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6 The Varieties of Kitsch: Ethical, Artistic and Political Dimensions

Abstract

Hermann Broch, the initiator of the discussion on the concept of kitsch, grappled with a variety of meanings to the term that almost a century later still remain open and ambiguous. He claims that “[t]he essence of kitsch is the confusion of the ethical category with the aesthetic category; a ‘beautiful’ not a ‘good’ one is the aim; the important thing is an effect of beauty.” (Notes on the problem of kitsch, 71). This proposition raises several questions. Where exactly does the kitsch factor reside: in the category confusion, in the lures of beauty, in the negligence of the ethical or in the search of effectism? In this chapter I will explore how or why an aesthetic category challenges art’s basic assumptions such as the pursuit of beauty, slides beyond its original field and becomes an ethical and even a political category. It is intriguing to revise this particular concept as a common node to cross-disciplinary approaches and its implications.

Keywords: kitsch, kitschmensch, künstlerkitsch, hyperkitsch, mystikitsch, ethikitsch, kitschaktivism

1. Defining kitsch

Kitsch is a German word coined in the 19th century and popularized in the early 20th century that, lacking exact translation in other languages, roughly denotes bad taste or a pretentious imitation of something of value, the aesthetically fake or simply sentimentalism, the corny and tacky. Various authors attempted to define kitsch from philosophical, artistic, and ethical approaches without a conclusive result, since while it is understood as a kind of art (or as pseudo art, even a style in art) others apply the term to a subjective state, to the quality of certain objects, people, responses or behaviors, or as a combination of them.

The most standard use of the term among economically well-off classes or by the artworld and guardians of elite taste, refers to the *parvenu* and *nouveau riche* imitating the style of higher strata to simulate status. Kitsch in this context is synonymous to bad taste, a fake status signal emitted through aesthetic means. Clement Greenberg categorized kitsch as the taste of the masses preferred by demagogues, a social-classist term that, as we will see, is not precisely accurate.¹

1 Clement Greenberg, “The Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 116–126.

For Hermann Broch Romanticism – the most important artistic tendency of 19th century Europe – as a craving for the past, is kitsch: “In reality, kitsch is the simplest and most direct way of soothing this nostalgia.” Another version is that “as often happens in periods of revolution, it is used as an escape from the irrational, an escape into the idyll of history where set conventions are still valid.”² To add more confusion to the concept, he proposes beauty even as kitsch: “The kitsch system requires its followers to ‘work beautifully’, while the art system issues the ethical order: ‘Work well’. Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art.”³ What have evil, an ethical category, and the rational, an epistemological category, to do with an aesthetic category?

2. Kitsch and art: mystikitsch, kitschism, hyperkitsch and kunstlerkitsch

According to Broch kitsch consists of art’s subordination to extra-artistic tendencies (such as to religion by Medieval Art or to political ideas as in Hauptmann’s play “The Weavers”). Nevertheless, he adds: “So we certainly cannot say that all art which contains a message is kitsch, although the system of imitation – as represented by kitsch – is well-suited to being subordinated to extra-artistic purposes, and however much we may feel that all art of this type runs the risk of becoming kitsch.”⁴ He questions: “Let us begin with an objection: if dogmatism is really to be considered as the ‘evil’ element in any system of values, if art should really refuse to be dominated by any outside influence, why should we not deduce from this that any form of ‘art-with-a-message’ represents evil? Why not ask ourselves directly whether the medieval subordination of art to the religious element was not a contradiction of the essence of art?”⁵

Yet art always involves a message, an artistic message as it is never semiotically empty whether in content, form, gesture, texture, style etc. even if its meaning is precisely “this is semiotically empty.” On the other hand, Broch’s condemnation of what he calls “tendentiousness” exerted upon art by other institutional activities follows an arbitrary axiom of the purity and autonomy of art. His assertion that medieval painting as a subordination of art to religion is, in my view, a false problem resulting from traditional debatable definitions that conflate art with aesthetics. To state briefly what I have amply argued elsewhere, art results from

2 Broch, “Notes,” 73.

3 Broch, “Notes,” 63.

4 Broch, “Notes,” 68.

5 Broch, “Notes,” 68.

individual professional skill that appeals to different degrees of trained sensibilities for the appreciation and enjoyment of meanings and expressive forms in relation to particular conventions (the artworld's) representing different sides of life.⁶ Aesthetics, on the other hand deals with the natural-cultural condition of sensibility for appreciating such meanings and values within the manifold of the subject's perceptible field, positive or negative, in pain or delight. In other words, aesthetics is the study of the condition of sensory and mental receptivity in multiple manifestations, one of which is art as a specialized production of artifacts that appeal to this condition for pleasurable effects. Another manifestation is religion which also conveys its messages by aesthetic means for achieving effects of faith persuasion (and so with other institutions). Aesthetization does not equal artification as it does not necessarily turn any such messages into art.

Ironically it is Broch himself who can be said to be theoretically subordinating artistic practices to a mystified view of creativity: on one hand he is mistakenly understanding religious aesthetics as art and on the other understanding art as a quasi-religious practice demanding an impossible purity and even deploring its contamination by beauty. This view could perhaps be qualified as kitsch in itself, a theoretical one or "*mystikitsch*," the kitsch of mystifying a quotidian activity. It basically refers to the deification of the artist and of his craft as a demiurge. There are many other less visible activities that are equally fruit of great talent, dedication, skill and perspicuity in medicine, science, altruism whose value is not even recognized, much less mystified, yet human talent can be equally admired in all these manifestations, not only art.

Another category mistake is common in art history papers that as a rule classify cave paintings as art when in fact were aesthetically elaborated for other ritualistic and communal ends and not for artistic or contemplative purposes. Their undeniably aesthetic quality, as well as remarkable skill certainly calls for an artistic categorization, except that the context, function and intention (being superimposed images or in dark places) are completely different as aesthetic expressions of probably magical, shamanic and hunting tribal customs. All institutions require aesthetic elaboration since aesthetics can convey dignity and power to any social organization. Lumping all aesthetic activity into the arts is a lazy theoretical move that needs to be challenged.

6 Katya Mandoki. *Prosaica; introducción a la estética de lo cotidiano* (México: Grijalbo, 1994); *Estética cotidiana y juegos de la cultura: Prosaica I* (México: Siglo XXI editores, 2006); *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture, and Social Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

On the other hand, deliberate kitsch became trendy in the artworld with Roy Lichtenstein amplifying kitsch comic book vignettes, Francesco De Molletta's repugnant sculptures, Oldenburg's soft sculptures, Andy Warhol's recurrent mass culture personality posters, Jeff Koons's animal balloons, Komar and Melamid's Stalin's paintings, and Botero's art's obese versions etc. Giesz cites Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* as "a classic example: the original text was by Wilhelm Müller and was composed in about 1820 as a deliberately kitsch parody ridiculing 'folk' poetry with the Romantic-cum-Biedermeier stamp!"⁷ By playing with intentionally bad taste elements, kitsch as a topic pretends to demystify art and unkitsch this idolization creating a distance that immunizes against real kitsch. As a style it may be called *kitschism*.

Another kin term is Dorfler's *hyperkitsch*: "This is an extreme case, often overlooked, of what could be called cultural elite kitsch: the bad taste of the high culture." "The existence of products which belong to high culture only in their external appearance, their make-up, their slang, but which are in fact part of the very same kitsch, that cultural substitute revealed in the crime novel or the romantic novel, in juke-box music, in the mass-appeal film."⁸ I think LaChapelle's photographs qualify as such.

We can add to the artistic sphere another category, the *kitschkünstler*, related more to the ethical kitsch as it refers to an attitude rather than a product of those who try to convince of being artists by their pose instead of by their work, dressing up eccentrically and exhibiting themselves at artworld circles at every opportunity. *Kitschkünstler*s tend to present trivial pieces, as they have not much to say yet demanding that it is up to the spectator to find their meaning.

These varieties of kitsch, like mystifying art or *mystikitsch*, the *hyperkitsch* of superficial imitation of elite art and the *kitschkünstler* posers contrast to *kitschism* which establishes an ironic distance from it, yet is not immune as kitschism can also be kitschified. We may consider Freytag-Loringhoven and Duchamp's "Fountain" 1917 piece, unkitsching art by exhibiting a commonplace urinal, which ironically then resulted overkitsched as object of adoration worth more than a million dollars as a case in point.

7 Ludwig Giesz, "Kitsch-Man as Tourist," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles & Vivienne Menkes (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 158.

8 Gillo Dorfles "Myth and Kitsch," in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles & Vivienne Menkes (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 35.

3. The ethical kitsch

In addition to understanding kitsch as the evil within the value of art, Broch defined it in at least 5 other completely different meanings: as imitation, appeasing nostalgia, yielding to a beautiful work rather than a great work, as the escape from the irrational and as an attitude. In the last case, Broch brings the term of *kitschmench* to point out that kitsch is not in the object (as hall-mark mass produced cards “for a very special person”) but in the subject and thus brims over into ethical and political repercussions. Giesz develops this idea in “Kitschman as a tourist” describing the inauthentic experience of packaged traveling that contrasts to real adventure (although he ends up focusing kitsch objects like souvenirs and ruins).⁹

The ethical dimension of kitsch is understood by Dorfles as the following:

Even ethics have their kitsch, and here one should consider two fundamental facts: 1) that kitsch is essentially the falsification of sentiments and the substitution of spurious sentiments for real ones. That is to say that real feeling becomes sentimentality; this is the moral argument against kitsch.

2) that where ethics are in evidence the aesthetic component suffers.¹⁰

Artistic kitsch is for Broch inevitable, in the sense that an artwork always pursues an effect:

How can we escape the conclusion that no art can do without a soupçon of deliberate effect, a dash of kitsch? Deliberate effect is an essential component of the spectacle, an aesthetic component, while there is a whole artistic genre (a specifically bourgeois genre), i.e. opera, in which deliberate effect is a basic and constructive element [. . .]¹¹

The ethical kitsch is by far more troubling than the artistic kitsch as it rots human interactions by pursuing effectism rather than clear communication. This crucial insight of Broch is taken by Kundera to explore it further:

In the French version of the famous essay by Hermann Broch, the word “kitsch” is translated for “art de pacotille.” A contradiction because Broch shows that kitsch is something more than a simple work of bad taste. There is the kitsch attitude. Kitsch behavior. The need for kitsch of “kitschman” (Kitschmensch): it is **the need to look at yourself in the mirror of beautifying deceit and to recognize yourself in it with excited satisfaction.**¹²

9 Giesz, “Kitsch-Man as Tourist,” 156–174.

10 Gillo Dorfles “Pornokitsch and Morals,” in *Kitsch: The World of Bad Taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles & Vivienne Menkes (New York: Universe Books, 1969), 221.

11 Broch, “Notes,” 71.

12 Milan Kundera, *El arte de la novela* (Madrid: Tusquets, 1987), 42. All translations from Spanish are mine. Emphasis mine.

The subjective kitsch is not an attribute of specific people, since no one can be reduced to a single quality, but of specific attitudes, postures, or presented identities. Here Broch brings up a very strong claim about the ethical kitsch not merely for its falsity but its radical evil.

The producer of kitsch does not produce ‘bad’ art, he is not an artist endowed with inferior creative faculties or no creative faculties at all. It is quite impossible to assess him according to aesthetic criteria; rather he should be judged as an ethically base being, a malefactor who profoundly desires evil. And as it is this radical evil that is portrayed in kitsch (that evil which is linked to every system of values as the absolute negative pole), kitsch should be considered ‘evil’ not only by art but by every system of values that is not a system of imitation.¹³

The issue here refers to its effectism and posture, as well as imposture (such as Kitschkünstler’s posing as artist) that empties any real content, similar to academic bluffing that uses complicated jargon to pretend inexistent depth and knowledge. By contrast to theatre acting that creates an effect of verisimilitude to convey a significant human meaning, posturing presents a fiction as real. For Kant: “It is an element in the radical evil of human nature, which messes up one’s capacity to make moral judgments about what a man should be taken for, and makes our attributions of responsibility—ours or those of others—wholly uncertain.”¹⁴ So posturing and imposture blur “what a man should be taken for” and so his taking responsibility for the meaning of his words and actions.

The word kitsch designates the attitude of those who wish to please at any price and to as many people as possible. To please you have to confirm what everyone wants to hear, be at the service of preconceived ideas. Kitsch is the translation of the foolishness of preconceived ideas into the language of beauty and of emotion. **It takes form as tears of tenderness for ourselves, for the trivialities that we think or feel.** Today, fifty years later, Broch’s phrase becomes even truer. Given the imperative need to please and thus attract the attention of the greatest number, the aesthetics of the media is inevitably that of kitsch; and, as the media covers our entire life and infiltrates it, kitsch becomes our everyday aesthetics and morals. Until a still recent epoch, modernity meant a non-conformist rebellion against preconceptions and kitsch. Today, modernity is confused with the immense vitality of the mass media, and being modern means an unbridled effort to be up-to-date, be contented, be more contented even than the most contented. Modernity has been dressed in kitsch clothes.¹⁵

13 Broch, “Notes,” 76.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Bare Reason*, Jonathan Bennett ed., (2017), 19 <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/kant1793.pdf> (accessed 14 May, 2019).

15 Kundera, *El arte*, 52. Emphasis mine.

The ethical kitsch by those “who wish to please at any price” bending backwards in exaggerated pleasingness, force unsolicited favors for implicitly demanding compulsory thankfulness and a reflection of themselves as nice persons. Ethical kitsch simulates generosity bestowing gifts not thinking in the recipient’s particular preferences but calculating the effect the giver expects by this very act, as public donations for personal exhibition (related to the mechanics of political kitsch, as we will see in the next section). The step from bad taste to radical evil passes through the in-authenticity of the gesture to outright hostility disguised as generosity, the imposture of kindness.

Socrates was critical of the sophists precisely for their pleasingness simulating authentic knowledge and loyalty to truth yet concealing superficiality, indifference and commonplace lazy thought. Christopher Hitchens expressed a similar ethical repugnance of Mother Theresa who he claimed was disguising herself as a saintly benefactor of the poor, yet actually exploiting their poverty for her public image and using donations of the most corrupt individuals for further enriching the Church.¹⁶ Hitchens’s claims can be disputed, but what enraged him most was the exploitation of the ethical kitsch, the imposture of a presentation opposite to a real behavior, the ethical abjection of her beautifying (in this case beatifying) deceit and the radical evil posing as radical goodness. Among the different kinds of evil, the kitsch-evil consists of true malignancy disguised as benignancy. Cheating and mimicry are basic strategies for survival, and thus not necessarily kitsch, but they turn into evil kitsch through this self-congratulatory deviousness in “the need to look at yourself in the mirror of beautifying deceit and to recognize yourself in it with excited satisfaction.”¹⁷

4. The political kitsch

Kundera developed Broch’s momentous ideas on the various dimensions of kitsch and aesthetic ‘evil’ observing that “[p]olitical movements rest not so much on rational attitudes but on the fantasies, images, words, and archetypes that come together to make up this or that *political kitsch*.”¹⁸ Such supply of political kitsch is particularly exploited today by social network news that deliberately incite anger to trigger righteous indignation reflexes as attention baits to insert advertising. They rely on the fact that political education of the general

16 Christopher Hitchens. *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (London: Verso, 1995).

17 Kundera, *El arte*, 42.

18 Kundera, *Unbearable*, 247. Emphasis in the original.

public is mostly reduced to clichés and headlines and posts in social networks like WhatsApp, Facebook or twitter within the social bubble they inhabit. Hence, in university campus politically lazy students with the need to produce the effect of being informed and engaged in politics despite of their cluelessness about the complexity of the problem they appear to defend, follow a fashionable new type of kitsch that can be named *Kitschaktivism*. In contrast to real political activism with concrete goals, kitschaktivism in universities is less concerned with understanding and examining the problems addressed than in exhibiting moral superiority over the aesthetically appealing “cause” they choose to adopt for signaling political correctness and produce an effect of engagement that elevates their status within their group. If kitschaktivists were genuinely concerned about the issue they appear to militate for, they would analyze it from various perspectives, invite all parts for dialogue and discuss alternatives rather than merely demonizing one side, repeating clichés and shouting slogans. In contrast to protests against the Vietnam war that directly endangered and affected students’ lives, today’s kitschaktivism is even government sponsored as in cases of skin color, gender and other grievance studies activism or the libellous “Israel apartheid week.”¹⁹ This 14 years old hate-fest against a factually multiracial country, never addressed any real apartheid case anywhere in the world such as apartheid against women by Wahhabi Saudi Arabia and Iran, of Uyghurs, Roma, Sikhs, and Yazidis, or of Bahá’ís and Sufis in Iran and Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan since it is not really about apartheid but about Israel, explicitly calling for its destruction (by Omar Barghouti’s BDS, Hamas and PLO’s allied organizations). This political kitsch event provides kitschaktivists a radical evil pleasure: “to look at yourself in the mirror of beautifying deceit and to recognize yourself in it with excited satisfaction” for being part of this again fashionable hate politics.

As the totalitarian mind all fanatics share, for kitschaktivists “all answers are given in advance and preclude any questions. It follows, then, that the true opponent of totalitarian kitsch is the person who asks questions. A question is like a knife that slices through the stage backdrop and gives us a look at what lies hidden behind it.”²⁰ This serves as a litmus test on kitschaktivists posing as left but cannot tolerate dialogue, much less questioning, as they operate by clichés signaling easily identifiable props of their “cause” for their chorus on the stage.²¹

19 Cf. <https://archive.org/details/LetterAddressedToTheEdinburghStudentsAssociationByDrDennisMacEoin>.

20 Kundera, *Unbearable*, 254.

21 http://www.ngo-monitor.org/data/images/File/BDS_Table.pdf.

While right-wing kitsch exalts the family, fatherland, and religion, left-wing kitsch entitles itself with moral and ideological superiority by taking a cause of an aesthetically appealing underdog, but as not all underdogs are equal: some are more favorite pet causes than others. “What makes a leftist a leftist is not this or that theory but his ability to integrate any theory into the kitsch called the Grand March” tearfully singing The International in beautifying deceit that negates the undesired reality of the real downtrodden and dispossessed in the name of the virtuous left.²² “It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch.”²³ Tragically “the brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch.”²⁴

5. Conclusion

This paper focused on the strange case of an aesthetic category that slides beyond its original field and becomes an ethical and a political category. We can mention at least 5 types of kitsch delineated here namely *kitschkünstler*, *hyperkitsch*, *mystikitsch*, *ethikitsch*, and *kitschaktivism*. One possible explanation of this sliding is the contagious potential of sentimentality always related to kitsch.

Kundera describes it vividly: “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! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.” This is almost a template that exhibits the kitsch element in all dimensions: the *künstlerkitsch* can be translated as: “How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by myself being an artist!” The same operates for the *ethikitsch*: “How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by myself being such a virtuous person!” *Kitschaktivists* are less moved by “the cause” than by themselves being moved by “the cause” i.e. “how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by myself caring about The Cause!”

At the end, all these variations elicit the same sense of repugnance that unites them under a common aesthetic dimension, even if negative.

22 Kundera, *Unbearable*, 257.

23 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987), 248.

24 Kundera, *Unbearable*, 251.

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