

KITSCH – THE HOARTFROST OF ART

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Abstract: You come across it where and when you expect it the least: in the street, in locations known as tourist attractions, in markets and fairs, in arts and crafts shop windows, in the houses of your friends whose taste you would have never doubted ... It bears various names: Roberto the Mariner, The Shooting of the Stag, The Snake Woman, The Abduction of the Sabine Women (not to be mistaken for Mozart's work of art), Peasant Woman or Little Draw Well, Painting by Guta Ionescu, Souvenir, I Loved You, Paraschiva, and many others. It clings to you like a bur, with aggressiveness and insolence. It sometimes takes certified forms, finding its legitimacy in diplomas and proper signatures, as kitsch may also be found in the bureaucratic style of awarding certifications.

There are two poles marking its movement: bad taste and naivety (obviously, when imposture is entirely out of discussion). One finds their 'vocation' for art overnight, speculating upon the existence of some niches in the aesthetic education of a certain category of the public. They elude the law or obtain, under who knows what circumstances, attestations, visas, and authorizations, and then conceive the kitsch and release its seeds throughout the world. Due to people's ignorance, naivety, and lack of discernment, it is accepted and assimilated. From here, there is only one step to take to the spiritual pollution.

Protection against this kitsch would thus be necessary: more discernment in receiving and accepting, at all levels, the public manifestations of art; a more intense and more systematic aesthetic education of the public, a firmer position to take against the aggressiveness of the aesthetic fake. It may be true that bad taste has its own supporters but so is the fact that the devil itself eludes the fragrance of incense...

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The concept of kitsch has been largely used in the field of arts, being related to the idea of creation and to aesthetic issues in particular, but it can also be used in a wider sense, whilst approaching unspecific phenomena which involve discrepancies, falsehood, or degradation. The kitsch attitude in the aesthetic field may be compared to and has the same effects as the snobbery or the hypocrisy reflected at a moral level on a daily basis.

But what is kitsch?

According to Abraham Moles, the concept of "kitsch" appeared in Munich, around 1860, deriving from the word "Kitschen". The first kitschy creations belonged to the German painters who had to meet the market demands at the time. Ever since, this tendency has had more or less thriving periods, so that one may even speak of an artistic trend of "kitsch" which has begun to dominate the field of arts. Kitsch exerts a particular influence on the masses, its creator being utterly aware of this aspect and the entire act of creation involving a well-established procedure and precise goals. The theory of kitsch is extremely vast, so that one may refer to the kitsch man, the kitsch object, the multitude of objects, the kitsch entourage, the kitsch atmosphere, mass media and the art of kitsch, etc.

Regardless of its origins, kitsch has never ceased to be a word with a strongly pejorative meaning, which explains why it is prone to being used subjectively in a wide variety of situations. To refer to something as kitsch is most often equivalent with rejecting it, from the very beginning, as something giving rise to aversion or even disgust. The term

can be used pejoratively with reference to architecture, landscaping, interior design, furniture, painting and sculpture, film making and television programmes, music, literature, and practically to whatever undergoes a judgement of taste. Irrespective of the classification of the contexts in which it appears, kitsch always implies an aesthetic inconsistency.

Yet the remaining question is how one could differentiate between an object and a work of art. A likely answer in this respect may be offered by the features of the kitsch object identified by Abraham Moles:

1. *“The curves delineating its contours and elements belong, in general, to a series of relatively complex differential equations characterized by numerous points of inflection; yet these points become connected one to another progressively and without discontinuities (tangent connections), which helps to distinguish them from the “oyster”, the distinctive mark of pure Baroque, whose motif is a visibly orthogonal double network. (...)*
2. *The kitsch object rarely comprises completely flat surfaces; its surfaces are, in general, filled in or enriched with representations, symbols or ornaments (the principle of crowdedness and that of decorativeness). There appears the idea of an exaggerated decorativeness: the ornament is a peremptory rule of the creative act, within a frequently figurative tendency.*
3. *Colours are often an inherent element of whatever is termed as Gestalt Kitsch. The contrasts between pure and complementary colours, shades of white, particularly the transitions from red to a fondant candy-like pink, to violet or to a fading lilac, as well as combinations of all rainbow colours, which intermingle with one another, often characterize the chromatics of the kitsch. (...) Traditional colours are not used: if pink and violet can be associated with each another, conversely, red and green exclude each other and are not considered “good taste”; the former might be referred to as “sentimental colours”, with reference to literature, where the equivalent of the term “colour” can obviously be found in the decorative style. (...)*
4. *In-built materials rarely look like what they are in reality. Thus, the wood is painted so as to imitate marble, plastic surfaces are adorned with in-built fiber motifs, zinc objects are coated with brass, bronze statues are gilded, cast iron columns simulate the stucco or the Gothic arch, etc. Materials are, therefore, disguised. (...)*
5. *Finally, I have mentioned the existence of some discrepancies, with respect to dimensions, between the representation of the object and its “natural” or “original” model. Rendering an object as gigantic or in miniature represents a classical feature of the kitsch object which solely reproduces the recognizable form of the object itself, leaving out its concrete, existential aspect. In fact, the kitsch object is essentially defined by a system of reference “characteristic to the human being”, the ultimate purpose being that of showing the object to advantage by adapting its dimensions.”¹*

¹ Moles, Abraham, *Psihologia kitsch-ului*. Arta fericii, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, pp. 42 – 49.

Should we not have the terms of comparison represented by genuine art, all of the above-mentioned aspects would probably appear normal to us and the objects which have been conceived in this manner would leave the impression of having an incontestable artistic value. Thus, "...kitsch is unavoidably tied to art in the same way the fake is tied to its authentic counterpart. «*There is a grain of kitsch in every kind of art*», says Broch, because in every kind of art there is a minimum of conventionalism, of that wish which no master is spared, namely to please the customer.”²

The kitsch artist manages to imitate the avant-garde only to the extent to which the latter's unconventionalisms have been perceived as a success and have been largely accepted and even transformed into stereotypes. “*Through its very nature, kitsch is incapable of taking the risk which any genuine avant-garde would presuppose. Kitsch makes use of the avant-garde's procedures for purposes which one may term as 'aesthetic publicity'*”.³

The likelihood that the avant-garde will employ elements of kitsch and, vice versa, that the latter will use avant-garde formulas demonstrates, once again, how complex the concept of kitsch is.

According to some authors, the essence of modernity is explicitly identified with kitsch and the latter is perceived as an historical style covering a large period. A German playwright, Frank Wedekind, identified an intellectually troubling equation between modernity and kitsch. They practically appear to exclude each other reciprocally, inasmuch as modernity entails the anti-traditional actuality, the experiment, or in Poud's terms, the “Make-it-new” type of novelty, the acceptance of change, whereas kitsch – in all its great diversity – suggests repetition, banality, triviality. From both a technological and an aesthetic point of view, “*kitsch is one of the most characteristic outcomes of modernity*”.⁴

The wide spread of the industrial production was the main element which not only determined a general social restructuring process, but also influenced all social relationships. The immediate and natural effect, with a wide range of implications, was the great and pressing need for labour force. Once the already existent human resources in the cities ran out, further labour force was recruited from the rural areas. This phenomenon started and fueled the long-term process of turning the rural masses into urban ones. At first, this meant the beginning of the peasants' invasion of closer or farther cities in a country, then that of the “invasion” across the borders, to other countries. A great number of people gave up their former lifestyle to adopt a new one.⁵

First the newly enriched, then the petty bourgeoisie as well as other segments of the population tried to imitate the old aristocracy and their consumption habits, including the consumption of beauty as a commodity. But as this new social category of people was hardly familiar with the genuine values and, since ‘cheap’ objects appeared to them just as good as anything else, the people in case became the main class of kitsch consumers.

² *Ibidem*, p. 6

³ Călinescu, Matei, *5 fețe ale modernității*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 195

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 191

⁵ Mate, Gavril – *Universul kitsch-ului. O problemă de estetică*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1985, p. 23

One of the fundamental characteristics of modernity is “the hypocrisy of luxury”. *Everyone hopes to appear what he is not and makes great efforts to succeed in doing so.* The hypocrisy of the luxury is particularly characteristic to the ages of democracy. The artists’ creations increase in number, yet the value of each and every product decreases. As they are no longer capable of accomplishing great things, artists tend to cultivate whatever is sweet and attractive, paying more attention to appearance rather than to reality.

Regardless of whether we accept the theory of “one’s search for a social position” or we prefer to see in kitsch a pleasant way of evading the monotony of modern daily life, the concept of kitsch still outlined by connotations such as cheap imitation, counterfeiting, falsehood, and the aesthetics of deceit and self-delusion.

Life in a mercantile environment makes it hard for one to perceive the value and the paradigmatic beauty of the world as well as of the human being. Leading a meaningless life, devoid of any significance, results in a constant encouragement of eccentricity and of the monkeyish aesthetic imitation as would-be “interesting” values in all fields, on the pretext of societal renewability and societal emancipation.⁶ Beauty and genuine value are no longer related to the idea of truth and good, which normally cause a state of transfiguration, but rather to producing bizarre feelings, some sort of “strong sensations” which ultimately degenerate into snobbery. The resulting axiological void generates an acute deficiency in motivation and a deadly boredom which, exacerbated by a culture of narcissism, cause the masses to abandon themselves to illusion.

Thus, the materialistic society undergoes such a flagrant mutation of values that the value of a civilization or of a culture is now exclusively appreciated in terms of its economic success. Aesthetic kitsch is a mere plastic image of this lifestyle characterized by a lack of value and turning everything into a commodity. It is yet perceived, in this phase of spiritual mediocrity, as impressively valuable.

Kitsch is the typical outcome of capitalism, modernism, or better said, of contemporaneity. It represents the act of putting to value tastes and manners which are normally perceived as bizarre, vulgar or banal. By promoting those features which are uncharacteristic to an individual, kitsch brings in the foreground one’s proneness to theatricality and exaggeration as well as one’s wish to impress through their lack of conventionalism. It is, to some extent, a form of self-irony. It is a phenomenon which may derive from the very lack of genuine values. Self-irony along with this obvious, intentional exaggeration serves as a substitute for an inability to appreciate the genuine value, it is a grotesque mask intentionally worn by a woman who is incapable of appreciating good-taste in make-up. This is how kitsch may become only an excuse for taking poor quality, unrefined and vulgar works of art for genuine art, a phenomenon which is also known as “the yuck factor”.

A current derivative of the kitsch phenomenon is the so-called “camp” phenomenon. According to the School of Frankfurt and its main representative, Theodor Adorno, the aforementioned phenomenon promotes a form of thoughtless consumerism.

⁶ Cherhat, Adrian. *Kitsch-ul ca mod de viață în cultura modernă*, <http://noinu.rdscj.ro/article.php?articleID=68>

As for the literature in the field, it either originates the term “camp” in the French word “se camper” (with the connotation of adopting an exaggerated form of couture), or keeps it in an obscure area like that provided by the Oxford English Dictionary.

The “camp” phenomenon promotes bad taste – most often it is the same bad taste promoted in the past – as a superior form of refinement. It is as if bad taste, accepted and intentionally looked for, would outperform itself to become its own opposing counterpart. It is difficult to differentiate between the “camp” phenomenon and kitsch. The recent “camp” trend has appeared recently among the circles of intellectuals in New York and spread across the entire U.S., contributing significantly to the revival of kitsch in the world of arts as well.

Nevertheless, the “camp” phenomenon has a social value, too, being rooted in the minority groups’ policy of taking attitude and thus deriding the dominant culture of the majority by means of exaggerations.

The phenomenon in case is also closely related to social movements with a sexual orientation: transsexuality, homosexuality, and even the feminist movement. However, it currently tends to become the expression of a spirit of rebelliousness towards the old values and order of the society.

Once a way to reject the social class difference, the adoption of bad taste has now become a mode of standing out of the crowd by asserting one’s individuality. This phenomenon is quite common not only with those adolescents who are willing to prove they cannot be forced to obey rules, but also “stars” like Lady GaGa, Madonna, RuPaul, Mika, etc.

The difference between the two concepts, which in fact resemble each other very much (both promote pseudo-art), resides in the fact that the user is utterly familiar with the genuine value of the object or of the style (thus, the “camp” type of user is aware of the lack of genuine artistic value, yet he or she employs this style in order to prove something, whereas the “kitsch” type of user very often considers the object extremely beautiful and as having an incontestable artistic value).

“If the models promoted by the avant-garde and camp culture can resort to artistic forms and techniques which are bound to the most typical category of kitsch, the latter, in its turn, can imitate to its profit the look of avant-gardism. This also explains the constantly renewed force of kitsch to survive in the world of what is generally termed as great art.”⁷

However, a great problem remains the expansion of the kitsch phenomenon which counteracts whatever art attempts to do in all respects. For various reasons, people no longer rise to the challenge of art, being simply too tolerant of kitsch. In their attempt to refuse all the ideas, and using the pseudo-argumentation as a substitute for all final answers, those who opt for their own reflection as a way of life will ultimately wonder, at some point, where the delineation between kitsch and art is and whom the two of them addresses mostly.

Is kitsch an art typical of the masses? Most critics and artists have to face the pressing thought that “It’s not beautiful what I personally like, but rather it is beautiful

⁷ Călinescu, Matei, op. cit. p. 195

whatever is beautiful.” Yet, as Eugen Ionescu remarks very well, in the aforementioned acceptance it is the masses that are left to decide what may be termed as “beautiful”.

Art’s mission is not to give up one truth in favour of another (namely that of the individual artist), but rather to integrate these truths into a “sum total” which rather requires meditation than leaves room for a clear-cut conclusion: the work of art speaks first and foremost about the human condition, regardless of referring in this case to “Miorita” or to the Sistine Chapel.

Should we condemn the masses to an irremediable bad taste? Are we not wrong when we state that artists give up to kitsch owing to the masses’ preferences? The new trends nowadays – including kitsch – require more knowledgeableness on the looker’s part, in complete accordance with the technical revolution and with the extent to which the 21st century individual is informed as compared to the one who lived in the 18th century. Obviously, the art of the former might not be understood by the latter unless he or she had similar concerns in life in this respect. The masses cannot create, in the strict literal sense of the word, but they can very well perceive the diverse aspects of creation. Heinrich Lutzeler remarked: *“whoever does not master form fails as an artist, whoever is unable to interpret form – no matter how, consciously or not – fails as one who looks at art.”*⁸

Art is first and foremost an interrogation with respect to faulty lives, to what seems to be excluded, and yet adds up and contradicts, highlighting and making things complete. In every beautiful thing there lies both harmony and contrast. From amongst craftsmen, who may be perceived as masters of form, only those can stand out who have something to express, an impulse, a living moment, something that requires formative knowledge (Brancusi attended the School of Arts and Crafts). Indeed, it is not enough to learn things because, in order to create art, one needs to have the true vision, the unique talent to perceive and create everything, from the very beginning, in terms of forms. Before reasoning, the artist sees and feels the reality differently from the others (which defines him and renders him unique), yet in a much more expressive way than the previously used artistic language. For this reason, the only art which the masses can create is the folk art, anonymous, and yet revealing the ordinary man’s strong sensitivity to whatever is beautiful.

A folk artist originating in the Oaş Country and taking part in a country festival gave an opening speech, highlighting at some point the necessity to counteract the “hoarfrost” which is about to suffocate the genuine values of art. Kitsch – a foreign word, difficult to be assimilated by the circles of nonspecialists – had become “hoarfrost” just like “lacramatie” (obsolete word meaning “complaint”) is still used now and then instead of “reclamatie” (its contemporary equivalent). Far from causing the audience to laugh, the phrase rather impressed through its metaphorical connotation. The folk artist proved to be well-aware of the meaning of the concept of kitsch, since he added up immediately: “that’s true, these objects [kitschy objects] are a sort of hoarfrost which spreads over the trees damaging their branches.”

What can be more eloquent than the connotation attributed to the concept of kitsch by means of this folk etymology? Kitsch is like the hoarfrost: it makes things indistinct,

⁸ Lutzeler Heinrich, *Drumuri spre artă*, vol. 2, Meridiane Publishing House, ”Biblioteca de artă” Collection, Bucharest, 1986, p. 53

misrepresents, and suffocates whilst leaving the impression of being attractive; it is fragile and perishable, yet invading and ubiquitous; it hides the healthy, everlasting nature of art under the sparkling crystals coming to life from mere ... “rain drops”.

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