

UNEXPECTED POWER
OF
ARCHITECTURAL
KITSCH

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Looking for meaning
and value beyond
abyss of academic neglect

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'Brotherhood of men on earth will be possible only on the base of kitsch.'

M. Kundera's prophetic dictum

CHAPTER 1: ART, CRAFTS, BACKGROUND

I. DEFINITION(S)

According to the Oxford art dictionary, kitsch is "art, objects or design considered to be in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality, but sometimes appreciated in an ironic or knowing way".

Probably the best definition of kitsch gave **Walter Benjamin**. According to this famous cultural critic and philosopher, "kitsch is, unlike art, a utilitarian object lacking all critical distance between object and observer; it offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation".

Kitsch can be defined as a low-brow style of mass-produced art or design using popular or cultural icons.

It can also be defined as art, decorative objects or design considered by many people to be ugly, lacking in style, or false but enjoyed by other people, often because they are funny.

Many art critics argue that kitsch art is characterized by **exaggerated sentimentality and melodrama**.

What is common for all these definitions is the fact that to brand visual art as "kitsch" is generally pejorative.

If something is kitsch, it cannot be considered as a piece of art. What is the purpose of art if a viewer or observer cannot make a critical stance, to contemplate, to perceive something more from pure aesthetics? Art cannot be reduced to a pure enjoyment of aesthetical. So, kitsch art, according to many experts, cannot be considered as art at all. Or, it can, but it would be "bad" art. Many contemporary artists are accused of implementing **kitsch elements** in their oeuvres – Jeff Koons, Andy Warhol, Yayoi Kusama and many others. Although these amazing artists are accused of their "kitsch artworks", they are among most popular contemporary artists.

All above being stated and considered here is my easy-to-digest definition of kitsch: artistic movement aiming for the lowest denominator of good taste

II. DEBATE

"I think what Keane has done is terrific! If it were bad, so many people wouldn't like it."
- Andy Warhol

“High culture is paranoid about sentiment. But human beings are intensely sentimental.”

- Thomas Kinkade.

"If works of art were judged democratically--that is, according to how many people like them--kitsch would easily defeat all its competitors."

- Thomas Kulka

Milan Kundera from "Unbearable Lightness of Being":

The concept of kitsch is a central motif in [Milan Kundera's](#) 1984 novel [The Unbearable Lightness of Being](#). Towards the end of the novel, the book's narrator posits that the act of defecation (and specifically, the shame that surrounds it) poses a metaphysical challenge to the theory of divine creation: "Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner".^[13] Thus, in order for us to continue to believe in the essential propriety and rightness of the universe (what the narrator calls "the categorical agreement with being"), we live in a world "in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist". For Kundera's narrator, this is the definition of kitsch: an "aesthetic ideal" which "excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence".

The novel goes on to relate this definition of kitsch to politics, and specifically — given the novel's setting in [Prague](#) around the time of the [1968 invasion by the Soviet Union](#) — to [communism](#) and [totalitarianism](#). He gives the example of the Communist [May Day](#) ceremony, and of the sight of children running on the grass and the feeling this is supposed to provoke. This emphasis on feeling is fundamental to how kitsch operates:

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.^[14]

According to the narrator, kitsch is "the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and all political parties and movements"; however, where a society is dominated by a single political movement, the result is "totalitarian kitsch":

When I say "totalitarian," what I mean is that everything that infringes on kitsch must be banished for life: every display of individualism (because a deviation from the collective is a spit in the eye of the smiling brotherhood); every doubt (because anyone who starts doubting details will end by doubting life itself); all irony (because in the realm of kitsch everything must be taken quite seriously).^[14]

[Art, Kitsch and Art History \(A. Brzyski\)](#)

"On the most basic level kitsch is not art. Our ability to distinguish between the two terms - even in those instances when kitsch approximates the appearance and logic of art and art that of kitsch - marks us as members of the cultural elite. Precisely because we are aware of their crucial dissimilarity, we can identify, discuss, and diagnose a wide range of phenomena usually associated with popular or mass culture as kitsch. We can even indulge in kitsch as camp, because unlike the actual consumers of kitsch, who lack the necessary critical distance and therefore fail to recognize kitsch for what it is, we know better. As Susan Sontag noted in the 1960s, our eager willingness to watch the very best "bad movies" or to relish with a hint of revulsion the extravagantly "awful" reveals our membership in the hip inner circle. Kitsch is therefore *our* term for *their* lack of taste and as such always a value judgement made from a position absolute cultural superiority.

But what exactly is that we mean when we identify something as kitsch? At different times, different authors have used this label to denigrate nineteenth century academic paintings, anything made by Salvador Dalí, various "inappropriate" forms of art reproduction, decorative bric-a-brac, political propaganda, votive objects, erotic images, advertisements, and Hollywood movies. The diversity of this list and the seeming lack of consensus among those disparate phenomena under the same rubric may be based on external considerations rather than any qualities shared among them. The pertinent question with regards to kitsch appears to be, therefore, not what is kitsch, but rather what exactly is meant when that label is applied to something.

Brzyski, Anna (2013) Art, Kitsch and Art History. In: Kjellman-Chapin, Monica, *Kitsch. History, Theory, Practice*. Newcastle upon Thyne: Cambridge Scholars. p 1.

III. HISTORY

a. ORIGINS

As a descriptive term, *kitsch* originated in the art markets of Munich in the 1860s and the 1870s, describing cheap, popular, and marketable pictures and sketches.^[5]

he word 'Kitsch' as a term is believed to have come up as a mispronunciation of the English word 'sketch' by the Germans in the Munich art markets of the 1860s and 1870s, to describe cheap and marketable pictures and paintings, but it also could have been derived from the German word '*verkitschen*' which means 'to make cheap'. The word can also allude to the Russian word '*keetcheetsya*' which means 'to be haughty and puffed up'.

Kitsch as an architectural style is attributed to social phenomena like industrialization and urbanization, which lead to the rise of the middle class and a need for mass-produced things to keep them cheap. It was studied exclusively in Germany till the 1970s, with Walter Benjamin being one of the most important scholars.

Kitsch Architecture is also attributed to the Modernist and Post-Modernist movements in architecture, because of the timeline during which it came up, and also for its basic

features. This style of architecture is still in use today, with more sub-styles and unique interpretations coming up every day

In *Das Buch vom Kitsch (The Book of Kitsch)*, [Hans Reimann](#) defines it as a professional expression "born in a painter's studio".

The study of kitsch was done almost exclusively in German until the 1970s, with [Walter Benjamin](#) being an important scholar in the field.^[6]

Kitsch is regarded as a modern phenomenon, coinciding with social changes in recent centuries such as the [Industrial Revolution](#), [urbanization](#), mass production, modern materials and media such as [plastics](#), [radio](#) and [television](#), the rise of the [middle class](#) and [public education](#)—all of which have factored into a perception of oversaturation of art produced for the popular taste

b. IMPETUS

The Kitsch Movement. The movement began in 1998 when Odd Nerdrum declared himself a Kitsch Painter. The movement defines *Kitsch* as synonymous with the art of the ancient Rome or the Greek *techné*. Kitsch painters embrace it as a positive term: not in opposition to art, but as its own independent superstructure, with a strong philosophical background. Some of the most notable painters of the Kitsch Art Movement are Nerdrum's students, and this movement has attracted a lot of attention and had several exhibitions.

c. DEVELOPMENT

- Kitsch is a product of the industrial revolution
- Clement Greenberg
- Read Hermann Broch, Susan Sontag

d. TODAY

IV. ART

a. Impactful participants

CHAPTER 2: LASTING APPEAL OF VULGAR ARCHITECTURE

I. RE-DEFINITION

We reject the notion that Kitsch design implies monstrous architectural statement that screamed “look at me!” while enjoying the status of garish, tasteless, and poorly conceived urban contraption.

Kitsch’s promise of inclusive and relatable content is a calling card of Architecture.

YES:

- populist, playful, self-deprecating, accessible, at times vulgar.
- The question I wish to explore is this: Is timeless, capital-intensive, heart-attach-serious business of Architecture allowed to be humorous for a span of single structure?
- My answer is a subtitle of this paragraph

NO

Here is what I believe Kitsch is not:

II. STYLE AS VIEWING LENS

- a. Kitsch in architecture can be described as having certain elements in a building that are classically associated with [traditional architecture](#) but have no relation to the styles and trends in the region it has been built in – for example, having a building in the [Gothic style](#) in a South Korean village. Kitsch Architecture could also mean borrowing a certain ornamental mental element in an otherwise [minimalist building](#), or a building that appears garish and gaudy.
- b. Sometimes, even replicas of famous buildings in unrelated regions could also mean Kitsch Architecture. The unnecessary ornamentation, which appears cheap, but is used to satisfy the middle class by giving them their desired taste of higher art, is one of the main reasons why this style is considered a major part of the Postmodern Movement.
- c. Kitsch as a word may sound negative, this style has been criticized for making a satire out of classic [architectural styles](#), but it also gets appreciation from people who like something out-of-the-box, ones who want to see the world differently than it has been before. The Kitsch Architecture was a result of satisfying the desire of the common man to experience luxury, it was about factory-produced elements that could be interpreted immediately and did not require careful perusal, and it has been successful in achieving its purpose.
- d. Kitsch Architecture is an umbrella term for many varied styles and elements. Everything from buildings shaped like everyday objects like baskets, to buildings shaped like food, and to buildings with a mixture of different traditional ornamentation, falls under this umbrella, and they are just some of the few interpretations of the term ‘kitsch’. Kitsch style has

carefully incorporated itself into contemporary architecture and finds more appreciation every day.

- e. Kitsch Architecture has been around since social movements like industrialization and [urbanization](#), having being born as a result of them, but it is still in use in contemporary architecture, mainly because it is not defined by certain specific elements, but rather is defined by terms like 'garish', 'gaudy', 'unnecessary ornamentation' and 'easily understood', that can be interpreted differently by different people.
- f. Kitsch Architecture never came to the forefront as a major defining movement, but it also never went out of fashion, growing slowly and steadily in the corner while other movements garnered more attention. It continues to be that way, and even though it has been gaining more intrigue than before, it is still hard to completely grasp the complexity of this style. Kitsch Architecture will continue to flourish in the background, even with changing times, and the only thing that might change is its interpretation.
- g. Overlap with PoMo

My second take on defining Kitsch:

For the sake of this essay, let's define K. K is not bad taste. It is not anti-art. It is not companion of entire art history representing low value aspect of high style. Kitsch originated as next artistic development after Romantism in the mid of XIX century. Characterised by

1. SIMPLICITY. Not of form, but of meaning.
2. DERIVATION FROM EARLIER SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES
3. SENTIMENTALITY. Charged with strong emotion spontaneously triggering stock (predictable) unreflective emotional response. Supporting basic sentiments and believes, not challenging them. Universal emotional response provides psychological comfort of unified humanity. 'Success of Kitsch depends on universality of emotion it elicits' T. Kulka0
4. ACCESSAVILITY. Aim is to please the greatest number of people possible by playing on the most common denominators. Lack of eathetic intensity and committed self-discipline of Modern Architecture. Jungian archirypes in Architecture? Study.
5. Instant and effortless IDENTIFIABILITY. Use of time-tested representational cannon. Primitive hut. Greek Temple order. Kitsch attempts to speak most common language understandable by most. Democratic to a fault. Down with esoteric jargon! Down with idiosyncratic dialects!

K is also not a lack of inventiveness or absence of new ideas. Borrowed elements often enriched by new interpretation, application, relationship of adjacent forms, textures, colors. Within established canon there is space for creative interpretation and individual voice

6. Styles that are non-representational are outside of the realm of K. all together. Amongst representational movements closest, indeed related, are PoMo and various revivals
7. In defense of PoMo
8. Greek Revival (arbitrarily chosen)
9. Success of Garnier
10. On official style (insincere tribute to making architecture great again)
- 11.

Playful Absurdity of Postmodern Architecture.

Tasteless, gaudy, ugly and facile are all words that have been used to describe postmodern architecture. These bombastic buildings—erected as an antidote to the austere elegance of modernist architecture—are all colours, ragged shapes, incongruous textures and lines. They have come to symbolize 1980s decadence and individualism, flooding malls, office blocks, municipal buildings and private homes with a strange medley of classicist homage and kitsch Vegas glamour.

h. Trauma of Transition in Post-Communist Architecture of Eastern Europe

kitsch style is best suited as the language of trauma rather than – as it has been perceived so far – simply pretentious bad art. A revision of the post-communist transition period, called "shock therapy", from an architectural perspective will contribute to a deeper understanding of the current turbulent times, crises, and populist uprisings in Europe. In the longer term, the project will benefit other researchers interested in collective trauma, macropsychology, transitions and the study of meaning-making in the architectural context. As its aim is also to shed new light on the neglected concept of kitsch, it will also open doors for further interpretation of the phenomenon from the psychological perspective.

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<http://www.englada.org>

III. TECHNICAL ANALYSIS

- a. Referenceiality
- b. Scale
- c. Proportion
- d. Materiality
- e. Presence

IV. FUTURE

- b. Predictions are difficult, especially about the future
- c. Bold Prediction
- d. Closing remarks:
 - i. Advise to the architect earning for Kitsch immorality:
 - ii. "There must be something in all of us that wants kitsch." Eugene Goodheart, symposium "On Kitsch"
- e. Disclaimer and plea for leniency

EXHIBITS

- A: Arts and Crafts Examples
- B: Architectural Examples

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