



THE KITSCH FACTOR: BETWEEN AUTHENTICITY AND COMMODITY IN THE BALKANS

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ABSTRACT

The following essay is based on my presentation on the topic, as part of the Design Week in Tirana and it aims to illustrate the widespread appeal of Kitsch in the region, with the help of a number of images taken throughout the Balkan Peninsula. But before we move on to the analysis of the presented images, let us attempt to define the notion of 'Kitsch' in broad terms. It is somewhat axiomatic to consider Kitsch as the embodiment of tastelessness and unoriginality. Kitschy artifacts are usually treated like knock-offs of dubious aesthetic quality (Samier, A.E, 2008)

Keywords: Design, Design Week, Kitsch, Authenticity, Balkans, Kosovo

INTRODUCTION

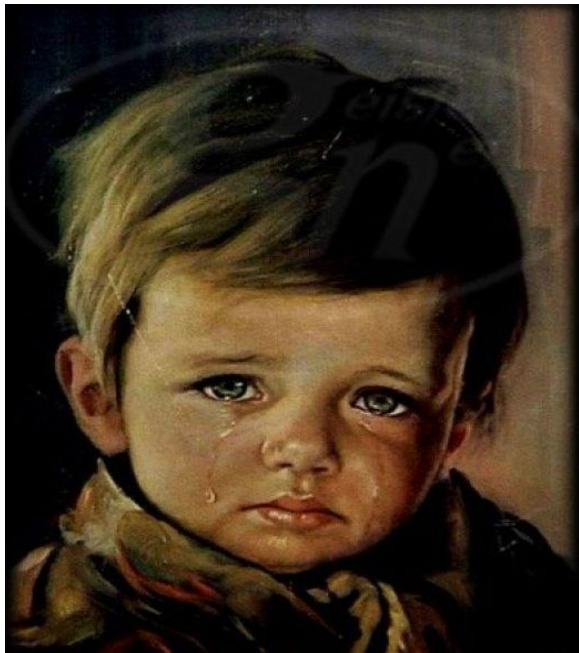
We can trace the origins of Kitsch to the decline of the monarchies in Europe and the beginning of the new order of industrial capitalism. In the transition period from feudalism to an industrialised society, aesthetic tastes, which had hitherto been dictated by the aristocracy, now were in the hands of people who, because of the newly acquired access to tools of production, could now set their own aesthetic standards, by deciding on what counted as beautiful or artistic. So, perhaps ironically, because of the stigma it carries, Kitsch is the product of a society where broad masses. Determine aesthetic values. Nevertheless, it is a symbol of democracy, despite values that could be defined as fake.

THE MORPHOLOGICAL PROCESS

According to Greenberg (C. Greenberg 1961), Kitsch is a diseased taste which typically takes root during the transition from a rural to an urban setting. These rhythms of steady migration produced stark socio-cultural differences in cities. So, in order to satisfy the needs of this emerging consumer class that now sought to acquire status symbols formerly reserved only for royalty. This gave birth to a market for cheap imitations of famous art works, but also a new genre, devoid of artistic pretensions of high culture. Instead of the lofty intellectual and artistic heights, Kitsch inhabits a more down-to-earth reality. It is art as a consumer product that serves to entertain more 'base' cravings, such as greed and lust instead of joy and sentimentality instead of tragedy. One of the defining characteristics of Kitsch is its inherent indifference for things like good taste. It typically describes artifacts produced without any pretense for cultural value. In other words, kitsch aims to satisfy the senses and create a feeling of seduction and lust, while satisfying the needs of the new consumer class hungry for culture.

APPEARANCE OF KITSCH

The first examples of Kitsch appear following the Industrial and the Romantic revolutions. The new middle class had been influenced the most by the popular culture of the time. With the advent of consumption on an industrial scale, the middle class also came to define it. According to Hermann Broch: “Even though it is not Kitsch in and of itself, Romanticism Kitsch can also be perceived as a charismatic expression by the masses. The reason for this is that Kitsch has an emotional density, is easily understandable and consists of signifiers that are already recognizable by the masses. Kitsch creates stereotypes! ‘Pretty, sweet, cute and emotional’ are some common adjectives used to describe Kitsch (H. Broch, 1969). This is perhaps the reason why most of the names of kitschy paintings are literal description of their content (e.g. The Portrait of a Crying Boy). This portrait makes one feel cozy, provides comfort and recognisability. A work like this relies heavily on emotional familiarity and sentimentality. Instead of inspiring us to analyse the causes of the emotional context, it encourages us to accept the content as a given, by depriving us of different perspectives and it inhabits a world where diversity and differences are discouraged. Kitsch is therefore pretty, comforting and easygoing. It doesn’t take risks and asks of us to do the same. The opposite of Kitsch – authentic art, for the lack of a better term – can also be ugly. It can be infuriating and can make you uncomfortable. It does involve a certain willingness to take risks and embrace strangeness and unfamiliarity. While Kitsch can give you a jolt of happiness and joy, ‘authentic art’ can cause pain.



“The Crying Boy”

Since, to an extent, consumer society is a product of capitalism, it also ultimately leads to the destruction of individuality and the increasing uniformity of individuals. Theodore Adorno (T.W. Adorno, 1999), in his book on the culture of industrial products talks about the means of production used to make art profitable. He is against the postmodernist view of Kitsch as a benign and democratic phenomenon.

Or, as Baudrillard (J. Baudrillard, 2010), puts it: “Every one of us lives inside a swamp called Kitsch”. In today’s globalized and interconnected world, this phenomenon is no longer localized and does not belong to one specific culture.

KITSCH AND KOSOVO

If we consider the tendencies way a society develops from a sociological standpoint, we will see that Kosovo has all the optimal conditions to welcome the Kitsch phenomenon. The lack of education over several generations and the spontaneous interaction of the transition have played an important part in the spread of Kitsch in Kosovo. In fact, if we consider that Kosovo is a country at the crossroads, influenced by different cultures and ideologies, with a high unemployment rate and equally high levels of corruption and outright criminality by the ruling elites, as well as high migration rates, whether from rural to urban settings, we can see discern the root causes of this social development (Kahraman, H. B., 2002). In order to understand this sociological phenomenon, we can refer to Baudrillard's diagram of itineraries between Kitsch and the consumer society (Jean Baudrillard, 2010). In this context, the majority of Kosovar society embraced an unhealthy aesthetic raising of consciousness, while dealing with the concepts of high and low culture. The embrace of Kisch in Kosovo began after the post-war financial boom, foreign investments and projects, as well as the rise of a new middle class, largely from the relatively poorer rural areas of the country. From this standpoint, Kosovo became a fertile market for kitschy products.



Horrorchitecture // Lipjan, Kosovo (photo A. Bajmaku 2013)

If we read this image carefully (which could take much more time than reading a Picasso or a Van Gogh painting), we will see the solid representation of the transitional aesthetics that likes this type of mentality. So, you can see that architecture is a reflection of different human behaviours and these behaviours express themselves in different forms, as in the images below.



Examples of Postmodern Hedonism of middle class

The risks that overconsumption carries, as expressions like 'spending mindlessly' or 'abuse' attest, and that is naturally accompanied by the notions like "luxury", abundance and "decadence" (M. Calinescu, 2012). The basic trait of postmodern hedonism is perhaps to excite the desire to consume, to the extent that it becomes a guiding social ideal...

VIOLENCE AGAINST ARCHITECTURE!

The analysis of specific contexts is very important to provide information concerning architectural works which will guide us towards its physical transformation. There is a lot of confusion about the different movements and styles such as postmodernism, traditionalism, or modernism – whether early or late stage – which inherits strong traces from the modernism period and embodies new dimensions of the complexity and the diversity of life. Kitsch occupies the cityscape in the form of its pseudo-Superego (examples of public spaces in Prishtina).



Kosovo Institute of History (photo A. Bajmaku 2013)

Below images show how functions are almost completely divorced from function and the form of the building. Function, in this case, adapts to form, as long as the form remains stable. (E.g.: Swiss Diamond Hotel Prishtina). This leads to the pornographication of the object, where traces of the past are destroyed in order to invent an alternative “fictional past”-

Prishtina during 80-s



Now... back to the Pornography

URBAN TOXIFICATION

Kitch represents a contradictory self-denial, that is, it involves elements that create, in most cases, an internal static conflict for the human eye. The internal static conflict is a moment where you are attacked by opposing elements in the internal chemistry of a society. We refer to it as a static conflict, because changes are impossible within a reasonable amount of time. Its ubiquity makes a different aesthetic conscience a daunting task. Therefore, each way you turn, you will find yet another manifestation of Kitsch. The following images illustrate this and show the ubiquity of this static background. So there is not much that can be done other than introduce time factor. Let us ask then, how long will this unhinged dynamism last and what it will take to foster a more aesthetically elevated character of public spaces? Nonetheless, in contrast to this aesthetic weapon, in the industry of the notion of a buyer, the notion of the idea of achieving wealth, we notice an unconscious escape from Kitsch. The notion ‘buyer’ requires a unique product, driven by the motive to empower the notion of buying power.

Urban toxification examples



KITSCH TOURISM AND CONSUMER CATHEDRALS

They represent an attempt to entice the public to macro-consumption, directed from above! In the Balkan context, this is another example of capitalism and the spaces that were created for the sole purpose of attracting the public with grandiose imitations of opulence. This can be seen in the below image of ‘all-inclusive resorts’ representing a microcosms of a packaged experience, including entertainment, education, shopping, sports, and lifestyle. The resort is a safe bubble that provides the illusion of being in a foreign place, without actually having to engage with the culture and shatter the illusion of paradise that the “vacation” package promises to the consumer. It is a predictable, familiar and safe way to ‘travel’ for the consumer culture, where you know exactly what you are getting in exchange for the money you spend.



Orange County De Luxe Hotel, Turkey (An imitation of Amsterdam)

Similarly, shopping centres – or consumer cathedrals, are a phenomenon that has developed at a neck-breaking pace on a global scale and have also infected our society, which has welcomed it with open arms. Instead of integrating into the existing urban landscape, they become its copy. In other words, they attempt to include all the functions of a city within a single capsule (example: Albi Mall in Prishtina)



Albi Mall - Place of your family!

POST KITSCH

As you walk along the river toward the centre of Skopje, you will encounter a number of gleaming structures, neo-classical building, adorned with columns and ceilings with mythical creatures (nymphs). These buildings were not here five years ago. “It is very kitschy, but it brings many visitors,” says Oliver Stefanovski, Unity Hostel manager, in a Guardian article. Foreign visitors who used to come to Skopje would typically stroll down the Old Bazaar, the narrow streets, mosques and the old castle on the hill overlooking the city. But now they spend only a few minutes, enough to have a Turkish coffee surrounded by Ottoman architecture, in order to return to the centre littered with faux neo-classic European buildings.



Skopje Centre View

This same level of urban chaos has suppressed the development of architecture in Belgrade. “Everything is permitted, from the black market up to illegal new buildings,” says Gordana Vucic-Sheppard in *Culture Versus Kitch: The Battle for Belgrade’s Streets*. According to her, Kitsch exerted most influence during the privatization of public spaces and it expanded in all directions.

In this process of reappropriation and occupation of previously public spaces in the 1990s, Belgrade was flooded with the so-called Turbo Architecture. In his book *Almost Architecture*, Srdjan Jovanovic Weiss says that the Milosevic rule was not a classic dictatorship. In fact, the oppressive strength of his regime lied precisely in the anything-goes culture, where the overall chaos made it difficult to challenge it. This was done primarily in the urban spaces. The author

calls this phenomenon turbo architecture, based on the turbo-folk style of music, which he characterizes it as ‘an immense clash, without any regard to copyright, of modern and traditional culture.

“In music,” continues Jovanović-Weiss “this is expressed in traditional sounds superimposed on loud techno beats of popular ‘Western’ songs. In fashion, this is manifested in female starlets with silicone breasts, puffy collagen lips and pink clothes and men with muscles and gold chains.” In architecture we see blatant examples of Kitsch in the mindless mixing of different influences. Thus, Romanesque influences are mixed with neoclassical ones together with traditional red tiles. Referring to it as a tool in Milosevic’s oppressive arsenal, Jovanović-Weiss calls turbo-architecture a fake cherry on top of the cake



Belgrade Centre Foto

THE BOTOXIFICATION OF BUILDINGS

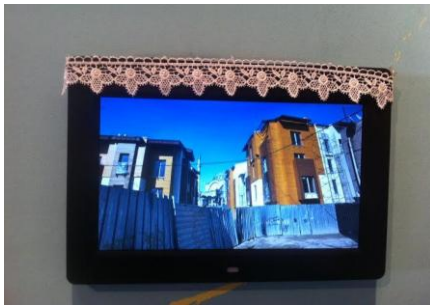
This is an interpretation of the context which reveals contradictory structural aspects and generates a copy-paste style of Kitsch, which with nostalgic hygiene actions, such as attribution, stratification, superimposition, etc, deconstructs the context with results like a formal structural critique, neither homogenous nor fragmented



Skopje (photo D. Anastasof) Urban mythologization

As a kitschy phenomenon par excellence Turbofolk Culture has created a strong network with the elements that ensure its ongoing existence (Özer, 2003). Like turbo-folk culture, Kitsch does not have an identity, history or personality. For these reasons, Kitsch and turbo-folk are intertwined and coexist within postmodernism. As Özer puts it, turbofolk culture and Kitsch are two sides of the same coin and postmodernism cannot escape from them (Özer, 2003).

Istanbul Biennial, 2013 (photo A. Bajmaku) Examples of tradition over technology



In the above images we can clearly see a blend of the traditional and modern aesthetics. Since lace had been status symbol of good taste, and normally, this it was used to cover furniture, such as dining room tables and cupboards. In present times, however, it has come to be seen as a symbol of tackiness and kitschy taste. By contrast, true art reveals and excites, kitch does the exact opposite – it conceals and pacifies the complexity of human experience. To paraphrase Karl Marx “Kitsch is the opium of the people.” With Kitsch as the lowest common denominator, it is attempted to impose a new reality. This is the intrinsic violence of Kitsch. In the specific Albanian and Balkan context, this translates into violence against cities. According to this view, the new elite, which hails overwhelmingly from rural areas, views the city with the suspicion, due to the deeply entrenched prejudices against the rural areas. To be sure, this prejudice is not necessarily limited to those living in cities, but it is also often shared by their compatriots in the countryside and also in the Diaspora. Unfortunately, urbicide – a sort of a revenge on the concept of polis – an organized society working for the common good – tends to pull the collective society down.

Thus, from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the destruction of the old did not make way for a well-planned replacement. The intention was to obliterate all traces of the previous order and to begin from scratch. We can see this in the soc-realist architecture in Prishtina, which replaced the old Ottoman buildings. The modernization was carried out by those who hadn’t yet grasped its essence and were unwittingly recreating it in their own image. One of the most drastic examples is the city of Salonica, which was practically leveled to the ground after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Old pictures of Salonica, e.g., depict a typical Ottoman town, like Prizren or Sarajevo. The modern Salonica, on the other hand, took French architecture as a model. As far as Kosovo is concerned, the Ottoman period was succeeded by the socio-realist brutality of Tito’s Yugoslavia, with the arrival of the repressive regime of Slobodan Milosevic, which also imposed its own tastes. This was manifested in the numerous monuments to medieval Serbian kings and every stage and metastasis of religious Kitsch. A particularly egregious example of this era is the half-built Serbian Orthodox Church purposefully built right in front of the National Library. This was largely intended as a provocation and a show of power over the subjugated majority Kosovar Albanian population, which did not share the same culture or religion. Rather than representing architectural value, it reminds more of the bunkers that littered Albania during the Enver Hoxha rule.

To this end, the prevailing view among Kosovar Albanians is that the building should be demolished. However, the debate still continues over its fate. Despite its very recent origins, Serbs largely see it as a sacred symbol and insist on treating it with the same deference as the actual medieval churches in Kosovo, such as Gracanica and Decani. One of the few proposals that attempts to strike a balance is that of Hajrullah Ceku, a civil society activist, who suggested that the unfinished church be repurposed into a museum of dictatorship.

In Kosovo, the void continues to be filled with objects that reflect the tastes, mentality and politics of the forgers of the new identity. Relatively affluent, they are able to travel, in contrast to most of their compatriots. However, they are not necessarily interested in visiting cultural landmarks when abroad, such as Tate Gallery in London or the British Library Reading Room. It is far more likely that you will find them at a shopping centre, buying expensive clothes or perfumes. You will not find them in a cutting edge restaurant serving molecular dishes, but rather in some Albanian banquet hall, where they can sample ‘down-home’ dishes with the Diaspora community, listening to loud turbo-folk music. Just like the resort vacationers, the Kosovar nouveau riche class is more interested in status symbols than genuine cultural values. It is also not very curious about the outside world, while at the same time imitates some of the more flashy and ostentatious symbols of wealth and power of the West. So they have an almost ritualistic need to display symbols of the new ruling paradigm – in this case Western Europe and the United States.

One example of this aggressive display of status symbols is the Versace house, built by an ardent fan of the brand. Its message is simple – I have a roof over my head, but I also can afford expensive clothing and perfumes. Also, considering the sizeable diaspora in Western Europe, this also signals that the owner has lived abroad and is affluent enough to not only afford a relatively expensive brand, but is exclusively devoted to it. In the same way that these buildings attempt to mask reality with crass status symbols – such as the aforementioned Versace house or the house emblazoned with the Adidas logo – they also attempt to conceal the formerly lower societal status of the owner. These houses lack character by design. The message is clear and one-dimensional: I am wealthy and can afford expensive stuff. Lace covers are more interesting, because they represent a status symbol in decline, as they represent some of the few surviving relics from the late Ottoman Empire period. Today, they are associated with the oriental side of our culture – traditional homes, floor cushions (minder), the skullcaps worn by imams, etc. Ironically, however, this old status symbol did not originate in the East, but in Venice. So, lace covers as a symbol of class and wealth may have well been the late Ottoman Empire equivalent of the modern emulation of Western consumer culture. Nonetheless, these ‘micro-explosions’ of Kitsch in our society represent only one facet of our ‘national virus.’ The turbo-folk culture and its idiom of perceptual anarchy, appeals to lust and confusion, the constant assault on the senses, has very strong parallels with Kitsch. By creating a landscape of ideological superimpositions, the disappearance of positive traditional values as well as the spirit of critique offered by Modernism, Kitsch continues to be a common societal reference point (Madra, 2008). These examples show us the inevitable rise of the turbo-folk culture and its correlation with the post-war transition period in Kosovo.



The Tasteless Authoritarian Kitsch Hero The Salesman

This wouldn't have been possible without the often synonymous, business and political elites, which dictate their ideology through turbo-folk culture and taste, instead of creating a fertile

environment for genuine artistic expression. This has practical uses as well, because by appealing to the lowest common denominators, the newly affluent corrupt political class creates the illusion that it is the same as the people who can only afford imitations of cultural status symbols. There is little investment in art projects or public spaces that do not benefit or glorify the ruling elites. There is however a tendency for the small 'high-brow' cultural scene to turn inwards and not reach out to the masses. E.g. cultural events are generally limited to urban centres, with little attempt to reach out the rural areas.. In his "Five Faces of Modernity," Calinescu explores the character of Kitsch, in its etymological, artistic and sociological context.

CONCLUSION

If Kitsch equals bad taste, then we have to ask ourselves what is bad taste. According to Calinescu, bad taste is very difficult to define. Thus considering its pervasiveness and largely subjective nature, a multidisciplinary approach is needed for a proper analysis of this cultural trait. One example of the interdisciplinary approach to examining Kitsch is the psychological aspect of it, which explains Kitsch as a form of escape from reality. From the sociological and literary standpoint, Calinescu cites the time factor as one of the reasons people give for reading 'easier' books, for example. Furthermore, the Frankfurt School with T.V. Adorno and Max Horkheimer put forward the notion of 'culture industry' as a way to explain the mass character of entertainment and the lowering of cultural tastes it entails. Art is seen as an entertainment commodity. Kitsch is therefore an aesthetic lie, acceptable to the masses. Nonetheless, Kitsch may not be seen as a serious threat. As Abraham Moles puts it: "The easiest and the best path to good taste leads through bad taste." (Moles, 1971)

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