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BETWEEN WEST & EAST: HISTORIOGRAPHIC APPROACH AND CONTEMPORARY SHIFTING DISCOURSES ON KITSCH IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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Abstract:

The main goal of the research approach is the historical reconstruction and interpretation of the development of the kitsch concept as an aesthetic and art-theory position of thinking about visual culture. According to the hypothesis, kitsch is dialectically related to modernity. It can be proved by dissolving boundaries between kitsch and art, as well as the disappearing of negative connotations connected with kitsch – in the area of visual art practice, as well as in the current discourse of theoretical conceptions of kitsch. Revealing a specific, Central European way of thought on kitsch illustrates that the development and transformation of the concept is more complicated. The contemporary understanding of kitsch can be grasped in two ways: a) as a postmodern, reassessed understanding of kitsch related to a transforming concept of art (from Eurocentric to global); b) as an aesthetic expression of

falsehood, beautification of moral failure, which was a striking part of the aesthetic experience from totalitarian societies.

Keywords:

Aesthetic Discourse, Sociology of Art, Kitsch, Painting, Central Europe, Socialist Realism.

Introduction

Discourse on kitsch has transformed over the past decades, changing its tone. The view offered by this text arose in a discussion representing two contemporary approaches: an essay by an Austrian representative of critical theory, the philosopher Konrad P. Liessmann¹, and the Finnish aesthetician Max Rynänen². Both scholars define kitsch as a "Central European highbrow product": Liessmann advocates reality shows, sit-coms, he even suggests that *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* became a contemporary cult. In his recontextualization of the concept, Rynänen³ indicates a contemporary turn in reflecting (on) kitsch – new interest in 'small cute everyday object[s]'. It was, however, artistic practice, mainly, that contributed to this transformed discourse on kitsch – in two lines: (A) in the line of institutionalized, academic-gallery art, which operates with kitsch functionally in the spirit of the conceptual, neo-Dadaist, and pop-art stream, whose peak is the conceptual turn of Jeff Koons; (B) in the line of anti-modernist, non-academic expression, which does not debar it from kitsch. They deliberately, openly, admittedly, remain in the realm of kitsch, in the attitude against deprivation caused by the aesthetic asceticism of modernism. An exemplary instance of such a stream is the international association (founded in Norway) *Kitsch Painting*. Artistic manifestations of the second line refuse safe framing by referring to high, post-avant-garde expression and therefore, declare their positions by manifesting and theorizing their own attitudes in order to maintain 'seriousness'. In this text, I would like to extend the well-known theoretical framework of kitsch thought by including 'domestic issues', which are an inherent part of the Central European specifics of the kitsch issue. I would like to point out how the theoretical concept of kitsch is employed in revealing aesthetic aspects of totalitarian regimes' propaganda. Central European thought on

kitsch after 1989 expresses a specific sensibility caused by decades of experience with communist propaganda.

An attempt of a brief historiography of kitsch

The phenomena that asked to be called kitsch began to emerge as a result of radical socio-cultural changes in the last third of the 19th century. It is not productive for this text to elaborate extensively on the implications of democratisation, industrialisation, and the massive urbanisation of the West; however, I would like to emphasize a not so often mentioned but key turn in the world of art. That is the crisis of the Academy of Arts as an institution. As Pierre Bourdieu⁴ writes, it was Manet who was the first to transgressively and successfully step out of the academic training system, creating an irreversible rupture in the institutional fabric of the world of art. Manet, as a good connoisseur of the social milieu of the 19th-century Parisian art field, could make the institutional revolution and start the existence of the *Salon des Indépendants*.

In the period of schism inside the academy, some academic painters deviated from the ideals of the 'high genre', met the requirements of the small and medium bourgeoisie and produced in the spirit of the so-called *salon painting*. To this day, the term still carries an image of superficial, 'gastronomic' painting which uses academic mastery in favour of cheap eroticisms. Marie Rakušanová⁵ showed that, in the 1870s, an increasing number of painters began to divert from the monumental ideological art of the Academy to the so-called *salon aesthetics*, following French salon eroticism. Although Matei Calinescu⁶ claims that the origin of kitsch is romanticism, and in terms of his eclecticism he is right, the true 'gastronomic' painting for the middle classes, which has developed iconography and stylistics of kitsch, is probably just salon, pulp academism. In the context of thinking about kitsch, the term 'gastronomic' also refers to Umberto Eco's 1964 essay *La struttura del cattivo gusto* [Struktura nevkusu]⁷, more specifically, to the chapter Kitsch as a 'boldism'. Umberto Eco brightly pointed out, that Giovanni Boldini's portraits of middle-class women have two parts: the lower part functions as a reference to impressionism (ergo, "high art") and the upper part (chest, arms, and face) is a pure "gastronomy". Despite Eco not naming the technique, it is morbidezza – sensually delicate colouring and brushstrokes – invented by renaissance Venetians and reused by Boldini.

While Charles Baudelaire, at the end of the 19th century, wrote as a warning about the new phenomenon of *le chic*⁸ (as a new word describing banal attractiveness), Hermann Broch⁹, Clement Greenberg¹⁰, Dwight McDonald¹¹, Ludwig Giesz¹² and others have elaborated on kitsch as a phenomenon parasitising on real art, or at least as a morally defective aesthetic phenomenon in a variety of contexts. However, since the 1960s, the discourse has been reversed: the massive critique of modernism, pop art, and the legitimization of Susan Sontag's *camp*¹³ have questioned the sharp border between art and kitsch. She presented and used examples of "kitschy", or, rather, "campy" sensibility in artworks considered as high art of the *fin de siècle* (e.g., Hector Guimard's art nouveau decorative designs for Parisian underground entrances). By showing us an art-historical depth of "love for extravaganza and excessive decorativeness" she also questioned the negativity of kitsch. These changes show (though not sharply or definitively) three periods of writing about kitsch.

I. The dystopian¹⁴ theories of kitsch can be represented by Hermann Broch's sentence: "Kitsch is an element of evil in the art system." These theories are framed by the criticism of the Frankfurt School, especially of Theodor W. Adorno's¹⁵ and Walter Benjamin's¹⁶ negative perception of popular and mass culture. The supreme and most influential concept is Greenberg's¹⁷ essay on the opposing position of avant-garde and kitsch, which also has a political dimension and points its criticism at 19th-century Russian academic painting. Greenberg's artistic criticism has made it possible for the general acceptance of abstract expressionism as real, true American free art.

II. In the theories of the critique of modernity, historization, and theorization of kitsch, the highlights are Matei Calinescu's kitsch archeology¹⁸ and Tomáš Kulka's analytical reassessment¹⁹. Here, we can also include the calculation and collection of different types of kitsch in Gillo Dorfles' anthology²⁰ and the effort to sociologically reassess bourgeois realism – *l'art pompier* in the beautiful book *Some call it kitsch – masterpieces of bourgeois realism* by Alekša Čelebonović²¹. Using stylistic and sociological analysis, Čelebonović, the Serbian aesthetician and curator, aimed to purify academic and so-called salon painting (from the end of 19th century) from the modernist aesthetic conviction of kitsch. The author offers a large palette of examples, especially painters, who were wiped from (western) modern art history – e.g., Alexandre Cabanel, Ilya Repin, Jan Matejko, George-Antoine Rochergrosse, and, especially, William Bouguereau. In the 1970's, Čelebonović²² grasped the issue of changing attitudes to bourgeois realism and at the same time to kitsch: "Today's aesthetic criteria, which are without any doubt much more tolerant

and flexible towards the idea of a copy that emulates the real thing, can help to rehabilitate the realistic painting of this period.”

III. Roger Scruton's²³ criticism of the Greenbergian concept started the period of anti-modernist turn to legitimize visual hedonism, and in addition to Liessmann's essay²⁴, there are texts from which Max Ryyänen²⁵ takes a stand. The most striking is the text by Eric Anderson²⁶, which (like Liessmann) differentiates the categories of 'low', kitsch, elevating it above *cheesy* and legitimizes the aesthetic state of 'love for kitsch'. I believe that the real initiatory step towards this type of hedonism and the acceptance of kitsch was Susan Sontag's essay²⁷, which points to the new sensitization of the American intellectual elite – *camp* aesthetics. This period of the 1960s is also the end of the history of the avant-garde and the end of the linear history of art²⁸, in which the idea of progress and innovation within individual art media was fulfilled. If such a conception of history has reached its terminal stage and its drive – originality and innovation - are losing energy, kitsch must also find itself in a different position.

Roger Scruton's²⁹ standpoint represents a bridge between dystopic positions in terms of modernity and contemporary hedonistic positions. From a postmodern perspective, he understands kitsch as having negative connotations but introduces a change: abstract art is no longer 'safe' from kitsch, thereby denying Greenberg's generally valid axioms. Avant-garde, in the form of abstraction succumbed to mass industry and kitsch, can also be found in the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art in New York). Scruton is referring to the abstract paintings of Georgia O'Keefe, which are controversial, since O'Keefe shows a dose of sentiment, but rather from feministic positions, and not in the pursuit of a quick profit. Whether we agree with Scruton or not, his discovery is essential: the banalization of avant-garde practices has shown that kitsch can take on a form that, in the previous period, was a counterpart to kitsch. Kitsch is not formally definable; it is always one step behind art. It is therefore not an immanent quality of an object; it is an example of attitude. The question is whether this attitude will be called parasitic, or will we understand it as the natural response of the masses which tries to stabilize the art of yesterday by reproducing and aesthetizing it.

Shifting discourses on kitsch: Central Europe in a post-Soviet world, and geopolitical determination of the concept

The following part examines and advocates the specific role of the Central European contribution to the international kitsch discussion. It is not necessary to elaborate on the modernist dystopian theories of kitsch in detail for this text, however, let us supplement the well-known Greenberg theses with some geo-cultural context, in which the idea of kitsch has a specific Central European touch supported by the experience of totalitarianism. During the pre-war era, the influential Czech art theorist and critic Karel Teige followed the critical discourse of the 1930s with reflections that arose in communication with the opinions of Josef Čapek³⁰. Reflections on kitsch originated in the discourse about the aesthetics of everyday life, although for Teige, it was related to his left-wing positions and his criticism of bourgeois academism, which he calls 'non-art', which has moments of kitsch because the strong Renaissance tradition recedes under pressure from commercialisation. Karel Teige³¹ readily commented on salon painting: "Between the official non-art and vulgar sub-art, the boundary is increasingly vaguer." He considers trivialised salon art created for people of the lower class to keep them in a kind of 'moral hypnosis' to be the most decadent form of kitsch. Clearly, pre-war discussions on kitsch in Central European countries (which are very close to the origin of the concept, Bavaria) stemmed from international criticism of "petit-bourgeois" kitsch, especially from the leftist and proletarian positions. Vigorous refusal of any form of 19th century decorativism took part in both: aesthetic preferences of leftist theoreticians and the positions of functionalists and purists.

In Slovakia, the discourse on kitsch has developed as a delayed reaction to interwar thinking in Bohemia. Ján Okrúcký³² reveals ways of kitsch creation in the field of utility object, from the point of view of aesthetics of functionalism. According to Okrúcký, an object manifests itself as kitsch when its shape does not correspond to the function but tries to resemble figures that are not related to the functional purpose of the object. He mentions hat-shaped ashtrays, owl-shaped lamps, mushroom-shaped powder-puffs. From today's perspective, this type of kitsch is a comical reminder of the bad taste of yesterday. In Okrúcký's views, Loos's condemnation of ornament as a 'crime' is very pronounced³³.

Critical reflections of kitsch occasionally appeared in Slovak magazine work of the 1990s. The artist and neo-conceptualist Ladislav Čarný contributed, by an analysis of the conditions of the birth of kitsch in order to avoid one-sided, Greenberg-like criticism. Here, a postmodern opinion resonates. He finds positive moments in popular culture and separates them from kitsch. Ladislav Čarný³⁴ considers the need for a feast as an 'impulse of suspension' in everyday life, he understands it as an immanent need "emerging from the

nature of human biotope”. Kitsch appears in a period of mass migration of the rural population to cities where such a situation arises, in which taking over the external, formal signs of urban lifestyle happens: “Adapting to a different cultural level has brought with it a significant wave of imitation of the lifestyle of ‘the upper classes’, of a serial image, replacing the need for self-expression and self-projection in a consumer way to everything. On the other hand, it is right here where very authentic expressions arise, e.g., urban folklore and pop-music.”³⁵

After 2000, re-editions of important and passionately discussed publications appeared in Slovak professional discourse – as the above-mentioned book of worldwide significance *Art and Kitsch* by Tomáš Kulka³⁶, translations of Eco’s writings collected in the book *Skeptics and Comforters* (by Czech editors)³⁷ and Broch’s essays in the collections of Milan Kundera (published in Czech, edited by Milan Kundera)³⁸. We can claim that Kulka’s thinking on kitsch is a continuation of the German or Central European tradition, but his approach is genuinely new in its analytical and neutral tone. One of the stimuli of the ‘passionate’ narrative of kitsch, both professional and lay, was the massive increase in the popularity of Milan Kundera’s *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*³⁹, which was reissued in 2007 by Atlantis publishing house. It was in Kundera’s novel, where kitsch was metaphorically, but sharply, grasped and revealed in relation to “communist aesthetics”.

Kundera’s intervention in the topic demonstrates that the Central European theory and sociology of art reflected the kitsch phenomenon specifically, also through the prism of the experience with totalitarian, dogmatic aesthetics, which is confirmed by the important contributions of the sociologist Miloslav Petrušek⁴⁰, by the artistic practice and views of Milan Knížák, and finally also by the widely outlined treatise on kitsch by the Serbian sociologist of culture Nikola Božilovič⁴¹. Nevertheless, Kundera’s and Božilovič’s thoughts on kitsch prove that intellectuals in post-soviet countries dispose a specific sensitivity to kitsch: they connect existence of artefactual kitsch with its deeper roots – “ethical kitsch” and “political kitsch”. Božilovič examines kitsch from the sociological point of view and tries to move on from the field of aesthetics to the ethical area. In the paper *Conservative ideology and political kitsch*, Božilovič reveals conservative ideology as “the basis from which grow a variety of kitsch creations and phenomena, among which the [sic] political kitsch dominates”⁴². Hermann Broch’s and Milan Kundera’s ideas clearly resonate in his text, especially in this important formulation: “Politics which is unethical in the sense that

it deceives, sow[s] lies and manipulates people, denying them freedom and turning them into subjects of the regime, is kitsch in its essential sense."⁴³

From the sociological point of view, it is productive for the issue of the aspects of kitsch in the official production of socialist realism to read the lesser-known text on the sociology of art by Miloslav Petrušek⁴⁴, who presented a thesis that aesthetic artifacts of official art in totalitarian regimes are not subjects to aesthetic study, since they do not carry a specific aesthetic function. The aesthetic norm of works of totalitarian art is not directed towards itself, but towards heteronomic, especially political, functions. We can partially agree with Petrušek – although the political function is behind the image of socialist realism as the main determinant (of course we cannot generalize), but the aesthetic function is extremely important here – a misleading message communicated specifically in an aesthetic manner – mostly by means of monumentalisation, heroization, and infantilisation, in eclectic stylistic compositions conceived in a utilitarian way.⁴⁵

I consider Petrušek's search for parallels between Nazi kitsch and the kitsch of socialist realism to be his contribution. Their common feature is the accent on realism (representative imaging), which has specific ideological functions: legitimising, translational, persuasive and propagandistic.⁴⁶ Petrušek, therefore, indicated a path which is a task for the sociology of art and for cooperation between aesthetics and politics. It is increasingly desirable to examine populist political acts in connection with 'kitschy' political speeches or election performances. We can find a similar focus on kitsch through a prism of the experience with totalitarian regimes in (mentioned above) Nikola Božilovič's thought: *"Kitsch in politics is associated with the moral categories of truth and falsehood, in which the author of this article argues that kitsch is a deliberately designed and programmed lie. The political kitsch serves for manipulation of the masses and represents the basis of totalitarian consciousness, which is an introduction to the repression and crime"*.⁴⁷

In post-Soviet countries, this issue is associated mainly with nationalist efforts and the related abuse of folklore.⁴⁸ Various types of simplified and emotionalised folklore performances were instrumentally used for ethnocentric and ethno-nationalist political representatives in the first half of 20th century Central European republics, and after the 2nd World War for the benefit of communist propaganda in the "Soviet part of the world". Folklore theatrical, musical, and visual forms still have a stable position as the equipment for so-called conservative parties' persuading and propaganda, especially during election campaigns. As Nikola Božilovič says: "Political lies tend to turn into the ideology of the

whole society or the state, so that one can speak of a kind of ‘nationalization of kitsch.’⁴⁹ The important principle of such a demonstration of folklore is the stereotyped and conventionalised collection of artistic forms, which are presented as ahistorical and isolated from the original context of religion, rural habits, and cult practices. These performances are pulled out of the whole structure of functions, they operate as aesthetic references, metaphorically said – “postcards” from the domestic ethnic tradition. The most powerful tool for ethnic populism is sanctified folklore. In sum, beautification, decorativeness, and sentimentality stepped into a realm of evil as ideological instruments of manipulation of the masses, hand in hand with other tools of oppression (media censure, omnipresent control of citizens, monopoly of worldview, etc.).

Current situation, painting, and the ‘hedonistic’ turn

The key idea, of which this text is a reflection, is Konrad Paul Liessmann’s⁵⁰ finding that the pugnacity against kitsch and its infectiousness “[...] today seems slightly as a curiosity in the history of culture. In the era of tolerance, we are already more tolerant even of kitsch.” Three years after the famously published second edition of Tomáš Kulka’s *Art and Kitsch*⁵¹, Konrad Paul Liessmann’s⁵² retrospective re-evaluation of kitsch appeared almost quietly in one Slovak daily newspaper. The Austrian philosopher and well-known critic of contemporary educational politics was an external contributor to the newspaper, and his aesthetical thoughts were far behind the margins of people’s daily interests of those times. Nevertheless, Liessmann’s notes on kitsch showed a fresh and contemporary approach. Liessmann started his notes with a claim: in previous times, the borderline between art and kitsch was so sharp that one could cut her/himself with it. Clement Greenberg, the ‘Pope’ of American art criticism, declared as kitsch anything besides avant-garde. However, recently kitsch became an artifact of the collector’s passion. The kitschier it is, the more authentic it is in its falseness. Today, it is difficult to claim what is art, but one can safely identify a kitsch object⁵³.

Max Ryyänen no longer speaks of kitsch as such, but of the concept of kitsch: he understands the concept as one’s self-definition, as a symptom of one’s aesthetic attitude, as a by-product of rationally justified ‘good taste’. It is based on the latest texts which deconstruct kitsch as an example of a relationship. Disavowal of kitsch, fear of kitsch is, for the

Finnish aesthetician, understood as an expression of superiority to sentimentality, to sweetness, to forms which are considered feminine⁵⁴.

After Jeff Koons, it was the Tokyo-pop movement and its well-known leaders Takahashi Murakami, Yoshimito Morita and Mariko Mori who intensified interest in "small, cute objects"⁵⁵. The author is undoubtedly right that the concept of kitsch originates in the safe space of the 'white, western man', in the position of the elites, in the aesthetics spawned in European classics, in a campaign for good taste – whether imagined as an avant-garde distrust of beauty or as an asceticism of the concept. Ryyänen, however, speaks only of one type of kitsch: of sentimental trivia. This problem was solved by Umberto Eco⁵⁶ when he, following Dwight McDonald's (1953) theory of mass culture, identified, besides the easily recognizable mass-cult kitsch, another type of kitsch, mid-cult kitsch, in visual culture, so-called Boldinian kitsch, which can also easily appear in reputable galleries. It is such kind of kitsch which is not so much an aesthetic lie as it is a calculation of aesthetic communication. However, I see Ryyänen's contribution in revealing that kitsch is a symptom of deprivation, as being based on the internal conditions of aesthetic experience, that it is not a scarecrow beyond the boundaries of our tastes, but rather part of the natural need to aesthetise and perceive the aesthetised.

As stated in the introduction, besides the conceptual turn to kitsch, which is represented by the work of Jeff Koons, Takahashi Murakami, by the work of neo-academic painters like John Currin, and Balthus, there is also a set of anti-modernist authors who communicate kitsch without disavowing it. To them, kitsch represents their aesthetic program, formulated in manifestos. Without ironic distance, *Kitsch Painting* members meet at the regular Kitsch Biennial (since 2006, Norway), the most prominent of which are Riccardo Rossati, Osiris Rain, Jan-Ove Tuv, Helen Koop, and the leading figure is the Norwegian philosophising painter Odd Nerdrum, who, with the oncoming new millennium, was increasingly inclined towards Caravaggio's and Rembrandt's traditions. Odd Nerdrum⁵⁷ wants to rehabilitate kitsch – by returning to the craft, to the beauty of painting, to the sentimentality which he sees as an anthropological necessity. He conceives kitsch as an opposition to public space, as an intimate area which contains our hopes, tears of affection and of joyfulness. Nerdrum updates the symbolic conception of figure and space in his chiaroscuro painting. Compositions upbuilt rationally use multiplication of figures and their number gives the impression of mysterious ciphers. These paintings give up the aspiration to be recognized by the Academy and the art museum. The evaluation of these works

would deserve their differentiation and a separate text, so I will omit the ‘double trick’ charge for this text. What matters is that they bring an open, non-ironic acceptance of kitsch and sentimentality to *Kitsch Painting*'s ‘art game’.

Like Odd Nerdrum's followers, the Czech painters Martin Kuriš, Filip Kudrnáč, and the Slovak painter Róbert Bielik represent such a line of neo-academicism that they are iconographically and, also, stylistically indistinguishable from framed kitsch photos sold in supermarkets. The exception is Róbert Bielik, who is more inclined to Nerdrum's nature, turning back to symbolism, to Baroque and Classical painting, but he often knowingly wiggles on the edge of yesterday's ‘salon-style bad taste’, too. Finally, the medium of painting is most susceptible to a relationship with kitsch. We can distinguish several common features of the above-mentioned artistic strategies. They draw from the imagery of romanticism, symbolism, salon painting, and the huge reservoir of cheap, instant landscapes, waterfalls, and sunsets usually sold in supermarkets. Despite academic-like delicacy, there is something very disruptive about Bielik's and Nerdrum's paintings. Eclectic images openly communicate references to artworks by Rembrandt van Rijn, Diego Velázquez, Gustave Moreau, Arnold Böcklin, Lucien Freud, hyperrealism, etc. The perfection of chiaroscuro is served here without any sarcasm or irony. This new, almost queer sensibility of cold seriousness is a type of expression which the witty and aloof Western spectator is no longer used to. By lacking irony, it disrupts the comfort zone of the well-educated spectator.

With the adjective ‘post-natural’ (W. Dunning's concept), the author describes the nature of contemporary art as a work not formed by nature, but by culture. It is, according to Jana Geržová⁵⁸, the pressure of the post-natural world which caused that said painters – unlike conceptualists – use all existing painting strategies and means, not even avoiding “[...] the joy of painting, which is passed on to the viewer, who is experiencing joy of view in front of their paintings”⁵⁹. In this context, what is essential is not the legitimacy or correctness of the use of the term ‘post-natural’, but the phrases ‘joy of painting’ or ‘joy of watching’, which the author used. Also, at this point, ‘new hedonism’ resonates in contemporary painting and its reflection. The hedonistic grasp of kitsch justifies its existence as a stylization of a work of art. This new preference for kitsch, a new “pursuit of happiness” means return to a painting in terms of “joyful process” of creating illusion, which entails delicate brushstrokes, depiction of depth and love for the human figure.

Conclusion

We can deduce some interesting observations from the development of the 'talks' about kitsch. It is art itself that has made a transgressive step from a sharp delimitation with kitsch. Moreover, it is art itself that proves that dystopic visions of the dissolution of art in mass production and pop-cultural expression no longer need to be taken seriously. In the spirit of postproduction⁶⁰ art can use kitsch in its communication strategy, either in favour of criticism or in favour of challenging 'high' art.

The short history of the concept sketched in the paper leads to the contemporary need to distinguish two concepts of kitsch. In the first case, we talk about objects and visual forms whose aesthetic reception is constituted by experiencing sentimentality, nostalgia, infantility, pathos, and the like. This, let us say, easily identifiable form of kitsch is nowadays understood by artistic practice, but also by theoretical reflections, also in positive contours, as a symptom of a tired consciousness, as a saturation of the loss of the feminine, the exotic, the sentimental, the immodest, the showy, and the like. Every form of appreciation of cute knick-knacks, kitschy objects, sentimental neo-academic paintings, or opulent campy images can be understood as a criticism of the "old" Euro-centric concept of art.

The second concept speaks of kitsch as a communication mode, in which mendacity or pretentiousness is specifically served in an aesthetic manner. The aesthetic dimension of such communication can be called kitsch and can be seen not only in visual culture, but in various populist political speeches, and ultimately in everyday communication. With the help of Umberto Eco's semiotics, we can see the communication structure of kitsch. Eco approves the concept of kitsch as fraud, but as he specifies, the falseness does not lie in the *topos*, but in the form of communication. In a difference with the poetic language used by art, kitsch uses elements of reinforcement, reiteration, and redundancy of elements in order to give an easily comprehensible and consumable message. In his earlier *The Open work*, Umberto Eco specified: "To protect the message against consumption so that no matter how much noise interferes with its reception the gist of its meaning [of its order] will not be altered, it is necessary to 'wrap' it in a number of conventional reiterations that will increase the probability of its survival. This surplus of reiterations is what we commonly call 'redundancy'". [...] Yet it also means that the very order which allows a message to be understood is also what makes it absolutely predictable – that is, extremely banal. The more ordered and comprehensible a message, the more predictable it is. The messages written on Christmas cards or birthday cards, determined by a very limited system of

probability are generally quite clear but seldom tell us anything we don't already know."⁶¹ By this quotation by Richard Egenter, in *The structure of bad taste* Umberto Eco added: [...] the Father of Lies would use Kitsch to alienate the masses from all notion of salvation, because he would recognize it as much more powerful, in its mystifying and consoling power [...]."⁶²

The huge power of image as the visualization of desires, needs, or idyllic places was discovered for capitalism and every form of totalitarianism. With the help of sociologists, we can see that "[...] kitsch is a product of social construction, or our perception of things, events, or behaviours. [The] anthropological, sociological, and psychological dimensions of kitsch is [sic] especially present in politics, political experience, and practice"⁶³. Kitsch, with its aesthetic predictability and semiotic redundancy, is a perfect instrument for political propaganda. Of course, even totalitarian kitsch needs its consumer, a Kitsch man. The problem is that it is almost impossible to escape from kitsch, it is impossible to not consume kitsch when it plays a key role in the official aesthetic doctrine.

Therefore, especially for scholars, critics and, artists coming from post-Soviet countries, kitsch is felt with ambiguous flavour. Despite the contemporary aesthetic rehabilitation of the sentimental object (either within or outside the realm of art), we are still witnessing the presence and usage of kitsch as the aesthetic communication of a lie, especially in the realm of populism, autocracy, and every form of intentional manipulation via human emotions. The concept of kitsch as a very modern instrument for detecting and articulating aesthetic vehicle for a lie still plays a role in a realm in which manipulative force of an image is misused.

¹ Konrad P. Liessmann, "Až teraz sme naozaj mimo dobra a zla," *SME*, December 20, 2013, <https://komentare.sme.sk/c/1210422/az-dnes-sme-naozaj-mimo-dobra-a-zla.html>

² Max Rynänen, "Contemporary Kitsch. The death of pseudo-art and the birth of everyday cheesiness (a postcolonial inquiry)," *Terra Aestheticae* 1, no. 1 (2018): 70-86. <http://maxrynanen.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Terra-Aesthetica.pdf>

³ Rynänen, "Contemporary Kitsch. The death of pseudo-art and the birth of everyday cheesiness (a postcolonial inquiry)," 70.

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

⁵ Marie Rakušanová, *Bytosti odníkud: metamorfózy akademických principů v malbě první poloviny 20. století v Čechách* (Praha: Academia, 2005), 20-21.

⁶ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁷ Umberto Eco, *Skeptické a těšitelé* (Praha: Argo, 2006), 101. Originally published in 1964.

⁸ Charles Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících* (Praha: Odeon, 1968): 143-144. Charles Baudelaire in his *Devant ses contemporains* (originally published in 1861) criticised new contemporary sensibility, calling it "le chic". It was for sure Charles Baudelaire – the greatest enemy of boring petit bourgeois everyday life, who identified and reflected on "le chic" and the banal in the realm of fine art. He identifies banal with "le chic", which he considers as a new weird, disgusting word. To Baudelaire, chic is something, which abuses memory – rather "memory of hands", than "memory of mind". Chic is related to painters of letters – with their nifty hands and accurately sharp pens. They can draw anything without hesitation, with closed eyes – Christ's head or an Emperor's crown. Le chic disrespects nature. "Everything conventional and traditional relates to the chic and banal". At the core of le chic is eclecticism and scepticism. "Eclectic man is a ship which wants to sail to all the [sic] directions [...] Peoples or objects which are banal are vulgar and trivial at the same time" (Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících*, 143). Baudelaire brings forward an example – Horace Vernet's art. He describes him as the "absolute antithesis of the artist" who replaces drawing with pretty lines, colours by glare, unity by mere episodes [...] (Baudelaire, *Úvahy o některých současnících*, 145). For the purpose of this paper, a Czech translation of the French original has been used and interpreted.

⁹ Hermann Broch, "Notes on the problem of kitsch" in *Kitsch. The world of bad taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1970), 49-76. (Originally published in 1933.)

¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," Clement Greenberg, accessed October 2, 2022, <http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html> (Originally published in 1939.)

¹¹ Dwight McDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes* 1, no 3 (1953): 1-17.

¹² Ludwig Giesz, "Kitsch-man as tourist," in *Kitsch. The world of bad taste*, ed. Gillo Dorfles (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1970), 156-174.

¹³ Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," *Partisan Review* 31, no 4 (1964): 515-530.

¹⁴ Broch, "Notes on the problem of kitsch", 63. The dystopian narrative or dystopian genre began as a response to utopian literature based on the fundamental belief in human progress. "The creation of the Dystopian Narrative began in the early 20th century, when attitudes towards human nature and society started to change across the globe" (Mary Baldwin, "The Evolution of Dystopian Literature," accessed October 2, 2022, <https://www.ramapo.edu/honors/files/2019/08/Baldwin-Senior-Project.pdf>.) After the Nazi and communist regimes, the Western tradition of hope transformed into a mood of despair. Here, the image of the future, where life and social structures are in calamitous decline arose. Dystopian narrative became an inherent part of the modern worldview.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektika osvícenství: Filosofické fragmenty*, (Praha: Oikoyemenh, 2009).

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Iluminácie*, (Bratislava: Kalligram, 1999).

¹⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch".

¹⁸ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. (Originally published in 1987.)

¹⁹ Tomáš Kulka, *Umění a kýč*, (Praha: Torst, 1994). In his *Kitsch and Art* (English language translation published in 1996), Kulka put aside a negative starting point and analytically examined the kitsch phenomena. He allocated 3 defining conditions of kitsch existence in its relation to art to answer the basic question why kitsch is attractive for humans. An analytical viewpoint helped to find the aesthetic basis of the objects we call kitsch. What gets reassessed is the idea that kitsch also lacks aesthetic function; that it is just a mere transparent sign which only refers to the signified, ergo, to art. Kitsch is in parasitical and referential relationship to art. Apparently, Herman Broch's and Umberto Eco's ideas are echoed in Kulka's approach more than regional, Czech, predecessors such as Vaclav Zykmond (who published his thoughts on kitsch in 1960s).

²⁰ The main spearhead of Gillo Dorfles' anthology is a visible variety of different contexts in which kitsch can emerge and be explained: politics, medium transpositions, religion, advertising, film, tourism, pornography. In a selection of the most influential essays on kitsch, we can find paradigmatic works by Greenberg, Giesz and Pawek, and most importantly, the final essay by Alekša Čelebonović who outlines so called "traditional kitsch". Gillo Dorfles, in his editorial introduction to this essay, makes a very important note on so called "traditional kitsch": "All the writings and publications which have been concerned with the problem of bad taste usually dwell on this type, which – though this must

be said with utmost caution – is probably less dangerous than the other more insidious forms which we have examined so far” (Dorfles, *Kitsch. The world of bad taste*, 279). The phenomenon of kitsch is showed in the anthology as something very difficult to catch, something with myriad faces - in its developmental character. What is most striking while reading the anthology is miscellaneousness (diversity, heterogeneity) as a core feature of the phenomenon.

²¹ Alekša Čelebonović, *Some Call It Kitsch: masterpieces of bourgeois realism*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1974).

²² Čelebonović, *Some Call It Kitsch: masterpieces of bourgeois realism*, 14.

²³ Roger Scruton, “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament,” *City Journal* 5, no 1 (Winter 1999), <http://www.city-journal.org/html/kitsch-and-modern-predicament-11726.html>.

²⁴ Liessmann, “Až teraz sme naozaj mimo dobra a zla”.

²⁵ Max Rynänen, “Contemporary Kitsch. The death of pseudo-art and the birth of everyday cheesiness (a postcolonial inquiry),” 81-84.

²⁶ Eric Anderson, “Sealing the Seas of Cheese,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 8 (2010), accessed October 2, 2022, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0008.019>

²⁷ The author understands the style called *campy* (see Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp’”) as a manifestation or as a consequence of the appreciation of intellectual elite members who are so confident of their good taste that they can decide to rehabilitate yesterday’s poor taste by coming out from the love of the unnatural and the exaggerated. Camp can be ironically served kitsch, as well as fascination with shallowness. As an example, she provides the Art Nouveau of Hector Guimard, now a good example of the travesty performances of *drag queens* and the like.

²⁸ Hans Belting, *Konec dějin umění*, (Praha: Mladá fronta, 2000).

²⁹ Scruton, “Kitsch and the Modern Predicament”.

³⁰ Josef Čapek, *Nejskromnější umění*, (Praha: Aventinum, 1920).

³¹ Karel Teige, *Jarmark umění*, (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1964): 51.

³² Ján Okrúcký, *Gýč v úžitkovom umení*. (Bratislava: Slovenský výbor Československého zväzu žien, 1968).

³³ The Slovak art theorist Ján Okrúcký belonged to the line of thinkers dealing with modern design in relation to traditional crafts – thinkers who followed the idea movement from the British designer William Morris to the German architect (and founder of Bauhaus) Walter Gropius, the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, the Czech aesthetician Bohumil Markalous, etc. Adolf Loos, influenced by the Chicagoan architect Louis H. Sullivan, wrote a radical essay *Ornament is a Crime* (1913), which was translated and thought-linked by the Czech aesthetician, critic, and journalist Bohumil Markalous (1882-1952), who used the pseudonym Jaromír John. He was interested in the aesthetics of architecture and utility art, often speaking about kitsch in his essays and articles. For Central European thinking of kitsch, the tension between modernist purism and functionalism, on the one hand, and factory-made trashy objects, on the other, is very important. Bohumil Markalous collected, translated, and published Loos’s essays in the 1929 book *Řeči do prázdna* (*Spoken to the void*, originally published in 1900). Loos’s sharply written essays mainly deal with contemporary interiors and everyday designs. At the same time, the author mocks the German tendency to decorate and “beautify” every place of their everyday life, including clothes and furniture. Following Loos’s ideas, Bohumil Markalous dealt with issues of the aesthetics of fine art in the book *What is Art* (originally published in 1938), and collectively published smaller literary forms with related themes were carried in the book *Aesthetics of Practical Life* (1989). See Adolf Loos, *Řeči do prázdna. Soubor statí, Soubor statí o architektuře, bydlení, ústroji a jiných praktických věcech, které uspořádal Bohumil Markalous*, (Praha: Tichá Byzanc, 2002).

³⁴ Ladislav Čarný, “Náboženstvo a gýč,” *Profil súčasného výtvarného umenia* 3, no. 8-9 (1993): 14.

³⁵ Ladislav Čarný’s views represented a significant shift from the descriptive criticism of Václav Zykmond’s concept of kitsch. See Václav Zykmond, *Umenie a gýč*, (Bratislava: Slovenský fond výtvarných umení, 1966).

³⁶ Kulka, *Umění a kýč*.

³⁷ Umberto Eco, *Skeptikové a těšitelé*, (Praha. Argo, 2006).

³⁸ Hermann Broch’s essays in the collections edited by Milan Kundera, *Román – mýtus – kýč*, (Praha: Dauphin, 2009).

³⁹ Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (originally published in 1984), which was reissued in 2007. The novel is set in the 1960's and the main leitmotif is searching for inner freedom in a state of ubiquitarian control. One of the heroines of the novel – the artist Sabine – is a strict opponent of kitsch. As she is described, her inner revolt against communism did not have a moral, but aesthetic accent. She did not hate the ugliness of the "grey" communist world, she hated the mask of beauty which communism was dressed in. See Milan Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, (Praha: Atlantis, 1984: 210). Kundera realized that there can be only one aesthetic expression of totalitarian regimes - kitsch. There is always the possibility to run away from kitsch in a society with plurality of opinions, but one is helpless in a land of "totalitarian kitsch". Most importantly, Kundera defined kitsch by his well-known allegory of the "second tear": "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". See Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*, 212.

⁴⁰ Miloslav Petrušek, "Umění totalitních režimů jako sociální fenomén (k sociologické analýze estetizace strachu a zla)," *Studia Moravica Symposiana: Sborník příspěvků přednesených na prvním mezioborovém sympoziu Česká kultura ve 20. století*, ed. Petr Komenda, (Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2006): 15-26.

⁴¹ Nikola Božilovič, *Gýčová kultura*, (Bratislava: Malé centrum, 2014).

⁴² Nikola Božilovič, "Conservative ideology and political kitsch," *Sociological discourse* 3, no. 6 (2013): 5.

⁴³ Božilovič, "Conservative ideology and political kitsch," 12.

⁴⁴ Petrušek, "Umění totalitních režimů jako sociální fenomén (k sociologické analýze estetizace strachu a zla)," 15-26.

⁴⁵ For example, the painting by Mária Medvedecká: *The Contingent Transfer*, 1951. At first sight, it is a harmless painting of a rural scene, which is quite well elaborated in a regressive manner similar to post-impressionism and luminism. We have to look twice, and we realize that the motif is actually tragic and a criminal moment of the history of Czechoslovakia – violent confiscation of small farmers' private properties by the newly emerged socialist republic. Considering the painting in the political context, we can see it as almost "vulgar kitsch". Despite Mária Medvedecká being a highly rated artist, she instrumentally used an eclectic mixture of styles in order to fabricate an idyllic visualisation of a non-existing scene: not fiction, but a lie. See the officially reproduced painting by Mária Medvedecká: *The Contingent Transfer [Odovzdávanie kontingentu]* (1951) at the website of the Slovak National Gallery, accessed October 2, 2022, https://www.webumenia.sk/en/dielo/SVK:OGD.O_1713.

⁴⁶ Petrušek, "Umění totalitních režimů jako sociální fenomén (k sociologické analýze estetizace strachu a zla)," 18.

⁴⁷ Božilovič, "Conservative ideology and political kitsch," 5.

⁴⁸ Jana Migašová, "Kde sa vzal „folkloristický gýč“? Folklor ako súčasť formovania slovenskej kultúrno-politickej modernity," *A&P. Časopis pre umeleckú komunikáciu a popkultúru* 4, no. 2 (2018): 59-71.

⁴⁹ Božilovič, "Conservative ideology and political kitsch," 9-10.

⁵⁰ Liessmann, "Až teraz sme naozaj mimo dobra a zla".

⁵¹ Kulka, *Umění a kýč*.

⁵² Konrad Paul Liessmann, Austrian philosopher, essayist, columnist, cultural commentator, former university professor at the University of Vienna published his book entitled *Kitsch: Oder Warum der schlechte Geschmack der eigentlich gute ist* [Kitsch: why can bad taste be good], 2013. In the book, the author argues that kitsch is a form of revenge on the aesthetic oppression that avant-garde has been exercising since the beginning of the 20th century. The book implies the hegemony of that concept of art, which is, in its essence, the representation of the superiority of good taste.

⁵³ Liessmann, "Až teraz sme naozaj mimo dobra a zla".

⁵⁴ Ryyänänen, "Contemporary Kitsch. The death of pseudo-art and the birth of everyday cheesiness (a postcolonial inquiry)," 80.

⁵⁵ Ryyänänen, "Contemporary Kitsch. The death of pseudo-art and the birth of everyday cheesiness (a postcolonial inquiry)," 82.

⁵⁶ Eco, *Skeptikové a těšitelé*.

⁵⁷ Odd Nerdrum, *On Kitsch*, (Oslo: Kagge Publishing, 2001).

⁵⁸ Jana Geržová, “Konceptuálna maľba. Terminologický paradox?,” in *Maľba v kontextoch, kontexty maľby. Zborník z česko-slovenského sympózia venovaného problému súčasnej maľby*, ed. Jana Geržová (Bratislava: Slovart a Vysoká škola výtvarných umení, 2012): 109.

⁵⁹ Geržová, “Konceptuálna maľba. Terminologický paradox?,” 110.

⁶⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postprodukce*, (Praha: Tranzit, 2004).

⁶¹ Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989): 51-52.

⁶² Eco, *The Open Work*, 183.

⁶³ Božilovič, “Conservative ideology and political kitsch,” 7.