

CONTEMPORARY KITSCH.  
THE DEATH OF PSEUDO-ART AND THE BIRTH OF  
EVERYDAY CHEESINESS (A POSTCOLONIAL  
INQUIRY)

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The discourse on kitsch has changed tone. The concept, which in the early 20th century referred more to pretentious pseudo-art than to cute everyday objects, was attacked between the World Wars by theorists of modernity (e.g. Greenberg on Repin). The late 20th century scholars gazed at it with critical curiosity (Eco, Kulka, Calinescu). What we now have is a profound interest in and acceptance of cute mass-produced objects. It has become marginal to use the concept to criticize pseudo-art. Scholars who write about kitsch are no longer against it (Anderson, Olalquiaga). And since the 2000s, art students have been telling us that they “love kitsch”. The contemporary concept is strongly attached to certain colors (pink) and materials (porcelain). In this article I aspire to find some keys on how to view the history and contemporary state of the concept. My hypothesis is that the change in the use of the concept has at least partly to do with changes in the concept of art, which has lately, this is my hypothesis, become sufficiently decentralized from its original roots and boundaries (upper class, male, ethnically Central European).

*Key words:* Kitsch, mass culture, contemporary art, everyday life.

## СОВРЕМЕННЫЙ КИТЧ. СМЕРТЬ ПСЕВДО-ИСКУССТВА И РОЖДЕНИЕ ПОВСЕДНЕВНОЙ ПОСРЕДСТВЕННОСТИ (ПОСТКОЛОНИАЛЬНЫЕ ИЗЫСКАНИЯ)

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Дискуссии о китче сменили тон. Понятие, в начале XX века относящееся скорее к вычурному псевдо-искусству, чем к милым повседневным предметам, было в период между двумя Мировыми Войнами атаковано теоретиками современности (Гринберг, Репин). С конца XX века на китч стали смотреть с критическим любопытством (Эко, Кулка, Калинеску). Современный взгляд — это глубокий интерес к очаровательным объектам массового производства, получившим признание. Использование понятия «китч» для критики псевдо-искусства становится, таким образом, маргинальным. Ученые, пишущие о китче, отныне не выступают против него (Андерсон, Олалкиага). А студенты-искусствоведы с 2000-х годов говорят нам, что «любят Китч». Современное определение китча накрепко связано с некоторыми цветами (розовый) и материалами (фарфор). В данной статье я стремлюсь отыскать ключи, как к истории понятия, так и к современным дискуссиям о китче. Моя гипотеза состоит в том, что изменение в использовании понятия «китч», по крайней мере частично, связано с эволюцией понятия «искусство», которое, как мне представляется, в настоящее время, вышло далеко за рамки традиционных границ, оторвавшись от своих же корней (господствующий класс, мускулиность, центрально-европейское происхождение).

*Ключевые слова:* Китч, массовая культура, современное искусство, повседневность.

Porcelain is a material which was created in the service of the monarch and made in the King's oven. Of course, over the centuries it has become totally democratized but still the material always wants to return to the service of the monarch. There is this uplifting quality about it; this feeling of one's social standing being increased just by being around the material.  
*Jeff Koons (as cited in Rosenblum, 1992, 100).*

If anything, the modern system of arts, which in the mid-18th century weaved the aesthetic cultures of the Central European upper class into a family of practices supported by a tight institutional framework, a value system and a concept (boas artes, belle arti,

beaux arts, fine arts), is in the heart of what we discuss as Eurocentrism.

The concept of kitsch is likewise a Central European highbrow product. It originated between 1860 and the early 20th century (Calinescu, 1987),<sup>1</sup> to serve as a critical tag used against the mass-appealing challengers of highbrow art.

When the West and Europe are criticized for a lack of global sensitivity and their colonial (or post-colonial) self-centeredness, it is not hard to note that what is meant with the West is, besides the now dominant Anglophonic world, mostly just the Western side of Central and Southern Europe.

With reason: countries like France, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria and their Northern counterpart England, are of course still in many ways prosperous as a result of their imperial adventures, self-centered history writing and central position in the world maps and networks created by their historical peers. But even more, many of our globally shared systems, categorizations, values and forms of administrating culture were born in this cultural territory in early Modernity.

What would have been a sheer impossibility even in late Medieval times – when it was not a commonplace to think that literature and painting had anything to do with each other – and what did not happen anywhere else, where other (more interesting?) ways of grouping practices took place before colonialization and/or westernization,<sup>2</sup> ‘art’ in Central Europe grew to become a cultural fundament in the period separating the Renaissance and the mid-19th century.

What nobody had seen before, i.e. the analogical nature of literature, visual arts, music, architecture and the performing arts, and the need to group them into one category (later the same happened with sport), and to support this formation with academies, criticism, research and sites of worship and sharing (museums, literary salons), did not erase centuries of Indian literary criticism or

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<sup>1</sup> This book chapter is based on the text “The Benevolent Monster: Reflections on Kitsch as an Aesthetic Concept” (*Clio* VI, 1). I will from this on refer to Calinescu’s text in my discourse on the idea history of kitsch.

<sup>2</sup> Think e.g. about the Indian systems of *Kalas*, which covered both what would today be considered as arts and aesthetic cultures of various kinds (food, social skills) (Chakrabarti, 2016, 4).

Japanese studies of aesthetic cultures (calligraphy, etc.), but made it easy for Central Europeans to see all other cultures through this newly acquired cultural lens, and to 'export' (read: colonialize) this matrix later on to cover nearly the whole globe.

The 'arts' were a man's world (Battersby, 1989; Woodmansee, 1994), and one of the fundamentals of the bourgeois culture, as Pierre Bourdieu has shown (Bourdieu, 1984).<sup>3</sup> With this history in mind, when one thinks about the birth of kitsch, and the original need to attack the competitors of 'art', it is no wonder if the concept has, through a change in our conception of art, undergone erosion.

Globally speaking, not far from the places where the original concept of the fine arts was formulated (boas artes, Portugal), where the system of art was clearly codified for the first time (Batteaux's *Les beaux arts réduits a un même principe*) and where the first academy of art had seen daylight in 1563 (Florence) (Kristeller, 1992; Tatarkiewicz, 1980), kitsch drifted into the center of culture, and it was not long before the bourgeois started to manifest their taste with a hunger to elevate themselves culturally above the poor and the 'uncivilized' (Huysen, 1989).

As aesthician and idea historian Matei Calinescu points out (1986), according to one story, English tourists buying 'sketches' were misunderstood by German marketplace painters in the 1860s Munich. Calinescu, in his "Kitsch" (1986), does not just present us with terms, which in the root of the modern concept of kitsch had a more practical meaning, like *kitschen* (to make new furniture out of old, Southern German; also synonym for picking trash) or *verkitschen* (to make something cheap). He describes the way kitsch won space from other concepts close to its nature. Some of them have survived. Some died. *Poshlost* in Russian (пошлость; banality, lack of spirituality), *camelot* (French for cheap and bad quality), the Jiddish terms *schlock* (bad quality) and *schmaltz* (sentimental, exaggerated), and even the Spanish *cursi* are examples of concepts that could have become global.

Umberto Eco guesses (playfully) in his "La struttura del cattivo gusto" that "kitsch" won because of the dominant role of kitsch in

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<sup>3</sup> The work is less about art than what its perpetrators like to think. A critical look easily shows that Bourdieu is actually writing about the way the bourgeois appropriates the art world.

Germany (Eco, 1964),<sup>4</sup> but it is not hard to understand that the strong and central role of Germany in the early 20th century modernism probably made *kitsch* the concept we still use internationally.<sup>5</sup> Notable is that the 1860s when the concept might have been created were also in many ways the time when modernism made its victorious entrance to the scene of art. Another issue is of course the way modernism in many ways took distance from beauty and sentimentality, which kitsch never ceased to represent. But following Eco one could also say: what we now see as bourgeois kitsch (partly the kind of objects (like cheesy interior design), which Susan Sontag by the way discusses as camp in her “Notes on Camp”) actually originated in Central Europe. We don’t call historical imitations of the culture of the Japanese or Indian upper class kitsch, only echoes of the Central European value system, attached to the cultural forms of the bourgeois of that area.<sup>6</sup>

My article here stems from an aspiration to understand kitsch better, and to recontextualize it theoretically. In part 1, “A short history of kitsch,” I will go through the history of the theory of kitsch and its relationship to changes in art and culture. In part 2, “Contemporary Art as Kitsch,” I will focus on the use of the concept today. The latter will happen with the help of contemporary art, but what I actually want to say is that the concept has become almost completely attached to everyday aesthetics. My hope is to elaborate our thinking to grasp the way the concept has been divided in the recent years and the way contemporary art has had a role in annihilating some negative aura of the term. I think it is also important to raise awareness about the new gender-related aspects of the term.

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<sup>4</sup> This is how Eco ironically inaugurates his “La struttura del cattivo gusto”.

<sup>5</sup> One should of course not forget neither concepts like *Schundliteratur* and *Trivialliteratur*, which were reserved for popular literature before the concept of kitsch. Mass literature was also the first form of art which created a mass culture debate, following the fact that in Germany the reading public was for the first time remarkably big and the Gothic horror novels sold huge amounts, so bringing in a lot of money for the popular writers (a feature the art writing scene couldn’t take easily) (Woodmansee, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Or when someone does that, there’s usually a reflective “kind of what could be called” added upon the judgement of kitsch in these contexts, indicating that it actually is not the proper word for it.

## I.

### *First Wave*

We can talk about the first wave of the kitsch theory appearing on the scene shortly before the Second World War. Although Friedrich Schiller wrote about sentimentality, T.S. Eliot hinted upon the schizophrenia of high and low culture, and Goethe discussed the soapy commerce of fake antiques during his Italian trip, what we would now call kitsch was not an object of discourse until the modernist theorists entered the stage.

Clement Greenberg might be the most famous user of the concept, but as we look at his classical "Avantgarde and Kitsch" (1939), we can note that it is today hard to look at his text as a theory of kitsch, as nearly everything in the world is kitsch according to him. In the essay, originally published in the *Partisan Review*, all cultural production that is left out from kitsch is either pure modernism (Greenberg's preference is abstract expressionism) or 'genuine folk art' (Greenberg, 1986). But he made the concept famous by making it as broad-natured as Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's "Culture Industry," (1944) which, too, comprises critically almost everything except for artists like Schoenberg and the straightforward forms of entertainment without a false uplifting quality (car advertisements ironically, circus seriously) (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1969). Adorno started his attacks on pretentious and/or fake authentic art already in the 1920s, and focused first on jazz, then on theatre, painting and classical music (which he viewed as a cheesy way of packaging the Central European tradition of art music).

Like American sociological debates about highbrow, lowbrow and (kitschy) middlebrow, where the latter term implied that one tried to elevate something fake or pretentious to be real art, Adorno's and Horkheimer's text is about false art in many ways, and could be looked upon as being a kitsch theory, although then one must keep in mind that kitschification here points to an overall falsification of society and its pressure on art to become more easily sellable and affective.

Their dialectic philosophy focused on asking why the Marxist revolution never came, although a rise in the consciousness of the masses had been taking place (like Marx had predicted). The answer

was that no elevation (*Aufhebung*) was possible towards a higher synthesis (socialist revolution) because of the culture industry. From a high and low point of view one could say that culture industry in Adorno's and Horkheimer's theory was comprised of two extreme ends, one being basic mass culture, and the other being the faked or soaped up versions of art. To the latter the theorists counted in Sunday afternoon classical music series, false syntheses of classical music and jazz (Benny Goodman and the London Symphony Orchestra) and all in all arts which tried to entertain people and not make them more conscious.

The Hegelian ideas of self-realization and cultural development were here connected to the idea that inauthentic art could twist people into not really understanding what they could need and what freedom could be (for Hegel, and for Adorno, the thing that should happen in arts on a symbolical level). Failed art was just one part of failed enlightenment, and it took part in the overall dominant leitmotif, to produce satisfaction. So, you would not have people listening to Schoenberg, but to the Metropolitan Opera Sunday series. As culture was real only in its extremes, car advertisements were bad but there was no complicated problem with it, and Samuel Beckett showed the totality of the system in his work, the rest was quite like kitsch in Greenberg's text, which was published seven years before Adorno's and Horkheimer's essay.

Knickknacks were not totally absent in Greenberg's work, as he discussed the way false small objects had to be differentiated from e.g. 'authentic' folk art objects. In Adorno's theory, though, the everyday kitsch was not discussed specifically. The same can be said of all the (in)famous cultural critics of the 1920s and the 1930s, like Martin Heidegger, Oswald Spengler and José Ortega y Gasset (Kovalcik & Ryynänen, 2013; Lunn, 1990). The tenet of the times was to discuss for example how the authenticity of art and/or culture was lost, or the way the masses invaded the world of art and heritage, e.g. accessing classical churches without understanding the meaning of historical architecture, but without any interest to specifically discuss the role of small everyday objects.

The 'aesthetic lies', 'false satisfaction' and other issues somehow bound to authenticity and inauthenticity were in the center of the Western dystopic discourse in these times (Shusterman, 1992).

Theologian Richard Egener wrote in his *Kitsch und Christenleben* in 1950, that kitsch was the work of the devil which lead people's focus astray to unworthy things (Egener, 1967), thereby echoing Tertullian's classical text on sport and theater, where the 5th century Roman philosopher sees these cultural practices as false interests which take the focus away from the real one, God (Kuisma, 1998).

There were traces in the work of this generation, outside of what we would often usually think of as kitsch research, which nevertheless related to small everyday objects. Benjamin shows a friendly curiosity towards the "sex appeal of the inorganic," the allure of the objects on people who in the end had partly become objects themselves (Ryynänen, 2017). Most 'art'-critical thinkers, though, were working for a broader conception of art. John Dewey, who was in favor of popular arts, did mention kitsch, but as an example of something that did not really work, as it was in some sense "too beautiful" (Dewey, 1980, 78). The concept was also mentioned by contemporary philosophers like Luigi Pareyson (Eco, 1964, 70-71) and phenomenologist Ludwig Giesz, who's "pleasures of kitsch" (Kitschgenuss) were about sentimental self-enjoyment, vis a vis the often even disgusting or at least non-beautiful (pleasures of) art (Giesz, 1971). Both continental European classics focused on 'high kitsch', e.g. on pseudo-art. The same can definitely be said about writer Hermann Broch, who did not just write that kitsch imitates the beautiful but not the good which is one of the classical one-liners that are, together with Gillo Dorfles' "it looks like art but it is fake," quoted when kitsch is discussed, and which sadly does not really open up the rich variety of 'kitsches' we have), but referred critically to kitsch as the evil in art's value system and blamed romanticism for it (Broch, 1968).

### *Second Wave*

The second wave of the kitsch theory comes after the first cracks in the modern system had been experienced. Although Westerners love to talk about 1967 and 1968, it is notable that Timothy Leary's *The Psychedelic Experience* and Susan Sontag's "Notes on Camp" were published, and Andy Warhol exhibited his *The Shop* in the 5th Avenue Stable Gallery already in 1964. Maybe not that coincidentally, that year Umberto Eco published *Apocalittici e*



*integrati*, a book which features his famous essay on *The Peanuts*, an introduction where he e.g. discusses Medieval monk debates as mass communication debates (can one display the content of the Bible through painting? (Eco, 1964, 16-17)), and the first really focused text on kitsch without sidepaths to other forms of mass culture. “La struttura del cattivo gusto” (“The Structure of Bad Taste,” published in English in *The Open Work*, 1989<sup>7</sup>) presents a variety of examples of art, like a banal cocktail of texts borrowed from five kitsch writers and Rainer Maria Rilke (Killy, 1962), an example of bourgeois painting which has been made to please and pretend to be challenging at the same time (by Giovanni Boldini), and a critical survey of the fascist neo-classicist Canova-inspired statues of Milan’s Monumental Cemetery. The turn to everyday aesthetics is, however, also in the text. “La struttura del cattivo gusto” explains itself as a text about bad taste, and it doesn’t differentiate kitsch in any way from the former concept. Eco’s everyday examples include the selection of a tie of the wrong color, but nothing which we would today say is kitschy in the everyday world.

For Eco at this point of Central European history, kitsch is still a concept which can be used of all arts, and although we can mark a small leaning towards the everyday, it still does not yet narrow the use of the word to visual culture. When bad taste occurs, it is clear that a) the work analyzed as kitsch is sentimental in a way which does not leave much room for interpretation, and/or b) it plainly goes against the rules of good taste (wrong color in the tie of the suit), and/or c) it just borrows formal patterns (stylemes; here Eco turns into a semiotician<sup>8</sup>) to be seen as art (although it is just a way of making money).

Eco also comes to a conclusion that it is not the formal thing itself as a detail that makes something become kitsch (e.g. a

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<sup>7</sup> The English language version is a translation of the 1965 French version of Eco’s essay, which had changed a bit following the fact that Eco had just found the French structuralists. It also includes a bit of different examples, e.g. Los Angeles’ Forest Lawn cemetery was not in the original text, which featured only one cemetery, the *Cimitero Monumentale* of Milan, which is full of quite pathetic Canova-imitations.

<sup>8</sup> This is the Eco’s new excitement (gained in the mid-1960s) about Roman Jakobson and the Prague School of Semiotics. Actually, this side of the article became stronger in the French (1965) and American (1989) translations of the original text (1964), as Eco found Barthes and French structuralism just at the time lapse between the original publication and its first translation.

stereotypical, sentimental passage in a novel), but the way the whole is organized, for example a kitschy passage being in a motivated way a part of a stylistically fragmented novel by Rainer Maria Rilke. In this sense Eco here echoes the aesthetics of modernism and its ideas on holism and the closed nature of the work of art. It is about having no innovations, as one could say in the technical language of today's neoliberalism, which here sounds awkwardly good for discussing what modernism wanted from art (Eco, 1964, 29).

But when the second wave comes to its end in Matei Calinescu's and Tomas Kulka's work, it is predominantly visual culture we are talking about, and the balance between everyday culture and art starts to be quite 50/50. Calinescu's pioneering idea history of kitsch (1986), "Kitsch," in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch and Postmodernism* is a great work of the history of ideas, where the everyday origins of kitsch are mentioned already in its etymological history (partly presented earlier in this article), and actually one point in the article which has gained less attention is that Calinescu points out how modernism adapted the term for its own use, i.e. that it existed and pointed to quite a broad array of things, but in that use gained a meaning which stressed the way it sometimes challenged the order of the arts. Calinescu talks about 'aesthetic lies' (Calinescu, 1987, 229), but he does not go on building anything on it, as his work is plainly idea historical.

Kulka's work (the article) "Kitsch" (Kulka, 1997; 1988) is about defining the concept, and this definition stays in the realm of art, and concentrates on bad art. (In this sense Kulka is conservative, as, by writing that TV series like *Dynasty* and *Dallas* are kitsch, he is leaning on Greenberg's notion that everything between 'real art' and 'authentic folk art' is kitsch). Kulka tries, however, to find positive sides in kitsch, like for example the fact that some marketplace paintings are well-done, skillful work (Kulka, 1997, 8-9; 39). It is his work where we can see that the concept was then already leaning towards knickknacks. Although pseudo-artistic work (paintings of crying clowns) was an issue for Kulka (Kulka, 1997, 33), his work, more than anyone else's before him, already touched consumer culture in the form of souvenirs and postcards. He is so to speak already discussing a sensitivity and the feelings we sometimes get

when we see kitschy things e.g. in nature. It becomes here clear that we have a cluster of sentimentality (Kulka, 1997, 25),<sup>9</sup> cheesiness and pretentiousness, among other features, which has become strong and which is dominating the concept.

This period at stake here is, interestingly, in the beginning not yet much gendered when we think about kitsch. But in our times I think we can notice a genderization of the concept. Kitsch, representing sentimentality, cheesiness, and sugary sensitivities, is somehow more present in our interpretations of female culture. One can see the rupture even earlier, here and there, of course. For example Umberto Eco's "Le strutture narrative in Fleming" (1965), the classical James Bond article, was about mass culture, not kitsch, which already he reserved for the romantic literature of female culture in his text on bad taste (Eco, 2001). The female thing is visible in C.E. Emmer's witty study "Kitsch Against Modernity" (1998), where he points out how much more the concept is in use when we criticize or feel superiority when facing feminine mass culture (Emmer, 1998, 58).

In our days it is also easy to claim that the concept has gained formal characteristics. Pink and to some extent, gold color, small objects rather than big ones, and porcelain rather than (the opposite) bronze tells us something about what we see as kitsch. You can think about nearly any form of a small object and make a version of it out of porcelain, paint it pink, and see how people will think of it as kitsch. This type of thinking was famously employed by the 1990s and the 2000s pop artists, like Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami. (More on this in part 2.)

And after the two waves of the kitsch research presented here, when kitsch is discussed in theory after the turn of the millennium, it is definitely no longer negative. Two 'happy' kitsch studies show the turn: i.e. Erik Anderson's "Sailing the Seas of Cheese" (Anderson, 2010) is an attempt to study cheesiness, plainly an attempt to discuss something which would classically be called kitsch, and it does so by showing curiosity and a positive attitude towards the subject. Celeste Olalquiaga's work has focused greatly on showing the auratic

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<sup>9</sup> Kulka mentions strong emotions as one of the features related to kitsch, but this somehow does not fit my intuition of how we relate to knickknacks. Once again it makes sense only if we think about pseudo art, where strong sentimentality is a commonplace.

(Benjamin) potentials of souvenirs and small objects (Olalquiaga, 2002). Through a post-colonialist reading of 'exotic' kitsch, she shows how small cute everyday objects became signifiers for far-away places and aesthetic curiosities.

To conclude, one could say that debates on what has been called kitsch have historically rather been debates about the nature of art, but lately, increasingly since the 1980s, they have actually been more about everyday aesthetics. And one key for understanding this has paradoxically been contemporary art.

## *II. Contemporary Art as Kitsch*

Although value hierarchies are not what they have used to be, even outside of the Central European sphere of arts it is often hard to paint a crying clown or a cat without getting the feeling that this is kitsch. The history of the concept is thus present in many ways, and the colonializing force of the modernist ethos has obviously been strong. (And don't forget that the modern clown figure we all now know from the media all around the world has its roots in the early modern culture of Central Europe.)

During the 1990s, Jeff Koons was one of the biggest names in contemporary art globally. At the same time his works were seen as kitsch, not just by those who opposed themselves to his work, but also by those who recognized its value. The main works for this period were his works which featured pastel colors, pink and gold, and works which were made of porcelain or glass. They also often contained pop themes, like the Pink Panther or Koons' then newly wedded wife, porn star Cicciolina, who had made a career in cheesy porn films.

Koons' kitsch studies were like the plates gourmet chefs prepare when applying ideas from folk cuisine. In the end they could have been used just as kitsch, there would have been no problem with that, and this conceptual twist made them a lovely object of attack for anti-sentimental, modern art minded people.

The way the tension of the Western concept was killed owes to the way Westerners have had to open up their art sensitivities for non-Western art I think. If you look at e.g. Tokyo Pop, the 1990s movement featuring Takashi Murakami, Yoshitomo Nara and Mariko Mori, the

material on display is, without any critical distance, something which would be called kitsch in any place in the Western world, but as it comes through in a strong art scene (Tokyo), it slips its way to the museums of the West, where the local people doing the same would seldom get acknowledged. It would have been impossible to do cute art in my home base Helsinki in the 1990s, but after the wave of new Japanese pop art this was suddenly plausible. This shows one example of what a more global art world has done to the West. It has forced it to rethink its own cultural boundaries and categories.

Another issue is female artistry, which has forcefully been taking colors and shapes and practices which have been labeled as lowbrow female culture, i.e. often as kitsch, into the arts. Painters like Yayuoi Kusama and Georgia O'Keeffe have studied these traditions in their work, and so pierced holes in the system.

Today what was once labeled art has met new challenges and critiques. One finds an endless array of writings, conferences and works of art showing the problematic nature of what we call the system of art. On kitsch, when we think about a critical stance against the competitors of art, we don't find the same kind of debate. There has been no institution that would have been distributed into the margins of Europe and the Western world, and so in many countries there is a strong resistance towards the art system, but no fight against the idea of kitsch. Still we see the practical erosion taking place in the form of the artist work mentioned.

One can ask why most of the writing has been about conflicting art with kitsch, and not about discussing kitsch as something that has experiential worth? Robert C. Solomon's *In Defence of Sentimentality* (Solomon, 2004) is a critique of the way we criticize sentimental culture. Why do we do it? Here one could say that as you get to the parts of the world where there is Western impact, but where the same aesthetic values do not necessarily dominate (Russia, Middle East), you easily see differences (to the west) in where to draw the line for something to be kitschy (or sentimental low taste, which we might refer to with that concept).

From a class point of view, it is interesting that the concept has never really been heavily imposed on the lower classes, if not in the early times when it stood for nearly anything between high modernism and 'genuine folk culture'. It is sometimes almost the

opposite. Mass culture, trash and low culture are (when used negatively) more clearly reserved for the people who are not a part of the educated bourgeois, and kitsch is an aesthetic lie (with a female accent) about art for those who can 'afford it' through their education and a bit higher taste.

In the mid-2000s I noticed for the first time being a bit surprised about how many of my students (I was teaching in an art school) explained that they love kitsch. At the same time small shops selling "kitsch" popped up everywhere, one even named Kitsch. Interesting in this turn is that educated people, especially young ones, are good in pointing out what is kitschy, but they still have a positive appetite for it. At the same time they like kitsch not just as camp.

The 1990s painter Odd Nerdrum (Nerdrum et al., 2001), who presented his work proudly as kitsch, had discursively gone further than Koons and his Japanese peers, who in the end were not interested in the concept, but just wanted to work freely with things you could associate with it. Nerdrum painted romantic, sentimental landscapes, and presented himself as a 'kitsch painter' (echoing Broch's idea that kitsch followed the tradition of romanticism: Nerdrum's paintings are full of sentimental landscapes and 'poetical' females). Anyway, there seemed to be a strong need to rethink the properties which were associated with kitsch, like the colors, materials, sentimentality and so on.

As contemporary art has become more conceptual, the pseudo art thing is no longer really a formal issue. There are situations when we feel that the art we encounter is somewhat a 'lie' or that it plays with stereotypes, but as kitsch has been a concept which in the end – here Eco's formalist-semiotic reading actually probably was to the point – has been connected to formal properties, we don't associate e.g. bad black-and-white political art (of the type text on a background) with kitsch. We just see it e.g. as simple-minded or populist.

Sometimes still I have heard the word used about both non-visual art and with an accent on pseudo-art, like in the case of Andrea Bocelli's music. The same has happened with art exhibitions about Asian or African art, curated by white middle class Europeans. Then the concept has been in the use of the critical thinkers from the areas portrayed. There elephant statues (which 'represent' Indian art

for many Europeans<sup>10</sup>) and texts about art written by the ‘friendly and supportive’ (and so in a sneaky way debasing) white middle class art education departments of the museums have made my friends and colleagues use the term kitsch, which of course here gets fermented also into the way we present art.

Interestingly, this takes us to the beginning of the article, where I tried to give a sketchy post-colonialist reading of the concept together with its basic defining features and early history.

As C. E. Emmer notes, Calinescu actually describes two modernities in his kitsch essay, the first one ‘bourgeois’, with its middle class values (including progress, cult of reason, etc.). The second one is aesthetic. But this intertwines with kitsch. One could add to this that the aesthetic one is also ethnic. Kitsch should be viewed historically as a product of the Central Europeans (and their diaspora), who created the system of the arts which we are still trying to de-colonialize, but later on the concept often also describes well their attitude towards the Others (and it is of course adopted also in countries where this system was brought to quite late, like Finland which got it in the early 20th century). As the fight of the art against the competitors of modern (or postmodern) art is less active than ever, and as female, lower class and non-European tastes are boldly and increasingly taking over everywhere in the world, what is left is maybe only a sensual memory of a cultural clash, now visible in every pink porcelain object sold or exhibited. There is an echo of elevation, and we feel the same while watching a sentimental painting being sold at an outdoor marketplace, but it feels that this has connection anymore to the conceptual and/or post-conceptual art we visit in galleries (if not a slight historical feeling about it).

It might be, on a meta-level, related to reactions towards a false depth and a cheesy, that stereotypical aesthetic culture has been an issue throughout the history, as we know at least from Cervantes and Petronius. It might also be that, as there is so much kitsch these days, we might have to forget Kulka’s intuition from 1994 that we cannot think about e.g. a real landscape as kitsch (Kulka, 1997, 69): nowadays I often hear people commenting that sunsets are kitsch(y),

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<sup>10</sup> I owe this to curator Sumeshwar Sharma, who, while visiting my course a couple of years ago, said to my students: if you see a statue of an elephant in an exhibition about Indian art, go away immediately — we are not into elephants in art.

and the way this sensitivity has become central might really at least affect our relationship to non-culture. But, anyway, all the painful problematics kitsch has, from class to gender, definitely owe to the modern time period, the societal, gendered and ethnically flavored phenomena discussed above. To progress with our attitudes, I think we need to be aware of this, and I hope this inquiry could help us in finding more depth to our thoughts about the issue.

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