

# The unbearable lightness of kitsch

Many people say that cockroaches will be the next species to dominate the planet. Despite of fumigation, shoe soles or people that set out to exterminate roaches by eating them like fried chips; cockroaches is a species impossible to exterminate. Kitsch is like cockroaches.

What theoreticians, manifestos, critics and designers always condemn about kitsch is the calamity of kitsch, the plague that contaminates everything, the sentimental trash and other similar terms; but kitsch is still alive and it even seems that it has become stronger. But what is kitsch?

*“Kitsch is the beautiful minus its ugly counterpart. So Kitsch, the purified beauty, becomes vulnerable to an aesthetic taboo that in name of the beauty declares kitsch as ugly. Kitsch is a parody of this catharsis, where it becomes impossible to draw up a line between which it is true aesthetic fiction (art) and what is merely sentimental trash (kitsch).”* Theodor Adorno

Although the term has been used for many years, it was Adorno that officially opened the debate on the philosophical analysis of kitsch. His definition continues to be used: kitsch is the beautiful minus its ugly part. Under that same principle it was in recent time that Milan Kundera wrote:

*Behind all the European faiths, religious and political, we find the first chapter of Genesis, which tells us that the world was created properly, that human existence is good, and that we are therefore entitled to multiply. Let us call this basic faith a categorical agreement with being.*

*The fact that until recently the word "shit" appeared in print as s--- has nothing to do with moral considerations. You can't claim that shit is immoral, after all! The objection to shit is a metaphysical one. The daily defecation session is daily proof of the unacceptability of Creation. Either/or: either shit is acceptable (in which case don't lock yourself in the bathroom!) or we are created in an unacceptable manner.*

*It follows, then, that the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is a world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch.*

*"Kitsch" is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both the literal and the figurative senses of the word; kitsch excludes everything from its purview which is essentially unacceptable in human existence. Milan Kundera, 1984*

We find then a contradiction: In a politically correct world, the very beautiful things and the totally disagreeable would have to coexist and both would have to be seen similarly, without predilections or favouritisms. In an imperialistic world things would be easier: if we decreed illegal the existence of beautiful objects, there would not be the possibility of the purified beauty; kitsch would not exist then. But the question is in fact: is it necessary to ban kitsch?

One of the Frenchs' great pleasures (and in general for the rest of the humanity too) in addition to sex (which in general is also enjoyed by some French), is food. We cannot deny the pleasure of enjoying a delicious dish. But we cannot avoid the unacceptable consequences, as Kundera would say. If we want to enjoy aesthetics, we must accept the existence of its toxic waste.

I don't mean that we have to embrace kitsch. That's disgusting! I am simply saying that we have to accept its existence as the waste or rubbish that has to be generated as part of the process of creating objects that are meaningful.

The main problem are the people who enjoy and caresses kitsch. I do not want to quote here the opinions that I have listened about a famous cabrito restaurant. While some criticize that type of "Art Raegio" (as they already baptised it), there are some who defend that kind of abomination, and argue about identity matters, popular art, etc. The truth is there is no such thing as popular art. Popular things exist, so does art. But art is not determined by the AMOUNT of people that likes it. Art is based on symbolism and aesthetic interpretation. Confusing food and crap is something that simply denotes ignorance, or a badly damaged taste!

*Kitsch is pretense. But not all pretense is kitsch. Something else is needed to create the sense of intrusion—the un-wanted hand on the knee. Kitsch is not just pretending; it is asking you to join in the game. In real kitsch, what is being faked cannot be faked. Hence the pretense must be mutual, complicitous, knowing. The opposite of kitsch is not sophistication but innocence. Kitsch art is pretending to express something, and you, in accepting it, are pretending to feel.*

*Kitsch therefore relies on codes and clichés that convert the higher emotions into a pre-digested and trouble-free form—the form that can be most easily pretended. Like processed food, kitsch avoids everything in the organism that asks for moral energy and so passes from junk to crap without an intervening spell of nourishment. Roger Scruton, 1999*

It is clear now that kitsch does not exist by its own account. Kitsch is not a style, nor a fashion. It is not a virus or a disease either. Kitsch is part of the natural waste that we designers generate and we must recognize what it is. My only advise on this matter is: put down the cover of your toilet, flush, wash your hands and do not eat so much fruit and vegetables. You better eat some fibre.

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