) defined the meaning of aesthetics as visual appearances and their effects and interpreted ideology as a style of thinking. By this definition, we find that the essential feature of kitsch's works depends on the principle of familiarity in both the aesthetic and ideological sense. Kitsch provides familiar sceneries of classical heritage and experiences of daily life, imitating the actual world and the past in the same approach. It bases its appeal on generating an ambience of remembrance and a sense of belonging. What recalls the sense of familiarity in psychological terms 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, in a broader definition, means the repetition of certain experiences over 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, as it represents a case of co-existing alternative ideology, which Raymond Williams (as cited in Wolff, 1984, p. 53) defined as an ideology from the past but still active in the current cultural process.

Bourdieu (2020) discussed the idea of habit created by authorities and dominant institutions. He explained that the environment in which one grows up develops behaviours, habits, and aesthetic preferences subconsciously. In 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. This was better explained by the American social psychologist Robert Zajonc (1968) in his theory of the *mere-exposure effect*. It states that if a person is repeatedly exposed to certain aesthetic appearances from a young age, they will get used to them over time to the extent that they will replicate them unconsciously in daily usage. Hence, when some of the proletariat gained higher social status, they expressed themselves in a way they already knew, by what they have been familiar with since infancy. What they were exposed to used to be high art, the taste of the upper bourgeoisie and the aristocrats, and also the official taste of the state. However, the principle of familiarity has two opposing sides. One explains that aesthetic preferences are based on prior experience, making one choose something because it is familiar. The other argues that prolonged exposure to something can make it lose its appeal to the viewer. This describes the attitude of the critics towards Kitsch Art when they rejected those kinds of paintings for presenting 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 that critics sought and 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 consumerist taste characteristics in a new objective art form. These movements spawned as a reaction to social events, mostly the wars' aftermath and their 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, showcasing a significant openness to embrace conflicting tastes at the same time, such as those presented in Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, and Conceptual Art. They all offered kinds of aesthetic ideology, and each 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 or share the same degree of beauty, as there is the sublime, the transcendental, and the beautiful, among others. In modern conceptions, the notion of beauty became so 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 (1757) 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.

3. 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 it 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 (2000) 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. Consequently, artworks are produced not for accumulation or their demise in the history of art but rather to ensure their existence in the world of both the artist and the beholder, thereby remaining vigorous in history. In the case of selling and collecting the works, their 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 supports this argument by clarifying that most of the old masters sold their works, whether they were original pieces 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 (1948) noted that they excelled in imitating Dürer's approach and vision. Drawings were replicated as paintings to the extent that it was considered forgery because they were sold enormously throughout Europe. Even his monogram was imprinted on various works all over Italy, Germany, and the Flemish region. However, the aesthetic value of Dürer's works has never decreased after these fake reproductions.

John Berger (1972) has also noted that paintings had a special connection with the notion of property. From 1500 up until 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, with the most crucial one being the culture of consumerism. After the industrial revolution, the culture of consumerism reached its peak, and with 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 by these determinants. However, the value of art, notably Kitsch Art, lies in the eye of the beholder. If it is 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 becomes more apparent than the other. Usually, the aesthetic aspect maintains the appeal of the works, while the functional aspect is generally considered 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 their 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 humans navigate throughout the day. Regarding the perception of art, one experience an ambience of aesthetic emotions, which may be called Aesthetic Hedonism. According to Clive Bell as cited in Robison (2020), the aesthetic emotions are a special kind of emotion evoked by visual artworks. 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 are embodied as concepts or sentiments. Michael Lacewing mentioned that Hume (2009) differentiated these imprints, which he called perceptions, into two categories. The first perception concerns the notion of *impressions*, which are associated with feelings, and the second perception is related to *ideas*, which are concerned with thinking. He divided impressions into *sensation* and *reflection*, with one deriving from the senses and the other from the experience of the mind. 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.

Subrahmanya Sastri (1954) 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 and are 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. In the case of kitsch, beauty in the repetitive and familiar sceneries of traditional art evokes 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 desire.

Kitsch indeed contemplates the past and glorifies its presence, and as Sastri 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 a product of cognitive faculty.

Robert C. Solomon (1991) 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 and what they visually and intellectually express. However, the beauty of kitsch remains in this exaggeration, which provides the beholder with a sense of feeling centred. People admire kitsch's work for the energy it provokes in them and the fantasized reality it creates. To elaborate more on this argument, one should notice that the perception of art conveys a distinctive relationship 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 the viewer observes the artwork cognitively, the greater they feel the pleasure of its aesthetic appeal. Observation here is an act of imagination associated with perceptions of the 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 a sense of pleasure.

4. Conclusion

It is evident that kitsch has evolved into a prominent concept, impacting various forms of art. Certain critics have perceived it negatively as a representation of poor taste, while others 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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Kitsch and Morality

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Throughout the realm of aesthetics there is the general sentiment that kitsch is inherently immoral. Although kitsch itself is a relatively ambiguous term, objects falling into this category are charged with a negative ethical stigma due to their being sentimental and manipulative. In this paper, I articulate the shakiness of the claim that kitsch *is* immoral by first comparing three accounts of kitsch to demonstrate how the term kitsch can be applied (or denied) to various aesthetic objects. I then argue that the charges of sentimentality and manipulation create further ambiguities regarding kitsch. I conclude that although certain objects can be kitsch, to categorically denounce kitsch on an ethical basis is too strong a claim. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Morality, Ethics, Aesthetics, Sentimentality, Manipulation*

1. Introduction

One of the central themes governing my delve into the world of aesthetics has been the relationship between art and morality. I have explored this topic from several angles – if art has cognitive value, if voyeuristic art forces its viewers to indulge in voyeurism, if art can push us to political action, and more. My line of questioning is not unique, however, and has been the topic of the research of many. It is important to note that in exploring these inquiries the question is seldom asked if art itself is immoral – the more popular and underlying question at this intersection is moreso if art *can be* immoral.[1]

Of the angles approached in exploring this relationship between art and morality, one has stuck out more than the rest: kitsch. This term functions as a catch all for some category of object engaged with aesthetically that seemingly eludes clear definition (Higgins, 1992, p. 576). Despite this ambiguity, however, kitsch holds a strong negative connotation (Harries, 1968, p. 75). Glancing through secondary literature, it seems that to call something kitsch is not simply to imply that it is *bad*; to be kitschy is to be immoral (Broch, 1975, p. 76). Due to this ambiguity and general sense of moral disapproval, during my delve into kitsch, the line of questioning has focused on two main areas (Harries, 1968, p. 75). Simply put, I have been asking *what kitsch is*, and *if kitsch is immoral*.

[1] This point will become important later in this paper.

I must admit, my knowledge of aesthetics was quite limited prior to the start of the year 2024. Before reading Tomáš Kulka's opening chapter to *Kitsch and Art*, I had no clue what *kitsch* referred to, or what it even was. As I immersed myself in texts and engaged in discussions on kitsch, I found myself further and further from the truth of the matter. It has now been months and I still do not know what kitsch is. This lack of knowledge is not mere ignorance, I must clarify. Rather, it is confusion. Although Kulka's attempt to define kitsch is seemingly as close as we, philosophers of art, have come to refining such a broad and general term, it proves to little avail. There is still considerable ambiguity surrounding the schema of categorization. What pieces count as kitsch, and what pieces do not? Despite there being a seeming consensus that pieces such as the various renditions of dogs playing poker qualify for the marker, the 'kitschiness' of other pieces seems to stand on shaky ground. As is the nature of philosophical debate, it would be somewhat odd if there was perfect consensus over the exact pieces that fit into the category. We do not even have that level of agreement when it comes to art itself. It would be unreasonable to place the responsibility on Kulka, or even on some other individual, to provide such a particular definition of kitsch that there would be no level of ambiguity surrounding the term whatsoever.

The issue with kitsch, although partially, is not wholly due to this ambiguity. As stated above, there is ongoing contention over which works are considered kitsch, much like there is debate over what constitutes high art (or even more generally, what is considered art). Rather, kitsch's ambiguity becomes an issue during discussions of normativity surrounding the term. In other words, the issue with kitsch being ambiguous arises when asking the question: is kitsch immoral?

There are numerous issues that arise when discussing kitsch and its morality. It is often the case that during discussions surrounding kitsch, scholars will either seek to define the term themselves or reference some other schema to base their argument around. It is not as though kitsch is a polysemic term. Whereas a trunk can either refer to a rectangular storage container or the breathing apparatus of an elephant, kitsch refers to a singular class of object. In defining kitsch, we are looking for criteria to denote the same thing. The issue arises, however, in that through these attempts at establishing conditions for what constitutes kitsch, the definition of the term has become more ambiguous as opposed to more specific.

Subsequently, when declaring kitsch to be immoral, we run into numerous philosophical conundrums. First and foremost is the issue of the generality of the claim. Are we asking if kitsch *can be* immoral, or if it *is*. We could compare this distinction to that of possibility and necessity. Is it merely possible for kitsch to be immoral or is kitsch necessarily immoral in being kitsch? If the latter, we find ourselves in the predicament of arguing for why simply meeting a criterion for some aesthetic category warrants moral denouncement. If the former, however, we find ourselves delving into a different line of questioning altogether. Once we are past this point, we run into a second issue: *what* are we calling immoral? I have been reading up on kitsch for months now and still

do not know what it is. To call kitsch immoral, to me, is tantamount to declaring 'those people' evil without clarifying who 'those people' even are.

Furthermore, before even setting out to construct an ethical argument condemning kitsch, we would find ourselves in a position of first having to make numerous determinations on the category itself outside of its general criterion. If all kitsch is immoral, is all kitsch immoral in the same way? If not, what distinguishes between the immorality of different types of kitsch? *Can we* distinguish between different sub-categories of kitsch while still meeting certain conditions for the larger kitsch umbrella? *What is* kitsch? Is kitsch a form of art, or merely a category of aesthetic work distinct from art? What separates kitsch from bad art? If kitsch is a type of art, we would then have to ask if art itself can be immoral. If not, however, we would then have to explore the definitions of both art and kitsch, possibly reformulating both to ensure that they preclude the other so that art may escape moral judgement, whereas kitsch could not.

Even then, regardless of if kitsch is art, to argue for an ethical condemnation of kitsch would consequently raise the question of where a kitsch objects' ethical weight lies. Is it the viewer that is immoral? Is it the producer of the piece? Is it the piece itself? Is it some combination of the three? If either of the first two, we would then need to determine what ethical system we are arguing through and how these perpetrators are worthy of moral denouncement. If, however, the ethical weight lies in the work itself, we would then have to pose the question of if an inanimate object *can* have any moral standing outside of its interaction with a viewer. The larger point being that to argue that kitsch is immoral is no simple task.

Before continuing, I do want to clarify that although I am asking these large questions, many (if not all) are far beyond the scope of this paper. My task here is not to provide some grand definition of kitsch (or art). Likewise, I am not seeking to argue that kitsch is *not* immoral. My concern has nothing to do with kitsch and its ethical standing. My task, rather, is to problematize the assertion that kitsch *is* immoral by exploring the shakiness of the terminology involved in such a declaration. How can we have a unified idea that kitsch is immoral when so many distinct works fall under the large category?

In writing this paper, I split my argument into two main sections. Each section, subsequently, is further divided into sub-sections. I first go through numerous definitions of kitsch to demonstrate the varying accounts of the term. This section will not serve as an endorsement of any uses of the term, but rather a demonstration of *other* views. It is in this section that I demonstrate the broadness of the category of kitsch, and how kitsch is defined in relation to its audience. I then delve into the moral quandaries of kitsch, namely its charges of manipulation and sentimentality, and explore how each charge becomes weaker when applied to the whole of kitsch. Through an exploration of sentimentality, we find a similar quality as observed in kitsch – its foundation in relationality. Finally, I end with some concluding remarks and display my bibliography. Let us begin.

2. Kitsch as it is Defined

As previously stated, regardless of how kitsch is defined, the term holds an implication of "moral disapproval" (Harries, 1968, p. 75). To call something kitsch is not merely descriptive, but normative. Most self-respecting artists would not *want* their work to be kitsch. We can see this normativity at play when examining various definitions of kitsch. In this section, I examine the descriptive definitions of kitsch as expounded by Tomáš Kulka, Gillo Dorlfes, and Kathleen Higgins. Although each are distinct in their approach, the accounts of kitsch in question find an underlying unity in the endorsement of Dorlfes' and Milan Kundera's descriptions of kitsch.[2]

2.1 Kulka

Kulka identifies three conditions for a work to be categorized as Kitsch. These criteria are:

> 1) [k]itsch depicts objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions," 2) "[t]he objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable," and 3) "[k]itsch does not substantially enrich our associates relating to the depicted objects or themes. (Kulka, 2002, pp. 29-37)

Based on these conditions we can identify the painting *A Friend in Need* by Brow and Bigelow as being paradigmatic of Kulka's characterization of kitsch. This painting depicts an object highly charged with a stock emotion (a group of dogs), its object is instantly and effortlessly identifiable (a group of dogs playing poker), and it does not enrich our association with the group of dogs, or with poker.

There are two underlying points central to Kulka's definition of kitsch meriting closer examination for the purposes of our discussion: the ideas that i) kitsch is relational, and ii) kitsch is not art. In reference to the first point, to Kulka, it is not just a property of the work that makes it kitsch, but how we interact with it. The second and third conditions are exemplary of this claim. For a work to be kitsch we, the viewers, would need to be able to effortlessly identify the objects, as well as not have our associations with the object enriched. If, for any reason, I was unable to identify the object or I felt my association with the object change (positively) because of my viewing of the work, Brow and Bigelow's *A Friend in Need* work would no longer be kitsch. In terms of the second underlying point regarding Kulka's notion of kitsch, we turn to the second chapter of *Kitsch and Art*. It is here that Kulka begins by

[2] In each account, we find a reference to Kundera's often quoted passage on kitsch: "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 say: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass./ It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch" (Kundera, 2004, p. 251). Underlying this view of kitsch is the idea that an objects' kitchiness is found in relation, a feature common to each account examined in this paper. To Kundera, kitsch ceases to be kitsch once recognized at kitsch, entailing a dynamic necessary for an objects' categorization of kitsch. Likewise, in stating that kitsch is made kitsch by a tear entails that it is in one's reception of some object that it becomes kitsch. While exploring Kundera's notion of kitsch may yield further considerations in terms of its morality, Kundera appears to think of kitsch as a broader category than one confined by aesthetics. In other words, kitsch to Kundera relates to objects outside of the consideration of art. To delve deeper into his notion of kitsch, unfortunately, would exceed the scope of this paper. For Kundera's conception of kitsch, see Kundera (2004).

positing a disconnect between the titular terms. He states, "[c]onsumers of kitsch do not buy kitsch because it is kitsch; they buy it because they take it for art" (Kulka, 2002, p. 44). Implied in this statement, kitsch is *not* art, first and foremost. And so, when he is describing conditions for a work to be kitsch, he is referring to aesthetic objects, not to art. This distinction is important, as it not only reinforces the idea that kitsch is not simply bad art, but also formulates an idea of kitsch that is bound in an element of imitation: kitsch is not art, but appears as though it is art.

He goes on to describe kitsch as

> integral part of our modern culture… flourishing now more than ever before. You find it everywhere. It welcomes you to restaurants, greets you in the bank, and smiles at you from advertising billboards. (Kulka, 2002, p. 16)

Although Kulka's criterion for kitsch are relatively specific, it seems that he does not have a narrow view of what qualifies as kitsch. Advertisements, for example, are kitsch and not art. This assessment seems to be further reinforced by his ideas that kitsch "comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them," that "kitsch never ventures into the avant-garde," that it "never questions anything", and that it "does not require interpretation" (Kulka, 2002, pp. 27, 33, 99, 109). By nature of advertising, we seldom must interpret the subject matter depicted on a billboard or in a commercial. The advertisement does not disturb our worldview but plays on them for some ulterior purpose.

It is worth drawing attention to a possible connection between Kulka's and Clement Greenberg's notions of kitsch. To Greenberg, kitsch functions as a "distraction from boredom," "demand[ing] nothing of its customers except their money," and imitating the effects of art (Greenberg, 1961, p. 10, 15). This description of kitsch's function parallels Kulka's third condition – in which kitsch does not enrich one's association to the object viewed. Where they differ, however, is that, to Greenberg, kitsch functions moreso as a force drawing artists away from ambition and the avant-garde, and towards the ease of increased profits (Greenberg, 1961, p. 11). Thought of in this way, kitsch appears an effect of capitalism on the production of art.[3] It is not a phenomenon found in reception of an object, but its creation in its author playing it safe for the sake of commercial success.[4]

[3] Sianne Ngai builds on this point of the impact of commercialization on art. To Ngai, cuteness, what might be considered as a category of stock image necessary to Kulka's definition of kitsch, emerges as "a term of evaluation… in the nascent mass culture of the industrial nineteenth century… [contributing] to the ideological consolidation of the middle-class home as a space organized around consumption" (Ngai, 2010, p. 951). To delve too deeply into the socio-economic realm of kitsch, however, would exceed the scope of this paper.

[4] Although Greenberg's account of kitsch may merit further inspection in relation to this discussion, his criteria for what qualifies as kitsch are quite capacious. To Greenberg, one might consider all popular and commercial art to be kitsch (Greenberg, 1961, p. 9). Further, because of the strong connections he draws between kitsch and commercialization, focusing on his account runs the risk of far exceeding the scope of this paper.

2.2 Dorfles

In Gillo Dorfles' collection of essays entitled *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, he describes kitsch in a much broader manner than Kulka. Rather than outlining a set of conditions for the reader, or outright defining kitsch, he instead describes two distinct processes of

> 'kitschification': one related to intentionality, and the other to sentimentalization. The former method of kitschification is one in which an artwork is 'transferred' from its real status and used for a different purpose from the one for which it was created. (Dorfles, 1975, p. 17)

The type of kitsch objects Dorfles seems to have in mind here would include the variations of historical art pieces present in museum gift shops, where the original piece may have had some artistic value but has since been 'kitschified' through commodification and used for some purpose other than aesthetic appreciation.

The second description of kitschification outlined by Dorfles is not in a method of production, but rather through the process of sentimentalization achieved via reproduction. This type of kitschification occurs through

> the attitude of the individual when confront[ing] artistic and natural phenomena, which are observed from that particular point of view which immediately transforms them into something inferior, false, sentimental and no longer genuine. (Dorfles, 1975, p. 29)

In this latter process, it seems that what Dorfles has in mind is in an observer of art witnessing some piece, and attempting to recreate some element of it, but instead sentimentalizing the piece and divorcing it from its original genuine character. An example of this sort of kitsch can be seen in when comparing Edwin Landseer's *Trial by Jury* (the original) to *A Friend in Need* (the kitschified piece).[5]

From these two processes of kitschification we can extract a basic Dorflesian definition of kitsch. In both instances, it seems that kitsch objects are those that exist in relation to some other piece. It is a work that imitates another in some way, but either diverts from the original intention of the work or is inauthentic by sentimentalizing the initial piece. Through this lens, we might consider objects to be kitsch insofar as they imitate or sentimentalize some other piece of art. It is important to consider, however, that Dorfles does not seem to outright preclude kitsch from art. Although one could argue that in the first case of kitschification, insofar as the object is no longer intended to hold aesthetic value, it is no longer art. In the second case, however, the pieces in questions would seem to qualify as a subset of bad art, rather than just non-art altogether.

[5] It is worth noting that by both Kulka and Dorfles's accounts of kitsch, *Trial by Jury* avoids the category of kitsch. For Kulka, *Trial by Jury* was both the original painting, unique in its time, and was intended as satire. Because of these two elements, these law practicing dogs enrich our relationship via satire, and is thus not kitsch. On Dorfles' account, however, this is the original piece and has not gone through the sentimentalization process, and is, therefore, not kitsch.

2.3 Higgins

Unlike the prior two accounts of kitsch examined above, Kathleen Higgins' notion of kitsch is centred on the *experience* of kitsch, as opposed to solely on an object itself. To Higgins, kitsch exists "only in a relational context" (Higgins, 1992, p. 568). A piece is kitsch because it "provoke[s] a certain response" (ibid). Expanding on this idea of an object becoming kitsch through its reception, as opposed to solely through its production, she states

> [i]n order for an object to be experienced as kitsch, the object must somehow resonate with largely preconscious desires and beliefs; but an object's facility for doing this is not an independent property of the object. Instead, this facility is a relational property that depends on the object's cultural context and its relationship to… beliefs and desires held by members of its audience" (ibid). Despite this description of kitsch in terms of its relational properties, and the assertion that is primarily defined through its reception, she does admit that "many objects seem clearly designed to provoke a kitsch response. (ibid)

In that way, we can understand kitsch as being a category not only placed on a work primarily through its reception, but one that can be demanded of the work itself. In other words, a work can be kitsch purely based on how it is received (or kitschified, harkening back to Dorfles), but the work may also warrant a kitsch response based on its "kitsch appeal" (Higgins, 1992, p. 578). She does not seem to distinguish between kitsch and art, instead relegating the category to one of audience interaction with the piece in question.

Speaking to her characterization of kitsch itself, however, Higgins describes those works as typically being "simple and attractive," and idealizing of its subject matter (Higgins, 1992, 572). Nonetheless, Higgins concedes that there is a difficulty in identifying kitsch objects. Because, in her view, an objects' kitschiness is partly due to a viewers' response, "there is no clearly definable 'set' of kitsch objects" (Higgins, 1992, p. 576). Although Higgins' definition, like the previous two, would likely agree that the *A Friend in Need* painting would qualify as kitsch, in theory, one might be able to consider an artwork such as the Van Gough's *The Starry Night* as kitsch, purely based on one's reception of the piece. An argument may have to be made for the simplicity and idealized aspects of the work, though those elements are not required for the work to be kitsch. Such an argument would serve only to reinforce one's receiving of the piece as kitsch, but not qualifying it as kitsch in and of itself. It is worth emphasizing here that Van Gough's *The Starry Night* would avoid the label of kitsch under the schema provided by both Kulka and Dorfles.

Through examination of the views of kitsch by Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we see two common underlying elements: i) an object's kitschiness is not due solely to the properties of the work, and ii) there is a simplicity involved in the property of the work that brings the object closer to being kitsch.[6]

[6] A possible objection to this point of kitchiness existing outside of just the properties of the work may be found in Sontag's notion of camp and its overlap with kitsch. To Sontag, "[c]amp is… a quality discoverable in objects and the behavior of persons" (Sontag, 2022, p._54). Thought of in this way, there is a quality of camp inherent to an object regardless of

It is important to note however that in each subsequent definition of kitsch we found a new type of aesthetic piece included that the previous definition may have been friendly to but did seem to outright point to. Kulka's view of kitsch would preclude Van Gough's *The Starry Night*, whereas Higgins' did not *necessarily*. Likewise, one could make the argument that *A Friend in Need* did not constitute kitsch through Higgins' view, despite Kulka's three conditions being met.

The underlying intention of this section is to illustrate the following points: 1) definitions of kitsch, while pointing to a singular category of aesthetic object, differ in subtle ways, and 2) kitsch is a broad term encapsulating numerous different types of objects. Although these three figures might agree on the basic properties distinguishing kitsch, they each differ in their views to such a degree that objects not included in one's definition become integral in another (Kulka, 2002, pp. 15-16, 27 and Higgins, 1992, pp. 569-570). We can see that although there is some general agreement over what constitutes kitsch, there is contention over what exactly kitsch is. What might be kitsch to one might not be kitsch to another. These points become even more pertinent when discussing the morality of kitsch.

3. Kitsch and Morality

In the views of Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we can identify two main charges of immorality present in kitsch: sentimentality and manipulation. In the Dorflesian account of kitsch, sentimentality is at the forefront – the second method of kitschification occurs *through* sentimentalization. In Kulka's account, however, this charge is more subtle. Kulka's first condition, that kitsch must depict "objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions," can be read as referring to sentiment, particularly when considering stock emotion (Kulka, 2002, p. 28).[7] Manipulation, on the other hand, is not a charge explicit in any of the three accounts. The closest we come to an explicit charge in our previous discussion on kitsch is in Kulka's idea that kitsch *appears* to be art, as opposed to *actually* being art. Instead, manipulation largely appears to be a sub-charge of the immorality of kitsch through kitsch's being sentimental. In other words, kitsch is manipulative *because* it is sentimental. This manifestation of sentimentality through manipulation is at the forefront of Higgins' view on kitsch. She characterizes kitsch as "provok[ing] a certain response" (Higgins, 1992, p. 569). This response is, subsequently, related to the emotions brought forth as a reaction to kitsch (Higgins, 1992, pp. 569, 578).

In this section I explore the charges of kitsch being manipulative and sentimental, problematising each accusation by relating them to

how one relates to it. The issue, however, arises that in Sontag's view there is not a complete equivalence of camp to kitsch (Sontag, 2022, p. 65). Rather, the overlap between these categories appears through a "'serious' point of view," which, in turn, points to a relationality necessary in the kitchiness of an object (Sontag, 2022, p. 55). To delve further into the nuances of camp and kitsch, however, would exceed the scope of this paper.

[7] Stock emotions" is a vague term, but he describes them as triggering an "unreflective emotional response," which is a criticism of sentimentality present in works such as Joseph Kupfer's "The Sentimental Self."

kitsch's ambiguity, as well as existing ambiguity present in each accusation. The charge of sentimentality rests upon the immorality of sentimentality, which, as we shall soon see, is somewhat ambiguous. In at least two accounts of sentimentality, what is sentimental arises through a sentimentalizing process. When it comes to manipulation, on the other hand, we find that the immorality present is predicated on deception – an act that is intentional – while this may not always be the case. As each charge is related to the other, I begin more broadly with the characterization of kitsch as sentimental, to then move on deeper into the charge of manipulation.

3.1 Kitsch as Sentimental

Although sentimentality appears as a charge against kitsch common to both Kulka and Dorfles, it is not unique to their views. Kitsch is often viewed as distinct due to this very element (Dyck and Johnson, 2017, p. 285). Thorsen Botz-Borstein goes so far as to describe kitsch as "an aesthetic product… [depending] on… sentimentality" (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p. 306). In that way, sentiment can be understood as an integral part of what makes kitsch *kitsch* (Solomon, 1991, p. 4). But what exactly is sentimentality?

Much like kitsch itself, sentimentality is a term elusive of exact definition. Mary Midgley describes sentimentality as the "[misrepresentation of] the world in order to indulge our feelings" (Midgley, 1979, p. 385). In this view, sentimentality is formulated as a lie produced in the service of self-indulgence. Deborah Knight, on the other hand, characterizes sentimentality as "a concept standardly associated with tender, comforting emotions and gentle feelings such as pity, affection, sympathy, fondness, caring, and compassion" (Knight, 1999, p. 411). This latter description of sentimentality seems to align, somewhat, with the treatment of the term by Joseph Kupfer, though not entirely. In "The Sentimental Self," Kupfer describes sentimentality through contrast to complex emotions. Throughout his paper, sentiments are characterized as emotions precluding "[t]hought and self-reflection," and rather pertaining to the emotions that are "warm [and] tender," that serve only to "[make] us feel good about ourselves" (Kupfer, 1996, pp. 547, 553, 557). In Kupfer's sense, sentiment would seem to be just those emotions that are simplistic, rather than complex. He does clarify, however, that simple emotions in and of themselves are not sentimental, perse, but become so after undergoing a process of sentimentalization (Kupfer, 1996, 544).[8] He describes this process as one in which we simplify our emotional responses to achieve "quick and easy affective resolution" (ibid).[9]

Here we notice a parallel to our conundrum with the term kitsch. Much like the views of Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, we can identify a common underlying theme to the treatment of sentimentality across these three scholars, but with notable differences. In the case of Knight and Kupfer, sentimentality refers to simpler emotions, yet to Midgley it seems to be concerned moreso with

[8] Much like Dorfles' account of kitsch.

[9] He does not, unfortunately, explain exactly what this process looks like step by step, but instead refers to its outcomes.

a distortion of reality. This self-deceit can be seen as a shared view of Kupfer, insofar as the sentimentalizing process functions as a way of undercutting emotional responses through projecting a simplification of reality, but is largely absent in Knight's view. As a result, sentimentality describes two distinct occurrences—one of simplicity and one of distortion. Unless all that is simple is a distortion, we find a term a notable ambiguity where sentimentality refers to both.

When it comes to the criticism of kitsch as being sentimental, we run into a few issues. Firstly, the seeming danger in at least two of the accounts of sentimentality discussed above seems to be contingent on some active process undertaken by a subject. To both Kupfer and Midgley, sentiments come to be *through* a sentimentalizing process of sorts; the danger lies in an action performed by a person. And so, if kitsch's immorality lies in its sentimentality, then is it sentimental in and of itself, or due to its being sentimentalized by the viewer? While we could argue that the piece itself provokes its viewer into a sentimentalizing process, we would consequently run into a secondary issue: a primary charge against sentimentality is in self-indulgence (Botz-Bornstein, 2015, p. 310 and Solomon, 1991, p. 10). In other words, the immorality of sentimentality lies on the person indulging in their sentiment, i.e. sentimentalizing. As Robert Solomon states, "the self-indulgence argument shifts the indictment away from the object of sentimentality and back to the subject, to the viewer and the not the art or artist" (Solomon, 1991, p. 10). When one over-indulges in, say, dessert, we seldom blame the cake for being too enticing. Rather, the fault lies in the person whom self-indulged. What distinguishes kitsch from dessert? Outside of pertaining to largely different categories of object, it seems that kitsch is unique in its manipulative nature, or so says Brown, Higgins, Karsten Harries, and Herman Broch.

3.2 Kitsch as Manipulative

To Broch and Harries, kitsch distorts reality into a "falsehood" (Harries, 1968, p. 152 and Broch, 1975, p. 49). It is an illusion parading around as art (Harries, 1968, p. 149). To Brown, kitsch is designed to serve a specific purpose distinct from aesthetic appreciation (Brown, 2000, pp. 42-45). It is commodity *disguised* as art (Brown, 2000, p. 45). And to Higgins, kitsch seeks to idealize and simplify, to "[provide] easy, effortless catharsis" (Higgins, 1992, pp. 569-572). In other words, "kitsch gives us a false and fraudulent… vision of the world" (Solomon, 1991, p. 5). Underlying each of these views on kitsch is the element of deceit. Kitsch deceives us into sentimentality. We approach kitsch with the vulnerability required for aesthetic appreciation, and kitsch, in turn, greets us with some underhanded goal. We can see cases of this when looking at kitsch objects such as propaganda, or advertisements, where they appear as art but, in fact, aim to manipulate us into indulging some desire. As is the character of manipulation, the producer of kitsch, and consequently the kitsch itself, hold an intention to deceive. Where this notion falters, however, is that not all objects that qualify as kitsch intend to pass as art.

In describing one's experience with a classic kitsch object (a fridge magnet

brandishing artwork in a museum giftshop), Cheryl Fok articulates the point that certain kitsch objects are "aesthetically designed, yet are not – and do not even pretend to [be] – great art" (Fok, 2024). In many cases in which we encounter kitsch in our everyday lives, as described by Kulka in his inclusion of advertisements as kitsch, or by Dorfles in his description of kitschification as entailing some other purpose than the one initially intended by the original work, we interact with kitsch where "aesthetics [are] not the point" (Fok, 2024). The way we "aesthetically relate to" a puzzle depicting the Mona Lisa differs vastly from the way we would interact with the painting itself (Fok, 2024).

Although one may concede that there *are* kitsch objects intended to deceive, this does not preclude kitsch objects that are kitsch for kitsch sake. In that way, these pieces of kitsch would not hold an intentionality to deceive or manipulate. And so, if those pieces of kitsch were sentimentalized, it would not be a process invoked by the piece itself but rather the self-indulgence of the viewer of the piece. In that way, the immorality of certain pieces of kitsch would then not pertain solely to kitsch, perse, but of the kitsch viewer. Consequently, the charge that kitsch is immoral would instead have to be that the *viewer* of kitsch is immoral when it comes to certain pieces. Furthermore, as alluded to by the characterizations of kitsch provided by Kulka and Higgins, much of what makes an object kitsch lies in its interaction with its viewer. A piece is not kitsch solely because of the properties of a piece. At least partly, an object becomes kitsch if its viewer experiences a kitsch response to the object. Understood through this lens, if kitsch is immoral, part of what makes it immoral is in the attitude of the viewer to the kitschified object. Kitsch cannot be kitsch in and of itself, and so if kitsch is immoral, part of that immorality comes from a view that is imposed on an object thereby making it kitsch.

We can further complicate this assertion that kitsch is categorically immoral by comparing two pieces that would typically qualify as kitsch. Although one could make an argument that a puzzle depicting the *Mona Lisa* is immoral in some way, intuitively it would have to be immoral in a different way than kitsch used in advertisements. Whereas the puzzle does not seek to manipulate, the advertisement does. While the puzzle does not even pretend to be art, the advertisement may. Based on intention alone, the former is not trying to do anything other than exist as a puzzle, whereas the latter might seek to function both to evoke desire, as well as convince the viewer of some message. Again, my point is not that kitsch is underappreciated, moral, immoral, or anything of the sort; it is that to claim that kitsch is immoral warrants further exploration and argumentation.[10]

[10] While one could assert the additional charge of kitsch being immoral based on how it is used, such as in propaganda or to further commercial success (sales), this charge positions the immorality present on the person using the kitsch objects, as opposed to kitsch itself. As such, kitsch would not be immoral qua kitsch but would be a *tool* of an immoral agent. If this charge is applied to kitsch itself however, that there is some property of kitsch that predisposes it to such uses, it consequently falls under the category of manipulation—that kitsch is immoral because it is manipulative and used to manipulate—which is addressed above.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have explored the notion that kitsch is immoral. Such a general claim raises numerous questions that ought to be answered pertaining to what kitsch is, where its immorality lies, and what makes it immoral. As we have seen through the definitions of kitsch provided by Kulka, Dorfles, and Higgins, kitsch is a broad term that points both to a specific class of object, as well as to other pieces that are tangentially related. The charges of kitsch being immoral are largely rooted in its sentimentality and, consequently, its manipulation. Through an exploration of each of these terms, we can see that while certain kitsch objects fit the criteria of being immoral due to these charges, others do not. Although certain kitsch objects seek to deceive and invoke sentimentality in its viewer, others merely exist as kitsch for kitsch sake. Additionally, because, at its basis, part of what makes kitsch *kitsch* is in its interaction with the viewer, to describe kitsch as immoral solely for being kitsch would partly be a moral standing imposed by a viewer on some object.

Before ending, I would like to re-articulate that this paper is *not* an argument in defence of kitsch. I am not aiming to say that kitsch is moral, or that kitsch is neither sentimental nor manipulative. Further, I am not intending to argue for or against sentimentality's moral standing. My sole purpose in writing this paper is to problematize the assertion that kitsch is immoral by exploring the ambiguity entailed in such a claim through highlighting the wiggle room provided by the terms: kitsch, sentimentality, and manipulation. It might be reasonable to call some kitsch immoral for being deceitful. It might be reasonable to call *some* kitsch immoral for being sentimental. It might even be reasonable to call some kitsch outright evil, but as I have argued in this paper, it seems unreasonable to state that *kitsch is immoral* without further distinguishing between different types of kitsch or refining the definition of kitsch to be more specific than a proverbial finger pointing in a general direction. I conclude with the following sentiment: kitsch *can be* immoral, but there is insufficient precision to say that kitsch *is* immoral.

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Kitsch as Experience of the World

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The term *kitsch*, widely laden with negative connotations, has often been used to designate worthless decorative objects or as a synonym for artistic failure. However, there is something in kitsch that, beyond its apparent low quality, distinguishes it from other matters as a novel and useful tool for expanding the horizon of meanings in the world. Kitsch generates an irresistible force of attraction towards its spectators, capturing their attention in a remarkable way. This allure belongs to a rarefied nature that highlights the pleasures and delights of an aesthetic appeal, opening up a space for social critique. Its apparent lack of value is thus mitigated by its ability to promote a radically relativistic attitude that establishes a conciliatory balance between what our reality is and what it could be. It is precisely here that all its power to shape our experience of the world resides. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Experience, Democratization, Effect, Pleasure*

1. Introduction. On the appeal of Kitsch

Kitsch is often associated with evoking a certain nostalgia that leads us, beyond the object itself, to experience kitsch as a statement about the structure of meanings in the world around us. For those who expect a challenge to established norms, this kitsch experience boldly implies a form of expression that, although eccentric and unusual, allows for the celebration of diversity and a break from conventional taste. In this sense, the appeal of kitsch may be confined to a specific, though broad, type of people distinguished by their bad taste (Kulka, 2011). But beyond that, its mode of presentation implies undeniable discursive power. The greatest virtue of kitsch could be what we consider its flaw; its aesthetics not only respond to the emergence of rapid industrialization and new cultural traditions but also serve as an eminently effective channel for them. Kitsch, though sometimes seen as something of extreme lowliness or bad reputation art, enormously amplifies the forms of current reality. In this aspect, kitsch is one of the most precise tools for representing the *iconic moment*[1] of the present and allowing its reconstruction and reformulation.

[1] We refer to this iconic moment as the event that presents reality as strictly present. In this sense, our experience of the world is mediated by the milestone of the current, which reconfigures every perspective that becomes subsumed within its temporal framework.

Although its popular appeal is intertwined with the unique emotional charge it evokes, kitsch redefines the beauty of the banal, highlighting the inherent tenderness in common objects. Through this operation, everyday life acquires an aura of goodness, of integral and incorruptible emotion that awakens sympathy. Around it, we feel safe and comfortable with the apparent innocence of new objects. The pleasurable supplants the threatening and brings the viewer closer to the object, held in a soft embrace. Thus, the success of kitsch essentially depends on this emotion. Its product comforts not only because it evokes a spontaneous reaction in us but also because we know we are reacting 'as we should', that is, we are moved appropriately (Kulka, 2011).

Kitsch reaffirms our most basic beliefs and feelings; it gives us the sense that we are not wrong. The evocation of common feelings aims for an effect that applies to society as a whole and generally produces the same results. Kitsch appeals to a precondition in individuals, a search for a certain tenderness, awakening that childlike need for closeness and maternal bond. Kitsch naturally comforts the whiny child we all carry inside; it speaks a common language that appeals to that inner desire for calm and tranquility. Far from esoteric language and intellectualism, its realism adheres to the most worn-out and repeated graphic conventions (Kulka, 2011), making us feel genuine comfort. Its adherence to the conventions of the moment allows it to easily connect the public with a work designed to be embraced in a kind of rediscovery of the object that kitsch transforms. It is precisely here that its great appeal lies.

2. Kitsch as the re-discovery of objects

Walter Benjamin (2008, p. 236) stated that "the side which things turn toward the dream is kitsch". It is precisely this side or more familiar contour of objects, wrapped like a dream over the object, that makes us pay attention to attractive things. Kitsch is a kind of repetition of the childhood experience; a re-dreaming of the discovery of objects. Benjamin (2008, p. 237) also said that "when we reach for the banal, we take hold of the good along with it—the good that is there (open your eyes) right before you". When there is no more space for the diffuse and we surrender to an intertwined intimacy, a conversation ornamented with objects, this experience produces empathy, a certain love. Kitsch is a dialogue in its essential truth with things. Thus, "the interlocutors are freed from the obligation to be polite" (*Ibid*.) and reserve the possibility of misunderstandings. In that precise moment, things become clear.

Kitsch plays with styles already digested by society. Its innovation precisely lies in not innovating, in giving another turn and squeezing what is already obsolete. Kitsch does without more embellishments than the object itself; it plays with that 'it is what it is'. And this is how kitsch becomes familiar, close. Precisely, the kitsch object is, in itself, what it is, what presents itself as itself. Thus, kitsch establishes a clear dependence on context. What differentiates it is that it speaks to us about what exists but has ceased to be; this occurs by highlighting and taking on a renewed form what had been blended with normality. Kitsch neither innovates, nor invents, nor expands the expressive

power of objects; it simply represents schematically and makes objects noticeable again. It enhances the inherent characteristics of the materiality of objects and presents them as they are, but emphasized in themselves. In this sense, kitsch not only represents, but re-presents. It emphasizes the reality or existence of an object. Consequently, the associations provoked by the kitsch image are the same as those provoked by the label: they basically produce the same effect. The label summarizes the image, and the image summarizes the label (Kulka, 2011).

For Susan Sontag (2018), kitsch represents an excess of emotion that is superficial or inauthentic. This excessively sentimental nature of kitsch distinguishes it from other matters like elevated art, which seeks depth and authenticity in its expressions. In this sense, kitsch, when inscribed within the sphere of art, is seen as a superficial, sentimentalist expression aimed at mass consumption. It is considered 'easy' art, appealing to immediate emotions and based on repetitive and predictable formulas. Approaches like Sontag's point out that the industrialization and massification of culture since the 19th century blurred the boundaries between elevated art and kitsch. While elevated art became more specialized and exclusive, kitsch emerged as an accessible medium for urban masses, generating a democratization of taste that challenged traditional cultural hierarchies, trivializing the artistic values that resembled a form of authority over the discipline. However, kitsch is not relegated to being just a mode of art but extends beyond it into the everyday. The poetics of art based on kitsch takes aesthetic, conceptual, or symbolic elements from kitsch but re-signifies, transforms, or re-contextualizes them within a deliberate artistic framework. This approach does not naively reproduce kitsch, but critically explores it as a creative tool. However, kitsch in its absolute dimension operates by directly influencing the way we look, know, and remember the world. From all of this arises the relevance of kitsch. It effectively fosters the memory industry. The object of memory refers us to the experience itself of the object, which, more than imitating or replicating, re-presents. The success of kitsch lies in the prior associations linked to the represented object, associations that it does not alter (Kulka, 2011). Therefore, kitsch does not create beauty, but parasitizes it and reveals it as a subtle trick that captures our attention. Kitsch is a kind of transparent glaze that reveals the attraction operation that objects exert over us. And this is how kitsch acquires a new dimension: its ability to reflect the contradictions of late capitalism and consumer culture. Its artifice and sentimentality allow for reflection on traditional aesthetic values, as well as on the role of art in contemporary society.

In kitsch, we glimpse the path that things follow. This is "the last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things" (Benjamin, 2008, p. 238). Through kitsch, genuine contact with the world, with things, becomes possible again. It completes the opportunity for man to approach reality. Man equips and reorders himself before a new sensation of the world that reconfigures nostalgia and allows for subjective emancipation.

3. The kitsch effect: nostalgia, escapism, and liberation

Closely related to this *new sensation of the world* made possible by the rediscovery of objects through kitsch, new perspectives arise that float and replace established conventions. A large part of the essence of kitsch, in its application to production, consists of replacing the ethical category with the aesthetic category; it imposes on the engineer and the artist the obligation to produce, not a 'good work', but a 'pleasant work': what matters most is the effect (Broch, 2011).[2] In this way, kitsch forces the illustration of the world as it is desired; it shows us the possibility of a pleasant world that is to be constructed, but at the same time, it uncovers the lie and illusion of the real world. Kitsch thrives on effects that, when applied to things, make them attractive to the analytical and attentive gaze. Thus, it suspends things and presents them for analysis in a way similar to what Sontag said about how Camp operates: Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role (Sontag, 2018).

As we can see, kitsch operates as a sort of ontological reconstitution of the object. In this sense, there is a bit of kitsch in all the arts and creative activities. It is precisely experimentation that gives rise to the instruments that allow for these effects. Therefore, what already existed, what has already been tried and tested, is destined to inevitably reappear in kitsch (Broch, 2011). Kitsch submits to the dogmatism of the past, of what has already existed. It never takes its words from the reality of the ongoing world, but from what is pre-established and prefabricated. The *cliché*, that realm of reused presence, is the territory of divine recreation in kitsch. Thus, it does not seek depth or authenticity, but imitation.

In a certain way, kitsch tends toward a bias towards the past. As Broch (2011) stated, kitsch art tries to communicate to man the security of being to save him from the threat of darkness, as a system of imitation. Kitsch thus makes use of art to show the reality of the world through its infinite falsification. It uses it as a lure, as a deception, and distances us from future perspectives on the reality now presented as replaceable. It thus makes us feel an irrepressible need for satisfaction: personal satisfaction with affections constitutes the most abundant source of kitsch (Broch, 2011). Kitsch leans on personal nostalgia for a better, past world; any historically revived world emanates beauty. Kitsch soothes this nostalgia through established conventions, attempting to establish an immediate relationship with the past and presenting us with a multiplicity of possibilities of being. Consequently, it alleviates anxiety and suffering with an atmosphere necessary for human moderation.

[2] The effect might be where the greatest power of kitsch lies. This does not refer to any embellishment but rather to the ease with which kitsch endows objects with a kind of accessibility and versatility that makes us vulnerable to their collection and experience. In this sense, the apparent lack of uniqueness in the objects is compensated by a certain spectacularity that makes the objects present before us (Olalquiaga, 2007).

Kitsch establishes itself as a temporary escape toward the rational, toward the safety of things themselves. Through imitation, objects acquire the appearance of prescribed remedies against the irrational. The copying of specific characteristics of art then entails a creative act from which emerges a new work of art with simple forms and endowed with its own fanciful character, constantly resorting to the most primitive methods. In this way, a link is established between the fundamentals of reality and its compositional form. Here, there is no subjective or objective freedom, nor a possibility of accessing real words. However, this is what drives the system toward imitation. Appeals to sentiment serve a higher purpose within the value of the system, appealing to the darker and Dionysian aspects of existence, the impulse of blood and feeling (Broch, 2011). There is, therefore, a pseudo-conception of the world, a romantic novel that treats feelings symptomatically through prescribed formulas. In kitsch, all feelings are inevitably destined to transform into a kind of rational compendium of copies and imitations.

The efforts kitsch makes to dissociate itself from its own representative methods in order to present itself slightly as of a nature different from art also serve to highlight its limitations as a tool for emancipation. The banalization of reality with which kitsch operates generates the possibility of critique of the established structures. Thus, no longer being a captive structure, reality's falsity is unveiled, and with that, kitsch is no longer necessary. The satisfaction derived from the use of finite means thus gives kitsch a certain falseness under which the ethical wrong is intuited (Broch, 2011). However, this is collateral damage. The escape from the fatal, from death, that occurs in the kitsch experience, pretends to be an apparent overcoming of time: the transformation of time into a simultaneous system toward which every system of values tends is an objective that also drives every system of imitations, and hence kitsch (Broch, 2011). In this system, there is no novelty in the shaping or forming act. In its emancipatory exercise, kitsch ultimately tends toward the self-destruction of its structure, but continues to allow for the 'game'. The escape carried out by kitsch does not truly transcend time or death; instead, it avoids them in a sort of game or pastime from which a sense of liberation emerges, but it is nothing more than artificial and contrived. The production of kitsch is not inferior, but ethically abject and, therefore, leads to irony with any system of values that is not a system of imitation. Kitsch offers the appearance of a solution that produces an addictive tendency toward things that 'look good', satisfying primary affections that, seemingly without any previous reflection, lead to the critique of the real. Thus, kitsch first operates as a kind of somatization that represents an apparent 'ethical evil' due to its peculiar way of making us experience the world *differently* in a fictively satisfying manner, but then it is discovered as a tool of penetration into the structure of the world and its lie, unveiling its pseudo-absence. The structural model of the reality in question, as Umberto Eco (1986) would say, is thus revealed as an operating and self-stimulating system. That is precisely where the possibility of critique, escape, and the principle of liberation open up.

Kitsch presents itself as a new form of aesthetics reminiscent of the Rococo; this realm encompasses all artistic disciplines with a certain ease, which leads to a particular facility in finding a receptive audience to certain norms, open to the reception of kitsch. In this sense, "what constitutes the essence of kitsch is probably its open-ended indeterminacy, its vague 'hallucinatory' power, its spurious dreaminess, its promise of an easy 'catharsis'" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 228). In fact, kitsch has adapted easily to modernization, with its development responding to economic and industrial progress, limited only by the market. Thus, kitsch can be seen as a pleasurable escape from the monotonous suffocation of daily modern life. It acts as a palliative for symptoms, an "aesthetic form of lying" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 229), making beauty something easy to fabricate and obtain. It is in its industrial possibility, in its application in manufacturing processes and through consumption logics, that kitsch finds a way to penetrate more deeply into society.

From this artistic perspective of kitsch, we can view it as a transcendence of the belief that confined it to the realm of cheap imitations. In this way, it manages to carve out a place in contemporary art as a varied artistic form or technique that knew how to benefit from avant-garde appearances. Kitsch has the peculiar ability to always be equipped with the latest conventionalisms. In this sense, it presents itself, outside of the inherent risk of avant-gardism, as 'aesthetic advertising'. The poetics of kitsch is based on assuming a false identity that camouflages and masks itself as depth and poetic power, as Sontag (2018) suggests. This aesthetic falsification "consists of the use of avant-garde expressive means that have nothing to do with the tenor of the poem and that have the unique function of sticking the label 'prodotto d'arte' ('artistic product')" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 231–232). Considering this, it is not surprising to label kitsch as primarily false art; however, kitsch entails a certain aesthetic inadequacy. Generally, we think of kitsch in terms of aesthetic deception and self-deception. In this sense, we witness a transformation from authentic art to the significance in which that lies between art and what is not art.[3]

The bad taste frequently associated with kitsch is nothing more than an ideological manipulation of what we consider taste. In a world deeply entrenched in commercialism, we are compelled to conform in a simplistic manner to what is labeled the 'official discourse'. Despite this, art always manages a degree of aesthetic autonomy that partly frees itself from the totalizing yoke of officialdom. On the other hand, "art that is produced for immediate consumption is clearly and completely *reducible* to extrinsic causes and motives" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 240). In this regard, the most significant aspect of the mass culture phenomenon in relation to kitsch lies not so much in the underlying discourse, but in the fact that this discourse is generalizable, as consumers are predisposed to accept what the market offers. The cultural industry, aware of the market's potential, provides pseudo-culture with

[3] The complex positioning or interplay that kitsch allows between art and mundane objects connects kitsch with a kind of 'common art' produced as something that does not fully conform to any canon or category; precisely at this point, kitsch influences the relationship between art and the everyday. It serves as a 'motif' that challenges artistic tradition regarding the necessity of originality. The artistic discipline is deconstructed as an activity and emancipates itself from its various conventionalisms.

products that induce a certain relaxation and comfort, creating fertile ground for kitsch and the possibility of criticism it brings. Thus, consumers themselves, who become objects of the productive mechanism, serve as a tool to highlight their own condition. In this sense, "the power of the production process extends over the time intervals that on the surface appear to be 'free'" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 242). The affluent classes of society and institutionalism, seeking the dominance of officialdom, find benefit in these production processes, as they express their way of life.

Kitsch, in this way, can be understood as more than just a reflection of a bourgeois dynamic or lifestyle that appeals to lower classes with the ideal of a better life to aspire to. Kitsch, by extension, represents a tool that challenges the established meaning regime and allows for a certain emancipation and democratization of the contours of reality. An action that Barthes (1977) would agree with in a certain sense regarding his ideas about the *death of the author*. In these effects, the mode of existence of kitsch aspires to a civilizational comfort that achieves functionality and pragmatism amid the unpredictability of social evolution. Kitsch lends itself to a definition in terms of a systematic attempt to escape daily reality and leverages the consumerist logic of modern society to launch a critique. As consumption is fully embraced, appearing as a duty or a way of understanding the world we live in, kitsch consistently and gradually accommodates itself to these value systems to offer *something reasonable* in the face of feelings of instability and discontinuity associated directly or indirectly with mass artistic culture. Thus, society finds in this mass culture the possibility of liberating itself from the influences of official and commercial culture (Eco, 1986). Kitsch possesses a certain uniformity that, along with its peculiarity, gives it anachronistic qualities that make it an efficient art form. Beyond being an indispensable cultural aspect for contemporary society, it signifies the emergence of a distinctive taste expression of the middle class, a form of ideology that seems somewhat spontaneous. However, this does not necessarily imply the paralysis of the aspirations of the less affluent classes under a dominant ideology through objects, but can also serve as an exciting and fruitful tool for them. Kitsch is "in fact the taste of the middle classes, which in the present day is the taste of the vast majority of our society" (Calinescu, 1987, p. 248). This corresponds to the view of kitsch as an easy way to escape the burden of time, a reaction to the terror of change and the insignificance of the flow of chronological time from one unreal reality to another.

4. Kitsch, the everyday, and the consumer society

Kitsch is closely tied to the specialized individualization of the social position of artists in an increasingly atomized mass society. This phenomenon is essentially an expression of the tension between the refined taste of specialists and the doubtful, unrefined taste of the mass society (Elias, 2011). Ultimately, kitsch is a reaction to a global productive dynamic oriented toward sales and consumption, hence the marketing logics inherent to kitsch.[4]

[4] Kitsch seemed to have originated as a sort of amusement or a means of obtaining pleasure for the bourgeoisie. However, its development facilitated not only its adaptation to other

Above this constellation lies the great tragedy affecting all forms of production in our society: artists and engineers, for economic reasons, are forced to integrate into the production chain and, therefore, produce to sell. Gradually, a mutual dependence arises on a social rhythm that ended up granting expressive forms in the fragmented society a certain uniformity, a *style* that, while adapting to the structure of society, would be less rigid, more multifaceted, and less rich in contrasts than previous ones (Elias, 2011). In this way, kitsch embodies and encapsulates the pretensions of seeking emotional liberation and the satisfaction of frustrated desires. The need for kitsch lies in the expression of repressed feelings, yearning for leisure, and a faithful reflection of a spirit diminished by the drift of industrial society.

The kitsch product permeates new forms, floating above the memory of the past. There is no objective world, only a nature evoked by the emotional sentiment of the individual. This sentimental charge, evident in kitsch, is supported by an emotional need arising from the impossibility of finding, within the limited leisure time, the relationships excluded from working life (Elias, 2011). As a result, it is not surprising to say that kitsch involves a paradoxical and antinomic link between the great works of specialized artists and works intended to satisfy the taste of the masses (Elias, 2011).

Therefore, kitsch must be understood from the perspective of the viewer or consumer. Kitsch concretely transforms and characterizes its consumer, marking them with a hedonistic, timeless sense toward the artistic or the beautiful (Calinescu, 2011). Kitsch fills their leisure time and demands a series of basic norms related to *making beautiful things* instead of *making things well*, as Sontag (2018) suggests. Actions are thus distorted within an aesthetic framework that allows and validates this deception to facilitate the acceptance of things. In relation to this, kitsch is often read from an ironic interpretation, as is the case with *camp sensibility*, extensively explored by Sontag in her *Notes on Camp*. The kitsch product seductively exploits the illusions and weaknesses of its victims, their desire to be deceived, and makes them prone to believe in the 'aesthetic images' of kitsch. Therefore, it is referred to as an invitation to laziness and mere enjoyment (Calinescu, 2011). However, we see that this irony of false appearances and lies allows kitsch to formulate new spaces for worldviews precisely for its enjoyment and the emancipation from work as a necessary activity.

Thus, kitsch is a modern product linked to the birth of purely aesthetic consumption. Its essence lies in its absolute availability in quantities dictated by existing demand. Its appeal is that of an aesthetic simulation that extends, beyond bad taste, as a complex and deceptive current that questions the morality and structure of our time. However, unexpectedly, kitsch decides to make the deception beneficial to the viewer, who, in an eloquent twist, becomes a witness to their own self-deception.

aspects related to social critique but also allowed for the emergence of other resources such as irony, which became useful for artistic exploration beyond traditional heritage and artistic conservatism.

Regarding the everyday aspect of kitsch, we can say that, at times, its recognition is instinctive, derived from the indignant reaction to any manifest disproportion, to something considered out of place (Eco, 2001). Thus, kitsch seems to exclude itself from the good taste dictated, approved, and disseminated in society. From this perspective, kitsch serves to oppose these dictates and their perpetuation through an original replica. This kitsch replica can arise not only through mass consumption but also on an individual level. The richness of kitsch's contribution lies in that it allows for a new way of seeing the things that fill the reality presented to us; the boundaries between kitsch, the everyday, and art are so blurred that thin lines penetrate and interconnect between them, making the characteristics that could differentiate them less precise (Flores-Figueroa and Balderrama-Armendáriz, 2018). In this way, kitsch remains a kind of intermediary step that produces stability between art and the everyday. The everyday is thus intervened by kitsch to form objects with a pretension of more authentic expression. Kitsch is possible precisely because of this peculiar type of creation that exploits the contrast between reality itself and our interpretation of it.

Giesz's approach, which views the kitsch object as an epiphenomenon of art (failed art = kitsch) (1973), leads us to understand kitsch properly as a byproduct of artistic production. Thus, kitsch stands out as an intermediate product that, failing in its artistic aspirations, finds a new utility with the firm intention of becoming an object of pleasure, a political object of emotions. Although kitsch is categorized in this sense as a failed product, this does not mean it should be discarded. Even accepting this premise, there is a certain utility in kitsch that makes it valuable for the social whole. Kitsch maintains a confrontational attitude, an irreverent discourse that is essential to recognize. Its very nature allows for the provocation and originality characteristic of many forms of art. Thus, in the face of the fierce defense of artistic canons, a differential emerges that responds to the need for the emancipation of human expression and the continuous, innate search for new modes of expression. Specifically, we could say that art seems to repel kitsch, but in reality, it defines itself through it (Flores-Figueroa and Balderrama-Armendáriz, 2018).

Kitsch, one could say in relation to this, thrives on a certain mismatch between the object and its original function.[5] Therefore, it always points slightly off-target, replacing purity with impurity, even when describing purity (Moles, 2011). The object, in this way, is simultaneously well and poorly executed. Thus, it is *well* in terms of careful and finished execution, *bad* in the sense that the conception is always widely distorted (Moles, 2011). On the other hand, there's a tendency for kitsch objects to 'give more of themselves'; a kind of clutter or overflow that leads kitsch to constantly surpass itself. Thus, it's about assaulting as many sensory channels as possible, simultaneously or juxtaposed.

[5] Kitsch does not truly introduce a new perspective for us to shift our gaze over objects; rather, it reveals a perspective already present within the objects that has, until now, seemed hidden and not illuminated to our sight.

Precisely because of all this, kitsch remains halfway between novelty. Kitsch products are authentically false and facilitate consumers in absorbing their endearingly artificial essence. There is a concurrent effect on sincerity that leads to a sense of comfort and closeness; a demand halfway between the set of sensations at play and the fundamental acceptance of that very play. Therefore, kitsch primarily provides man with a function of pleasure, or rather, *spontaneity in pleasure*, foreign to the idea of transcendent beauty or ugliness, and also offers him a limited and indirect participation in *extravagance* (Moles, 2011).

For all these reasons, kitsch has a certain pedagogical character. Its appreciation as a game involves a gradual and successive process of refinement that leads to the identification of *good taste* as an interchangeable variable. It ascends a qualitative pyramid that gradually allows access to demands for greater refinement. The communicative possibilities of kitsch thus imply a precedent of an aesthetic model that adapts to the majority, introducing a function of testimony of the forces that reconstruct a purified image of the world, but it is linked to the ideas of middle ground and direct contact with reality. Kitsch ironically transforms everyday life and teaches us the semantic criteria of the objects and works present in our reality.[6]

The creation of kitsch entails the refinement of life and the sensitive reconquest of the world. If kitsch is not art, it is at least the *aesthetic mode of everyday life* (Moles, 2011). Thus, it is within reach of all consciousnesses and rejects excess, constituting a sort of domination.[7] Its greatest power lies precisely in *stirring us while remaining on the margins*. Therefore, kitsch remains a fundamental tool for aesthetic democratization with broad possibilities of action in the world.

5. Kitsch and its possibilities in the world

Kitsch has made it possible to diagnose the crisis of autonomous art that followed the massification of culture in late capitalism. This has led to questions about how to assess the critical potential of the arts in mass societies, given the absence of a generally accepted standard of judgment. The difficulty lies in the ambiguous nature of contemporary artistic practices, which are often mixed and linked to irony or their own exploitation, allowing for multiple arguments to evaluate the critical role of the arts today. In fact, "the legacy of kitsch, one can argue, has been to promote a critical examination of the one self-evident Western discourse concerning the value of art" (McBride, 2005, p. 283). However, the question of what art is remains relevant.

What is at stake in the analysis of kitsch is that the other can reach the most intimate parts of a person, reaching, with its intimate value, the place where the exterior, the peripheral, reaches the core (Miller, 2010). This leads to

6 In this sense, it teaches us to judge and observe from different perspectives regarding the starting point of our expectation.

7 For this reason, we speak of the dictatorship of Kitsch imposed by the ruling class. There is an object for every problem, and thus, any conflict can be resolved with an object.

considering the paradigm of kitsch from the perspective of otherness. Kitsch allows us to overcome invisibility and the absence of connection through the activation of a relational dynamic with the other. This use of otherness can lead to overcoming everyday prejudices that reflect the dominant ideology. With Mandoki's assertion that in contemporary society, judgment based on sensitivity and intuition is more common than judgment based on coherent argumentation (1994), the possibility arises to question the widespread judgment based on officialdom and consider a reflection on 'the ordinary' that allows for the emergence of new forms.[8]

On the other hand, it is clear that kitsch is a product of the Industrial Revolution that urbanized the masses of the West. Thus, kitsch originally served to discover a new ability to overcome boredom. In this way, "to fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised" (Greenberg, 1989, p. 10). Kitsch cultivated insensitivity and was used to serve the search for profit as a mechanical operator driven by the formulas of capital. Kitsch demanded nothing more than money from its buyers. However, its formulation allowed for unlocking new discoveries and conditions that art could use. The methods of industrialism could also be explored as methods and tools for artistic creation. Kitsch is deceptive; it has multiple levels, but it produces something worthy; it transforms the limiting and altering mechanics that diminish the essence of artistic creation into a productive possibility of resistance in a way that true culture could never be more than accidental. The temptation of kitsch triumphs as a cultural universal that, beyond ideology, allows for its exploration from different angles. The virtue of kitsch, by erasing the distinction between the everyday and art, produces almost a sense of attraction for the familiar, affecting viewers like a sudden discovery of the value of what surrounds them. In this sense, the discontinuity between art and life is effortlessly broken by the viewer. At the same time, kitsch offers a vicarious experience with great immediacy for the insensitive.

Kitsch appeals to everything included in the universe of emotion, as an idea inherited from Romanticism. However, in kitsch, this feeling is captured and identified with a basic mechanism: the effect. The recipient of the work is given what their feeling already demands. Kitsch accompanies a search for the compensatory, positioning itself as a substitute in a reconfiguration of taste that is no longer bad and can now be characterized with the adjective banal (Mecacci, 2018). In the nature of kitsch, there is a pretense of falsely beautiful things that banalize taste and turn it into something speculative, thus opening it to new reconsiderations. Therefore, what initially means one thing can end up meaning something completely different. Kitsch, in its effect of connecting the specialized aesthetics of artists with that of the masses, represents a problematic overlay between high and low culture that, however, cannot be ignored. In this sense, banalization in the context of kitsch constitutes a central axis that redefines our relationship with everyday aesthetics and the sense of the ordinary. By stripping objects and experiences of their elevated or

[8] Here we see the emergence of an entirely new possibility for the democratisation of social space through the phenomenon of kitsch.

transcendental character, kitsch democratizes access to the aesthetic, but also runs the risk of reducing meaningful experiences to mere immediate effects. This banalization not only dilutes traditional parameters of artistic judgment but also introduces a new sensitivity based on direct emotion and immediacy, creating a bridge between the sublime and the trivial. However, in this process, kitsch challenges the hegemony of established categories, proposing an aesthetic that celebrates the common as a valid form of interaction with the world. In this sense, banalization, far from being a mere degradation, can be interpreted as a subversive gesture that invites us to reconsider value hierarchies and explore new forms of emotional and symbolic connection with our surroundings. Expanding this perspective involves recognizing how kitsch transcends its apparent superficiality to offer a critical tool that repositions the ordinary as a legitimate space for experience and aesthetic reflection.

Based on the above, kitsch allows the exploitation of fantasies by those who have never had one (Sachs, 1932). Embodying the devaluation of art, the goal of kitsch is not goodness, but the appearance of beauty. Like an obsession with unconditional applause and recognition, the hope of kitsch amounts to the glorification of beauty to 'please everyone'. Thus, kitsch remains a kind of art of happiness that deprives the subject of the experience of the genuine poverty of the world. Kitsch guides eyes away from reality itself, distorting and transforming it *somatically* to avoid suffering and alleviate the unmet aspirations and desires of viewers. In this way, kitsch constitutes a kind of palliative for the dysfunctional symptoms found among the constituent elements of post-industrial culture. The values of kitsch indicate the recognition of a new vision of art that definitively incorporates the attributes of the banal and bad taste (Mecacci, 2018) and democratizes taste to embrace the disordered perspectives of those whose dreams have been frustrated by the marketing logic of late capitalism. Kitsch, as a parody of taste, is the fertile ground for the emergence of new ideas in the present and the revision of the past. The feeling or need to be original is destroyed, or at least, at each stage, a transformation subtly alters the original (McHale, 1990) to admit new originals. In a particular deviation or distortion, kitsch not only affirms bad taste but also opens a path to channel the dissatisfaction generated by the movement in art. Kitsch breaks the parameters of good form, harmony, and good taste, turning 'what's interesting' into just another option. In this sense, it facilitates the context between an aesthetic form and an intentional external effect (Illing, 2006) in which the value of the popularization of art is reproduced. There is no overcoming of the inauthentic nor an approach to the peculiar essence of art, but a tremendous naivety that keeps kitsch usefully distant from nostalgia for the authentic (Lucero & Abadi, 2017). Kitsch belongs to daydreams, claims for itself the childish, but there can still be thought of a subversive dimension in it where eroticism transcends 'the other', not as a vengeful ghost, but as a vestige between the sublime, the beautiful, and the everyday, like an echo that truly represents the wound and the healing to come.

As long as the artificial quality of this experience remains, kitsch can rescue things from the pretended continuity outside the musty air of museums, becoming a stage that faces the organic fossil with all the strength of modern curiosity. As relics of an imaginary moment, kitsch allows us to dream beyond mere nostalgia, reifying the interpretation of reality and glorifying memory as a way to reinvent the future. Kitsch, instead of materializing the utopian desires of society, no longer satisfies the thirst for temporal transcendence, but revives it by proposing the recovery of leisure and life through constant reinvention. In this sense, kitsch allows us to momentarily find that lost time, but to do so, it must die and be reborn repeatedly, paying with its soul for each concession to a mythical desire (Olalquiaga, 2007). The pleasures of a lost experience become recoverable, like a buried secret treasure ready to be discovered. Our experience is then colored by a profound longing that leads to a vivid sense of the need to rediscover this primitive and archaic pleasure of total connection (Olalquiaga, 2007) with the world in an attempt to recover what industrialization took from us forever. Thus, kitsch is nothing more than a sensitivity born from loss; it is a longing once again for the capture of objects that themselves form the experience of the world. Life, in the face of kitsch, becomes something deeply linked to the search for rooting, meaning, and connection with nature.

6. Conclusion

In light of the points mentioned, kitsch, in its complex relationship with art, everyday life, and consumer society, reveals itself as a multifaceted and curiously paradoxical phenomenon. While its development exposes a capacity for the democratization of taste, allowing for a sensitive reconquest of the world's reality by viewers, it also positions itself as a *double-edged sword*. Its artificiality and genuine ability to connect with emotion through mechanisms of sensory seduction not only offer an opportunity to aesthetically reinterpret the world around us, but also alter our perception of reality. In doing so, kitsch challenges established norms and encourages a deeper exploration of the underlying structures of our perception of the environment (McHale, 1990). As such, kitsch's capacity to evoke both fascination and disdain speaks to its place as a socially charged aesthetic form, straddling the boundaries between high culture and popular sentiment.

In the intertwining of the everyday and the artistic, kitsch acts as a palliative for the dysfunctions of postindustrial culture. It creates a space for critical and subversive reflection, opening interpretative horizons that pluralize perspectives and meanings. Ultimately, it invites us to reconsider our relationship with aesthetics and human experience as a whole, revealing that, beyond any apparent superficiality, it is a powerful means to question, reinterpret, and reconnect with the essence of our cultural and emotional experience. As noted by Eco (2001), kitsch is not merely an aesthetic product but a cultural phenomenon that allows individuals to navigate the dissonance between personal emotions and the impersonal forces of modernity.

This capacity of kitsch to operate as a bold intruder that penetrates our perceptions is manifested in the miraculous regeneration or resurrection of the casual encounter with lost objects. These encounters move us, depositing grains of experience in our closed-off interiors. Within this framework, kitsch celebrates the fusion between what is fixed and what continues to transform in reality. On this border, the creations of our deepest nature arise, where the most exquisite pleasures and the sharpest pains intertwine with purpose: to help us understand the passage of time and its impact on our existence. As Elias (2011) argues, kitsch speaks to the longing for emotional liberation and satisfaction of repressed desires, becoming a vessel for the frustrated aspirations of a society marked by industrial and capitalist processes.

The precarious balance that kitsch maintains between constant change and its suspension allows us to glimpse the secret of the things that compose our world. In this space, intensity manifests as a resonant frequency that penetrates time beyond memory, measuring its margins and finding refuge in remote corners of our spirit. Where kitsch radiates its soft light, the circular perfection of the world seems delicate, and its experience opens us to a renewed vision that suspends us like dry sponges ready to absorb the new (Giesz, 1973). This transformative quality of kitsch underscores its power to evoke nostalgia and contemplation while simultaneously unsettling these very emotions, creating a tension that forces the viewer to confront their own engagement with art and culture (Greenberg, 1989).

In this sense, kitsch becomes a valuable and timely tool that helps us explore not only the distance between the past and the present but also the possibilities of an eternal future. It is this ability to unite the emotional, cultural, and aesthetic that allows kitsch to transcend its apparent banality to become an agent of transformation and rediscovery, both personal and collective (Moles, 2011). Kitsch's power lies in its ability to offer an accessible means of aesthetic pleasure, allowing it to function as a bridge between the ordinary and the extraordinary. This democratization of aesthetics reflects a broader cultural shift toward the rejection of traditional hierarchies in favor of an inclusive approach to artistic experience (Flores-Figueroa and Balderrama-Armendáriz, 2018).

Its subtle charm reminds us that aesthetics, even in its most controversial forms, can be a bridge to reconnect with the essence of human experience and the potential for cultural creation. Far from being merely superficial, kitsch possesses the potential to transform both individuals and society by breaking down barriers between art and the everyday, ultimately fostering a deeper connection to the world around us (Lucero and Abadi, 2017). In this way, kitsch continues to serve as both a reflection of cultural anxieties and a tool for personal and collective expression, reinforcing its significance as a vibrant and enduring force within the cultural landscape.

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Emotions Guaranteed: On the Kitsch Contract

Thomas Küpper

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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Theology of Creation and Beauty: Kohelet 3:11

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This paper explores the interrelated concepts of beauty, creation, and kitsch, which collectively form a comprehensive framework for understanding one's relationship to the world and one's place in it. The hermeneutic of the text Kohelet 3:11, which defines beauty as a characteristic feature of all being in the context of creation theology, is utilised to focus on the typical tension between beauty as an immanent feature of the real world and the human desire to fully understand and capture it. In this context, beauty is posited as a spiritual value that, on the one hand, reflects God's essence and serves as a source of inspiration for humanity, and, on the other hand, remains an unattainable reality for humanity's ambitions. This paradox forms the basis for understanding kitsch, which is not merely an aesthetic category, but also encompasses the broader cultural and value dimensions of humanity. Within the context of a narcissistic culture, kitsch is conceptualised as a manifestation of humanity's creative endeavour to articulate beauty, characterised by a simplification of beauty that does not edify humanity and society, but rather leads to superficiality, mediocrity, and the loss of the transcendent dimension of beauty. The exploration of these three concepts in unison underscores their interconnectedness and the potential for serving as a conduit of understanding across diverse cultures, value systems, and individuals. A theology of beauty in relation to kitsch thus offers not only the possibility of reflecting on the state of the modern world, but also an important integrating element in a polarised society that can foster a deeper understanding of interpersonal relationships and the spiritual dimension of the human person. | *Keywords: Beauty, Aesthetics, Solipsism, Creation, Artistic Sensibility, Kitsch*

1. Introduction

The narrative of creation, as recounted in religious texts, serves as a wellspring of inspiration not only for theologians and philosophers but also for artists. The book of Genesis offers an account of the origins of the world, thereby establishing a framework for discourse on metaphysics and its relationship to moral philosophy, particularly in contemporary ethical realism and anti-realism scholarship. Moreover, this well-known narrative provides a significant foundation for understanding beauty in theological and artistic contexts.

The present study seeks to demonstrate the inextricable linkage between art and theology by examining the manner in which art serves as a medium for both the articulation of human desires and thoughts, in addition to providing answers to more profound inquiries concerning the meaning of existence and humankind's position within the context of creation. In contrast, the concept of kitsch, as a value phenomenon in contemporary art, has the capacity to revive classical debates surrounding the authenticity and profundity of a work of art. Furthermore, it has recently given rise to reflections on the legitimisation of kitsch, particularly in relation to the authentic self-expression of the postmodern individual. In this context, the creation story emerges as a conceptual framework that facilitates a nuanced understanding of kitsch's role in artistic expression. It serves as a point of reference, offering scholars a valuable space to engage with contemporary debates and explore the complex relationship between art and authenticity in the postmodern era.

Furthermore, the book of Genesis, which is part of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible, also provides insight into the contemporary issue of the rise of narcissism in society. The anthropocentric interpretation of the world and self-expression, which is characterised by solipsism, has resulted in the fragmentation and disintegration of society, as well as the blurring of traditional artistic criteria for evaluating authentic self-expression in art. The theological underpinnings of creation, as elucidated within the aesthetic and beauty paradigm, serve as the foundational framework for our examination of the nexus between beauty and kitsch. The hermeneutical analysis of the biblical text, specifically the book of Kohelet chapter three verse 11, forms the crux of our investigation. This text, with its content and reference to the creation story, provides a pertinent basis for reflection on the role of beauty in creation, both in its observable physical aspect and in its transcendent and enigmatic dimension for humans. The dialectic between these two aspects of beauty, as outlined in the text, is therefore central to our understanding of kitsch.

2. Hermeneutics Kohelet 3:11

"He made all things beautiful in His time, even eternity He has put in their hearts, yet man does not comprehend the work that God has done from beginning to end." (Koh 3:11)

Within the context of wisdom literature, the Book of Kohelet is regarded as a paradigm of scepticism, representing a distinctive manifestation of philosophical realism of its era. The inquiries posed by the author and the way they are addressed offer a comprehensive array of authentic and analytical commentaries on the intricacies of existence, the manifold dynamics of life, and the entanglements inherent to the human condition. The author's intent is not to engage in equivocation regarding the human intellect or to engage in self-aggrandisement through the recounting of a rich life story. Instead, the objective is to ascertain the meaning of life in its universality, to recognise the transience of worldly things, and to elucidate the necessity to discern God's plan for humanity. Within this framework, the text of 3:11 constitutes a seminal theological foundation for the entire book.

Solomon[1], as the declared author, incorporates several essential components into this sentence, upon which he systematically builds his paradigm for comprehending the world in both the external and internal senses. The first component is God[2] as an eternal being who genuinely revealed himself in the creation of both visible and invisible things. As the creator of time, he is positioned above time itself and simultaneously manifests himself in time. The concept of eternity, therefore, is inextricably linked to temporality, and from the perspective of humankind as a created entity, these two dimensions of reality are inseparable. The notion of *eternity in the heart*[3] signifies the hidden layers of the human psyche, where eternity and temporality interweave in a mystical manner. This concept is a remarkable expression of the existential potentiality of humankind, where there is space not only for the urgency of the individual's self-actualisation stemming from eternity, but also for the limitation of its realisation, which is determined by the temporality and transience of the human condition.

The eternity embodied within the human heart suggests that the human desire to comprehend this beauty and its origin is rooted in something that transcends time and space itself. The Koheletian paradigm thus encapsulates the paradoxical nature of human existence, wherein individuals, in their quest for understanding, confront their own limitations in attaining a state of harmony between their knowledge of the subject under investigation and the complexity of the subject itself.

3. Beauty in the context of creation theology

Creation theology is a theological doctrine that focuses on the origin of the world and on God's relationship to creation, in which humanity occupies a prominent place. Indeed, humanity is said to be created in the image of God. Everything that God has created he repeatedly evaluates as beautiful (Hebr. טוֹב towb, Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21,25, 31), good, pleasing, fitting, proper, appropriate. The etymology of the Hebrew term opens the possibilities for a wide-ranging use not only in the aesthetic sense but also in terms of the functionality of the system, the synergy of the individual components, and the moral order, as can be seen in many places in the biblical text. Beauty, as one of the main aspects of God's creation, plays a significant role in this theology. The Koheletian paradigm facilitates a more profound comprehension of the interplay between creation theology and

1 The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem - Ecc 1:1. King Solomon was the third king of Israel, the son of King David. He is renowned for his wisdom, wealth, and the construction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. In the biblical tradition, Solomon is traditionally associated with the authorship of several books, including Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes (Kohelet). Solomon is a key figure in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Kohelet is the Hebrew title of the book known in English as Ecclesiastes. The term Kohelet can be translated as *Teacher*, *Preacher* or *Assembler*. The book is a philosophical reflection on the meaning of life, the impermanence of worldly pursuits, and the pursuit of wisdom.

2 The Hebrew אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) is a plural form of Deity that refers to the creation story in Gen 1-3.

3 The Hebrew עוֹלָם (olam) concept of eternity contains within it not only the dimension of timelessness, but also the antiquity and futuristic horizons of the passage of time. The concept of the heart לֵב (leb) refers to and the mind of man, his ability to make decisions and exercise his choice. It is the inner capacity of man in the sense of the cognitive-behavioral aspect of his existence.

aesthetics. Notwithstanding, the creation narrative also encompasses the fall of man and, consequently, the corruption of nature and all of creation (Gen 4). Consequently, creation theology acknowledges the shadow side of human existence and the existential limitations that hinder man from achieving the excellence for which he was originally intended. Pain, disappointment and frustration are thus integral components of beauty, alongside joy, contentment and enthusiasm, with a shared underlying passion for life.

In the context of biblical theology, the creation of the world is interpreted as an act of God's self-revelation, characterised by love and the pursuit of love. This fundamental reality is expressed through the beauty of creation, which is materialised in the diversity and complexity of the natural world. The concept of beauty, as understood within the framework of biblical theology, is deeply intertwined with the concept of community. The concept of God as a triune entity underscores the notion of community as a fundamental aspect of beauty, calling for the establishment of a community that is characterised by beauty, functionality, welcoming, organisation, significance, and selfless love. According to Moltmann, "creation is an open system in which God expresses his love and freedom" (Moltmann, 1993, p. 198), thereby facilitating an ongoing creative interaction between humans and creation. The concept of beauty in creation provides a foundation for the establishment of a reciprocal relationship between God and creation, as well as between creation (man) and God. The biblical concept of beauty encompasses the inner man[4], his holiness and godliness[5], and love[6], while outer glamour[7] and physical beauty may prove misleading. Man's sin, within this context, signifies his inherent inability to meet the standards that the goodness and beauty of creation anticipates from him. This corresponds to humanity's inability to comprehend the divine work.

It is evident that beauty functions not only as an aesthetic concept but also as a significant theological and ethical principle that ought to be manifest in the world. In this context, beauty is not merely an abstract concept; rather, it is the radiance of truth and goodness that, in a state of mutual harmony, unveils the glory of God. Consequently, creation becomes a mirror of God's beauty. Consequently, authentic art does not merely mirror the world, but rather serves as a "mirroring of transcendence in immanence" (Marion, 2004, p. 112). In the absence of beauty, truth and goodness risk becoming "dry academic concepts" (Balthasar, 1982, p. 42). Conversely, the world is perceived as a Koheletan scene, accessible to a human being entrusted with a mandate of stewardship[8] , in accordance with creation's immanent beauty. Even though not

4 In 1 Peter 3:3-4, the emphasis is on the constitutional primacy of a person's inner character over his outward appearance: 'Let not your adornment be external [...] but a hidden man of the heart, with an unbroken spirit of a quiet and peaceable nature, which is very precious in the sight of God.'

5 Psalm 29:2 says: "Give unto the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." Spiritual purity based on spiritual anchorage in relationship to God is a prerequisite for being formed in beauty according to creation.

6 John 15:13.

7 Proverbs 31:30.

8 God, after creating man, placed him at the centre of the Garden of Eden and commissioned him to steward the world, to care for it, to ensure its sustainable growth, and to see to the cultivation of all creation (Gen. 1:28).

all of life's endeavours may be successful, it is not permissible for man to acquiesce to this purpose. This commitment entails not only the pursuit of personal desires, but also the discernment of God's will, purpose, and objective.

4. Beauty and the three stages of existence

Kierkegaard's three existential stages of life - aesthetic, ethical, and religious - in three distinct perspectives address the paradoxical nature of human existence. In all directions of human thought, reflection, and conscious and unconscious human endeavour, no individual can escape the contradictory nature of their own existence, which is determined by the fusion of the eternal into the temporal and the inability of the temporal to encompass the eternal. The three stages of existence do not represent a cascade of man's knowledge, a kind of inner development through which the individual must lawfully pass during his personal development. Kierkegaard's three views are offered as three perspectives on the existence of man, who is faced with a reality that transcends him in all respects and which he at the same time wants to grasp, to describe, to capture, to express. This metaphysical asymmetry places responsibility before the gates of eternity not only in moral and religious conduct and thought, but also in artistic and scientific self-expression.

Although Kierkegaard did not draw directly on the text of Kohelet 3:11 in his writings, yet his ideas and analyses indirectly correspond to and point towards the Koheletan paradigm of eternity in the heart. As a theologian and philosopher, he was conversant with the wisdom literature, and his entire corpus of writings refers to the Hebrew way of thinking and the source message of the Old and New Testaments. In his work *Either/Or* (*Enten/Eller*), he elaborates a dualistic tension of human existence that stems from the paradoxical nature of reality: "For the individual is essentially a temporal being, and as such, he lives in time. Yet the consciousness of eternity is also inherent in him, and it is this duality that is the tension in his existence" (Kierkegaard, 1987, p. 529). In his work *Fear and Trembling* (*Frygt og Bæven*), he expounds on his conception of eternity as immanent in the human heart, positing it as the driving force behind human action, lest life devolve into despair:

> If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, if at the bottom of everything there were only a wild ferment, a power that, twisting in dark passions, produced everything great or inconsequential… what then would life be but despair? (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 15)

Kierkegaard's observations of human existence do not lend themselves to scepticism; rather, they are characterised by an inherent conflict between the eternal and the temporal in human consciousness. In his seminal work, *The Sickness unto Death* (*Sygdommen til Døden*), he emphasises the pivotal role of existential despair in the progressive direction of human life, stating:

> Despair is the sickness unto death in the sense that it is the relationship of the self to itself, the infinite spirit's refusal to be itself or the infinite spirit's inability to be itself. Despair is the impossibility of anything eternal… (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 30)

Such despair is not destructive to human consciousness; on the contrary, it carries the constructivist potential of the knowledge that human understanding of life is limited and the true meaning of life can only be found in union with the infinite, with eternity, that is - with God (Kondrla and Repar, 2017).

5. The paradox of beauty

The human condition is characterised by a perpetual oscillation between two distinct yet interconnected realms of existence: the external, and the internal. This duality is further compounded by the concept of *beauty* as the fundamental creative principle that permeates both these domains. The pursuit of beauty, both in its tangible and intangible forms, serves as a paradoxical mirror to the human condition. It reflects the dichotomy between the unattainable and the attainable, the fleeting and the enduring. Buber refers to this paradox in his exegesis of the Kohelet text: "Man is, in a way, a prisoner of time, but at the same time he feels a longing for something eternal that transcends time. This contradiction is the source of both human anxiety and hope" (Buber, 1970, p. 154). When considering the question of how to understand beauty and the basis for identifying kitsch, the paradoxical nature of human existence serves to further complicate the situation.

According to Hart, "beauty is an objective reality that reflects God's presence in creation. By being beautiful, the world bears witness to its Creator, whose own beauty transcends all human understanding" (Hart, 2003, p. 89). Hart points to an important aspect of the Kohelet paradigm, which is the expression *in his time*. In this context, Kohelet underscores a dimension of beauty that is not static but dynamic, existing in a state of constant flux and transformation. This beauty, in its metaphysical essence, represents a universal category. However, it simultaneously embodies a contradictory nature, existing as a subject defined by its partialities *in different times* and in *different contexts*. The phenomenon can be illustrated by the example of a person in two different contexts, who may perceive the same object differently.

In his exploration of the interdisciplinary relationship between theology and culture, Tillich (1959) conceptualises beauty as "a symbol of God's presence and transcendent value which transcend human understanding" (Tillich, 1959, p. 27). Here, beauty represents a reality that transcends aesthetic experience and denotes a manifestation of the Divine. According to Tillich, beauty thus functions as a conceptual bridge connecting the finite realm of human experience and knowledge to the infinite nature of reality, thereby offering a glimpse into the sacred.

A considerable number of contemporary thinkers, in both theology and the arts, adopt a similar mode of thinking. Wright (2008, p. 101) asserts that "Kohelet reminds us that even when we do not see the full picture of God's handiwork, beauty and meaning are present in every moment of creation". The despair of feeling one's own inadequacy before God must not be a reason to overlook the beauty of God and His greatness, as well as one's own

significance and the importance of the knowledge one has attained. McGrath's perspective on the Koheletian paradigm is decidedly positive, as he asserts that it underscores the notion that the human capacity to create and appreciate beauty is a divine gift that prompts a deeper comprehension of God's creation (McGrath, 2008, p. 134). This perspective thus opens the possibility and space for the apprehension of absolute beauty by the author.

It can be argued that the finitude of humankind cannot be regarded as an absolute impediment to humanity's pursuit of beauty, its recognition, and its articulation. Instead, the significance of these human endeavours is substantiated by the existence of beauty, and by the inherent capacity within human nature for the desire and pursuit of its manifestation. The artistic value of a work of art created with the authentic intention of expressing beauty is determined by the artist's education, skill, aesthetic sensibility, and other factors. It is also important to emphasise that, just as beauty affects all of creation, so too should man, in his self-actualisation, strive for beauty in all that he thinks, does, creates, and lives.

6. Beauty and kitsch

In the domain of philosophy of art, the concept of *kitsch*[9] emerged in the second half of the 19th century, particularly during the 1860s and 1870s in Munich (Calinescu, 1987, p. 234). The precise moment of its emergence remains contentious, as it is a gradual formation of a concept that began to be used in artistic and literary circles, gradually spreading to several spheres of human activity, including the political (Arendt, 2017). Despite the absence of a universally accepted definition, there is a prevailing consensus that kitsch impacts all facets of life, encompassing both the secular and religious domains (McIntyre, 2014, p. 95).

In essence, the issue of kitsch can be distilled into two overarching concepts. Firstly, the objectivist approach, as outlined by Broch (2002, pp. 13–40), asserts that kitsch is inherently deceptive due to its deliberate fabrication of falsehood. This deception is perpetuated not only to its audience but to the artist themselves, as it seeks to eliminate all that is deemed negative, challenging, or unresolved. Instead, it proffers an ostensibly harmonious and aesthetically pleasing facade. The essence of kitsch lies in its substitution of an ethical category for an aesthetic one, with the artist prioritising the pursuit of a *beautiful* work over a *good* one, and the effect on people being of paramount importance. Broch's philosophical approach accentuates the reality of beauty, which appears to exist independently of the human subject.

The subjectivist approach, on the other hand, is associated with an individual's innate abilities and characteristics. A notable contemporary example of this is Broch's Robert Musil (2022), who viewed kitsch as

[9] The first documented use of the term *kitsch* is attributed to art dealers in Munich, who employed it to denote works of art that were inexpensive, sentimental, or of inferior quality, and intended for the commercial market. The term is believed to have originated from the German verb *verkitschen*, which means to sell cheaply or to undervalue, or alternatively from the English word 'sketch', referring to superficiality and mass production. For further information, see Kulka (2002, p. 18).

a manifestation of superficiality and inauthenticity in cultural expression. In this context, kitsch is perceived as a tendency to reduce the complexity of reality to sentimental, simplistic and often inauthentic images. It is a kind of *cheap emotional effect* that is not based on actual experience, but rather on schemes and clichés. In his thinking, we could define kitsch as an aesthetic category that eschews critical thinking and substitutes prefabricated emotions for genuine experience. Kitsch therefore resonates with mass culture and collective taste, which is at odds with individuality and its authentic being, which by its very nature escapes mediocrity and conventionality. Kitsch thus offers an ostensibly beautiful facade, devoid of the depth and complexity that authentic art demands. This is due to its rejection of reality, as Musil notes, "the world of today loves pretty dreams, since reality is too complex" (Musil, 1996, p. 647).

Even Kulka, in his definition of kitsch using the three criteria[10], does not avoid the problem with which he is continually in controversy (Kulka, 2002, pp. 36–42). The definition proffered by Kulka provides unambiguous criteria by which to differentiate between kitsch and art. The definition is analytical in nature and eschews the use of subjective terms such as *bad taste*. Concurrently, Kulka and other scholars have emphasised the capacity of kitsch to manipulate viewer responses through uncomplicated and direct means. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the perception of kitsch as art is subjective and can vary between individuals, thereby complicating the application of the definition. It is noteworthy that certain artistic creations may align with a single or two criteria yet still be categorised as art, thereby illustrating the ambiguity of the delineation. The assessment of the author's intention remains a fundamental question. It is not always clear that the intention of artistic creation is commercial success on a mass scale (Zayas et al., 2024).

The definition of kitsch thus becomes problematic and paradoxical. Kitsch is typically associated with superficial aesthetic values, such as exaggerated sentimentality or idealisation (Leskova and Yochanna, 2024). Nevertheless, it has the capacity to appeal to the masses and evoke profound emotional reactions (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023, p. 15). This phenomenon gives rise to the following question: If kitsch is superficial, why do people react so strongly to it? On the one hand, we may anchor our artistic and ethical values as Broch in a metaphysical realm, outside the sphere of aesthetic discourse. On the other hand, Musil frames the distinction between *good* and *bad* art "within an empirical, relativistic, and immanent understanding of aesthetic experience" (McBride, 2005, pp. 285–287), thus creating a wide space in which multiple views on judging what kitsch is and what else is not can be identified. Kitsch is often considered aesthetically inferior, but at the same time it can be a source of nostalgia, joy or humour. While some may be reluctant to

[10] Kulka (2002) proposes a three-criteria analytical framework to distinguish between kitsch and art. The first of these is the depiction of an emotionally highly charged object or scene, such as a sunset, a crying baby, or romantic couples. The second criterion is the immediate and straightforward readability of the work, which does not necessitate any intellectual or interpretive process. The third criterion is the evocation of emotion without the presence of original qualities of value. Kitsch is designed to elicit emotion in a straightforward way, often through cliché or exaggerated aesthetic expression, but without deeper artistic or intellectual value.

acknowledge their affinity for kitsch, it is undeniable that it provides a source of pleasure. This prompts us to delve into a multifaceted domain that transcends traditional disciplinary boundaries, a territory that is becoming increasingly intricate with the advancement of both technology and culture (Kusnir and Pavlikova, 2024). The proliferation of perspectives that characterise kitsch leads to a more intricate and less straightforward delineation of its defining characteristics.

In the postmodern era, characterised by the relativisation of beauty within the context of the sophisticated fashion industry, there has been a notable shift in the transcendent dimension of art (Detweiler - Taylor, 2003, pp. 277-8). This shift can be attributed to the subordination of aesthetic value to commercial interests, which has resulted in the rationalisation of culture, thereby reducing aesthetic experience to a technical and commercial level (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 36). Consequently, kitsch has come to symbolise beauty in the context of commercialisation and consumption, rather than as an expression of authentic artistry that seeks to comprehend beauty and embody it in a person's work.

Philosophical pluralism and relativism have resulted in a blurring of the distinction between high art and low art. These two categories have traditionally provided a framework for evaluating the quality of art and identifying kitsch. Conventionally, *high culture* (good taste) encompassed domains such as painting, sculpture, literature, classical music, opera, theatre, and philosophy, among others. These disciplines were regarded as *classical* and exemplified the eternal qualities that had earned their place in the *canon* of a given civilisation. The appreciation of high culture has been shown to require a certain level of education and the capacity to discern its finer aspects. Conversely, a narcissistic form of individualism has been demonstrated to lead to a process of deculturation, thereby enabling the proliferation of relativism in all its forms (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 136). Popular forms of *low culture* that are often considered to be in bad taste, such as popular music, reality television, literature, magazines, celebrities, fashion, and blockbuster movies, enjoy widespread popularity due to their ability to appeal to the masses without the need for special initiation. Olivier (2009, pp. 63–77) posits that kitsch emerges when these clear boundaries become blurred and overlap, resulting in hybrids that combine elements of high and low culture, such as *The Matrix*, the Jerry Springer opera, pop art, comedy panel shows, and so forth.

In this sense, kitsch can be regarded as a significant contemporary problem. Objectivist beauty is becoming less prominent, and the subjectivist experience of the individual, his preferences and his right to authentic expression are becoming more dominant. A component of postmodernism is the subversion of the foundations of knowledge and historical truth. In contradistinction to the past, when the critique of reason was accompanied by an alternative foundation, such as imagination, postmodernism tends to abandon any metanarratives that might legitimately establish a foundation for postulating truth (Waugh, 1992, p. 5). Moreover, it claims that such metanarratives are no longer necessary and are of little use.

7. Kitsch and narcissism

Christopher Lash is a prominent figure in the establishment of the concept of a culture of narcissism within the domain of scholarly discourse across the humanities. He has provided an apt characterisation of the society in which the cult of celebrity was born:

> In the contemporary era, individuals seek the kind of recognition that applauds not their actions but their personal qualities. They aspire to be admired rather than respected. They crave not fame but the glamour and excitement of the celebrity world. They desire to be the recipients of envy rather than respect. (Lash, 1991, p. 105)

He identifies the hallmarks of narcissism, emphasising that individuals prioritise their *qualities* and *feelings* over their actions, which are performed for the benefit of others. The self-deification of the individual not only contributes to the culture of kitsch but also leads to the atomisation of society, resulting in the loss of coherence of individual subsystems. Kitsch feeds into currents of thought that dissocialise the individual, consequently leading to a sense of emptiness and boredom, despite the presence of a highly developed entertainment industry (Winter, 2002, p. 85). The pursuit of momentary, pleasurable experiences, self-affirmation, the exaggeration of banalities, and the trivialisation of subtle yet important differences by the individuals fosters a culture in which kitsch flourishes (Botz-Bornstein, 2021, p. 76).

The strong prevalence of subjectivism has the potential to act as a trap for both the individual and the wider society. As Detweiler and Taylor (2003, p. 107) argue, there is a cultural demand for "glitz and glamour, our taste for immortality" that is deeply ingrained in all of us. This cultural inclination, characterised by the pursuit of happiness and success, is fuelled by the distorted reflection of the celebrity world, rather than by effort or responsibility towards others. The allure of the celebrity world serves as a metaphor for an existential void and a yearning for spiritual fulfilment, underscoring the search for meaning in life (Boorstin, 1992). Boorstin contends that the entertainment industry and the culture of narcissism can be regarded as a spiritual problem of humanity, given that "we have created celebrities in our own image, now we have an obligation to worship them" (Boorstin, 1992, p. 232).The phenomenon of venerating celebrities, which, though tangible, is inherently distinct from the world of our quotidian experience, is a manifestation of our profound need to transcend the abyss that looms in our lives (Králik et al., 2024).

A further facet of contemporary narcissistic culture is the markedly diminished capacity for critical thinking, thus engendering a mass culture that is devoid of elevated aspirations and exhibits a disavowal of truth and beauty. This phenomenon, which has been noted by Kierkegaard (1987, p. 222) as being indicative of a c*rowd* that is *untruth*, is one that has been identified as a significant threat to Europe, and one that has the potential to manipulate the populace through the medium of the media. The events that have come to pass in the twentieth century have served to validate this assertion. The contemporary context, characterised by the pervasive influence of

disinformation and the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) within digital technologies, underscores the critical role of critical thinking in fortifying cyber security (Nowduri, 2018, p. 392). Critical thinking is instrumental in curbing the cyber-related destruction of democratic principles in an open society, as it fosters a conducive environment for the cultivation of a democratic society, particularly by facilitating the honest consideration of divergent views and preferences (Burbules, 2023, p. 3–4). A narcissistic culture, however, has been shown to weaken the ability to think critically (Jones, 2019, p. 123). This results in individuals becoming immersed in a world that is warped around their own ego. As beauty confronts one with otherness, narcissism ultimately prevents one from perceiving beauty in all its diversity, instead preferring simplifications that resonate with one's own mirror (Smith, 2021, p. 13). In doing so, it ignores the complexity of life and the complexity of the world in which we live. In contrast, true art has the capacity to confront reality, while kitsch, as Scruton (1997, p. 58) asserts, becomes "an aesthetic experience that avoids painful reality, instead providing simple, predictable, and pleasurable emotions", and which readily becomes mainstream in a narcissistic society. In the absence of a culture of critical thinking within a society, there is a risk that the pursuit of political correctness may result in the propagation of tastelessness, which, through clever manoeuvring, may produce a similar effect in terms of high art to that of totalitarian regimes in which culture is strictly ideologized and subject to institutionalised control.

In this context, it is important to note that kitsch is frequently regarded within the domain of art and aesthetics as antithetical to authentic beauty and truthfulness. It symbolises superficial and sentimental interpretations of genuine beauty that are deficient in the requisite depth and authenticity. At times, art is susceptible to becoming mired in utopian perspectives on life. As Kundera (1984, p. 211) asserts, "kitsch is the absolute oblivion of death", art, in its distorted state, becomes a caricature of truth and goodness, losing its ability to reflect life in its complexity and contradictions. This tendency aligns with the narcissistic inclination to avoid pain and suffering, preferring instead the pursuit of happiness, joy and peace. Digital technology and the entertainment industry have emerged as conduits that cater to these cravings, a phenomenon that kitsch, in contrast to authentic art, is capable of appealing to a broad audience through its easily accessible and pleasurable nature. The repercussions of this phenomenon are grave, as it engenders a dissociation from the natural world, leading to the forfeiture of a crucial and intrinsic facet of the human experience. This results in a loss of opportunities to acquire essential communication and social skills that shape both the conscious and unconscious mind (Giannelli, 2016). The pursuit of authentic experiences, driven by a yearning for true life, can lead to a spiral of death.

8. Kitsch and the theology of beauty

The concept of beauty, as an aesthetic phenomenon, is subject to contemporary trends of relativising aesthetic claims regarding the distinction between art and kitsch. Kitsch, understood as an aesthetic phenomenon, also functions as a cultural product, closely associated with social values, emotions,

and norms. In an open society, these norms are subject to change in accordance with the prevailing social and cultural context (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023). Proponents of kitsch as a legitimate part of the new postmodern society argue that kitsch lovers "are simply coping with the increasing abstraction of daily life and are finding new opportunities for creating their own articulation of that life" (McIntyre, 2014, p. 96), and in any case, "kitsch offers an experience that is in many cases valuable" (Ryynänen and Barragán, 2023, p. 255), especially from the perspective of authentic feeling on the part of the consumer. However, when considering the impact of kitsch on the individual's life and, consequently, on society, an implicit call for a metaphysical anchoring of the concept of beauty and, consequently, of kitsch can be identified across the entire spectrum of opinion. This concept is intricately linked to the philosophical inquiry into the meaning of human existence and, by extension, human endeavours. Consequently, the notion of "a correct distance" (McBride, 2005, p. 294) emerges as a unifying concept that connects both conservative and neo-liberal viewpoints. In this context, the theology of beauty serves as a foundational framework for a meaningful dialogue that transcends diverse perspectives on the ascription of a *correct distance* in relation to the transcendent dimension of beauty.

Art in the light of beauty theology thus transcends purely intellectual and theoretical horizons, becoming instead "a response to God's creation and a reflection of the human desire for beauty and harmony" (Wolterstorff, 1980, p. 122) or, in the words of Haught (2000, p. 224), "man's response to God's creative activity". Thus, it becomes a spiritual activity alongside the aesthetic, manifesting in all aspects of human life. Metaphysical beauty, in this sense, becomes a challenge for humanity to understand its own knowledge of the world and to apply this understanding to its practice in a way that reflects its progressive development, both as an individual and as a part of the ecosystem. The question that naturally arises is which outcomes of critical analysis on the part of man will be positive, which will be ambivalent, and which will be negative. The theological concept of human freedom[11] locates the possibilities of choice in the dialectical relationship of man's responsibility for the world around him. The resulting vector of reasoning may offer some starting points in understanding what kitsch is and how kitsch relates to a theology of creation and beauty.

The concept of understanding kitsch in such a case will be tied to 'usefulness' in the sense of 'building up', 'developing' and 'educating' the individual and the community. The concept of beauty in the sense of a theology of creation

[11] The biblical concept of freedom and responsibility is predicated on the rabbinic wisdom, "I may do all things, but not all things prosper; I may do all things, but I will be controlled by nothing" (1 Cor 6:12). This concept is robust in its relationship to ethics, self-denial, and the perspective of the community. This concept of freedom, as outlined in the Bible, is one that is directed towards the protection of the self, but not for the sake of narcissism, but rather to be responsible for one's surroundings. This responsibility becomes the primary mission to which one must subordinate one's narcissistic tendencies. According to the principle outlined above, an individual who becomes subservient to their own preferences and egoistic desires will not make decisions that will be beneficial. This is because such individuals are incapable of considering the needs of themselves or their environment. Compare Guttesen (2024).

thus offers a powerful teleological impetus for diverse human activism. In such a case, the benefits of the individual need to be critically evaluated in relation to the benefits of the larger social entity. This is not a simplistic utilitarian approach, but rather an acknowledgement of the transcendent dimension of feelings, thoughts, and actions. An important factor in this dialectic is humility, based on the recognition that humans are not the owners or creators of the universe, but its stewards. From a metaphysical perspective, humans will not be the final arbiters of what is and what is not *kitsch*. From a human perspective, this question remains unanswered. The concept of *a correct distance* in the context of the theology of beauty signifies a position of dynamic equilibrium between the respect for the authentic artistic expression of each individual and the recognition that no human being can fully express beauty in its totality. Human judgement of the quality of art cannot, by definition, be accorded absolute weight; rather, it is to be exercised with all love, respect and tact.

It is vital to acknowledge the notion that beauty, when expressed authentically through art, possesses the capacity to "shape us, transform us, and lead us to God, insofar as it is grounded in truth" (Hauerwas, 2001, p. 93). Consequently, the inquiry into truth within the domain of art remains pertinent. In the pursuit of beauty in life, truth must not become a commodity in the hands of individuals seeking personal gain at the expense of society. From the perspective of the theology of beauty, truth remains an attribute of art that transcends its concrete forms and contents. Ryynänen and Barragán (2023, p. 235) asserts that "values such as truth and goodness are not among the categories, we follow in life but represent values that define what it means to be human in truth". The concept of truth, in this context, is not merely a matter of objective reality, but rather, a moral and spiritual imperative that shapes human responsibility (Pavlikova and Tavilla, 2023). Consequently, any artistic endeavour that aspires to authentically reflect the beauty of God must be grounded in truth, thereby resonating with the integrity of the individual who engages with it (Begbie, 2007, p. 305). The deliberate evasion of accountability to the revealed truth engenders a realm where the meaning and purpose of art are distorted. Kitsch, in this sense, is a tangible manifestation of this distortion. The concept of kitsch, as it pertains to the realm of art, is understood to be more closely associated with the moral and spiritual rhetoric that characterises the artist's personality profile than with the conventional aesthetic criteria for art, which are often culturally contingent. Within the context of a culture dominated by solipsism, the presence of kitsch serves to exacerbate the perceived distance between humanity and the aesthetic beauty that is believed to be divinely bestowed upon creation. This phenomenon functions as an impediment to the formation of a genuine and profound connection between the individual and the beauty that lies within the created world, thereby hindering a deep engagement with the divine creation. This results in a state of self-alienation, both from oneself and from one's designated mission.

Contemporary media and culture are increasingly influenced by economic and power parameters, resulting in a noticeable absence of love as an attribute of God's self-expression in creation. Given the assertion that "love remains the great norm even in art" (Rookmaker, 1994, p. 222), the distinguishing mark between true art and kitsch becomes, in the light of a theology of beauty, the degree to which the artist reduces and distorts the image of God's love. Instead of acting in accordance with what is right, beneficial to others, and brings goodness, justice, and righteousness to the weak and oppressed, the artist chooses to compromise, thereby undermining society on its path to excellence. Kitsch can be said to diminish the capacity for critical thinking in people and create a crowd thinking that distances people from the *image of God in us*, i.e., it falls short of its maxims. From a theological perspective, "true artists are called to capture transcendent beauty and to refuse to distort truth through superficial aesthetic forms" (Evdokimov, 1990, p. 201) in order to reflect the Koheletian horizon of eternity with their work and not to shy away from the contradictions of temporality.

Within a theological framework, kitsch can be conceptualised as a form of self-expression or reflection of the prevailing reality, characterised as "an aesthetic failure that purports beauty without genuine depth or truth" (Viladesau, 1999, p. 82). In certain circumstances, kitsch may not invariably exert a detrimental formative influence on individuals; indeed, in some cases, it may even result in "a deeper aesthetic and spiritual appreciation" (Brown, 2000, p. 120). This is predicated on the condition that people have unobstructed and adequate access to art. This positions the discourse on the relationship between art and kitsch within a perspectivist framework, thereby creating space for the acknowledgement of kitsch's legitimate role in contemporary art.

Verdon's perspective asserts that authentic artistic creations, crafted with reverence for creation and its divine origin, "transcend temporal limitations and enable us to experience the eternal dimension of beauty" (Verdon, 2010, p. 130). In this sense, art functions as a conduit, facilitating access to the eternal dimension of beauty and thus transcending the confines of temporal existence. This teleological dimension of art and beauty is predicated on the anticipation of the practical forms of human self-expression, manifesting as vitality and life itself. In this sense, the practical outputs of beauty and art are not limited to the realms of visual art, design and architecture, but extend to the domain of social relations, economics, and the collective well-being of a community. Interpretations of beauty within the Kohelet paradigm embody the universal concept of blessing, which, as outlined in the creation narrative, is intrinsically linked to the fulfilment of humanity's mandate in paradise. In this paradigm, beauty corresponds to the harmony of the entire ecosystem, in which the various subsystems function both independently and in mutuality.

9. Conclusions

The Koheletian paradigm of *eternity in the heart* presents a compelling concept that facilitates a thoughtful exploration of the themes of beauty, art and

kitsch. It acknowledges the inherent challenge of capturing beauty and the fundamental human desire to perceive, possess and enjoy it. Contemporary consumerist and narcissistic culture has narrowed the definition of beauty to the aesthetic domain, and art is increasingly becoming a commodity with economic value. This study offers a theological reflection on beauty in light of the creation story (Gen 1-4) as a contribution to the discourse regarding the meaning of art and its place in contemporary society. The Koheletian paradigm of *eternity in the heart of man* presents beauty as an interdisciplinary concept whose value and moral applications have practical implications and transcendent overlap.

The following findings are arrived at:

· Beauty is not an artistic construct but has its metaphysical grounding in the creation story.

· Beauty is not merely an artistic preference for human beings, but brings a challenge to understanding the world and one's place in it.

· Beauty is a timeless category that confronts man in his finitude and in a specific cultural context. The human condition is defined by the need to comprehend and embody beauty, not in the context of self-aggrandisement, but as a responsibility to one's own life and the ecosystem to which they are integral.

· The concept of beauty encompasses the dimensions of truth, goodness, justice, responsibility, and, most notably, love.

· It is through the aesthetic experience that humans are inspired to take responsibility for themselves and their fellow beings. The communal dimension of responsibility is an intrinsic quality of beauty and art, as outlined in the creation story.

· True art, in contrast to narcissistic culture, is believed to recognise the value of human imperfection, pain, disappointment, and various forms of failure and setback. Consequently, it is seen as liberating itself from the economic pressures of profit and success at any cost. It functions as a prophylactic factor in a society that is atomising and there are attempts to undermine the foundations of democracy.

· In the light of creation theology, the category of kitsch is not absolute but relative, and the criteria for judging it may change in society.

· Kitsch as an artistic category has its formative place in the consciousness of society, and its proper functioning helps to educate and develop a person's aesthetic and artistic sense.

· Kitsch should not become an instrument of stigmatization and ostracization of any person who, in his desire to seek forms of authentic expression of his perception of life and the world, has creatively arrived at its concretization.

The present study posits that the Koheletian paradigm provides a valid framework for interdisciplinary dialogue on the question of understanding kitsch and its place in contemporary society. This complex discourse

encompasses an analysis of kitsch from the particular to the universal and from the internal to the external, while resonating with moral realism in questions of ethics. Furthermore, it is posited that this paradigm has the capacity to serve as a counterbalance to the prevailing trend of absolute relativisation of values, while concomitantly delineating novel avenues for research in this domain.

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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

[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

[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. foreig*n. 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.

[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, Jož a 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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Regional Kitsch

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I hereby raise a new subdivision of kitsch to become an object of philosophical reflection. While a broad variety of objects is mentioned in studies on everyday kitsch – i.e. knickknacks, to here mark a difference towards bad 'art' called kitsch – there are no notes on regional kitsch per se. There is a difference between regional kitsch, anchored to regions and broader geographical wholes, and the type of 'urban' kitsch, which scholars have been discussing more, i.e. kitsch that presents kitschified versions of famous statues and architecture, objects of cultural heritage that represent their cities (e.g. Michelangelo's David represents Florence). While miniature David statues and Eiffel Towers are for tourists only, and often detested by the locals, regional kitsch seems to have a more positive meaning for the inhabitants. Regional kitsch also focuses more on local culture through its everyday objects and atmosphere. Could it have a bigger role in building identity than what we have so far realized? The main aim of this article is to describe and present the phenomenon in the framework of kitsch research, and to provide a basis for further study of regional kitsch. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Aesthetics, Popular Culture, Mass Culture, Mass Art, Knickknacks*

> A region, like the Paris basin [...] is far larger than any city. It is far too big to be directly experienced by most of its people. The region is therefore primarily a construct of thought, the most active mode of human experiencing.
> (Yi-fu Tuan, 1975, p. 158)

1. Regions and Kitsch – an Introduction

There is a 'genre' of micro-geographically motivated kitsch, which is connected to extraordinary cities, their landmarks and artistic treasures. Think of the miniature gondolas of Venice. Even Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's father bought one. Seeing it inspired Goethe. He had the object in mind when he arrived in Venice on his *Italianische Reise* (Goethe, 1976, p. 87). Although mass tourism was considered a problem in the city, roughly speaking, already a century later, in the 1870s, when the locals started to speak of tourist hordes (Pemble, 1995, p. 15)[1], Goethe's hand-manufactured gondola was still an early product in the same tradition, which later became an entire industry, magnified by the huge acceleration of tourism (by the way, Goethe

[1] Talking about architecture, and e.g. fake ruins, see e.g. Zoltan Somhegyi (2020).

was also sold a fake antique (i.e. kitsch) in Naples (Goethe, 1976)). This genre of kitsch is very much at the forefront of discussions by theoreticians regarding the everyday side of kitsch (see e.g. Kulka (1988)) (kitsch as bad art is a different story, with a slightly different cultural logic (see Barragán and Ryynänen (2023)).

While these days, in the midst of an absolute inundation of consumer objects, we would not necessarily gain that much interest in a place according to knickknacks that reproduce its iconic objects (I am thinking of Goethe here), we still anchor our own memories through the objects we buy from cities geographically meaningful for us or just sites where our travels, meaningful breaks between work and the everyday, take us. Naturally, it does not have to be a kitsch object that we bring home. We might buy a hat in France or a yoga mat in India which has a special significance because we bought it in Paris or Mysore, but the objects of kitsch, which are associated with geographical places, represent a peculiar case of culture which we anchor to a place, a very strict tradition with not much alteration. The objects refer to the point in question, aiming at a light, folkly and 'popular' experience, mostly without fear of being banal, and almost never with an intent to borrow 'aura' from great artwork.

The matchbox-sized canal houses of Amsterdam and the red double-decker buses of London – ending up on windowsills – are icons of famous cities. They help people to connect to something that once happened in a certain place, even decades later. The objects in question might have been manufactured in China or Thailand, far from the place where they were sold (David and Marvin, 2004) (and so also they traveled to the location, and sometimes their journey was longer than that of the tourists), but selling them makes sense only at the appropriate site, the geographical location, where the micro (the souvenirs) and the macro (the real objects) are present, side by side.

Pocket-size Statues of Liberty and replicas of the Gateway to India, which travel around the world in suitcases, are a bit different, pointing to certain landmarks, of course still representing their respective "homes" (New York, Mumbai), but geographically embodying a double intent. Among other objects which carry memories, the way in which these objects iconize a site, by representing central icons like Michelangelo's *David* or the Burj Khalifa of Dubai, their production, distribution, and logistics, is a big business on its own, which distinguishes it from local fashion, spices, and olive oil, also sold for tourists; but what is even more important for understanding what I call 'regional kitsch,' the iconic object portrayed often overshadows the feeling of the place. The significance of the object of art portrayed is mostly as big or bigger than the city referred to.

Like objects of modern art, both of these groups of objects are non-practical, and not-withstanding emotions, they are useless – like most kitsch. They mean something only for the people who buy them and travel back home with them. They visually represent the object pictured, and symbolically the place visited, and continue in a tradition that extends all the way to craft objects sold to

early modern travelers, and a whole industry of colonial knickknacks and cute, cheesy (see Anderson, 2010), and sentimental (Solomon, 2004) objects sold to tourists hand-in-hand with the rise of tourism in the 19th century[2], without forgetting the echoes of the colonies, which were brought to the markets of colonial rulers. As Celeste Olalquiaga shows in her *The Artificial Kingdom* (2001), many historical kitsch objects had a central role in communicating colonial fantasies (Olalquiaga, 2002). Our inflatable banana or plastic pink flamingo in the yard might echo age-long geographical power-relations, and of course, often, in the gray north, the colors of the south side of the globe were happily welcomed through these (often of course one-way) cultural exchanges (Ryynänen and Sysser, 2021).

2. Urban Kitsch and Regional Kitsch

Together with (fake) indigenous craft[3] the classics of kitsch research refer to this type of everyday kitsch in the same breath as more art-driven kitsch (such as sleazy erotic paintings and portraits of crying clowns, see e.g. Kulka 1989). Often, they are connected to art objects or something heritage-driven, and a dialectics of originality and copying is visible, which has often been discussed by kitsch-theorists (see e.g. Kulka, 1989 and Calinescu, 1986).

As I said, however, in the manner embodied by the examples mentioned at the beginning, the gondola, canal houses and the double-deckers, there also exists another form of kitsch, where the geographical limits are broader, and the focus blurs even more, from the objects to the broader cultural context and the set of landscapes of the region.

To cite an example: While driving north from Helsinki, I stop at every café and gasoline station starting from Ostrobothnia, to see where the kitsch sales begin[4]. Past Oulu, on my way to Rovaniemi and the polar circle, nothing happens for a long time, until in the evening, just 70 miles from the capital of Lapland, suddenly, the roadside shop is full of soft Christmas decorations (many like to think Santa Clause is from Finnish Lapland), furry arctic foxes and reindeers, and reindeer fur, not to mention small puppets which portray the indigenous Samí people (a constant debate on appropriation surrounds these toys, of course), and replicas of famous mountains, like the Saana. Rovaniemi is all kitsch, offering Christmas practically every day for tourists, but its kitsch is very regional, all related to the self-image and understanding of the area – from cheesy, plastic Christmas trees to soaps portraying Santa's helpers. It is not about the city of Rovaniemi itself, though, but about Lapland, both real and imagined. On the way down, this time far from the

[2] Even the whole invention of the concept seems to relate to selling stuff to tourists. See "Kitsch", in Matei Calinescu (1986), based on the text *The Benevolent Monster: Reflections on Kitsch as an Aesthetic Concept* (Clio VI, 1).

[3] Although Clement Greenberg's notes on kitsch are conceptually so broad that they cover all consumer culture and non-avantgarde art, and do not really make much sense today, as a whole, while he of course sometimes refers to really kitschy objects, he discusses fake indigenous craft in a way which makes sense in the context of kitsch. See Clement Greenberg (1986).

[4] I am thankful for Svenska Kulturfonden for their support for my study of kitsch in Lapland, a trip, which I took in the fall of 2022.

coast, through Kuusamo, along the east side of Finland, close to the Russian border, the selling of kitsch continues for a longer time, further south, maybe even 100 miles after Rovaniemi, but the material is the same. Then, suddenly the commerce disappears. I have driven out of the territory of Lapland kitsch.

We are really talking about regional kitsch, a set of objects, topics and topoi (mountains), which extend to a broad geographical area, with a commerce which must have a huge impact on the otherwise relatively poor (by Finnish standards, of course) area. It embraces a wide geographical whole.

But Lapland is not the only region which has a life in the world of kitsch. Think of Alpine knickknacks, miniature mountains, beer pints, and plastic deer, which together with Tirolian hats, travel the globe with both backpackers and luxury travelers. Bavarian kitsch is about small pints of beer (plastic, or ceramic), lederhosen, images of men in moustaches, and puppets representing women in Dirndlgwand (a traditional dress, often eroticized with semi-exposed breasts, together with images of excessive beer glasses). The Tatra mountain range with its "virile" symbolical natural purity (analogous to Lapland) and miniature mountains, the Amalfi coast with its lemons paired with picturesque seascapes, and the sheep of Wales, which come in various sizes, forms, and materials – flags and neon lights included – all testify to another, geographically broader type of kitsch.

There seems to exist a cluster of meaningful differences between these types of kitsch, although the boundary is not always clear. Urban kitsch seems to seize on important (singular) objects which tourists are supposed to gaze at (although one might find e.g. a miniature-sized plastic parmesan cheese close to Parma), and it works on two levels, referring to the 'cult' object (to paraphrase Benjamin's ideas on the *hic et nunc* of original works of art, or, if one wants to think like that, having an 'aura'), and through this, referring to the city where the object, statue, or piece of architecture is based. It is more about originals, a statue or an architectural treasure, and the city is the site where this remarkable thing exists – although then, as stated above, some urban areas also have everyday objects and atmospheric indicators of the broader lifestyle in their kitsch arsenal.

Regional kitsch refers more generically to culture, e.g. the cultivation of lemons (Amalfi) or sheep (Wales) in an area, to landscapes – Alpine mountains, windmills (Holland) – or nature; Lapland's local kitsch brings out a variety of wild animals (furry in sales) from the reindeer to the polar fox. They also come in plastic models and landscapes coronated with the Northern Lights (which stands for maybe the only regionally symbolized celestial kitsch in the world), but also Alpine, and the kitsch of the Tatras features, mountains, trees and deer with majestic horns, even boars and birds.

One could say that the regions are portrayed via animals (deer in the Alps, reindeer in Lappland), as they are more about nature and the countryside, but on the whole, by being more generic, and more birds-eye in its approach, this type of kitsch lacks a clear place, a clear object of praise, and this is what I feel, turns more towards environments and atmosphere. It also is not a lower take

on a highbrow object, but something mundane and/or related to the everyday, thus accentuating the difference between the kitsch of urban centers. It is everyday kitsch about the everyday, which is something to note in everyday aesthetics.

When discussing the non-urban or broader areas (with an urban area inside it) as 'regional kitsch', it is important to note that not all regions have regional kitsch. It is much more usual, for a city to have its own array of objects. Think of any bigger city with some history, and they have it. But when regions have their own kitsch, it has probably been harder to look at it critically. People in arts, aesthetics, and criticism have often have looked on kitsch with urban site-specificity in a critical manner, as we can see from the classics in the kitsch debate. They have not probably seen regional kitsch as an issue, as it does not have any dialogue with art, although there has not been much consciousness of separating these issues in the old kitsch debate[5]. Of course, sometimes there are heritage classics on the countryside too, but when they are not situated in big cities, they can represent the region even less than what kitsch, which derives its meaning from art in cities do.

These features referring to culture, environment and atmosphere do not appropriate high culture, rather the opposite; many 'works' of regional kitsch underline their nature as 'folk' and/or somewhat popular, belonging to the 'people,' which makes regional kitsch different. They do that stereotypically, of course, but the direction is different, which is something that kitsch research has yet to take notice of.

In 1964, Umberto Eco wrote hinted at the 'dialogue' of highbrow art and kitsch in his *La struttura del cattivo gusto.* He said that kitsch copied art, and art tried to evade it and to find new ways of getting rid of kitsch (Eco, 1964), which might have been true of some modernist and avant-gardist work. Of course, the history of knickknacks considered to be kitsch has some interesting examples of this, some, where even the dialogue between art and kitsch leads to artistic comments. The endless banal reproduction of *Mona Lisa* resulted in Marcel Duchamp's famous *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919), where Mona Lisa had a mustache.

However, the way in which a different kind of approach to material culture is accentuated in regional kitsch makes an interesting difference. There is nothing that could anger a conservative modernist or highbrow heritage enthusiast[6], and of course, today this concerns all kitsch, as the one-sided cultural war between highbrow and kitsch is somewhat over. It's just that regional kitsch seems to have been better accepted by highbrow thinkers early on, which is interesting to note. One does find any rage on kitsch, which does

[5] In current kitsch research, the situation is, of course, different. For research with an accent on (contemporary) positive reactions to kitsch and with a clear separation of everyday kitsch and kitsch in art, see e.g. Max Ryynänen and Paco Barragán (2023). For a broad idea of the historical presentation of the history of kitsch research, see especially the introductory chapter *Kitsch: From Rejection to Acceptance*.

[6] For more on anger and cultural hierarchies, see Andreas Huyssen (1989). See also C. E. Emmer (1998) and Herbert Gans (1974).

not represent or refer to culture heavily labeled as 'authentic' or legitimate (art, indigenous). Today's more positive relationship towards kitsch has so had its precedent in this type of kitsch.

Culturally, it is significant that while many forms of kitsch appropriate a traditionally more valued form of culture to sell the idea of it to the masses (not forgetting its geographical meaning), with one original object to focus on (Michelangelo's *David*, etc.) miniature beer pints and furry wolves with a regional aura simply refer to the masses of these objects and/or animals in a certain area, often with an invisible tag saying 'folk,' the 'people,' or even (national/local) 'nature', somehow belonging to the people who inhabit it. There are probably millions of beer pints in Bavaria, and having the kitsch item representing one type of them, is not, in the end, about cherishing this object, but about cherishing a culture, or an atmosphere typical for it, a *Bierstube*, and a culture with the *Oktoberfest* and a tradition of drinking wheat beer and talking and singing, the relaxed atmosphere of Bavaria. Even more, while a *Mona Lisa* is not even Paris, but Michelangelo's *David* is about Florence (at least to some extent), even the latter is not about life in Florence.

3. Uses of Regional Kitsch

Seeing the miniature beer pint on the bookshelf in the evening, just before going to sleep, one might, for a moment, feel the atmosphere of a beer house in some cozy Bavarian town. Even Munich feels like a cluster of happy villages, and wherever you look you can find a lovely place for a beer, where people come together. It's not that memories like this could not pop up while watching a shrunk, banalized version of *Manneken Pis* – maybe good beer memories again? – but that one could ask if the everyday objects of a certain cultural region are more icons of a lifestyle, a way of living, an atmosphere, condensed into one object, as the object in question is not in the end what is represented, as it is too generic, and too much about a way of life. The tradition of regional kitsch calls for new thinking about kitsch.

Where does atmosphere hide? In his philosophy of atmosphere, the 'half-things,' as he calls them, Tonino Griffero lays out countless examples, from the police asking to see your passport, to the 'cool' atmosphere which surrounds Barak Obama, but there is not much about everyday objects (Griffero 2006). Atmosphere is hard to catch. How to show that Latvia's capital Riga has a very open type of energy or that Delhi feels somehow toxic (while Mumbai not)? Still, people share these experiences. This 'half-thingness' of atmospheres is present, and never visible, but of course, like most cultural depth, it builds through a cluster of small things, many of which are reproduced in kitsch objects. And, while openness and toxicity are hard to turn into cute, sentimental kitsch, other atmospheres are certainly not. Anything pleasurable can be reproduced in a surface-scratching way, and of course this does not only happen in regional kitsch, although it seems to be a quintessential feature of it. But the Londoners – here large cities with their kitsch can resemble regional kitsch – and the porcelain lemons of Amalfi bring about atmospheric qualities in these regions. It is the everyday aesthetics, which regional kitsch touches on much more.

According to Yuriko Saito, everyday aesthetics is represented by a certain set of objects which form the everyday (Saito 2007). While the collection of everyday objects that regional kitsch presents as miniatures and useless copies might be outdated (historical) and/or focus on the most peculiar, things one does not find in other regions, or which are very much symbolical in the region, it still focuses on a set of objects, which relates to seeing the everyday though its mundane material culture. What it brings forth is partly an identity, an idea of the everyday, where current culture and historical culture, and maybe fantasies of what a historical culture of the area might have been, come together.

At the same time, it is not unusual for locals to buy regional kitsch and feel a sort of local identity connected to it. While it would be hard to find a Venetian who has been on a Gondola (David and Marvin 2004) and one does not probably find kitschy miniature gondolas in their apartments, in Lapland, many people buy the same furry animals that the tourists buy, as well as the trash related to Christmas that is sold everywhere for Santa-hungry tourists. Also, Alpine kitsch seems to hit many places where locals gather, and homes where they exist with only an inch of camp attitude included. But one does not find people building a local, site-specific identity through a miniature Eiffel tower or a pocket-sized David. At least there seems to be more accent on this in regional kitsch.

The environmental and landscape-driven side of the practice is also interesting. Montmartre is not portrayed 3D in miniature kitsch, but Alpine mountains and Lapland's hills are. Venice and Amsterdam exist as miniature buildings, but the kitsch does not dive deep into the water or any other natural side of these sites – or other cities. While kitsch has been criticized for nearly two centuries (although I need to reiterate that today the situation is different (see Ryynänen and Barragán (2023), especially Chapter 1)), often for cheap copying, its imitations of nature of the regions it kitschifies in the 'genre' of regional kitsch are mostly first-hand portrayals. They remind us about experiencing nature, or the appreciation of animal life in the natural environment of the region, and they've done that for a long time. Kitschy furry reindeers and arctic foxes greet travelers as soon as they step off the plane at Rovaniemi Airport Lapland, like proud manifestations of the extraordinary natural and cultural nature of the area. Unique local kitsch! Interestingly, they are (mostly) made in Lapland, not in Thailand or Taiwan, which is the main paradigm in kitsch, and they are not even very cheap to buy. This is also more typical for Alpine kitsch than kitsch sold in and about Rome or Paris. Venice sells its original local glass objects with a document confirming local production, but the kitsch glass items sold around the originals are Asian imports.

Without any attempt to borrow the aura from highbrow objects, regional kitsch objects are pioneers of the more positive feeling of kitsch for the intelligentsia, which today is commonplace – and so it has survived the kitsch wars without focused portrayals showing its existence, although it is probably as old as other types of kitsch. Of course, one can ask if any kitsch should have ever come under attack – who's afraid of sentimentality, as Robert C. Solomon

asks (Solomon, 2004), and why bother if other people have other approaches to culture; but one has to understand that when mass-produced and mass-distributed cheap objects first hit the cultural sphere, and when icons of the art system were appropriated, it must have felt like a sort of attack against craft and art (Calinescu, 1986). Although old theorists do not really distinguish between different types of kitsch, their critical comments are based on the relationship between high and the low, reproductions of objects of cultural status, mainly (Kulka, 1989, Calinescu, 1986), while stereotypical expression and repetition have also been attributed kitsch, and these estimates and judgements easily apply to regional kitsch. It is stereotypical, it reinforces stereotypes, and its endless repetition of them can make one who lives in a region where local kitsch is strong, crazy in the end.

Interestingly, regional kitsch cannot be found everywhere. Not all regions have it. In fact, one really has to think of the regions that would be meaningful for this discussion. Not many regions offer an identity which easily lends itself to kitsch, or many regions lack symbols which somehow make a positive difference to the urban centers that exist inside of them or in their vicinity. Of course, for a kitsch production to make sense there must also be tourists. In any case, Lazio is overshadowed by Rome, and Brandenburg is overshadowed by Berlin. And, of course, the nature portrayals are not 'innocent', though they would not copy highbrow. It can change our way of looking at real nature if we see too many sugary copies of it (see Ryynänen, 2019), of course. After one thousand sunsets in mountain sceneries seen on postcards and digital images, a real one in the Alps might feel like kitsch, even if it is real and we would view it for the first time. This is of course how kitsch can both give identity to not just landscapes but cities and regions (Venice and its sunsets, Northern Lights in Lappland) and somewhat give a kitschified feeling to their life too, not through referring to unique objects, like the Eiffel Tower, but through distributing local symbols and cultural highlights which come in masses. And regional kitsch probably has an effect often on the culture regions, which it portrays, in a way, which might be seen as more positive than in the urban cases mentioned. For sure, the way people of Lapland look at themselves must echo a bit the quite positive relationship to regional kitsch, which is present in the region.

Weirdly, although enormous sums are spent on art, to provide a better identity to regions, often ending up being enjoyed by a small margin of people (like me), regions have yet to fund and employ kitsch for their benefit. No region has a conscious approach to kitsch, although it represents a livelihood for some. What if Lapland had a kitsch strategy? It seems that kitsch, however visible and usual, has somehow escaped the attention of people working with cultural policy and branding. There are no projects about expanding the variety of kitsch objects anchoring the region; additional furry animals haven't appeared on the shelves (I'm still looking for a furry Wolverine in Lapland), and other parts of the everyday which could be more cherished have yet to go into kitsch production. And, as regional kitsch so praises the region it portrays, how would you e.g. sell equality or democracy, which definitely are part of

Lapland's legacy together with its broader context, Finland? The cultural wars of modernity (as I said, although one-sided) continue to have too much of an effect on how things are viewed. While historical landscape painting is considered meaningful and portrays places in the regions, we have not found regional kitsch important, despite the fact that it is enjoyed much more extensively. The atmospheres that these objects show, support and help visitors to remember could be studied and enhanced by local production supported by the regions. Whatever, understanding regional kitsch better, and even just noting that it exists, is a step in the right direction, and I hope this article has been able to contribute to that. As Bavaria is the home of the concept, where it was developed in the 1860s to refer to sketches sold to tourists (Calinescu 1986), and Munich does not host many cultural treasures, which as singular fetish objects of art would easily overshadow regional qualities, Bavaria could cherish both the invention of the concept, and the strength of regional kitsch in the area, and build upon contemporary features, which we who visit this wonderful area in the southeast of Germany, remember from our visits, like the surfers of the Eisbach Wave (and the Wave itself) or the incredible food culture, which has settled side by side with local delicacies, and made the area the most frequently-starred Michelin restaurant region in the world.

4. Conclusions

"The region […] is far too large to be known directly. It has to be constructed by symbolic means," Yi-fu Tuan writes (Tuan 1975, 159). He claims that it "has to have sentimental identity" (ibid. 163). Philosophically speaking, finding the idea of regional kitsch will not change much, but thinking about the philosophy of kitsch will surely remind us of the fact that more positive takes on kitsch from the highbrow side have existed for a long time in the philosophy of kitsch, and that there is a difference between kitsch, which is in dialogue with highbrow culture, including most urban kitsch, and kitsch which embraces regions, stemming from their cultures and arsenals of everyday objects, however banal their folkly and/or popular nature and its celebration would ever be. Regional kitsch, as noted, stands also more for environment and nature, which is a perspective still unstudied by kitsch scholars. Important to note, kitsch, often hated for its sentimentality, could also stand for Yi-fu Tuan's idea of sentimental identity (quoted in the beginning of the paragraph). Whether really needed or not, kitsch might actually build identity more than we understand, and for sure, regional kitsch at least looks like doing that more than most other types of kitsch. While there is a lot to study, and this article has only scratch the surface, we should at least not underestimate the meaning and role of regional kitsch. I hope this text supports our growing understanding of this less discussed form of kitsch, and not just for the sake of understanding kitsch, but also for understanding regions, identity, and culture more generally.

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The Antinomy of Kitsch

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

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

1. Introduction

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

Thesis: Kitsch and art are incompatible.

Antithesis: Kitsch and art are compatible.

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

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

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

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

2. The Antinomy of Kitsch

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

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

If one reads or listens to art, film, theater, or literature reviews, one can find proof that art critics, journalists, and feature writers also consider kitsch and art antipodes. In 2017, when *Lala Land* was the talk of the town, the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published, for instance, a piece with the title "Musicals—kitschy commerce or great emotion?" (Britzelmeier and Rietzschel, 2017). Two authors discussed whether musicals like Lala Land can count as art or are simply kitsch. In 2022, two Austrian journalists debated whether Netflix's successful series *Bridgerton* was great cinema or unbearable kitsch (Priesching and Siebert, 2022). The German art podcast *Augen zu* (*Close your eyes*) asks, "Is Gustav Klimt great art or great kitsch?" in its episodes on Klimt[1]

[1] I understand "artifact" in Dickie's (2004, p. 49) sense.

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

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

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

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

3. Kitsch as an Aesthetic Category: Defending the Thesis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. Kitsch as an Aesthetic and Art-Critical Property

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5. Conclusion

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

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The Influence of Artistic Kitsch on the Formation of Political Memes

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Memes are a fundamental aspect of digital culture in the era of globalisation. As a powerful mode of communication, they reach vast audiences and exert significant influence on society. Their origins are closely tied to the concept of kitsch and its proliferation within 20th-century culture and art. Kitsch, which transitioned from *low* art to the realm of camp, paved the way for forms that serve a potent communicative function. By transforming simple images into widely recognisable symbols that circulate rapidly and embed themselves in collective consciousness, memes establish a foundation for aesthetic evaluation. Political memes, in particular, fulfil ideological, art-therapeutic, and recreational roles, often characterised by a pronounced comic element. Their connection to kitsch offers fertile ground for interdisciplinary research, highlighting the cultural and aesthetic intersections between these phenomena. | *Keywords: Kitsch, Political Memes, Globalisation, Mass Consumption, Digital Culture, Humour*

1. Introduction

Globalisation is a process that leads to the development of mass consumption. The scale of this phenomenon can be observed in various cultural spheres. The formation of the consciousness of the masses, which is revealed in the consumer dimensions of human activity, is influenced by the targeted impact created by the development of the industry of professional political centres. They affect the worldview of a citizen who is a potential voter, accustoming him or her to the use of simplified models, depriving him or her of the right to make his or her own decisions. Thus, instead of a politically stable voter, a simulated model of his or her political activity is created, which is formed by manipulating and simplifying visual political images. Political memes are a form that helps to broadcast these narratives. These social practices can be seen as a kind of modern kitsch. Greenberg explained kitsch as a mechanical art that embodies fake emotions and the falsity of modern life, which indicates

that it belongs to mass art, easily adapted by totalitarian culture. Memes, as part of digital culture, are a means of expressing trends in society. They reflect the reaction to public discourse and reveal the current political moods of society members. Contemporary political practices are a dynamic socio-cultural space where new cultural practices that are significant for the majority of the population are quickly adopted and actively used. This is the reason why we consider political memes as reflecting the current state of development of neo-kitsch. In addition, we can see how many political technologists and political leaders work with political memes, which improves their use in the political culture of society. The meme has become quite popular in the American presidential election process because of its low cost of creation, the ability to eclectically use previous cultural heritage, and the ability to appeal to a large, diverse audience. A meme is a mass product, it is aimed at a large number of consumers who do not have specialised artistic or cultural training or education, but it can convey messages and narratives that are most understandable and necessary for political technologists. At the same time, a meme is not an official verbal message constructed as a coherent literary text. However, it may contain a verbal textual component that is necessarily tied to a narrative image. A meme in the digital space can be visual or in other forms that are available to digital culture. Given the change in the vector of development of the space of contemporary culture and the shift of emphasis to digital culture, cyberspace is becoming a mediator of human sensuality and identity. Fierce political races, business life, education, science, medicine, art, everyday life, and other practices take place in the digital dimension. The presence of a large number of people, especially after the forced isolation of humanity during the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to a total significant impact of digital forms of interaction on various cultural phenomena. The true essence of a meme is to devalue or exalt through various forms of humour and to form one's own interpretation of events in the process of interaction. The vast majority of political memes convey narratives in an emotional, humorous, accessible form that is inherent in the masses and encourages a new sensibility. The aesthetic characteristics of memes reveal their closeness to mass art, which gave rise to kitsch and camp, where humorous approaches to the depicted object are manifested in different ways.

That is why conducting a comparative analysis of them, potentially across several dimensions, is advisable. It is necessary to determine the aesthetic characteristics of memes as practices of mass culture of the present and compare them with kitsch.

2. Kitsch as a Component of Consumer Culture

The process of urbanisation caused by industrialisation has shaped the culture of the city, in which the status artistic practice of the upper classes began to be imitated. It created demand for goods, including artistic goods, which demonstrate the solvency of the city's citizens. This phenomenon was emphasised by Thorstein Veblen, who defined the characteristics of the development of the leisure class engaged in demonstrative consumption (Veblen, 1899). The formation of kitsch, which is often characterised by mass

production, commercial nature and appeal to popular tastes, can be seen as a form of demonstrative consumption. The spread of kitsch reveals not the recipient's personal interest and pleasure, but the acquisition of social status through consumption.

Kitsch can be seen as a multilevel phenomenon. Some authors interpret it as a purely artistic phenomenon. However, it is not uncommon to have an in-depth vision of it that reveals a connection with other spheres, not just art. Milan Kundera interpreted kitsch as an integral part of politics. For him, it is like glue that unites different political communities, and its purpose is to *hide death*. The diversity of kitsch inherent in free societies is expressed in the form of republican, democratic, or ecological kitsch. If they are available, then

> competing influences cancel or limit one another can manage more or less to escape the kitsch inquisition: the individual can preserve his individuality; the artist can create unusual works. But whenever a single political movement corners power, we find ourselves in the realm of totalitarian kitsch. (Kundera, 2008, p. 132)

This is how we record the interdependence of political and artistic activity. Aesthetics comes in the form of aesthetic feelings after the interaction of these activities as a consequence, conclusion or protest.

Monika Kjellman-Chapin argues that kitsch is a variable concept that crosses a variety of related fields, including commercialism, artistic and aesthetic counterfeiting, class-related taste standards, and the conceptualisation of camp (Kjellman-Chapin, 2009). Walter Benjamin's interpretation distinguishes reproductive photographic tourist art, which is a subcategory of kitsch (Benjamin, 1970).

Kitsch as an artistic phenomenon became widespread as a result of the emergence of the Art Nouveau style, which in the early twentieth century was marked by a wealth of ornamentation in architecture and design. Accordingly, this characteristic began to create associations with the feminine. Decorativeness, pomp, and floral motifs became dominant, defining the originality of new forms embodied in modern buildings, their interiors and exteriors. The criticism of kitsch by modernists, including the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who in his work *Ornament and Crime* (Loos, 1998) defines kitsch as a sign of primitivism and feminine taste, which are perceived as negative, removes it from avant-garde trends. Nevertheless, kitsch does not disappear, given the background that shaped it.

Kitsch is often considered tasteless or overly sentimental because it is heavily influenced by gender perceptions. As Ruth Holliday and Tracy Potts (2012) point out, both in the Victorian period and in the early twentieth century, the domestic space and its decoration became a place for expressing femininity, which was often trivialised or rejected as kitsch by modernist criticism. Here, kitsch appears not just as an aesthetic choice, but as a gender marker that often undermines women's creative expression as superficial or secondary to more *serious* cultural forms dominated by men (masculinity).

With the rise of consumer culture after World War II, the role of women as consumers of mass-produced goods became central. The transition to a consumer society, where goods were often sold on the basis of aesthetic appeal rather than functionality, strengthened the association of kitsch with femininity, as women were primarily aimed at consuming decorative objects. Thus, the prerequisites for kitsch and its promotion in culture reveal the connection between the spread of globalisation, consumer society, and the formation of a circle of potential recipients.

> Kitsch could not, in fact, either emerge or prosper without the existence of kitsch-man, the lover of kitsch; as a producer of art he produces kitsch and as a consumer of art is prepared to acquire it and pay quite handsomely for it. (Broch, 1968, p. 49)

There is a homogenisation of taste, which leads to the proliferation of mass, commercially oriented and highly aesthetically simplified artefacts. By creating the conditions for the spread of a standardised commodity around the world, an artistic commodity emerges that can be easily commercialised and sold in different cultures. Valentin Bushanskyi defines kitsch as follows: it is "eclecticism, sincere, inspired and uncritical. It is sentimentality brought to the point of humiliation, humanity that seems about to start snarling with a toothless mouth, pathetic without feeling, petty grandeur" (Bushanskyi, 2011, p.145). Its accessibility and simplified artistic language allow for the creation of a global consumer network. Imitation, as well as copying, leads to the preservation of formal characteristics, which lose the essence of the phenomenon and the model.

The answer to the question of why kitsch, which is a product of mass culture, spreads is to form a solvent community.

> In the context of mass culture, it is the masses who determine which values and artifacts come to the fore, that is, which have priority, and which must remain in the shadows... The point, of course, is the most vulgar thing – solvency. The consumer (even when it comes to culture) determines production, including the work of artists. (Bushanskyi, 2012, p. 124)

Kitsch in the context of the spread of the cultural industry is becoming the dominant form of artifact distribution, as pointed out by Theodor Adorno (1991). Instead of inventing something fundamentally new, there is a repetition, duplication, and replication of the most popular things. And in the context of the decline of art, there is a demand for other forms that have artistic characteristics, but they are not dominant. Moreover, according to Bushansky, the hierarchy between social strata, as well as between different types of cultures, is disappearing, and they are beginning to be comprehensively replicated. "Both high art (classical works) and folklore have become exclusively material for kitschy replication" (Bushanskyi, 2012, p. 132).

Clement Greenberg's essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1986) emphasises the antagonistic relationship between avant-garde (modernist) art and kitsch (commercial art). Greenberg argues that kitsch is a byproduct of modern consumer culture and class differentiation. And it seems that this opposition is reasonable and constant, but Jose Luis and Mejia Razo's work

Greenberg's Paradox: The Influence of Modernism and Kitsch on Contemporary Art (Razo and Luis, 2009) proves that modernism and kitsch influence contemporary art. And the authors come to the conclusion that kitsch elements are often reinterpreted and incorporated into new works of art, which leads to what the authors call the *Greenberg paradox*. This paradox describes how kitsch, which was initially considered lowbrow, becomes highly valued in both quality and monetary terms when used in contemporary art. Kitsch has evolved and undergone transformations during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It used to be a mass art that was perceived by the cultural elite as a manifestation of bad taste. However, later it acquired the meaning of a technique that Abraham Moll calls *new kitsch* or modern kitsch, the artistic embodiment of which is accompanied by retro fashion and nostalgia for the past (Moles, 2016). Through the prism of a modern vision, before the Internet as cyberspace appeared, we were talking about historical kitsch, but afterwards we have to talk about neo-kitsch, which has acquired other characteristics. Similarly, the emergence of the Internet also influenced the phenomenon of massification. Both the mass consumer and the mass product no longer belong to the same society, but instead to cyberspace. At the same time, social groups and subcultures of different societies have been globalised into a kind of synthetic unity. The mass product and the mass consumer of cyberspace have a dynamic change of group identity. The main thing is not the result, but a constant process.

Olga Mukha notes the following:

> Kitsch is never a simple rejection of high art or art in general. It is a much broader phenomenon that encompasses social, economic and mental factors in addition to aesthetic ones. It no longer needs any legalisation, because it has already taken its place in the organised chaos of contemporary culture. (Mukha, 2013, p. 260)

The use of kitsch as a technique correlates with the concept of *camp*, which was introduced into wide circulation by Susan Sontag, who considered it an aestheticisation of bad taste. It was associated with the homosexual community. However, camp did not remain a phenomenon of closed communities for long, but became a response to the demand of a part of society for a new type of sensuality. With its spread, camp transformed into a technique of exaggerated *weird parody* and later into the pervasive contemporary mass culture of camp sensuality. A number of authors note the change in the interpretation of kitsch, but do not use a separate term for it. Umberto Eco notes in his works, in particular in *Apocalypse Postponed* (Eco, 1991), that kitsch plays a role in culture, and is a product of the mass media and consumer society. Eco acknowledges that postmodern art often recovers *low* culture, such as kitsch, and gives it a new, ironic value. This is similar to Sontag's interpretation of camp as being associated with self-awareness and humour. However, Eco notes that irony, instead of dismantling kitsch, can sometimes support it, making its consumption acceptable in elite or intellectual circles.

The ironic nature of kitsch, according to Eco, can blur the line between sincerity and mockery, potentially reinforcing the presence of kitsch rather than undermining it. Instead, Sontag, speaking of camp, indicates that it has a deliberate detachment. For Sontag, camp marks the artificiality and excess of kitsch, and she suggests that kitsch and camp can be valuable, creative and give freedom of expression to marginalised groups that subvert dominant norms with their aesthetics. "In this sense, kitsch and camp have opposite vectors of direction: kitsch reduces *high art*, *lowering* it to simple accessible schemes, while camp complicates, flirts with, aestheticism the *low*, elevating it" (Mukha, 2013, p. 88). Despite the diversity and complexity of the interpretation of kitsch and camp, a number of common and distinctive features can be identified between them, which will later be embodied in memes.

In various artistic movements, particularly in pop art, one can find elements of kitsch, which blurred the boundaries between high and low art by incorporating popular culture and commercial imagery into its works. The use of kitsch in contemporary art often serves as a critique of society, capitalism, and consumer culture. Artists such as Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami use kitsch elements to challenge traditional notions of art and provoke reflections on social values (Razo and Luis, 2009).

In fact, the way we classify art as high or low, avant-garde or kitsch is influenced by the education and social position of those in power in the art world. This process of classification affects how art is perceived, evaluated and consumed by the public. This emphasises not only the evolutionary nature of art and artistic practices, but also the fluidity of the boundaries between different artistic categories.

The development of the Internet and digital media has complicated the connection between kitsch and globalisation, as a result of which social media platforms allow the dissemination of artifacts belonging to both high and low culture. Moreover, it is the kitsch product that can go viral due to its simplicity and ability to influence an individual in the shortest possible time. This digital distribution enables a participatory culture where users can actively interact with kitsch content, change it or criticise it. Kitsch content is based on the use of texts, images, and audiovisual sources that are overly sentimental, clichéd, and intended to evoke an emotional response.

This is closely intertwined with the changes taking place in society in general and in the sphere of political activism in particular. If earlier democracy was manifested through the culture of contemplation of images created in television culture, now it is the spread of active practices that provide an opportunity to interact through online forms.

> We are transitioning from a spectator democracy, in which citizens project their hopes and dreams onto charismatic leaders, to a participatory democracy, in which citizens enact change through their real-time interactions. This shift reflects more than a change in communications technologies; it marks a change in the mode and dimensional level of activism. (Rushkoff, 2019, p. 335)

The transformation of social interaction that Rushkoff writes about refers to the transition to a new technological model of interaction that will be inherent in many societies that call themselves democracies.

Tamara Hundorova aptly observes that kitsch was initially linked to tastelessness but gradually evolved into a distinct stylistic category (Hundorova, 2012, p. 465). It now embodies qualities that are inherently kitschy, reflecting a shift from being merely an inferior aesthetic object to becoming a mode of representation. This semantic evolution sheds light on the nature and functions of kitsch in the latter half of the twentieth century. Hundorova identifies two key forms of kitsch: *primary kitsch*, which retains its traditional characteristics, and *secondary kitsch*, encompassing variations such as camp, ironic kitsch, parakitsch, and what she terms *double aesthetics* (Kitch, 2013). In contemporary contexts, kitsch is best understood through the lens of *neo-kitsch*, a term that captures its integration into cyberspace, widespread reach, and dynamic, communicative essence. Neo-kitsch represents a modern iteration of this multifaceted phenomenon, thriving in the digital age where its prevalence and adaptability highlight its evolving cultural significance.

To summarise our chapter, urbanisation and industrialisation fuelled a demand for goods, including artistic ones, that signified social status. This environment gave rise to kitsch as a form of demonstrative consumption, appealing to the masses while showcasing societal affluence. In the post-World War II era, consumer culture further cemented the link between kitsch and femininity, associating it with domesticity and positioning it as inferior to the *serious* cultural forms dominated by masculinity. Kitsch flourishes in consumer-driven and globalised contexts, where homogenised tastes lead to mass production and replication. Over time, kitsch evolved from a stylistic movement into an artistic technique, influencing contemporary art movements like pop art through its incorporation into camp aesthetics. This interplay blurred the lines between *high* and *low* art, creating a paradox where kitsch, once dismissed as lowbrow, gained appreciation in elite cultural spaces. The advent of the Internet and digital media transformed kitsch into *neo-kitsch* - a global, dynamic, and participatory phenomenon. Neo-kitsch thrives on sentimental, exaggerated, and humorous elements, often achieving viral popularity. Social media amplifies its spread, enabling user interaction and reshaping its cultural significance. Neo-kitsch mirrors broader societal changes, shifting from passive spectator democracy to participatory democracy, where digital interactions redefine daily practices, community engagement, and civic participation. Its presence in cyberspace highlights the intersection of aesthetics, technology, and the global homogenisation of culture.

The cyberspace of various democratic societies will reflect neo-kitsch with its digital aesthetics that combines kitsch elements with modern technological challenges. This is a new kitsch content that deliberately exploits superficial, bright and sentimental images to create an instant mass emotional effect. We will inevitably encounter sentimentalism and populism, interactivity and eclecticism, simulation and humour. Kitsch, in its various forms and

interpretations, continues to evolve, reflecting wider social, technological and cultural transformations. Its adaptability and mass appeal ensure its continued presence in contemporary art, media and global culture.

3. Political Memes are Born from Kitsch in the Modern Information Space

Kitsch should be seen as a modern phenomenon that mediates desires, as a communicative system that conveys ideas and embodies meanings in everyday life. A meme is another communicative form that conveys meanings. This is the source of kitsch memes. Moreover, their communicative nature and focus on creating the desired image of a product or person is also a common feature. Tamara Hundorova says that the communicative role of kitsch is especially relevant in postmodern society, where kitsch

> becomes an extremely important meta-language - a communication channel that represents desires, advertises emotions and roles, participates in the creation of political and cultural myths, helping to turn abstract slogans into glamorous emblems. (Hundorova, 2012, p. 475)

In her opinion, kitsch is part of the process of the perception and representation of the other - the racially, culturally, socially, politically and gendered other. The social function of kitsch is manifested in the fact that with its help, ways of understanding are formed between representatives of different races, nations, classes, genders, professions, "regardless of the difference in political views, upbringing and material status" (Hundorova, 2012, p. 475). As we see, in contemporary society, kitsch is becoming an important mechanism for transforming ideas into popular symbols that not only evoke emotions but also influence the formation of cultural or political myths. It also works as a bridge between different social, cultural or gender groups, promoting common understanding through the universality of its aesthetic code. Thanks to its ability to unite diverse views and experiences, kitsch is not only an aesthetic category, but also a social tool that creates conditions for dialogue between people with different life experiences. The transformation of kitsch and the ability to adapt to changes caused by social demands create a situation where kitsch moves from one form to another. And this is what allows it to become digital kitsch in the current context in the form of memes. In our opinion, this idea is revealed in Brigitte Munier's work *Aux bonheurs du kitsch*, where the author points out that:

> Born of the first industrial revolution, kitsch easily conquered the third and, as a great user of stereotypes, adapted to the peculiarities of digital communication: by mobilising the senses, it humanises the continuous flow of information exchanged online and encourages the illusion of sharing, but its recourse to common ideas and stereotypes hinders mutual understanding and communication. (Munier, 2019, p. 143)

Kitsch, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, has adapted to the digital age, using its ability to unify and operate with stereotypes, and in the modern information environment it serves as a mechanism that creates the illusion of community through the emotional colouring of information. However, this superficial unification often blocks genuine interaction and

understanding between communication participants. Equally important are such kitsch characteristics as repetitiveness and seriality, which can be seen in forms of digital interaction. Seriality, which is based on the principle of repetition, allows "to use old clichés and form new ones, to homogenise perception, colouring it with sublime, libidinous pleasure, and colonise it with homogeneous ideas-delusions" (Hundorova, 2012, p. 477). The repetitiveness of kitsch contributes to the consolidation of stereotypes and the formation of a homogeneous perception that brings aesthetic pleasure, but at the same time limits imagination and imposes monotonous patterns. This repetitiveness contributes to the construction of simplified idealised images that simplify the perception of complex reality, while depriving it of depth and diversity.

According to Munier, contemporary kitsch is pervasive, with a growing stream of derivative products designed to give a tangible and touching form to the *memory* of films, bestsellers, events, exhibitions, museums and travel. Overcoming even the resistance of the intangible, kitsch conquers the digital space through immersive exhibitions and the practice of emoticons.

Munier calls the emoticon or smiles a representative of virtual kitsch, which all digitally savvy people certainly know. These are stylised faces in the shape of a yellow circle with two eyes, a nose and a mouth, the different orientation of which can mean several emotions. Emoticons form a catalogue of simple emotional stereotypes. Widely used in text messages, these emoticons convey an emotion to the recipient that they are supposed to feel and share with the author. The standardisation of these clichés compensates for the effort required to understand others, while avoiding misunderstandings inherent in all human communication. The author presents the emoticon as a modern form of digital kitsch – a paradigm of sentimental figurative clichés. Manifestations of kitsch can be traced in various formats of the digital universe, such as selfies, posts, memes available on social media.

Richard Dawkins in his work *The Selfish Gene* points out that memes can be "melodies, ideas, buzzwords and expressions" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 257). For a thesis to be acceptable, its presentation must be effective, quick, and simplified. It should be perceived not only rationally, but also evoke a certain range of emotions. An Internet meme is a similar form of argumentation.

Due to the ease of interpreting political events in the form of a meme, social media users can be quickly identified. The level of trust and openness of communication is growing.

> When we share our self-reflections with the world, we turn media on its head. The Internet has allowed the masses to communicate individually. Instead of communicating to one another, we now communicate many to many, or few to few. (Rettberg, 2005, p. 7)

The use of political Internet memes reduces the rationality of perception, through the use of emotional stereotyping and primitivisation, and creates the basis for the formation of sustainable constructs that will reduce the level of intellectual engagement of recipients.

Internet discourse is defined as a complex system of digital interaction that does not contain clear rules for the implementation of communication, leading to the emergence of new trends in the objectification of thoughts, the formation and transformation of phenomena and ideas in the minds of individuals and society as a whole. One of the methods of this transmission of ideas is the socio-cultural phenomenon of memes.

Depending on the form of memes, they are divided into textual (words, phrases or sentences); visual (pictures, videos); and creolised (verbal-visual). Due to its textual content, visual characteristics, humorous and emotionally expressive components with an allusive basis, a creolised meme is relevant, concentrated, has a standardised laconic form, is characterised by virality and the ability to self-replicate.

Memes, similar to the simulacra described by Baudrillard, exist in the virtual space and have no real analogues. Their formation and circulation on social media define their characteristic features. "Memes are an aesthetic trend that attracts and shapes subjective, collective and political moods" (Horyunova, 2016, p. 54).

In our opinion, a meme is a media product that is easy to view, evaluate with the help of likes, and spread quickly. It is a kind of collage of quotes and references that can be ironic, frivolous, superficial, but at the same time true and critical of socially important topics. As an information unit, memes have such characteristics as a wide social media audience, high replicability and rapid spread.

Typically, memes have a simple structure – an image with text or a short video – which makes them easy to digest. Their humour is often based on everyday situations or universal experiences that many people can relate to, which increases their appeal. Successful memes contain unexpected twists and turns in captions that elicit laughter through a sudden change in context or perspective. This transformation of expectations is achieved through the use of well-known cultural references in the digital space.

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *carnival laughter* provides the conceptual basis for a modern understanding of digital culture. Bakhtin viewed the carnival as a space where the world is turned upside down, where hierarchies are temporarily suspended, and high culture is mixed with the popular, the grotesque and the absurd (Bakhtin, 1984). Digital culture should be seen as a form of modern carnival – massive, accessible, somewhat hypertrophied, where *high* and *low* art forms are mixed. In the digital space, it seems that the action is constant and endless, ambivalent.

Digital culture, like the carnival, is a space where social norms are nullified or ridiculed. Memes, as a phenomenon of digital culture, borrow from the carnival the magic of temporary liberation from the rigours of everyday life. For Bakhtin, laughter in the carnival context challenges authority and exposes the relativity of established truths. Making fun of the authorities and politicians becomes a way to deprive them of their mystique and dominant

position. Political memes build on this tradition by using humour to expose the overblown rhetoric and images of political figures. Bakhtin's ideas highlight an important ambivalence: while ridicule can be liberating and democratising, it can also become a tool for maintaining the status quo. In some cases, the culture of laughter reduces complex political criticism to mere entertainment, blunting its transformative potential.

Political memes address events taking place in a particular society, making them timely and relevant. They create a sense of belonging to a community that shares the views of the *creator*. The meme template is repeated with slight variations to adapt to different contexts. It should be easily adaptable and transformable in accordance with the content that is being disseminated.

The next feature is that political memes have their own level of exclusivity. They require knowledge of the context, which makes them particularly resonant and funny for those who are *in the know* but incomprehensible to outsiders. They often use satire, irony and sarcasm to comment on social norms and the actions of politicians. It is not just entertainment, but a means of provoking dialogical reflection or criticism in a relaxed manner. Political memes constitute a separate group because of their thematic focus. They can be identified by the emphasis on covering specific events, facts or situations related to the activities of public figures - MPs, members of the Cabinet of Ministers, the President, etc.

Given that managing the flow of information disseminated in the Internet space is an important feature of the functioning and development of political figures, forces and organisations, its monitoring is extremely important and may form part of the national security concept. This process can be both spontaneous and directed. Accordingly, their existence can have both a positive and negative impact on the political image and political process. Political memes are usually aimed at specific figures and events of global or local significance. Their emergence may not be spontaneous, as well as the principle of replication. That is, their promotion is a means of lowering the rating of politicians, undermining certain initiatives, etc.

Oleksij Shevchenko (2011) points out that modern state mechanisms go through a stage of glamorisation, where, as a result of the spread of consumer culture, politicians become its active representatives.

> The state itself becomes an active lobbyist of the culture of consumption, and its leaders become vivid examples of such consumption. Just like the know-it-alls, politicians are turning into mannequins for demonstrating expensive dresses, diamond watches, expensive cars, castle mansions, and ostentatious consumption is not only a feature of the government style of countries like Russia and Ukraine. Gradually, such consumption is becoming a kind of international standard. (Shevchenko, 2011, p. 134)

That is why their behaviour and forms of glamorised activity receive coverage and commentary, including through memes, developing in the direction of political and aesthetic phenomenology (Shevchenko, 2011, p. 137).

Memes are aimed at spreading a certain cultural code. Their nature and ability to persuade allow us to explain a meme as a logical chain of argumentation that appeals not only to rational structures of perception but also to emotional experience. In the political sphere, this influence becomes a force that shapes social reality.

In the world of memes, politicians are often presented not as strategic decision-makers or professionals but as ordinary people with flaws, blunders, or even peculiar quirks. This portrayal fosters a sense of *humanisation* – a double-edged sword that can either endear them to voters or undermine their image as authoritative leaders. Memes thrive on simplicity, delivering quick, emotionally resonant messages that are easy to digest and remember. However, this often comes at the expense of depth and context. By reducing the complexity of a politician's public persona and fixating on their awkward or amusing moments, memes can inadvertently suggest that their political actions are equally trivial or ineffective. For instance, a meme mocking a politician's mannerisms, attire, or verbal slip-ups often leaves a stronger impression on the public than intricate debates about their policies or accomplishments. A meme highlighting a politician's perceived ineptitude or foolishness can cement a lasting, negative stereotype, even if it is far from the truth. Politicians who grasp the dynamics of contemporary media can successfully turn memes to their advantage. Embracing self-deprecating humour or cleverly responding to online jabs can help cultivate a relatable and likable image or popularity. In these instances, memes transition from being a threat to becoming a tool for forging stronger connections with the electorate. Thus, the use of humour in memes can reshape a politician's image, either enhancing it positively or casting it in a negative light.

We are talking about the acquisition or loss of credibility, significance and power of the politician's image or event through memes. A striking example of a political meme that, in 2022, was able to bring Ukrainian society out of a state of distress and deprive the world's famous political leader, Vladimir Putin, of his image of an invincible ruler of the world is meme *Russian warship, go f*** yourself* (Meme Wars, 2024). In Iryna Kabluchko's documentary *MEME WARS. Folk humour strikes back. Documentary premiere* (2024) outlines the role of memes in the development of the culture of resistance of the Ukrainian people during the full-scale invasion, and presents the views on this phenomenon from both ordinary citizens and experts in the field of cultural anthropology. Laada Bilaniuk, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, was invited as one of the experts. In her speeches and in her article *Memes as Antibodies* (Bilaniuk, 2023), she analyses the role of memes as a cultural response of Ukrainian society to Russian military aggression. The author sees memes as a kind of immune defence against ideological and cultural threats that accompany military action. Through memes, Ukrainians not only express their resistance, but also strengthen their national identity, emphasising their uniqueness and difference from Russian culture. Memes play a role in the formation of an imaginary national community that unites people of different regions, social statuses, languages

and diasporas. They are becoming a means of cultural resistance, testifying to the bravery, resilience and solidarity of Ukrainians in the difficult conditions of war. This phenomenon highlights the ability of memes to transform social media into an important battlefield where cultural, emotional and political aspects intersect.

Olena Voznesenska highlights that memes, as a product of collective creativity, demonstrated both artistic and therapeutic potential during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Their role in addressing the collective trauma experienced by Ukrainian society cannot be overstated (Voznesenska, 2022). Voznesenska introduces the concept of media art therapy, which integrates elements of therapy, art, and modern information technologies. She argues that meme creation constitutes a creative process within the realm of media, serving as a therapeutic outlet. The emotional foundation of memes, she notes, reflects the feelings of both their creators and audiences. According to Voznesenska, "Meme creation can be rightly considered a form of media art therapy for large communities, carried out through the creation, perception, and dissemination of images, videos, and texts" (2022, p.27). Thematically, these memes captured the emotional states of Ukrainians – expressing defiance against their enemies, reinforcing symbols of national importance, distancing themselves from adversaries, and commemorating significant events. In response to the collective trauma, a strategy for coping emerged through media creativity, where co-creation played a vital role. This co-creation extended not only to the co-development of the memes themselves, but also to the joint interpretation and interaction with sharing.

During the information wars, which are part of the active hostilities of the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is a state monopoly on television, vertical control and censorship of content. At the same time, less controlled media channels broadcast uncontrolled content and present material more freely. In closed communities, the spread of political memes takes on a different tone than in open media. In particular, the article by Olena Pavlova and Mariia Rogozha presents the experience of studying the Viber content of groups of residents of the occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol. Online communities are a space of civic activism where relative freedom of thought is possible.

> The study of new forms of civic activism in media communities proved that they are less politically engaged, self-critical, and incapable of managing dissent. However, the presence of such trust networks serves as a breeding ground for civic activism and spontaneous forms of deliberative democracy. (Pavlova and Rohozha, 2023, p. 262)

Instead, in the open space, the possibility of freedom of expression will be available only in an ironic form, where the true position of network users is revealed under the symbolic, allegorical and metaphorical images of memes.

The formation of communities in Ukrainian society has been carried out permanently, in connection with certain professional or educational needs. Similarly, during the occupation of Ukrainian cities, there was a spread of grassroots movement of Viber communities, which is a "form of deliberative democracy, a form of organising a non-political social space in which the

social aspects are understood more broadly than the political ones" (Pavlova and Rohozha, 2023, p. 261).

The realisation of intentions through memes is aimed at spreading a certain cultural code. The nature of such a unit of information, its ability to persuade recipients, allows us to explain a meme as a chain of reasoning that has a logical basis as an argument, but appeals not only to the rational structures of the recipient. Appealing to subjective experience, which is experienced through the senses, makes it possible to quickly and effectively perceive information and simplifies its content. In the political sphere, this influence becomes a force that affects social reality. The power of such information does not lend itself to critical analysis and makes it possible to impose a certain point of view and establish an algorithm of user actions. Under this influence, the user unconsciously sacrifices his or her own identity and becomes part of a collective political entity with clearly defined ideas and beliefs.

Memes *Good evening, we are from Ukraine*, *Russian warship, go to…*, *Patron the dog*, *Chornobayivka*, *Cruiser 'Moscow'* were born in the most difficult days for Ukrainians (Memes of war, 2022). They became internationally recognised and moved from the digital space to the offline format. The images of these famous memes are now replicated in tourist and souvenir products (T-shirts, stamps, socks, magnets, pillows), which are bought and given as gifts to foreign citizens who support Ukraine, including government officials. Some meme characters, like *Patron the dog*, have become part of popular culture. A series of cartoons about *Patron the dog* was made (Patron the dog, 2024), which had both an entertaining and educational function, and the song *Patron the dog* was written under the influence of the meme, which became extremely popular when performed by the band *Karta Svitu* (Karta Svitu, 2022). Similarly, the *Cruiser 'Moscow'* became the basis for the song '*maskva*' by the band *Spiv Brativ* (Spiv Brativ, 2022).

The phenomenon of kitsch, deeply embedded in modern cultural and digital environments, serves as a powerful communicative tool, embodying desires, shaping perceptions, and constructing shared meanings. In the digital age, kitsch has transformed into digital kitsch, manifesting prominently in the form of memes. Political memes, in particular, blend the characteristics of kitsch – such as simplification, emotional appeal, and repetition – with the dynamics of digital culture to create impactful, shareable narratives that resonate with diverse audiences. Memes function as a modern-day meta-language, capable of translating complex political and social realities into accessible, emotionally charged content. They borrow from traditional kitsch the capacity to unite diverse groups through shared symbols and stereotypes, while their digital nature ensures rapid dissemination and broad reach. However, this simplification often comes at the cost of depth, reducing intricate political discourse to superficial yet compelling imagery and slogans. The use of humour, satire, and irony in political memes challenges authority and disrupts traditional hierarchies, echoing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival laughter. This duality allows memes to humanise political figures, exposing their flaws and fostering relatability, but it also risks trivialising serious political

discourse. Memes' effectiveness lies in their ability to distil complex events into digestible, emotionally resonant forms, making them potent tools for influencing public opinion and shaping social realities. In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, memes have demonstrated their capacity not only as tools of resistance but also as mechanisms of cultural solidarity and collective identity formation. Iconic examples such as *Russian warship, go f*** yourself* illustrate how memes transcend their digital origins to become symbols of national resilience and international recognition. Their replication in offline formats underscores their cultural and emotional significance, reinforcing their role as both artistic and therapeutic outlets. Ultimately, political memes highlight the interplay between cultural aesthetics, digital technology, and political messaging. They encapsulate the transformative potential of kitsch within the modern information space, bridging divides, amplifying voices, and reshaping perceptions in ways that are simultaneously liberating and constraining. Through their simplicity and adaptability, memes have become a defining feature of contemporary political communication, offering new opportunities and challenges for understanding and engaging with the world.

4. Aesthetic Dimensions of Political Memes

Our current research fascination with memes is highly relevant, as this phenomenon serves as one of the most expressive reflections of contemporary culture and the collective spiritual state of society. Stripping away their humorous, simple, and seemingly insignificant facade reveals a powerful and multifaceted cultural phenomenon. In our view, political memes are ultra-dynamic, capturing the immediacy of the *here and now* while seamlessly penetrating and connecting various social spheres without rigidly delineating boundaries between domains such as politics, economics, culture, and art. The twenty-first century presents humanity with challenges marked by shifts in international politics and law, occurring not only in the material world but also within an ideological realm often referred to as the information, virtual, or cyber world. This shift is accompanied by transformations in cultural practices and aesthetic sensibilities. New phenomena are emerging – difficult to define yet essential to modern life – that have become integral to our everyday existence. Memes are a prime example of this, embodying what can be described as subjective universality. Immanuel Kant described this concept in his writings on aesthetic judgement, arguing that judgements of taste carry universal value because they feel subjectively valid to individuals.

Similarly, according to Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young, memes may contain a universal quality that remains inherently individual. This antinomy, characteristic of judgements of taste, is also reflected in the nature of modern memes. To illustrate this point:

> While meme aesthetics may not embody 'purposiveness without purpose' as in Immanuel Kant's account of the beautiful (though there is an element of the gratuitous about them in their purposeless proliferation), memes' tendency to bridge the universal and the particular is part of their aesthetics, their particularly general form of subjective universality. (Best, 2024, p.8)

In our view, this thesis is highly accurate, as it captures the aesthetic essence of memes. The interpretation of memes is never entirely serious and always incorporates a degree of ambiguity, which is integral to their nature. This ambiguity underscores a key feature of meme aesthetics: their inherent connection to social function. The very act of perceiving and replicating memes indicates that their content resonates with a certain universality embedded in them by their creator. In the current study of meme aesthetics, the author Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young offer a compelling explanation of their fundamental properties:

> This meme conjoins the zany and the interesting, but also the cute, which could describe its humorous tone as well as the man in the image, who seems as harmless and endearing as he is impassioned. In these memes, the three minor aesthetic categories described by Ngai index the core processes of capitalist exchange – production, consumption, circulation – but nothing is produced other than the form of these processes themselves. This empty and self-reflexive form, in the abyssal mode of ambiguous irony (since the memes both do and do not mean what they say), is a key aspect of meme aesthetics. (Best, 2024, p.11)

One of the defining characteristics of memes is their inherent ambiguity, which enables them to be ironic, entertaining, and thought-provoking simultaneously. This quality shapes their aesthetic identity and enhances their role in various social interactions. The authors highlight that memes function as a kind of *empty* form, reflecting the processes of creation, consumption, and circulation typical of capitalist culture. While memes often serve no purpose beyond self-reflection, this does not diminish their aesthetic or social significance. They possess the capacity to evoke emotional responses, unite audiences, and enhance collective perception by blending simplicity with irony. Memes integrate aesthetic categories such as *ridiculousness*, *curiosity*, and *cuteness* (Ngai, 2012), making them light-hearted, comical, and emotionally engaging - all forms of humour. As such, memes represent a unique aesthetic phenomenon of our time, combining depth and superficiality, seriousness and humour, universality and subjectivity. They fulfil an important social function, acting as a tool for fostering collective identity, reflecting on contemporary culture, and exposing the irony and ambivalence of the modern world.

Stephen Best, Mia You, and Damon Ross Young (Best, 2024, p.20) argue that memes not only reflect the culture of late capitalism but also function as a tool for navigating conditions that appear unavoidable. Moving away from the individual toward the general and universal, memes create a shared cultural experience. Despite their negative aspects, such as environmental degradation or the oversimplification of political issues, memes play a role in fostering sociality and facilitating collective experiences. The black humour inherent in memes unites people through shared experiences, reinforcing the sentiment that *we are all in this together*. At the same time, they challenge us to reconsider the boundaries of aesthetics and political thought, unlocking potential pathways for liberation, particularly through the influence of black humour (sarcasm, irony) on sociality - an essential aspect of their cultural significance.

In his article *'Liking' as Creating: On Aesthetic Category Memes*, Jordan Schonig also highlights the centrality of community formation in understanding the aesthetic specificity of memes. Schonig emphasises the duality of memes within the framework of neoliberal capitalism: on one hand, they serve as a form of distraction, and on the other, they activate cognitive and aesthetic capacities previously associated exclusively with art and philosophy. This duality positions memes as a cultural phenomenon that is both entertaining and meaningful for social and aesthetic development. The author further connects this perspective to Immanuel Kant's logic of aesthetic vision, which underpins the broader understanding of how we perceive and engage with the world.

> I've borrowed the vocabularies of Kantian aesthetics and modernist reflexivity to describe the pleasures of such an activity because these discourses provide the best models for aesthetic engagements that feel generative of philosophical insight; that is, to appreciate a modernist painting is simultaneously to learn about the ontology of painting, the institution of art, or the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Aesthetic category memes offer a simulacrum of these revelations. They resemble aesthetic reflexivity without the risk of disrupting the irony endemic to Internet and meme cultures. (Schonig, 2020, pp. 43–44)

The author's conclusions about the aesthetic nature of memes suggest that they serve as a medium for exchanging judgments among participants in a networked society through the act of communication.

> Wasting time on the Internet can engage our aesthetic faculties as much as our affective registers, and 'feeling connected' can be as much a matter of sharing words, images, and 'likes' as it is a matter of sharing judgments. (Schonig, 2020, p. 44)

The judgments of taste formulated in the aesthetics of I. Kant are violated by the kitsch person, who, according to Sebastian Loewe (2016, p. 1) is "the most prominent theoretical figure who violates all prohibitions on pure aesthetic judgment". It is the principle of sensual pleasure that comes to the fore, changing the rationality of disinterested perception. "This kitsch-lover fully indulges in art and the sensuous aesthetic pleasure it arouses, lets his instincts corrupt his prudence, practices escapism and sees life through the infamous rose-coloured glasses" (Loewe, 2016, p. 1). People's taste preferences are clearly manifested in their attitude to the world. And kitsch, which, according to Broch, is a falsity, returns the reflection of the false world to the person who consumes these images. Reflection in artistic forms of a modern person who recognises himself in a false image and seeks "to confess his own lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere)" (Broch, 1968, p. 49).

Internet memes, as a form of digital communication, are defined by their humorous essence, a core feature of their aesthetic identity. Earlier forms like kitsch and camp also relied on comedic elements, each reflecting the cultural and technological milieu of its time. Kitsch is marked by its superficiality, ornamental charm, and earnest imitation of high art, often resulting in unintended humour through naive parody. Camp, on the other hand, embraces artificiality, theatricality, and exaggeration, with a self-aware use of irony and

parody to critique conventional taste and revel in the outrageous. Its humour is intentional, frequently highlighting the absurdity of cultural norms. Memes take this lineage further by remixing and transforming existing cultural symbols, employing a range of humour - from irony and sarcasm to absurdity and dark comedy. The progression from kitsch to camp and then to memes illustrates a shift where humour becomes increasingly self-aware and participatory. The accidental humour of kitsch evolves into the purposeful parody of camp, ultimately culminating in the interactive and iterative comedic dynamics of memes. Humour serves as the unifying thread, adapting seamlessly to the aesthetic and cultural sensibilities of each era. Memes can have a powerful impact on recipients. Kitsch in the context of political memes often implies an overly sentimental, exaggerated, or superficially pleasant aesthetic that appeals to mass tastes. This aesthetic quality helps memes become widely recognised and easily shared, thereby increasing their viral potential (Baspehlivan, 2024). An example is the golden toilet and golden loaf of the fourth President of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych. In this particular example, the kitsch of the toilet and the loaf went viral because of its belonging to a political person, which destroyed the political image of businesslike and consistent behaviour and revealed to voters the primitiveness and arrogance of the owner of these attributes.

The authenticity of their existence is currently being questioned, but the circulation of their images and references to them as viral memes has finally destroyed the ex-president's reputation. The connection between kitsch in art and memes is further emphasised by the working toilet called *America* by Italian conceptual artist Maurizio Cattelan, which was created in 18-carat gold for The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and was intended for use by visitors. Its theft from the Blenheim Palace in 2019, two days after the exhibition opened, echoes the disappearance of the Yanukovych golden loaf from the former Ukrainian president's former residence in Mezhyhirya in 2015. Obviously, it was the kitschy and brightly coloured *golden* nature of objects common to everyday life that belonged to representatives of the political elite that initiated Catellan's creation of such an art object.

Fig. 1: Cattelan, M. (2016) *America.*

As a form of comedy, they rely on the models that are present in the culture and understandable to the recipients. The audience of memes is mostly limited (clearly defined) in terms of age, sometimes focused on representatives of those professions that have constant access to social networks and are involved in the communication process. A number of memes have a pronounced cultural and national character, and their meaning may often be unclear to people from other cultures. At the same time, as a result of globalisation, a number of them acquire universal meaning in the globalised digital space and become sustainable and well-known. These include countryball, stoned fox by Adele Morse, Homunculus loxodontus by Margriet van Breevoort, and others.

Fig. 2: Morse, A. (2012) *Stoned Fox*.

Their appearance in European countries as art objects provoked a quick reaction from representatives of the post-Soviet space, becoming Internet memes.

Fig. 3: *G8 results* (2013).

The circulation of images of provocative and kitschy art objects is possible in various types of memes, including political ones.

A meme as a kind of kitsch is not *bad art* but forms its own closed system, which will be a foreign body in the general art system. With the help of memes, people express their own position and attitude to reality. Many of the media products distributed are negative in nature, often using taboo techniques, and the way they present information goes beyond the bounds of decency. Internet memes containing elements of disrespect for the government and its representatives are treated as violations of the law in totalitarian states. Their emergence is a reflection of the political culture and society in general, which is developing in a trend of massification and degradation of traditional values.

Fig. 4: van Breevoort, M. (2016) *Homunculus loxodontus.*

The spread of memes through viral means has a significant impact on the formation of the system of political values of groups and affects the behavioural mechanisms of the Internet audience, gaining the importance of a tool for managing public consciousness. Political memes have the potential to undermine dominant narratives and ideologies. Using humour and kitsch aesthetics, they can criticise and challenge political power structures. The ambiguity and irony inherent in many political memes allow them to act within and against hegemonic discourses. They circulate in a decentralised, non-hierarchical manner. This allows them to cross and connect different political and cultural contexts, making them instruments of both resistance and strengthening.

The promotion of the image of *Homunculus loxodontus* ('Waiter') in post-Soviet society was caused by the lack of ability in countries with totalitarian systems to express their position in free media. That is why the anonymous and satirical image used in memes is becoming widespread and actively transformed.

Fig. 5: *New date of visa-free regime for Ukraine known…* (2017).

Discontent can only be expressed in online communities, hiding behind the anonymity of nicknames. "Social problems cannot be addressed by a legitimate parliament, an independent court, or demonstrations, so internet satire is the only weapon against the government" (Eindeloos wachten). As with most forms of comedy, a meme contains concentrated information. It is impossible to predict other indicators of a meme, such as what form it will take, for what reasons, and when it will be used. This uncertainty makes the meme effective because of its unexpectedness and mega audience coverage.

> Reactionary memes, although working through a nonsensical, vulgar, and transgressive subversion of signs, rely on historically conditioned and racially situated understandings of superiority and inferiority for the resonance and execution of their comedic effect. (Baspehlivan, 2024, p. 54)

The role of the comic in modern society is extremely important. These images that appear in the media space perform informative, emotional, motivational, and regulatory functions. Ideological influence can also be exerted through memes. An example of the successful use of the role of the comic in political life is the TV series Servant of the People, which allowed V. Zelenskyy to win the presidential race and, subsequently, to create a party that no one knew and which achieved maximum results in the shortest possible period, taking a parliamentary majority (Servant of the People, 2015).

Political memes are not only an entertaining element of digital culture, but also an important social phenomenon that shapes collective identity and responds to the challenges of our time. They combine aesthetic ambiguity with a social function, creating a space for the exchange of ideas, opinions and emotions among the participants of the networked society. Memes reflect the duality of contemporary culture: they are both simple and ironic, frivolous and critical. This ambivalence is a key feature of their aesthetics, which allows them to combine universality with subjective experience. By using humour, irony and paradox, memes create a new language of communication that unites different social groups and allows them to present complex political and cultural phenomena in an accessible way. The chapter puts a special emphasis

on the connection between memes and aesthetic concepts, such as Immanuel Kant's *subjective universality*. This feature reflects the ability of memes to evoke emotions that are universal in nature but subjective in perception. Memes also have the ability to balance between deep reflection and light entertainment, which makes them a powerful means of cultural and political expression. The kitschy aspects of memes add to their aesthetic expressiveness, turning simple images into recognisable symbols that spread quickly and remain in the mass consciousness. In this context, memes act as both a mirror of contemporary culture and a critique tool that helps to both criticise power structures and rethink the boundaries of aesthetic perception. Thus, memes are becoming a universal tool of digital culture that simultaneously reflects and shapes contemporary reality, offering the audience a means for social unity, aesthetic pleasure, and political reflection.

5. National Differences in Political Memes

Political memes are a global phenomenon, but they show significant differences depending on the country of origin. This differentiation is due to several factors, including cultural context, political climate, historical past, and current calls and issues. Understanding these factors is crucial to understanding how political memes function in different national contexts.

Memes often rely on local cultural references and symbols to convey messages. American memes can refer to popular TV shows, movies, or national symbols. These cultural markers help memes resonate more deeply with local audiences who share these common references. Memes in different countries use local languages, dialects, and idiomatic expressions specific to the region. It can make memes more understandable and impactful for the audience, but it can also limit their comprehensibility for outsiders.

The topics of political memes often reflect current political issues and events in a particular country. For example, during the Brexit referendum, memes from the United Kingdom featured topics related to European Union membership, immigration, and national identity. In contrast, memes from the United States during the same period could focus on domestic issues such as gun control, health care, or the presidential election. Memes often target local political leaders and public figures. The portrayal of these individuals can vary greatly depending on their political actions and public perception. For example, memes about Putin in Russia differ significantly from memes about him in Western countries, reflecting different political narratives and moods.

In countries with a colonial history, memes may include themes of resistance, identity, and postcolonial critique. The issue of indigenous populations is also relevant. In Germany, memes can sometimes refer directly or indirectly to historical events such as World War II and the Berlin Wall.

Social norms and values shape what are considered acceptable or comical in memes. In conservative societies, memes may avoid explicit content, while in more liberal societies there may be a greater tolerance for controversial or provocative humour.

The popularity of social media platforms varies from country to country, which affects how and where memes are shared. For example, while platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are widely used around the world, countries such as China have unique networks with platforms such as WeChat and Weibo that form a different and distinctive style and nature of meme distribution, which may indicate a strong need for social platforms among the population despite the ban on Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, the creation of an alternative is a mandatory response of the ruling elite to the demands of the levels of political and social communication.

In heavily censored cultural spaces, memes can use more sophisticated, encrypted language full of hidden symbolism to avoid detection, while in freer environments they can be more direct and outspoken in their criticism. As a media product that incorporates elements of other art forms, memes reveal the use of key images that are understandable to members of a particular society. South Korean political memes often incorporate elements from K-pop culture, television series, and local slang. They address issues such as North-South relations, public policy, and social justice, often combining pop culture with political criticism.

In the article *Political Memes and Fake News Discourses on Instagram*, Ahmed Al-Rawi (2021) explores the discourses surrounding fake news on Instagram, with a particular focus on political memes. He analyses the interplay between political polarisation, racism, and hate speech on this social platform. Al-Rawi collected more than 550,000 Instagram posts tagged with *#fakenew*s from February 2012 to December 2018, using quantitative and qualitative analysis methods, including thematic modelling and visual metadata analysis. The study identifies two large online communities on Instagram: The Pro-Trump community and the Anti-Trump community. The pro-Trump group is much larger and more organised, actively trolling against liberal mainstream media, including CNN, and political opponents. In contrast, the anti-Trump community, while smaller, also engages in trolling aimed at discrediting Trump and his supporters.

A visual and textual analysis of the memes shows that Donald Trump is a central figure in the discussions. Pro-Trump memes often attack mainstream official media outlets as fake news, while anti-Trump memes criticise Trump's policies and actions. The results of the study suggest that Instagram has become a toxic weapon, where memes serve as a discursive weapon in the ongoing *meme war*.

> These findings indicate that Instagram has become weaponised by the two main online communities, and memes are used in an ongoing political online warfare to attack and demean the opponents. Meme War II is an ongoing daily reality on Instagram which requires more scholarly attention. (Al-Rawi, 2021, p. 287)

The dominant themes in pro-Trump memes are *Alllivesmatter*, *Rightwing*, *Draintheswamp*, and *Republican*, reflecting conservative and nationalist ideologies. In contrast, anti-Trump discourse is less prevalent, but includes important themes such as *Notmypresident*, emphasising opposition to

Trump's presidency. Al-Rawi's research makes it clear that Instagram, often perceived as an apolitical space for sharing personal content, has become a battleground for political influence. The study underscores the importance of studying visual social media platforms to understand the broader effects of fake news and political polarisation.

Other memes that support Trump's policies include *MAGA* (*Make America Great Again*), *Drain the Swamp*, *CNN is Fake News, Build the Wall* (about the construction of a border wall between the US and Mexico), and *Pepe the Frog*. Anti-Trump memes include *Not My President*, *Dump Trump*, *Trump as Hitler*.

Marco López-Paredes and Andrea Carrillo-Andrade (2022) compare memes from the presidential debates in the United States (Trump vs. Biden) and Ecuador (Lasso vs. Arauz). According to the researchers, memes dedicated to similar events reveal their differences. For example, American memes often focus on expectations of the debate, highlighting the candidates' speeches, behaviour, and the quality of the discussion. The debate between Trump and Biden gave rise to memes that mocked the chaotic nature of the debate, the lack of substantive discussion, and the interruptions.

Fig. 6: *Grant Wood's masterpiece reimagined for the 2024 election season* (2024).

Memes such as *The Old Man Yells at the Cloud* from The Simpsons emphasised the frustration felt by viewers. It is quite telling that in Russia, which traditionally perceives the United States as its frozen antagonist, products that

used this meme began to circulate during this period. For example, sweatshirts and T-shirts.

Instead, Ecuadorian memes tend to focus on discourtesy, violence, and personal attacks between candidates. During the Lasso vs. Arauz debate, one phrase was repeated: "Andrés, don't lie anymore", which reflected a common tactic in Ecuadorian politics of using catchphrases to discredit opponents. It became the basis for the meme. Another meme uses a frame from the TV series *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000), where the character's frustration is used to humourously suggest that the moderator should provoke a fight between the candidates instead of leading a civil discussion.

These differences in focus can be explained by the different political and cultural contexts of each country. In the United States, political debates are iconic events with a long tradition, and candidates are expected to present their policies in detail and behave with dignity. In Ecuador, the political culture is more tolerant of personal attacks and theatrics, and debates place less emphasis on detailed policy discussion.

Political memes are a reflection of the social, cultural and political realities of a particular country, demonstrating the unique features of national contexts. Their structure, content, and style are shaped by local symbols, historical events, social norms, and even the specifics of language and visual media. This allows memes to be a powerful tool for local communication, although it also limits their universal comprehensibility. National differences in political memes can be clearly seen in the topics they cover and the way they are presented. For example, American memes often refer to pop culture and domestic political issues, while in countries with a colonial past, themes of national identity and resistance prevail. In countries with authoritarian regimes, memes often use veiled or symbolic forms to avoid censorship. The technological aspect also plays an important role: the use of local social media platforms, such as Weibo in China or Viber in some post-Soviet countries, creates unique styles of memes and shapes the specifics of their distribution. At the same time, in the globalised digital space, some memes acquire a universal meaning, becoming part of the world culture. Thus, political memes are not only a way to highlight current issues, but also a means of reflecting the cultural code of each nation. They serve as a platform for political criticism, social dialogue and the formation of collective consciousness, while revealing the complex interaction between global trends and local contexts.

6. Conclusions

Our study provides a systematic analysis of the interplay between artistic kitsch and political memes, illuminating their aesthetic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions. By tracing the evolution of kitsch from its origins as a marginal art form to its prominent role in digital culture, the research highlights its adaptability and enduring relevance in contemporary discourse.

Artistic kitsch, traditionally associated with mass consumerism and sentimental excess, is reimagined as *neo-kitsch* in the digital age. This modern

form flourishes within the interactive space of digital platforms, producing content that is both engaging and culturally resonant. Political memes, as a key manifestation of neo-kitsch, exemplify this transformation, blending humour, irony, and emotional resonance to distil complex realities into accessible and shareable formats.

Ambivalence lies at the heart of meme aesthetics. Memes possess a unique capacity to evoke emotions that are universal in essence yet subjective in perception, forming their core appeal. By transforming simple images into widely recognisable symbols that circulate rapidly and embed themselves in collective consciousness, memes establish a foundation for aesthetic evaluation. We highlight the dual function of political memes as tools of critique and cohesion. While they amplify political narratives and encourage engagement through their wit and relevance, they also risk oversimplifying intricate issues, raising concerns about the depth and quality of political discourse. This ambivalence reflects a broader tension within digital media between the democratisation of cultural production and the homogenisation of content.

A significant contribution of this paper is its focus on the balance between local specificity and global universality within meme culture. Many political memes are deeply rooted in their national contexts, drawing upon local histories, symbols, and languages. Simultaneously, others transcend these boundaries, resonating with global audiences through shared cultural references and aesthetic sensibilities. This duality positions political memes as both reflections of their immediate socio-political contexts and participants in a globalised cultural dialogue.

We emphasise the crucial influence of technological and socio-political contexts in shaping the nature and impact of memes. In authoritarian settings, political memes often adopt veiled or encrypted forms, functioning as sophisticated tools of resistance. Conversely, in more open societies, they frequently serve as direct critiques, reinforcing dissent and fostering dialogue. This flexibility underscores their role as a versatile medium of expression across diverse socio-political landscapes.

By situating political memes within the broader framework of kitsch aesthetics, our study underscores their cultural and political significance. Memes emerge not merely as fleeting artefacts of digital culture but as potent instruments for identity formation, community building, and resistance to ideologies. Their capacity to intertwine humour with critical reflection ensures their ongoing relevance in navigating the complexities of contemporary society.

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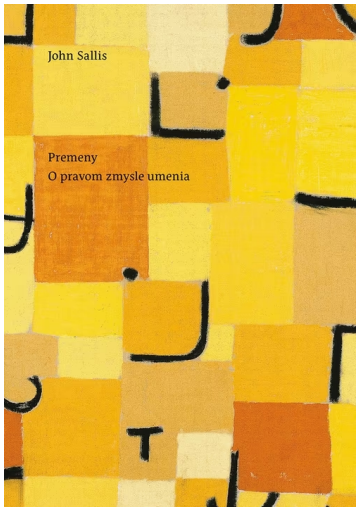
BOOK REVIEWS

Myslieť umenie ako imaginatívne pretváranie zmyslového

Slávka Kopčáková

Sallis, John (2024) *Premeny. O pravom zmysle umenia*. Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Minor, Kapucíni na Slovensku. ISBN 978-80-89888-38-2.



V jeseni tohto roku sa na knižnom trhu objavil prvý slovenský preklad z bohatého diela významného amerického filozofa Johna Sallisa (*1938). Pôvodný titul *Transfigurements: On the True Sense of Art* (2008) je syntézou zhŕňajúcou fenomenologicky orientovanú spisbu autora a jeho početné analytické sondy do myšlienkových svetov velikánov svetovej filozofie (Platón, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche a iných). John Sallis pôsobil na významných amerických univerzitách, v rokoch 1964–2005 postupne na University of the South, na Duquesne University v Pittsburghu,

na Loyola University v Chicagu, v rokoch 1990–1995 na Vanderbilt University, na Pennsylvania State University. Od roku 2005 je profesorom filozofie na Boston College. Je zakladateľom významného časopisu *Research in Phenomenology* (od roku 1971) a ďalších platforiem venujúcich sa kontinentálnej filozofii. Originálne dielo profesora Sallisa tvorí viac ako dve desiatky kníh, najnovšie aj edícia zobraných diel. Zahŕňa v sebe témy filozofie prírody, filozofie vedy, vizuálneho umenia a hudby, poézie, literatúry, jazyka a teórie prekladu.

Vďaka neúnavnej prekladateľskej aktivite filozofa Ladislava Tkáčika má slovenský čitateľ v preklade *Premeny. O pravom zmysle umenia* (2024) príležitosť načrieť do myšlienkových meandrov filozofa hľadajúceho pravý zmysel umenia. Cestu filozofického skúmania fenoménu umenia prešiel takmer každý filozof v dejinách, nie všetky pokusy však boli úspešne prijaté a akceptované. Sallisov vklad do kontextu obnovy a aktualizácie myšlienkových svetov popredných filozofov spočíva v jeho metóde paralelného zvažovania výrazových, sémantických a estetických kvalít viacerých druhov umenia. Často tak činí v jednom myšlienkovom prúde. Svojou metódou konfrontuje svet predchádzajúcich výpovedí (ich akceptovaním a prenikavou argumentáciou v ich prospech alebo aj neprospech) s premieňajúcim sa svetom umenia v optike každého jedného stretnutia s umeleckým dielom, s umením, s umeleckým artefaktom.

Úvahy o pravom zmysle umenia sú pre Sallisa cestou metaforického objavovania kategoriálnych prepodstatnení ním favorizovaných druhov umenia. Ide najmä o hudbu, výtvarné umenie, čiastočne aj literatúru a drámu. Ukazuje sa, že prekladateľ zámerne zvolil a prezentuje nám dielo neskoré a syntetické, kde Sallis zhŕňa stav svojho aktuálne zavŕšeného poznania, hovorí jasne, čistou a vycibrenou rečou, nijako neuhýba pri prezentovaní svojej subjektívnej pravdy filozofa. To isté platí aj pre slovenský preklad. Jazykom metafor nám Sallis predstavuje maľbu ako neviditeľnú, hudbu ako imagináciu, telo umeleckého diela ako farebné a znejúce, „žiarenie zmyslového odpútavajúce dielo od jeho materiálnosti“ (Sallis, 2024, s. 227), jeho zmyslovosti ako jedna z ciest vykladajúcich „prísľuby umenia“ (*ibid.*).

Na krátkej pôde recenzie sa pokúsim vyzdvihnúť práve tie aspekty knihy, ktoré by mohli najviac zaujať. Hoci sémantické možnosti hudby sú menšie ako u iných umení, jej výrazová, emocionálna a imaginatívna sila vždy priťahovala pozornosť aj tých najvýznamnejších filozofov. Na druhej strane hudba vždy odolávala najrôznejším výkladom, kvôli svojej vysokej miere abstraktnosti a filozofmi rozpoznaného dualizmu na pomedzí kvantovosti zvuku (častica či vlnenie, hmota či idea). Z toho dôvodu často mnohé teórie zostali len v náčrte, nevysvetlené, nedokončené. To je aj prípad filozofov Immanuela Kanta a Georga Friedricha Hegela, ktorí boli v dejinách neraz kritizovaní pre ich malý záujem o otázky hudobného umenia. Možno ani nešlo o kritiku ich záujmu, ako často skôr o nimi samými (prípadne ich oponentmi) deklarovanú nedostatočnú hĺbku vhľadu do teórie, praxe a sémantických možností hudby, čo sa argumentovalo údajmi z ich biografií, ich deklarovaným či im pripisovaným vkusom a pod. Sallis toto klišé vyvracia a odkrýva skryté kvality

ich úvah o hudbe s kapitolách *Hudba a predstavivosť* (Sallis, 2024, s. 72–94) a *Rozoznievanie* (Sallis, 2024, s. 132–155). Je to naozaj úspešný pokus. Sallis nám prináša prekvapujúco nový pohľad, postavený na zaujímavej faktografii (najmä z Hegelovho života a jeho hudobných preferencií). V prípade Immanuela Kanta sme účastníkmi prenikavej a vecnej analýzy paragrafov týkajúcich sa (nielen) hudby z *Kritiky súdnosti*. Premýšľať o premene zmyslového pre filozofa znamená „znovu premyslieť, oživiť myslene, ktoré sa nám v textoch, akými sú Kritika súdnosti a Estetika, otvára ako minulosť stávajúca sa budúcou – budúcou tým, že toto myslenie dovádza až k hranici" (Sallis, 2024, s. 22).

Záverečná kapitola *Prísľub umenia* (Sallis, 2024, s. 186–227) ako iniciačná úvaha znova otvára známu a dodnes rezonujúcu tému koncov umenia, resp. minulostného rázu umenia. Ten sa v estetike 20. ale aj 21. storočia objavil ako produkt filozofmi doteraz neúplne dešifrovaného čítania Hegela. Keď uvažuje o budúcnosti umeleckého diela si Sallis nenárokuje na jedinú pravdu, ale pri jej formulovaní načiera do Heideggerovho diela reflektujúceho Hegelov a Nietzscheho pohľad na umenie. Dáva ho do kontextu toho, čo je užitočné aj pre súčasníka, keď hovorí:

> Prísľub umenia sa teda týka spôsobu, akým by sa mohla utvárať jeho budúcnosť. Ide o budúcnosť umeleckého diela, teda o perspektívu, že budúcnosť sa bude utvárať tak, aby umenie mohlo zostať rozhodujúce vo svojom vplyve na ešte stále vyhradené udalosti i na budúcnosť samotnú. (Sallis, 2024, s. 186)

Sallisovou pridanou hodnotou je poznanie, že *myslieť umenie* ako pretváranie zmyslového, zahŕňa aj uvedomenie si skutočnosti, že v umení je premieňaný dojem. Predchádza mu materiálny vnem, ako vnímateľnosť vecí, ktorá sa pretvára na žiarivosť niečoho krásneho. Inteligibilný význam sa pretvára tým, ako je zaobalený do vnemového plášťa. Umenie je výsledkom takejto dvojitej premeny, ktorá sa uskutočňuje v horizontálnom i vertikálnom smere. Podľa neho pravý zmysel umenia spočíva v takejto dvojitej transfigurácii zmyslového. Tieto tézy pripomínajú úvahy slovenského hudobného estetika Jozefa Kresánka (2000), ktorý hovorí o dvoch kategoriálnych prepodstatneniach umenia. Sallisovou ústrednou témou je imaginácia, metódou je imaginatívne porozumenie umeniu.

Cieľom tejto recenzie nie je hodnotiť kvalitu prekladu (autorka nie je lingvistka), navyše ju vo fáze zrodu slovenskej verzie knihy ocenili svojím odporúčaním dve renomované slovenské lingvistky Erika Juríková a Adriána Ingrid Koželová. Mojím cieľom je informovať o stupni porozumenia a stotožnenia sa s obsahom Sallisových esejí, tak, ako v nich načrtáva kategoriálne predpodstatnenie medzi materiálom umenia (tóny, slová, línie, obrazy, pohyblivé snímky, miesta) ako syntagmou a jazykom toho-ktorého umenia ako paradigmou. Druhé kategoriálne prepodstatnenie prebieha po stretnutí filozofa s umeleckým artefaktom, ktorý pred neho predstupuje a ktorý rovnako môže kedykoľvek vstúpiť aj do komunikácie s vnímateľom. Podobne aj čitateľ Salisových esejí je akoby recipientom prijímajúcim jeden z možných výkladov fenoménu umenia autorom.

Preklad Ladislava Tkáčika plní viaceré funkcie súčasne: ukazuje skvelú prácu a transfer cudzojazyčného textu do slovenského jazyka cestou porozumenia, údivu a nadchýnania sa, hľadania metaforickosti s uváženou mierou interpretácie tam, kde jazykový kód znemožňuje tlmočiť myšlienky anglofónneho filozofa priamo a bez nuansovania. Autor prekladu poukazuje vo svojej prekladateľskej poznámke výslovne iba na jedno slovo *sense* (Sallis, 2024, s. 237), ktoré má mnoho synoným v slovenčine, avšak súčasne mnoho významov v anglickom jazyku. Kľúčový je kontext, kde sa generuje a spresňuje možný význam, ktorý mu dal filozof a dekóduje ho autor prekladu. Sallis pred nami rozprestiera myšlienkové svety mimo vyšliapanej cesty analytickej filozofie, formalizmu či neoštrukturalizmu. Je to vynikajúca fenomenologická etuda zrelého filozofa, ktorú slovenskému čitateľovi sprostredkúva skvelý a imaginációu obdarený prekladateľ Ladislav Tkáčik. Ten pre nás chystá v roku 2025 ďalší preklad z diela Johna Sallisa, *Senses of Landscape* (2015), ktorá je reakciou na renesanciu záujmu o filozofiu prírody a krajiny. Bude nesporne obohatením teoretického diskurzu o krajinomaľbe v našom myšlienkovom prostredí rovnako, ako ho obohatil preklad recenzovanej knihy *Premeny. O pravom zmysle umenia* (2024), ktorý si už v akademickej obci stihol nájsť premýšľavých čitateľov.

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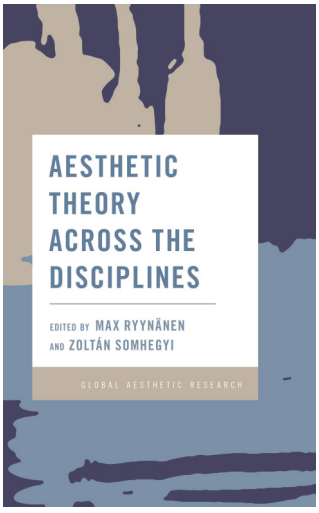
Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines: A Review

Lenka Lee

Ryynänen, Max and Zoltán Somhegyi (2023) *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. 1st ed. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated.



I would like to begin this review with a preface: my forthcoming comments will be open, personal, and somewhat unconventional, mirroring the distinctive and candid nature of the book under examination. Although my task was to write a straightforward review, I found myself deeply inspired by the ideas and styles of the various authors discussing the relationship between aesthetics and other disciplines. As a result, I spent more time on the text than I initially intended. I mention this to explain why I am submitting my review one year after publishing the book *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines*. This book was released as part of Rowman & Littlefield's *Global Aesthetic Research* series, which highlights innovative research in aesthetics.

When writing any text, it is essential to consider the model audience. In the case of ESPES, this audience includes fellow aestheticians from around the world (though I am unsure how many there might be), individuals interested in culture with some *Vorverständnis*, and perhaps those who have already read the book or casual internet flaneurs. This is the audience I have in mind as I write this review.

Editors Max Ryynänen and Zoltán Somhegyi flatter aestheticians in the opening line of A*n Introduction to Aesthetics and Its Companions* with the information that

> In Aesthetic Science, Alexander Wragge-Morley shows how the pioneering work of the natural scientists of the seventeenth century Royal Society of London was not just actively visualised but based essentially on aesthetic principles (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 1).

After all, the natural sciences have historically been competitors – and often outright adversaries – of the humanities! But, as we can see, according to some scholars, they are influenced by aesthetic principles. Therefore, the Humanities versus Nature Studies score is 1:0. Hooray!

Unfortunately, this is one of the few positive aspects this book offers. It explores the relationship between aesthetics and related fields such as art history, curating, philosophy, etc. The twelve authors of the various essays suggest that the connection among these disciplines is somewhat distant – similar to older siblings who look down on their younger counterparts with a mix of condescension and disdain.

The editors refer to these other disciplines as companions of aesthetics. Latin would probably use the word socius, meaning partner or mate. At the same time, Czech has a colloquial term, kumpán, which describes a lively companion with whom one enjoys a good time, often shared with others and typically accompanied by alcoholic beverages.[1] However I encountered the English word wingnut (a mentally unsound person), which "one scholar of cultural studies said when she heard that an aesthetician was going to join a research project" (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 2). Aesthetics is often an underdog in areas where it is needed and is institutionally weak, although it is inherently a part of many scholarly traditions. The editors, therefore, call for interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration with other disciplines, as aesthetics is a clearly defined discipline (although it's not generally known): "A higher level of reflection - this is what we call philosophy - meets applied thinking and studies of material(s). (…) Aesthetics bridges, clashes and provokes thinking" (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 4).

In our previous discussion, we focused on the audience of a book review. Now, let s clarify the definition of a book review itself. After conducting thorough research, I returned to Wikipedia, which defines a book review as follows: "A book review (or book report) is a form of criticism in which a book is

[1] The etymology of the word *companion* is as follows: Companion comes from Middle English and Anglo-French, originating from Late Latin *companio*. The prefix *com-* in companion means *with*, while the latter part derives from the Latin word *panis*, meaning bread or food.

analysed based on content, style, and merit. It is often carried out in periodicals, as school work, or online" (Wikipedia, 2024). Based on this description we can summarize that *Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines* examines aesthetics as a unifying framework across diverse academic fields, advocating for its interdisciplinary value beyond traditional artistic confines. The book highlights aesthetics' integral role in evolutionary biology, environmental studies, urban planning, and political theory, illustrating its relevance in interpreting scientific and cultural phenomena.

In science, aesthetics is not just a tool for visual representation; it also serves as a framework for understanding scientific inquiry. Early scientists, particularly those influenced by the Royal Society, regarded nature as a divine creation, believing that beauty and order were integral to empirical study. This perspective highlights the role of aesthetics as an interpretive lens in scientific analysis.

Evolutionary aesthetics explores how beauty influences mate selection, proposing that aesthetic preferences play a significant role in species development. This theory connects aesthetics to both biological and cultural evolution, highlighting how our aesthetic choices help shape human identity and societal norms. Additionally, this section discusses the role of female agency in aesthetic choice and its impact on species, particularly through concepts such as ornamentation.

Environmental humanities explore the role of aesthetics in connecting people to the natural world. Concepts like Arnold Berleant's *aesthetics of engagement* highlight the importance of immersive environmental experiences, promoting active participation instead of passive observation. This approach encourages a continuous relationship between humans and nature, challenging traditional boundaries and fostering greater ecological awareness.

Architecture and urban aesthetics demonstrate the influence of aesthetic considerations on city planning and building design. In urban environments, aesthetics shape sensory experiences and contribute to liveability and community coherence. This work explores the relationship between architecture, utility, and beauty, highlighting their impact on human well-being.

In politics, aesthetics intertwines with ideologies and societal values. Artistic symbolism is frequently employed to either support or challenge political narratives. Historical examples include fascist art in Italy and Nazi Germany, where aesthetics played a crucial role in shaping national identities. Contemporary political aesthetics reflect modern nationalist movements, emphasizing how cultural symbols convey ideological messages.

Philosophical aesthetics and art history examine the role of aesthetics in the evolution of art. They trace its foundations in classical texts and explore how these ideas have been reinterpreted in modern aesthetics. Thinkers like Alexander Baumgarten and Charles Batteux framed aesthetics as a structured field of study, rooted in classical principles, which laid the groundwork for contemporary theories of beauty and taste.

However, I would also like to share ideas from the text that I find provocative, personal, and alarming and that call for active engagement in the spirit of Adrian Kvokačka's slogan, *Make aesthetics great again*, quoted in Ryynänen and Somhegyi (2023, p. 130). Some themes are repeated in several texts. Literature is cited as an important source of aesthetics, the 'disinterested interest' of Kantian beauty is revisited, and interest in the work of art connects the humanities and the natural sciences; aesthetics is somehow everywhere and, at the same time, invisible. It also mentions the polarity of the world influenced by biological, social, cultural and economic worlds, the division into *I* (or *we*) and *they* (without any attempt at dialogue, so *you* is left out).

Wendy Steiner associates aesthetics, beauty, and the idea of freedom and equality with the feminine element. In contrast, the rejection of excessive ornament is associated with male modernists and their misogynistic attitudes. The objectification of women and the violence they face can lead to a decrease in offspring in future generations. Research in ornithology indicates that many female birds have developed (biological) adaptations to avoid rape or forced fertilization. The result is that for species where nearly forty per cent of all copulations are violently coerced, only between two and five per cent of ducklings result from extra-pair matings (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 17).

As far as art is concerned, according to Steiner, art stages sexual selection as a virtual event that can be repeated in various forms throughout life. She sees music, dance, visual art and literature as manifestations of courtship out of season, that is, out of biological necessity, thus linking pleasure to culture rather than biological conditioning.

In a text on humanistic environmentalism, among other things, **Mami Aota** talks about rethinking the boundaries of *self* and *other*. *Ecology* here is seen as overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object. The boundaries between self and environment are overcome. When we overcome the dualism that suggests humans are the subject and nature is the object, we change from environmental spectators to ecological agents (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 31), something we know from Berleant's aesthetics of engagement.

Tyrus Miller and **Mateusz Salwa** clarify that architecture and urban studies are distinct disciplines, each relating to aesthetics uniquely and confronting different challenges. Architecture's ties to *technē* and the mechanical arts, along with Hegel's characterization of it as dealing with "heavy matter, shapeable only according to the laws of gravity" (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 51), have hindered its consistent recognition as a subject of philosophical inquiry. In contrast, urban aestheticians argue that philosophy has focused too much on architecture, neglecting the broader concept of *metrosophy* (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 59), encompassing a wide range of cultural, economic, environmental, political, social, and aesthetic issues. Urban aesthetics is also linked to two intertwined sub-disciplines, namely environmental aesthetics and everyday aesthetics, because the perception and experience of the city are through its images, sounds, inhabitants, smells,

visitors, houses, markets and sidewalks, the colour of the sky, history, memories etc.

In his essay on politics, **Karl Axelson** turns to Shaftesbury and his dual conception of pleasure:

> The difference between the pleasure we get ('the enjoyment of the prospect') from contemplation of a 'delicious vale' and the pleasure we gain from 'property or possessions of the land' is real and true, and to be 'charmed' with the beauty of a tree and to rest in its shade is not the same as satisfying a strong appetite by consuming its fruits. (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 80)

then he discusses fascism and Nazism, which he refers to as ideological distortions. He shows that both Hitler and Mussolini were aware of the political significance of art and that they perceived the crowd, which is characterized by irrationality, instincts and emotions, as a feminine principle, to which they adapted their performance by working with psychological manipulation.

The chapter on philosophy by **Joseph Tanke** recalls Baumgarten's justification of phenomena that are not *clarae et distinctae* but instead *confusae et obscurae*, and it revisits the ideas of several key authors: Kant, who discusses the concept of disinterest; Schiller, who proposes an aesthetic education that emphasizes a playful impulse and artistic creation; Schopenhauer, who presents a vision of aesthetic experience as a means of liberation; and Nietzsche, who justifies existence through aesthetics. Philosophical aesthetics based on Baumgarten's research and the concept of the fine arts are the main topics of **Oiva Kuisma**'s chapter *Aesthetics and the Classical Tradition*.

Max Ryynänen's text, as the subtitle *On the Relationship between a Small Discipline and Her Bully Big Brother* suggests, is very personal and recalls an incident that mirrors certainly not only my personal experience in the academic world: when he contradicted a colleague from cultural studies about the beginning of scholarly interest in rap music and cited multiple sources from the field of aesthetics:

> My colleague nodded her head, but she did not comment on what I said – in a way that made me feel uncomfortable and dismissed. What I said did probably not matter, as it came from the wrong source, from one of the marginal ghettos of the academy, called aesthetics. (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 126)

The text critiques the relationship between cultural studies and aesthetics, arguing that cultural studies should abandon its self-victimizing stance and acknowledge its dominance in academia. The author notes that cultural studies often portray aesthetics as detached or elitist, which is misleading. Scholars from Western centres, such as London, can sometimes approach regions like Eastern Europe with a patronizing attitude that overlooks their unique contexts. Ryynänen advocates for a greater appreciation of aesthetics within cultural studies, highlighting that it offers a complex theoretical approach that can deepen analyses. Key figures in cultural studies, like Dick Hebdige, have shown the relevance of aesthetics in understanding popular

culture. The text envisions an integration of cultural studies and aesthetic theory, which could lead to a more holistic understanding of cultural phenomena and encourage recognition of contributions from non-Anglophone scholars and traditions.

Zoltán Somhegyi claims that aesthetics complements art history by offering theoretical insights that deepen our understanding of art's significance. Both disciplines aim to interpret art, though aesthetics focuses more on theory, while art history examines context and development. The author rails against the disrespect for art criticism, which, far from being "as 'intellectual' and 'heavyweight' as academic art history or aesthetics" (Ryynänen and Somhegyi, 2023, p. 150), in fact, brings art closer to a wider audience.

Jacob Lund's chapter *An Exercise in Metamorphosis. Aesthetics of the Curatorial* resonated greatly with my practical interests because it shows how the curatorial work creates experiences that actively engage audiences, prompting reflection on social and political realities. Curatorial aesthetics emphasizes participatory appreciation rather than viewing art purely in a visual context.

Paul Duncum shows that art education throughout the 20th century strived to teach students to appreciate beauty in the fine arts! Only over time did the field become interested in the artistic preferences of its audience, and aesthetics in art education has evolved from this obsolete focus on fine art appreciation to encompass everyday aesthetics, reflecting changes in cultural values and art forms.

Lisa Gombini's final essay on musicology basically summarizes these previously mentioned pains as well as perspectives and recommendations for the future: There is a divide between philosophical aesthetics and practical music studies, with musicologists often sceptical of aesthetic theory. Bridging these perspectives could enhance both disciplines, providing a fuller understanding of music's emotional and cultural impact.

In conclusion, aesthetics plays a vital role across various fields by enhancing our understanding of human experiences through reflective, experiential, and ethical dimensions. This integration across disciplines underscores aesthetics as both a study of beauty and a valuable framework for interdisciplinary inquiry. As the author of this review, I would recommend Aesthetic Theory Across the Disciplines to anyone considering or beginning a deeper study of aesthetics. It shows in an erudite but at the same time frank and open way the problems of this discipline, which, although still often overlooked with disdain or with an exalted gesture of 'well, well, that aesthetics…', assists with its conceptual apparatus and elaborate structure many other disciplines in the humanities and natural sciences. New followers of our field need to realize that they are joining a society on the fringes, but one that has the potential to emancipate itself and go from being an overlooked dwarf to a recognized giant.

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Zmeniť pohľad na Arthura C. Danta

Michal Šedík

Lojdová, Š. (2024) *Změnit svět uměním. Definice umění Arthura C. Danta a emocionální zkušenost publika.* Praha: Karolinum. ISBN 978-80-246-5799-8.

V pozadí rozvoja analytickej filozofie umenia v polovici minulého storočia bol kladený dôraz na rozlíšenie medzi problémami viažucimi sa k definícii umenia, k povahe umeleckého diela, k interpretácii umeleckého diela a pod., a problémami viažucimi sa k percepcii a recepcii umeleckých diel. Problémy druhej skupiny (ako súčasti estetickej skúsenosti), boli považované za subjektívne a z hľadiska snahy o objektivitu, platnú argumentáciu a jasné používanie pojmov za problematické.[1] Porozumieť tomuto nastaveniu, ktoré

[1] Pre lepšie porozumenie charakteristických čŕt rannej analytickej estetiky pozri úvod editora v zborníku *Analytic Aesthetic* (Shusterman, 1989).

viedlo k odlišovaniu estetiky a filozofie umenia, je veľmi dôležité pre pochopenie recepcie a interpretácie diela Arthura Colemana Danta.

Danto bol pri rozvoji analytickej filozofie umenia takmer od jej počiatkov, potom, ako napísal knihy z analytickej filozofie histórie, epistemológie a filozofie konania, ho k umeniu v roku 1964 priviedla skúsenosť s výstavou A. Warhola, na ktorej umelec, okrem iných, vystavil *Škatule Brillo*, ktoré vyzerali na nerozoznanie od svojej predlohy – škatúľ *Brillo*, ktoré slúžili ako kartónový obal na čistiace hubky určené na umývanie riadu. Táto výstava bola pre Danta dokladom radikálnych zmien v umení tej doby. Už viac nebolo možné voľným okom rozlíšiť medzi obyčajnou vecou a umeleckým dielom, pretože z hľadiska zmyslov medzi nimi niet rozdielu. Umenie si samo začalo klásť filozofickú otázku: *Čo je umenie?*. Danta tento príklad zo sveta umenia inšpiroval k vlastnej definícii umenia, ktorú potom celý svoj profesionálny život spresňoval a dopĺňal. Monografia *Změnit svět uměním* sleduje túto cestu vývoja Dantovej filozofie a odhaľuje jej dosiaľ málo tematizované dimenzie.

Šárka Lojdová je nepochybne skvelou znalkyňou filozofie Arthura Colemana Danta. Napísala o ňom dizertačnú prácu a v roku 2021 výborne do češtiny preložila Dantovu knihu z roku 1997 *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. Jej dizertačná práca bola aj východiskom monografie, ktorej je venovaná táto recenzia. Autorka si v nej kladie cieľ, ktorý je nielen na prvý pohľad neľahký, ale v istom zmysle ide proti východiskám a pozíciám analytickej filozofie umenia, v rámci ktorých je Danto štandardne chápaný a hodnotený. Na konci úvodu knihy autorka explicitne stanovuje tézu knihy: „Na následujících stranách hodlám argumentovat, že zkušenostní dimenze podle Danta prostupuje do samotné podstaty umění a že mají umělecká díla potenciál proměnit život jednotlivce“ (Lojdová, 2024, s.12). Táto téza ide proti snahe analytickej filozofie umenia o striktné oddeľovanie problémov spojených s umeleckým dielom od problémov spojených so skúsenosťou a prežívaním.[2] Okrem toho v sebe autorka našla odvahu a prezieravosť, pristupovať k Dantovmu dielu ako k systému (opäť niečo, čo sa v analytickej filozofii objaví len zriedka), ktorý zahŕňa nielen práce z filozofie umenia, ale aj práce z epistemológie, filozofie histórie a filozofie konania. To jej umožňuje domyslieť Dantove pojmy a teórie do širších dôsledkov, objaviť aj dosiaľ prehliadané[3] aspekty a spojiť ich do originálnej a podnetnej interpretácie. Na to, aby som ju priblížil, je potrebné načrtnúť myšlienkový postup ukrytý v štruktúre knihy.

Vzhľadom k cieľu autorka rovnomerne rozvrhla knihu do troch častí a šiestich kapitol. Prvá kapitola prvej časti sa venuje identifikácii najvšeobecnejších východísk Dantovej filozofie (okrem filozofie umenia zahŕňajúc aj epistemológiu, filozofiu jazyka, mysle a histórie), ktorými sú: pojem a špecifické chápanie *reprezentácie* a *metóda nerozlíšiteľnosti*.

[2] Treba poznamenať, že oddeľovaniu umenia a estetického prežívania a hodnotenia nahrával aj vývoj umenia v danom období. Readymade Marcela Duchampa a následne diela pop artu a konceptuálneho umenia v druhej polovici 20. storočia sú príkladmi umenia, ktoré sa rozchádza s estetikou.

[3] Dá sa povedať, že aspekty, ktorých význam a dôsledky si možno celkom neuvedomoval ani sám autor.

Danto človeka chápe ako *ens representans*, ktorý môže byť vo vzťahu k svetu buď vo vzťahu pravdivosti alebo kauzality. Subjekt je tak jedným z troch členov kognitívneho vzťahu: *subjekt – reprezentácia – svet*, ktoré sú k sebe navzájom buď vo vzťahu kauzality alebo pravdivosti. Pre pochopenie vedy ako aj umenia a ďalších oblastí je dôležité, že reprezentácie a) nie sú totožné s tým, čo reprezentujú (aj keď možno niekedy boli), b) sú samostatnými entitami v sémantickom vzťahu k reprezentovanému a sú tiež c) esenciálne historické. Pre definíciu umenia z toho potom u Danta plynie jedna z jej nutných podmienok (byť o niečom, mať sémantický obsah), rovnako ako požiadavka odlíšiť umenie (reprezentáciu) a realitu.

Metóda nerozlíšiteľných je v prípade umenia[4] spätá s vyššie spomínanou iniciačnou situáciou – stretnutím s Warholovou *Škatuľou Brillo* (umenie tu samo v istom momente svojich dejín kladie filozofickú otázku). Ide o situáciu, keď máme pred sebou dve alebo viaceré veci, ktoré nemožno na základe zmyslov od seba rozlíšiť, kategorizovať alebo určiť o aké typy predmetov ide, prípadne ide o myšlienkový experiment, keď si máme takéto veci predstaviť. Táto metóda má za cieľ odlíšiť esenciálne vlastnosti od náhodných a má v prípade umenia viesť k definícii, ktorá toto odlíšenie ponúkne.

Lojdová pojmy *reprezentácia* a *nerozlíšiteľnosť* považuje za zásadné piliere celého Dantovho filozofického systému.

> Zatímco fenomén reprezentace představoval obecný předmět Dantových úvah, nerozlišitelnost byla metodologickým východiskem, jež mu umožňovalo problematiku reprezentativnosti v jednotlivých oblastech filozofie, jimž se v průběhu kariéry věnoval, strukturovaně uchopit. (Lojdová 2024, s. 49)

V úvodných častiach by niekto mohol namietať, že dva uvedené piliere nepokrývajú celú problematiku Dantovho filozofického systému. Ako chýbajúci element by sme mohli vyhodnotiť napr. esenciálnu historicitu kultúry. Je však potrebné povedať, že na tej najvšeobecnejšej rovine (zastrešujúcej od jeho teórií z epistemológie až po filozofiu umenia) je to adekvátna voľba. Historicita je esenciálnou vlastnosťou našich reprezentácií a naša kultúra je tvorená reprezentáciami a jej dejiny sú dejinami zmien reprezentácií. Pre porozumenie a reflexiu kultúry je potom nutné vedieť rozlišovať medzi jednotlivými reprezentáciami, nielen v čase, ale aj v priestore a tu zohráva kľúčovú rolu metóda nerozlíšiteľných. Rozlišovanie je potom cestou k interpretácii – pendantu reprezentácie. To všetko (v oblasti umenia so zameraním na jeho definovanie) sa však podrobne dozvieme z ďalších častí knihy.

Druhá kapitola prvej časti analyzuje Dantov vzťah k estetičnu a estetickému oceňovaniu (*aesthetic appreciation*) umenia. Vzhľadom na cieľ knihy autorka považovala zo potrebné objasniť Dantov vzťah k uvedeným aspektom umenia aj napriek tomu, že sám autor týmto otázkam nevenoval systematickú pozornosť a jeho dominantné (filozofické) problémy len zriedka vysvetľoval vo vzťahu k estetike, ba dokonca estetický postoj a oceňovanie ako prístup k umeniu odsudzoval. Dôležitosť tejto kapitoly vyjde najavo až v záverečných častiach knihy. Lojdová analýzou Dantových diel vysledovala tri základné

[4] Danto tento prístup aplikuje aj v iných oblastiach filozofie, napr. pri vysvetľovaní dejín filozofie (porov. Danto, 2021, s. 107–108).

tendencie jeho filozofie umenia: a) snahu o oddelenie problémov estetiky od problémov ontológie a definície umenia, b) ostrú kritiku estetického vzťahovania sa k umeniu a c) snahu nahradiť estetické oceňovanie iným modom pozornosti. V druhej kapitole prvej časti podrobne analyzuje tieto tri tendencie a vzťahy medzi nimi. Tu si dovolím zdôrazniť, že im treba rozumieť na jednej strane v kontexte vývoja analytickej estetiky (už sme spomínali snahu oddeliť estetiku a filozofiu umenia), ktorej bol a je Danto neodmysliteľnou súčasťou a na druhej strane v kontexte vývoja umenia druhej polovice 20. storočia (oddelenie zmyslového a konceptuálneho pod vplyvom readymade, popartu a hlavne konceptuálneho umenia). Danto však v rámci uvedených tendencií nie je vždy jednoznačný a konzistentný. Nemôže totiž hľadať rozdiely medzi nerozlíšiteľnými (bežný objekt, prírodný objekt, umelecké dielo, ...) v oblasti zmyslov a zmysly ani nedokážu postihnúť kontextuálne – historické vlastnosti potrebné na identifikáciu umeleckých diel. Súčasne však umenie považuje za niečo, čo nás bytostne (a teda aj emocionálne a zmyslovo) zasahuje spôsobom, ktorý v iných sférach života nenájdeme. Hľadal preto niečo, čím by tento aspekt vysvetlil a obsiahol bohatšie vzťahy medzi umelcom – dielom a publikom. Lojdová to identifikuje v jeho pojme *interpretácie*, ktorý je neskôr v knihe analyzovaný v štvrtej kapitole. Analýzou širších východísk a tendencií si autorka pripravila pôdu na to, aby prešla k jadru Dantovej filozofie umenia, ktorým bezpochyby je jeho definícia umenia.

V druhej časti, v tretej kapitole nazvanej *Dantův obecný přístup k definování umění*, najprv Lojdová vysvetľuje Dantov prístup k definovaniu v širšom kontexte vývoja analytickej estetiky, aby následne v štvrtej kapitole detailne rozobrala jeho definíciu umenia, ktorá sa počas rokov spresňovala a dopĺňala.

Definovanie umenia sa u Danta prekrýva s problémom ontológie umeleckého diela, teda s otázkou: O entitu akého druhu ide?. Tieto dva rozličné problémy nemožno u neho chápať oddelene. Okrem toho v jeho definícii paradoxne spája esencializmus (umenie má svoju nemennú transhistorickú podstatu) a historicizmus (za umenie je v každej dobe považované niečo iné). Autorka, sledujúc Dantove texty z rôznych období, vysvetľuje tento (podľa Danta zdanlivý) paradox a zasadzuje jeho definíciu do rámca širšej diskusie[5], v ktorej v tom období dominoval antiesencializmus inšpirovaný neskorým Wittgensteinom. Ak máme dva zmyslami nerozlíšiteľné objekty, z ktorých jeden je umelecké dielo a druhý nie, tak v prvom rade potrebujeme identifikovať, ktorý je ktorý. Podľa Danta nám však metóda rodinných podobností, ktorú navrhovali nasledovníci Wittgensteina, na identifikáciu nových a originálnych prípadov nepomôže. Definícia (ktorá udáva nevyhnutné a dostatočné podmienky na to, aby niečo bolo umením) nemôže nijako obmedzovať to, ako umenie vyzerá (štýl), keďže sa podľa Danta umenie nachádza v štádiu svojich dejín, kedy ním môže byť čokoľvek. Explicitne inšpirovaný Heglom, Danto navrhuje ako nutné podmienky pre existenciu umenia: obsah a prostriedky jeho podania.

[5] Pre orientáciu pozri napr. knihu *Co je umění? Texty angloamerické estetiky 20. století* (Kulka a Ciporanov 2011).

V druhej časti a štvrtej kapitole (*Dantova definice umění*) prechádza Lojdová plynule k Dantovej definícii umenia. Jej prvotnú podobu Danto (1981) naznačil vo svojej knihe *Transfigurácia bežného*, ale explicitne ju vyjadruje až v knihe *Po konci umenia* (Danto, 2021), v ktorej stanovuje dve nutné podmienky pre existenciu umenia: 1) byť o niečom (*aboutness*) a 2) stelesňovať svoj význam (*embody its meaning*) (Lojdová, 2024, s. 98). Pre cieľ celej knihy je potom kľúčová dištinkcia sémantickej a pragmatickej dimenzie definície, ktorú síce sám Danto explicitne nezavádza, ale autorka ju nachádza a jej opodstanenie dokladá na príkladoch z viacerých jeho kníh.[6] Danto v rámci sémantickej dimenzie chápe umenie ako príklad širšieho vzťahu reprezentácie (reprezentujúce je v sémantickom vzťahu k reprezentovanému). Pragmatická dimenzia ostáva oproti sémantickej v úzadí, ale pri analýze krásy (Danto, 2008) hovorí o pragmatických vlastnostiach ako o tých vlastnostiach, ktoré majú u publika vyvolať určitý typ pocitov k reprezentovanému obsahu. Lojdová ukazuje, že uchopenie pragmatickej dimenzie je v Dantovom diele nejednoznačné a vzťahuje sa k nej na rôznych miestach prostredníctvom viacerých pojmov (*metafora, rétorika, expresia, štýl, modulácia* a *bdelé sny*).

Ďalej v kapitole autorka analyzuje kľúčovú rolu *interpretácie*. Postupne vysvetľuje: jej konštitutívnu úlohu v definovaní umenia (podkapitola 4.1.1), umeleckú identifikáciu ako jeden jej aspekt (4.1.2), rozlíšenie medzi povrchovou a hĺbkovou interpretáciou (4.1.3) a následne vzťahom interpretácie k historickej dimenzii umenia (4.1.4). Ak je umelecké dielo vždy o niečom a súčasne ho častokrát nemožno zmyslami odlíšiť od bežného objektu (neumenia), tak je potrebná procedúra, ktorá *objekt* pred nami identifikuje ako umelecké dielo, rozlíši medzi tými vlastnosťami ktoré patria dielu, a ktoré sú z hľadiska diela náhodné. Aby sme vedeli určiť, že ide o dielo a následne rekonštruovať to, o čom dielo je. To všetko pri zohľadnení historickej dimenzie umenia (kontextuálne a historicky podmienené vlastnosti), ktorá u Danta znamená, že nie všetko môže byť umením v ktoromkoľvek čase. Interpretácia je korelátom diela ako reprezentácie svojho druhu. Ako prehľadne sumarizuje Lojdová: „právě interpretace formulovaná na základě vodítek obsažených v díle a na základě adekvátní umělecké identifikace jednotlivých prvků, jež dílo tvoří, vyzdvihuje předmět do sféry uměleckých děl“ (Lojdová 2024, s. 132).

Podkapitola 4.2 *Vtělení* následne rozoberá druhú Dantovu nutnú podmienku, ktorou je *vtelenie*, ktorú Danto chápe synonymne s termínom *spôsob podania* (obsahu). Spôsob podania a obsah nemožno podľa Danta v umeleckom diele chápať oddelene, čo je nesmierne dôležité pre hlavnú líniu argumentácie autorky. Tento problém uzatvára štvrtú kapitolu a tiež druhú časť knihy.

V tretej časti knihy v piatej kapitole nazvanej *Pragmatická dimenze umění* sa Lojdová podrobne zaoberá pragmatickou dimenziou umenia v Dantovej

[6] Tu môže vyvstať otázka, či nejde o nadinterpretáciu Danta, smerom k cieľom, ktoré si autorka vytýčila – nájsť v Dantovej definícii umenia dôkaz o tom, že skúsenostná dimenzia umenia je organickou súčasťou jeho podstaty. Autorka však vychádza z tvrdení samého Danta, ktorý sám pojem *pragmatické vlastnosti* používa vo svojej knihe *Zneužitie krásy* (2008, s. 18 a s. 22) a že to nebolo náhodou dokladá jeho ďalšia kniha, v ktorej hovorí o umení ako o *bdelom snení* (Danto, 2013).

filozofii. Najprv analýzou pojmov *metafora, rétorika, expresia, štýl* (podkapitoly 5.1.1 – 5.1.4), ktorými sa Danto snažil postihnúť tie vlastnosti umenia, ktoré presahujú sémantickú dimenziu. Danta k tomu viedla potreba odlíšiť umenie od neumeleckých reprezentácií, ktoré síce nie sú obyčajnými vecami – sú o niečom, a spĺňajú tak prvú nutnú podmienku, ale nie sú umením. Neskôr sa Danto pokúša uchopiť tento rozdiel využívaním pojmov *modulácia*[7] (5.2) a *bdelé sny* (5.3), ktorý dokonca vo svojej poslednej knihe (Danto, 2013) označuje za nutnú podmienku umenia a ako jedinú ju aj explicitne zahrnul medzi definičné podmienky umenia. Všetky tieto pojmy sú snahou postihnúť akými prostriedkami umelecké dielo pôsobí na diváka a súčasne jeho zodpovedajúcu emocionálnu odozvu. Lojdová to výstižne nazýva pragmatická dimenzia (na rozdiel od sémantickej, ktorej Danto a aj jeho kritici a vykladači venovali omnoho viac pozornosti) a celý čas smeruje k cieľu ukázať, že bez tejto dimenzie nie je Dantova definícia umenia kompletná. Bez pragmatickej dimenzie totiž Dantovej definícii chýba nástroj na odlíšenie bežných reprezentácií a umeleckých diel. Piata kapitola tak dokladá a mapuje Dantov *zápas* s vlastnými požiadavkami na definíciu, ktoré ho postupne vedú do oblastí, ktorým sa analytická filozofia umenia skôr vyhýbala.[8] Týmto si autorka pripravila ideálnu pôdu, pre argumentáciu vo finálnej časti knihy.

V šiestej kapitole *Zkušenostní dimenze jako součást podstaty umění?* ponúka Lojdová interpretáciu Dantovej definície umenia, ktorá vedie k zmene štandardného pohľadu na jeho filozofiu umenia. V podkapitole 6.1 poukazuje na miesto skúsenosti v úplnom jadre jeho definície umenia, ktorá by bez nej nebola kompletná. Neponúkala by totiž nástroj na odlíšenie umeleckých a bežných reprezentácií (Lojdová, 2024, s. 209). Autorka súčasne ukazuje v podkapitole 6.2, že interpretácia tak ako ju Danto chápal, na túto úlohu nestačí a nepokrýva celú oblasť toho, čoho sa Danto neustále dotýkal v rámci skúmaní toho, čo Lojdová zhrnula pod pojem pragmatická dimenzia umenia. Autorka tak u Danta rozlišuje v súvislosti s umením dvojitú premenu (transfiguráciu). Prvou je, keď v procese interpretácie dochádza k ontologickej premene všedného objektu na umelecké dielo (umelecká identifikácia škatule *Brillo* ako *Škatule Brillo*). Druhou je, keď vďaka aktívnej spolutvorbe vyvolanej umeleckými dielami (premene postoja k obsahu diela a následne aj k svetu) dochádza k premene divákovho postoja k svetu. Tento zmenený pohľad na Danta ho prepája s Johnom Deweym (1980) viac, ako by komu mohlo v tábore analytickej estetiky napadnúť.

Na záver už len pár slov k celej knihe. Na začiatku čítania som mal pocit, že autorka niektoré časti rozoberá príliš opatrne a podrobne a navyše sa k nim na viacerých miestach a v iných kontextoch vracia. Táto zdanlivá redundancia však určite nie je na škodu a pomáha čitateľovi hlbšie preniknúť do Dantovho filozofického systému a plynule sa naladiť na zmenu *štandardného* pohľadu

[7] V origináli (Danto, 2003) – *inflection* (v slovenskom preklade (2008) nie celkom šťastne *inflexia*), pre ktorú Danto našiel inšpiráciu vo Fregeho pojme *Farbung*.

[8] „Ochraňovaný tým, čo som sa naučil, znova môžem začať dlhými laboratórnymi kliešťami analytickej filozofie dvíhať také toxické vlastnosti ako sú krása, vznešenosť a podobne“ (Danto, 2008, s. 23).

na Danta. Lojdová okrem prehľadu rozsiahlej primárnej literatúry poctivo zozbierala obrovské množstvo sekundárnych zdrojov (vrátane domácich), čo nielen pomáha argumentačne podložiť každý krok, ale čitateľovi ponúka vynikajúci nástroj na orientáciu v Dantovej filozofii. Kniha tým, že nepriamo je aj o prekonávaní 'schizmy' medzi estetikou a filozofiou umenia, je zaujímavým čítaním ako pre analytických filozofov umenia, tak aj pre výskumníkov v oblasti kontinentálnej estetiky. Čítanie môžem len odporučiť aj všetkým umelcom, kurátorom a kritikom zo sveta umenia.

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