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(Editors)

CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF VALUES



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Contents

Foreword (<i>Anca-Diana Bibiri</i>)	9
--	---

Plenary Conference

Human Enhancement: tehnologie versus teologie. Repere pentru o evaluare interdisciplinară a valorilor și posibilităților de devenire a umanului prin cunoaștere [Human Enhancement: Technology versus Theology. Landmarks for the Interdisciplinarity Evaluation of Human Values a Potential of Becoming Through Knowledge]

Pr. Andrei-Răzvan Ionescu	21
--	----

Philology

The Use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Linguistics. Case Study: Analysis of Linguistic Phenomena in the Novel *Ion* by Liviu Rebreanu

Cristina Bleorțu	35
-------------------------------	----

Traducerea automată a literaturii. O himeră încă vie? [Automatic Translation of Literature: A Still Living Chimera?]

Alexandra Ilie	51
-----------------------------	----

Kitsch. The Control and Faking of Aesthetic Value

Daniela Petroșel	77
-------------------------------	----

Valori perene în predarea romanisticii în spațiul universitar românesc [Perennial Values in Teaching Romance Studies in Romanian Universities]

Mihaela Secieru	93
------------------------------	----

Authentic vs. Pseudo Values

Paula-Andreea Onofrei	111
------------------------------------	-----

Medical Humanities Approached Through a Feminist Lens

Laura Ioana Leon	127
-------------------------------	-----

Explorări teoretice și suprapuneri terminologice. Romanul, obiect de reflecție și prim suport al teoriei genurilor [Theoretical Explorations and Terminological Overlaps. The Novel, as Object of Reflection and the First Support of the Genre Theory]

Alexandra Olteanu	141
--------------------------------	-----

Spectrele filiațiilor literare. Portrete ale generațiilor – Mircea Ivănescu și Radu Vancu [The Specters of Literary Filiations. Portraits of Generations – Mircea Ivănescu and Radu Vancu]	
Teodora Iurusiuc	165
Memoria comunismului în <i>Jurnalul unui jurnalist fără jurnal de Ion D. Sîrbu</i> [The Memory of Communism in Ion D. Sîrbu's <i>Journal of a Journalist without a Journal</i>]	
Oana-Elena Nechita	181
Language in the Church: Orthodox Religious Terminology in Polish and the Role of Translations in Establishing Lexical Norms	
Irina-Marinela Deftu	201
History & Theology	
<i>Non naturalibus desideriiis, sed censibus aestimentur.</i> Piața romană de legume și fructe [<i>Non naturalibus desideriiis, sed censibus aestimentur.</i> The Roman Vegetable and Fruit Market]	
Iulia Dumitrache	219
Un posibil clivaj între teoria asupra stilului și aplicarea acesteia în cazul Fericitului Augustin? Pluralitatea de stiluri în operele acestuia [A Possible Split Between the Theory of Style and Its Application in the Case of Augustine? The Plurality of Styles in Augustine's Works]	
Pr. Liviu Petcu	249
Conflicting Values during the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598): Loyalty to the King and Loyalty to God	
Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru	261
Polemici teologice în <i>Praefatio paraenetica</i> a lui John Pearson (1613-1686) [Theological Polemics in <i>Praefatio paraenetica</i> by John Pearson (1613-1686)]	
Constantin Răchită	281
Moartea – o preocupare a vieții cotidiene în Iași veacului al XVIII-lea [Death – a Preoccupation of Everyday Life in the 18 th Century Iași]	
Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu	301

Economics

The Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Business as a Value-Creating Tool: Analysis on the Case of SMEs in Romania Valentina Diana Rusu & Angela Roman	317
Evaluation of Hospital Financing in Romania: A Comparative Analysis pre- and post-Pandemic COVID-19 Mihai-Vasile Pruteanu & Alina Moroşanu	337
Green Jobs, Green Skills and Green Human Resource Management. An Analysis of Current Trends Silvia-Maria Carp & Ana-Maria Bercu	367
Is Security a Timeless Value? An Insight from International Relations Andreea-Cosmina Foca & Oana-Maria Cozma	381

Kitsch. The Control and Faking of Aesthetic Value

DANIELA PETROȘEL*

Abstract: *Characterized by its interdisciplinary nature, kitsch has been shaped at the intersection of various aesthetic theories such as those proposed by Clement Greenberg, Matei Călinescu, Karsten Harries, and psychological theories provided by Abraham Moles, Stefan Ortlieb and Claus-Christian Carbon. It also draws upon ethical approaches advocated by Hermann Broch and gender-centered perspectives put forth by Rita Felski. Unlike its earlier perception as an object defined solely by formal features, kitsch now functions as a reflexive and constructive mechanism within culture, as highlighted by Monica Kjellman-Chapin. It pays close attention to the dynamics of cultural paradigms and the reconfiguration of values. Positioned within the realm of negotiations between art and non-art, ethics and aesthetics, social relevance and sentimentality, and even the modern and postmodern paradigms, kitsch often changes its theoretical framework, and consequently, so do also the meanings that are assigned to value. Given the complexity of kitsch and its theoretical underpinnings, this study aims to problematize how kitsch, as well as the theories that reinforce its limited historical destiny, manipulate or distort the concept of aesthetic value. Its deceptive nature lies in its ability to masquerade as art. Simultaneously, any attempt to define kitsch theoretically inevitably results in a negative definition of art and its ever-changing attributes. During the Modernist era, kitsch emerged as the polar opposite of art, representing a lack of value or, in some instances, a pseudo-value. However, in the Postmodernist era, characterized by amalgamated hierarchies, kitsch and its associated theories not only embody the crisis of values but also reflect the collapse of aesthetic evaluation systems.*

Keywords: *Kitsch; Aesthetic value; Modernism; Postmodernism; Sentimentality.*

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Introduction

Construed as interdisciplinary, as it can be seen from the array of definitions proposed to explain it over time, kitsch is constructed at the intersection of aesthetic (Clement Greenberg, Matei Călinescu, Karsten Harries, etc.) and psychological theories (Abraham Moles, Ortlieb and Carbon, etc.), of ethical (Broch) and gender (Felski) approaches. Through the variety of its manifestations, it exceeds the position of an object easily reducible to a series of formal features, functioning actually as a reflexive, restrictive and constructive mechanism within the culture (Kjellman-Chapin), subject both to the dynamics of cultural paradigms and to the reconfiguration of values. Occupying the field of permanent negotiations between art and non-art, between ethics and aesthetics, between the tastes of social and, possibly, gender classes, between sentiment and sentimentality, and – we could go as far as to say – between the modern paradigm and the postmodern one, kitsch has fluid conceptual outlines, which leads to alterations to the meanings attached to value.

More than any other concept that refuses the rigours of a single field of study and a single all-encompassing and clarifying theoretical perspective, kitsch displays a strange vitality that seems to feed on its contradictions. In contrast to other concepts that will not easily reveal their secrets to researchers, kitsch is characterised by a very short history of definitions coagulating it theoretically through an overlap of diverse and often contradictory interdisciplinary perspectives. And the contradictions do not arise, as one might expect, from the cohabitation of different fields of study, each subjected to its inherent methodological rigours, but precisely from the constraints existing within the same discipline. The variety of perspectives is multiplied by the diversity of disciplines, and so, if the picture of the definition of kitsch does not come out of its frame, it certainly puts a strain on the eye of the beholder, to say the least. Thus, in the realm of aesthetics, at the same time and in different historical periods kitsch can be seen as art, quasi-art, non-art and pseudo-art. We are not talking here about mere nuances in the theoretical delineation of the concept but about the very core of its value or lack of value. The kitsch produced by modernity or theoretically delineated by the theorists of Modernism is very different from the kitsch of postmodernity and that of the theorists of

Postmodernism. Even the identification of kitsch to the genus level is extremely problematic: *art and anti-art*, *mediocre art* (but can it still be art, if mediocre?) or *immoral art* – with the ensuing discussion on the mixture of the aesthetic and the ethical –, these are all terms used to delineate the notion of kitsch. The refuge taken in the elitist citadel of the aesthetic is pervaded with social and sociological explanations, while the superficiality of boasting about material well-being leads to dissonant mixtures of running commentaries on the fragility of the individual or collective psychology. As for the underlying tensions in the cultural field, the kitsch unfolds as a battleground for opposing forces: those who pinpoint and try to control the proliferation of kitsch and those who consume it without any trace of irony or guilt and, more importantly, without calling it by its name, since unaware of it. The mere naming of kitsch implies stepping out of its sphere of influence and positioning oneself at a critical distance. The clash is ideologically or/and socially grounded, with class tensions or aesthetic taste tensions feeding the debates.

The large differences in the definition of kitsch can also be explained by the historically determined shifts in the aesthetic paradigm; as the meanings attached to *beauty*, *taste* and *aesthetic value* change, it is only logical that the perspectives on this phenomenon should suffer alterations, in their turn. According to Max Ryyanen¹, without overlapping neatly with the Modernism – Postmodernism pair, the exploration of the kitsch pursues two major theoretical lines of thinking. The first research direction is provided by theorists such as Clement Greenberg, Theodor Adorno, Ludwig Giesz or Gillo Dorfles, and can be traced, in some cases, to a period preceding the Second World War. For these theorists, kitsch is non-value, an artistic lie, it offers aesthetically false experiences and implies a debasement of the ideals of art. Profoundly elitist and pervaded with sexist sequences, these theories of kitsch associate it with the detestable consumer practices of the uneducated or female classes. Moreover, it becomes one of the forms in which Evil comes into the world and, through the propagation of pseudo-values, the falsification of reality, the standardisation of feelings and of the ways of expressing them and so on, leads this world down the path to perdition, for

¹ M. Ryyanen, "Contemporary Kitsch: The Death of Pseudo-Art and the Birth of Everyday Cheesiness (A Postcolonial Inquiry)", *Terra Aesthetica*, 1, 2018, pp. 70-86.

the ethical implications of the aesthetic pseudo-values are visible both at an individual and collective level. Thus, art and kitsch stand under the sign of an antithetical relationship, verbalised in clear-cut terms, allowing for no nuance in its expression.

The latter category of theorists is the result of the shift in the modern aesthetic system. The new theory of kitsch was generated by the need to redefine aesthetic values, especially since the artists, as always, had taken the lead over the art critics. The aesthetic canons become looser and are reinvented, while the hierarchies based on social class or gender reveal their fragility if not their reductionism altogether. The research conducted by Umberto Eco, Matei Călinescu, Thomas Kulka, C. E. Emmer or Celeste Olalquiaga belongs to this type of approach. To Ryyananen's list, we would add two other names, Hermann Broch and Abraham Moles. Even if it were far-fetched to say that all these theorists break with the paradigms of modern aesthetics, they approach kitsch without prejudice and with open curiosity, determined to explain its success and relevance to society. Their stance on kitsch is no longer a loudly incriminating one, and, if it does not go as far as to rehabilitate kitsch (as, in many cases, it would be impossible to do that), it at least treats it with the impartiality it deserves. The picture painted of kitsch now becomes much broader, by the rights of mass culture, with sentimentality (which, in its turn, is stripped of its shortcomings and positively valued) or with gender approaches. We note Max Ryyananen's² conclusion which captures the specificity of these two periods: if initially the debates about what kitsch means were rather problematisations of the status of art and the reasons why kitsch is not art, especially after the 80s of the last century, the definition of kitsch slides towards the aesthetics of everyday life and illustrates the inherent shifts in aesthetic thinking.

Kitsch Theory – from Non-value to Aesthetic Value

Given this variety of approaches, this paper problematizes how both kitsch and the theories underlying its short historical destiny establish the norms for the aesthetic value or falsify it, or, in a possible and partial synthesis, by falsifying the aesthetic value while resorting to the practice of kitsch,

² M. Ryyananen, "Contemporary...", p. 81.

establishes it through the latter's theory. The production of kitsch is a simulation of the artistic act since the author, the kitsch product and its consumer stray, in various and often difficultly quantifiable ways, from all that is artistic creation. By selling itself as art, kitsch is misleading. *Aesthetic deception, artistic deception* or *fake* are some of the attributes associated with this phenomenon constructed under the appearance of value. Born out of the pretensions of a bourgeoisie which, to flaunt its social value and material well-being, imitated the behaviour - including at an aesthetic level - of the aristocracy, kitsch carries with it, despite its acclaimed and real technical virtuosity, the attributes of improvisation and ostentation without nuance. In the context of its aesthetic definition, kitsch promotes the non-value and, as sterile imitation, it stands for all that is not art. It is a danger in the field of art because it propagates emotions that sell themselves as aesthetic and alters the principles of true art, both at the pole of production and at the pole of reception. Nothing justifies the mass production of allegedly artistic products and then the promotion of their consumption. Clement Greenberg's harsh opinions in his well-known article *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* published in 1939 leave no room for interpretation:

"Kitsch, using for raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture, welcomes and cultivates this insensibility. It is the source of its profits. Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is a vicarious experience and faked sensation. Kitsch changes according to style but remains always the same. Kitsch is the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times. Kitsch pretends to demand nothing of its customers except their money – not even their time"³.

Accurately captured, all the flaws of kitsch come up to the surface: it will not be concerned with the modernist (and not only the modernist) principle of novelty, contenting itself with recycled formulas that will ensure its public acclaim. With skilful formal perfection, it may also imitate fashionable styles, succeeding in creating an easily recognisable background which enables it to stand the test of time. In contrast to art, which exists

³ C. Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", *Partisan Review*, 1939, available at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html>.

under the banner of financial disinterest, kitsch is driven by the desire to make money, and this is the reason why its proliferation leads to a rich and lucrative market of aesthetically false products. And if art implies value, Greenberg is interested in how kitsch conveys inauthentic aesthetic values, in terms of what is vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic. To draw a parallel between art and kitsch, and especially between the reactions of a hypothetical recipient in the form of them, he imagines how paintings by Picasso and Ilia Repin - the latter being a Soviet kitsch painter - might be viewed by a Russian peasant, uprooted by societal changes to an urban environment. While Repin's painting allows an immediate and easy identification, Picasso's painting requires an aesthetic decoding that implies unfamiliarity and, above all, appreciation of the artistic conventions used by the painter. And even if the non-specialized viewers in their turn extract some kind of value from this lower form of art, it is only the cultivated viewer who decodes the aesthetic value, which treats art as art, and not as a redundant extension of a reality that already exists in the consumer. The reception of kitsch creates a continuous flow between reality and life, with the consumer remaining unaware of the existence of an artistic filter. This process of imitating aesthetic experience dismisses art, and more precisely its tradition and its specific languages.

Pursuing the art-kitsch parallel, Greenberg argues that the latter provides the *effect*, a digested emotion for a consumer who is in a hurry and will not take time to reflect on what he sees, while true art provides the *cause*, an opportunity for its recipient to become introspective and enter into dialogue with the aesthetic object. Therefore, kitsch becomes *synthetic art*, as it condenses the labour of reception to the point of uselessness, offering pseudo-artistic tablets. Art promotes value and cultivates it in its recipients, whereas kitsch merely gives consumers the illusion of value. It is ultimately a question of the duration and quality of the aesthetic experience which, in the case of kitsch, results in a rapid and inconsequential combustion. The countless ways in which artistic products operate at the level of the consciousness and sensitivity of their recipient, in broad articulations of the theory of the aesthetic effect, in the case of kitsch can only demonstrate their superfluity.

But Greenberg's article also captures another meaning attached to kitsch that is very important in this picture of the problematisation of value.

He notes that, over time, while there may have been certain variations in taste, there has been general agreement on the difference between valuable and poor art. But the emergence of kitsch, which was also a consequence of industrial mass production, makes it difficult to make the traditional dissociation between values that are only to be found in art and other types of values: "There has been an agreement then, and this agreement rests, I believe, on a fairly constant distinction made between those values only to be found in art and the values which can be found elsewhere. Kitsch, by a rationalized technique that draws on science and industry, has erased this distinction in practice"⁴. Here, Greenberg's ideas resonate with those of Walter Benjamin, who in his 1935 article, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, drew attention to the loss of the *aura* of the work of art under the assault of reproduction techniques: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be"⁵ is shattered since subjected to multiplication and democratisation. Its consequences, currently wide-ranging and self-evident, are not limited to the field of art, for this weakening of the aesthetic value leads to an ideological manipulation through pseudo-art, as was amply demonstrated by the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century.

In the case of kitsch, another interesting phenomenon arises in terms of the problematisation of the types of value. By promoting aesthetic pseudo-values and being functionally oriented towards giving the public what it wants, kitsch popularises, as a propagandistic instrument, false values in communities. If art has the role of awakening individual and collective consciences, being an effective subversive tool and developing critical thinking as well, kitsch functions as an anaesthetic, for the consumption of kitsch leads to the oversimplification of the feeling and to the loss of its uniqueness, including of the ways of expressing it. As Robert Nozick observed, "Kitsch provides a simulacrum of the emotion that erodes

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, from the 1935 essay New York: Schocken Books, 1969 <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>.

and degrades the capacity to feel that emotion”⁶. Thus, the trivialisation of feeling and the clichéisation of emotion range among the most serious consequences on the collective consciousness. Entire communities’ dependant on the consumption of kitsch, be it democratic or totalitarian, risk being subject to the standardisation of feelings, being reduced to a series of template representations and systematically educated in the spirit of these reductionist images.

In his book *Kitsch and Art* published in 1996, Tomas Kulka addresses the question related to the forms through which kitsch propagates pseudo-values. He identifies three distinctive features of kitsch: *it depicts objects or themes heavily charged with stock emotions*⁷, *the objects or themes depicted by kitsch are instantly and effortlessly identifiable*⁸ and *kitsch does not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes*⁹. Our objective here is not to discuss these features in detail, but to call attention to the fact that, with them in mind, art promotes aesthetic value precisely through the author’s way of treating familiar themes and extremely familiar objects and images, whereas by recycling clichés, kitsch renders any processing of the theme useless. Beauty and value are sought not where they should be, in the artistic act, but in a reality from which the consumer of kitsch will not depart. Kitsch sends its recipient an already-reflected image, it does not rely on the receiver to complete it. Insular, pseudo-art does not open itself to the interlocutor, because it does not need the interlocutor’s cooperation. Art discovers and proposes, kitsch “simulates the discovery and the proposal”¹⁰. For in the so-called decoding of kitsch, the association systems generating meaning are automatic, based on banality and have nothing to do with artistic emotion.

⁶ R. Nozick, “On Kitsch: A Symposium”, in Saul Friedlander, Susan Sontag, Irving Howe, Robert Nozick, Stanley Kauffmann, Barry Goldensohn (eds.), *Salmagundi*, 187, summer, 2015, p. 366.

⁷ T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, Pennsylvania, 1996, p. 28 (<https://dokumen.pub/kitsch-and-art-9780271074184.html>).

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁰ U. Eco, *Apocaliptici și integrați. Comunicații de masă și teorii ale culturii de masă*, traducere de Ștefania Mincu, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2008. p. 125.

And yet does kitsch promote quasi-aesthetic values? Values that do not know the complexity associated with aesthetic values, but which, for the non-specialised consumer, generate an experience similar to the aesthetic one? Tomas Kulka argues (and his opinion is bold and easy to question): “Judging by all the external, behavioural indications, people who like kitsch derive the same kind of pleasure from its contemplation that others experience in their encounter with so-called serious art.”¹¹, because “One person’s kitsch is another person’s art”¹². A first problem, which we will not dwell on because we feel the pressure of the positivist perspective, could be methodological: how can we compare and quantify aesthetic pleasure? Another one lies in the evidence that the pleasure associated with kitsch is not aesthetic, which is generated, according to the simple aesthetic rules, by the transformation of reality into a work of art. It is an extra-aesthetic pleasure, a simulacrum of artistic emotion that circumvents the very art and its conventions. The so-called aesthetic pleasure given by kitsch has nothing to do with art and is greatly dependent on reality. The pseudo-art of kitsch is a pretext meant to confirm the potential for cuteness, sweetness, etc. of certain aspects of reality and gives the public the illusion that it is connected to the sphere of artistic experience. Thus, kitsch products only mimic aesthetic value, failing to encompass the inherent stages of aesthetic decoding. It is not so much aesthetic needs that kitsch is called upon to meet (which would have implied aiming at the top of the pyramid dominated by self-actualization and creativity) -, but rather needs to be related to the sense of connection, esteem or status, which in this case are promoted and consumed as aesthetic needs.

And yet, if we were to see certain kitsch products' ways of promoting aesthetic value, we should relate these creations to one of the aesthetic categories approached by Evangelos Moutsopoulos, namely the *joli*. Introduced with much reluctance into the extremely noble company of the *sublime* or the *elegant*, the *joli* seems to be a kind of Cinderella in the world of the traditional aesthetic categories. It operates as opposed to the *sublime*,

¹¹ T. Kulka, *Kitsch...*, p. 20.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 3.

“diminishing and debasing the beautiful by degrading it”¹³. It is conceptualised as accessible, agreeable beauty – “an unpretentious Gershwin melody” – with a pronounced hedonistic character and sinning by a certain passivity in the activation of aesthetic consciousness. It is a *category of the momentary*, which risks removing the spectator from the state of aesthetic contemplation. In addition to these attributes, which are also very important for understanding the psychological dimension of kitsch, this category is characterised by the social utility; for, about other aesthetic categories, the *joli* “acknowledges a particular nuance and a complex functionality necessary for the aesthetic enjoyment of things without which life is unlivable”¹⁴. In our opinion, the succinct presentation of this aesthetic category accurately captures both the specificity of a wide range of kitsch objects and the particularities of their reception. For we are dealing with something beautiful that has become well too tame, which will not trouble its recipients, but which, when consumed, makes their existence bearable.

A similar perspective on kitsch, but which is more nuanced precisely because it pays closer attention to changes in the artistic discourse, is proposed by Abraham Moles in his book *The Psychology of Kitsch: The Art of Happiness*. His view of the relationship between kitsch and art is anchored in the framework of postmodern thinking. He avoids establishing an antithetical relationship between the two phenomena. On the one hand, kitsch (“this antiart, solidary with art”¹⁵) is dependent on art, recycling conventions and artificialising literary strategies that were once innovative: “kitsch and art movements cannot but live *in symbiosis*; art provides the wellspring on which universal kitsch will feed, condemning itself to the destruction of its transcendent character, and therefore of its very essence”¹⁶. In the rearguard of literary movements (as Clement Greenberg put it), kitsch amasses the recipes for a success that is both ephemeral and perennial. It is ephemeral because, being an imitation of aesthetic experience, it does not propagate in

¹³ E. Moutsopoulos, *Categoriile estetice. Introducere la o axiologie a obiectului estetic*, traducere de Victor Ivanovici, introducere de Constantin Noica, Editura Univers, București, 1976, p. 48.

¹⁴ Moutsopoulos, E., *Categoriile...*, ed. cit., p. 50.

¹⁵ A. Moles, *Psihologia kitsch-ului: arta fericirii*, traducere de Marina Rădulescu, Editura Meridiane, București, 1980, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 219.

its beholder; it is perennial because, despite the succession of literary fashions, kitsch boasts a healthy thematic constancy. *Beautiful and sweet* subjects will always be favoured by kitsch representations because love, motherhood, patriotism, etc. are capable of animating large crowds and each individual will easily identify with this sentimental area.

On the other hand, Abraham Moles argues that the very nature of art has changed. That it has lost its aura, as Walter Benjamin put it, and in its turn kitsch is becoming a mark of these reconfigurations. According to Moles, kitsch – and this is perhaps the most revolutionary idea of his study – is “acceptable art, art that does not shock the spirit by transcending everyday life or by requiring an effort that supposes surpassing, especially if we should surpass ourselves”. *Kitsch is the measure of man*; while Art is surpassing the measure, kitsch dilutes originality as much as necessary to make it acceptable to everybody¹⁷. Such a quotation shines a light on the underpinnings of postmodern thinking, where some of the non-values of modernist aesthetics become the new values of postmodernist aesthetics, in a demonstration that Art was not forced into prostitution - as the bombastic avant-garde once declared - but has simply entered the supermarket. And the absence of aura has turned it into a commodity for public consumption, a consumption that is not always synonymous with elitist aesthetic reception. Thus, subsumed under the principles of democracy, kitsch becomes even digested art, promoting a new kind of aesthetic value.

In the larger picture of defining postmodernist sensitivity, kitsch loses its status as an artistic degenerate offspring and becomes a phenomenon cumulating a series of contradictions that define this cultural paradigm. Once the frenzy of distinctions between mass and elitist culture (one of the founding principles of Postmodernism) is subdued, kitsch is viewed as a style about the artistic phenomena. Thus, the non-value of kitsch is recycled and recontextualized, incorporated into aesthetically valid broad scenarios. Playing an essential part in the identity configuration of postmodernity, associated with the forms of irony, parody or collage, kitsch also becomes a pretext for aesthetic pluridiscursivity. In postmodernity, art becomes predominantly ironic and self-reflexive, focusing on its mechanisms of producing meaning and shaping power relations. By way of consequence, any definition of Postmodernism will

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

presuppose the presence of the term *kitsch*, viewed also as a rhetorical strategy, called upon to show the distinction from Modernism, a movement that would not have identified with kitsch under any circumstances. On the contrary, kitsch was the polar opposite - not the only one, but a particularly important one – against which the aesthetics of modernity came into being. The normative dimension of the theory of kitsch is thus highlighted, for by removing questionable artistic manifestations from the citadel of value, Modernism sharply spells out the differences between value and non-value.

Perhaps it is precisely because of its relation to modernity and to its sum of aesthetic values that Postmodernism has its group of critics who reproach it for the inconsistency of value generated by its excessive openness to forms of mass culture; an openness, say its opponents, which leads to the cancellation of the very idea of art and its associated value. We do not intend to go into detail regarding the theories supporting the lack of aesthetic substance of Postmodernism, but we deem noteworthy Clement Greenberg's approach who, in his article *Modern and Postmodern*¹⁸, criticises the commercial assault on art and equates Postmodernism with a less demanding art. Similarly, Virgil Nemoianu's verdict is just as radical: "Postmodernism is, in fact, the prologue to the abolition of culture"¹⁹. Opinions of this kind are numerous, fuelled by different ideological and aesthetic positions, their underlying principle being the degradation and commercialisation of Art and the depreciation of aesthetic values. And in this vortex of value confusion, kitsch is the most visible iceberg.

On the other hand, the assumption of kitsch with artistic intentions that go beyond the ironic gaze takes us into the realm of new theories about it. Take, for instance, the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum, who, as a theorist of kitsch, treats this phenomenon as a form of artistic manifestation combining figurative and naive painting. The label of *kitsch painter* is enthusiastically adopted, becoming a coagulating principle for his aesthetic manifestos. In collaboration with other artists, he published the book *On Kitsch* (2001), followed by *Kitsch. More than Art* (2011), in which he

¹⁸ C. Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern", *Arts*, 54(6), February, 1980, available at <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html>.

¹⁹ V. Nemoianu, *Postmodernism and Cultural Identities: Conflicts and Coexistence*, 2009, available at <https://dokumen.pub/postmodernism-and-cultural-identities-conflicts-and-coexistence-1nbsped-9780813217574-9780813216843.html>.

advocates the reception of kitsch as an authentic art form. His followers form the *Kitsch Movement*, no longer fearing a dishonourable connotation attached to this label. The kitsch theorised by the Norwegian painter and his followers is, in fact, synonymous with a particular type of figurative art, a kitsch that stands in polar opposition to the Modernism obsessed with novelty and that has removed any trace of sentiment and pathos from art.

Brought to the heart of the art movement from the periphery where the paradigm of elitist Modernism had isolated it, the new theory of kitsch goes as far as to be concerned with the relevance of the *feeling*. For, as is convincingly argued by Robert C. Solomon in the article *On Kitsch and Sentimentality*, many of the negative perspectives on kitsch are reactions to the sentimentality promoted by it. It is a sentimentality derived from Romanticism which, in its minor manifestations (for not all of it was concerned with the abysmal depths of the experience and the tension of the cosmic) cultivated intimacy and idyllic feelings, and partly also a range of attitudes founded on mild emotion, cuteness, sympathy or delight. In addition, sentimentality, conceptualised by the all-too-abstract Modernism as an ethical flaw and a danger to society, makes its comeback almost triumphantly in a postmodernity that is no longer afraid to flaunt pathos. Behind the theories of kitsch, the author finds, in fact, an elitist discourse of class and gender: "Irony and scepticism are marks of the educated; sentimentality is the mark of the uneducated. One cannot understand the attack on kitsch, I propose, without a sociological-historical hypothesis about the fact that the "high" class of many societies associate themselves with emotional control and reject sentimentality as an expression of inferior, ill-bred beings, and male society has long used such a view to demean the emotionality of women"²⁰.

Thus, although the forms of manifestation of kitsch phenomena do not change to a high degree over the course of time – there is a certain thematic constancy and a certain *realism* of representation that is preserved –, the theory of kitsch is deeply imbued with the changes of aesthetic paradigm. Similarly, the theoretical rehabilitation of concepts that fall within the scope of the definition of kitsch, as is the case of *sentimentality*, alters the meanings attached to kitsch.

²⁰ R. Solomon, *In Defense of Sentimentality*, cap. 11: "On Kitsch and Sentimentality", Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 246.

Possible conclusions

Attempts at providing definitions of kitsch have been made since the 1930s, which is illustrative not only of the array of factors called upon to depict it but also of the shifts in the concept of *aesthetic value*. Launched into the world by a newly enriched bourgeoisie determined to imitate the behaviour, including the aesthetic behaviour, of the aristocratic classes, kitsch is continued and multiplied by the vast mechanisms of mass production of objects that are available due to the poor quality of their materials and by the abolition of strategies of aesthetic reception. Entering the postmodernist consumer society fascinated by the number of ways in which the boundaries between art and non-art can be (fruitfully) breached, kitsch reinvents itself through irony and collage, ending up by being perfectly integrated into valid aesthetic contexts.

At the same time, any theoretical delineation of kitsch is a definition, in the negative, of art and its often fluctuating attributes. For in the modernist artistic perspective, kitsch develops and is conceptualised as the pole of non-value or, in some cases, of pseudo-value, whereas in the postmodernism of amalgamated hierarchies, kitsch and its theory condense not only the crisis of values but also the implosion of systems of aesthetic evaluation. This is how, from the point of view of aesthetic theory, kitsch, which, in reality, does not undergo substantial changes at the core of its thematic and stylistic manifestations, transitions from anti-art to pseudo-art, and finally to art, in the full sense of the word, without a hint of irony. Meanwhile, in the background, the avatars of its definition activate a series of aesthetic principles and contradictions, moving from a Modernism convinced of the differences between value and non-value to a democratic popular and tolerant Postmodernism, and then to the current, perhaps, Post-postmodernism characterised by the total implosion of the criteria of aesthetic judgment.

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