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# How is One to Speak Badly about Art?

The loss of the ability or even the need to evaluate, which is more grievous since it is accompanied by an intensifying thirst for value, is one of the most serious problems facing contemporary history of art. Not only do such categories as a 'great artist' or 'masterpiece' disappear but there remains the other side of the question – problems involved in adopting a critical stance; in saying that art is bad. The former reflection on art, which emerged from a humanistic tradition, was concentrated, above all, on its positive values and little thought was devoted to bad art. The problem of the 'aesthetics of ugliness' appeared later, in the middle of the 19th century<sup>1</sup>. Rimbaud's confession made in *Alchimie du Verbe*: '[...] je [...] trouvais dérisoires les célébrités de la peinture et de la poésie modernes. J'aimais les peintures idiotes, dessus de portes, décors, toiles de saltimbanques, enseignes, enluminures populaires; la littérature démodée, latin d'église, livres érotiques sans orthographe, romans de nos aïeux, contes de fées, petits livres de l'enfance, opéras vieux, refrains niais, rythmes naïfs'<sup>2</sup>, prophetically predicts the future concerns of aestheticians, art theoreticians and, primarily, of the artists themselves. The height of interest in bad art, which for a number of decades had been known as kitsch, was in the 1950s and 1960s. This reflection had already become necessary considering the problems which had been increasing for some time: the negation, already in the previous century, of the 'aesthetics of beauty', the destruction of all aesthetic norms and the undermining of the need to rely on and create such norms. On the other hand, art was abruptly invaded by the world of Rimbaudian fascinations: trivial and vulgar images, cheap materials, common objects, banal words. From the cubist collages using every sort of material, through surrealist fascinations with banality, up to the pop-art apotheosis of mass culture, art began to include 'the remnants of life and reality', to feed upon them, to revive its language with their aid, to shock and scandalize; sometimes to dissolve itself totally in them.

Studies about kitsch or bad art are numerous but only a few are written with an academic approach based on the traditional workshop of art history. Indeed, it would be difficult, to unambiguously describe

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<sup>1</sup> K. Rosenkranz, *Aesthetik des Hässlichen*, Königsberg 1853 (ed. facsimil. – Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt 1968).

<sup>2</sup> A. Rimbaud, *Alchimie du Verbe*, Paris 1941.

many of those books and articles since they oscillate between aesthetics, sociology, psychology, critique and essays which cannot be specifically classified<sup>3</sup>.

What are the reasons behind this state of affairs? It would appear that tendencies in contemporary art history research, moving beyond traditional circles associated with the 'beaux-arts', should take into account all visual mediums, even those whose artistic function is subordinated to another function<sup>4</sup>.

However, by reducing all works to the status of a given culture's artifacts, artistic values are apparently neutralised by the iconology, sociology and psychology of art, its semiotics or structuralism. This neutralisation was not always expressed or intended by product of shifting research interests into other problems and values, e.g. world outlook, contents, spiritual expression, social functions, problems of perception, communication, the transmission of information and meanings, etc.

The history of art is still charged with having an apologetic character. It is true that it continues to devote very little space to art that is considered to be bad; it also has little place for artistic failures creative defeats and analyses of abortive works. These are remembered or even shown – vide, various 'blacks legends' – whenever they constitute an indispensable hagiographical element in the ever present schema of 'martyrdom and posthumous triumph'. The acknowledging of positive values in art seems to be necessary for sanctioning the object of research, and this will usually result in tending additional value to mediocre art. How often in popular works on provincial, second rate and stylistically 'backward' (and hence frequently Polish) art do we come across assurances that 'it is not worse' than certain highly regarded paragons. Paweł Beylin noticed that when a comparison is made between history proper and the history of victory of art, one is struck by one difference – world history is a history of defeats while the history of art is only a history of victories, won either during life or posthumously. The very act of becoming part of that history is already a sign of success, while failure in art is tantamount to one's absence in its history<sup>5</sup>. This comparison leads to other reflections pertaining to the consequen-

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<sup>3</sup> For example the essays and articles by many authors (J. Duvignaud, H. Broch, J. McHalle, K. Pawek, L. Giesz, L. Eisner, U. Volli, V. Gregotti, A. Celebonović) in an anthology edited by G. Dorfles, *Le Kitsch. Un catalogue raisonné du mauvais goût*, Paris 1978 (1st ed. 1968, a number of foreign language editions), also A. Moles, *Psychologie du kitsch. L'art du bonheur*, Paris 1971.

<sup>4</sup> L. Kalinowski, *Model funkcjonalny przekazu wizualnego (A Functional Model of Visual Transmission)*, [in:] *Renesans. Sztuka i ideologia (The Renaissance. Art and Ideology)*, Warszawa 1976, p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> P. Beylin, *Kicz jako zjawisko estetyczne (Kitsch as an Artistic Phenomenon)*, [in:] idem, *Autentyczność i kicze (Authenticity and Kitsch)*, Warszawa 1975 (1st ed. 1968), p. 208.



ce of the history of art borrowing certain stereotypes from social history. James Ackerman warned in his 1960 article on history and the problems of criticism against obliterating certain fundamental differences between developments in politics and developments in art. He stressed that the basic difference rests on criteria of evaluation. Political events are judged by their outcome. The battle of Waterloo was important because it changed the balance of power in Europe. This was good or bad depending on whether one was English or French. Even if we are unconvinced about the existence of objective and absolute values of art, we must admit that art should not be judged upon the basis of its influence upon the art of a later period. Meanwhile, by looking backwards and knowing the effects and consequences, the history of art very often evaluates artworks according to their impact. Therefore, that which proved influential is considered to be valuable and important. Precisely because retrospection permits the applying of later work's norms to an earlier one, the history of art can become a history of great successes. A work which has been ignored by a few ensuing generations becomes 'marginal' while a work which won the approval of the next generation, suddenly belongs to the 'main trend' of development. It is true that often it is the most influential art which has the greatest value but there is not necessarily a connection between influence and merit. Bad art is sometimes tremendously popular while good art lacks supporters. In modern art particularly, 'progress' and 'influence' have become a yardstick in evaluating significance to such an extent that whatever is (or appears to be) a step forward is valued more highly. It is the 'progressive model' of art which makes it obvious for us that Cézanne was a precursor of cubism and not that the cubists were the epigones of Cézanne. By saying that Cézanne was a precursor of cubism we presume, silently or unconsciously, that cubist painting, as a later phenomenon, should be placed higher than Cézanne. Only the genius of the master from Aix, who 'preceded his times', eliminated that disproportion resulting from the 'progress of art'.

Since it is impossible to find in orthodox art history either the method or practice of the negative evaluation of art, let us refer back to the earlier mentioned studies which liberally use concepts and methods of various disciplines. It is strange that the phenomenon of insignificant social detriment, such as the 'peintures idiotes', cheap comics, absurd gadgets, tasteless fineries or gaudy decorations can provoke such a vehement reaction and such extreme judgements as the declaration that 'kitsch is a pathological phenomenon, a combination of underdevelopment and overgrowth, it is a cancer on the body of art'. — 'Kitsch contains falsehood, which conceals the presence of a moral evil', the producer of kitsch is not a worse artist. He cannot be judged according to aesthetic categories but ethical ones, as an evil-doer, 'since kitsch reveals radical evil, evil-in-itself, which is the extreme pole of absolute negation within the system of value, kitsch must

be regarded as evil, not only for art but for the entire system of value'<sup>6</sup>. These sentences taken from an essay on kitsch, reveal a hysterical note. Such catastrophic lament must give rise to a suspicion that it is used for silencing what Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno described as 'the dirty conscience of lofty culture'.

It is hardly a straightforward thing to answer the basic question what kitsch actually is, from the ominous diagnoses, warnings and often devious scientific arguments. The situation has changed little from the time when Beylin wrote that 'kitsch is an imprecise ambiguous concept, used practically intuitively [...] it is a negative manner. But this is where the ambiguity ends. We understand those negative traits to refer to the most divergent issues'<sup>7</sup>. Let us ask, putting aside for the time being the problem of unambiguity, what negative features are perceived in kitsch, that artistic anti-value? We are not concerned with the ethymology of the word, deduced on a number of occasions, nor with its definition which is usually created by negation or opposition. Kitsch is primarily the opposite of art, since the word 'art', even if its meaning is unclear, is always connected with positive values. This is, therefore, a rather emotional opposition and in order to make it more dramatic and concrete, it was even attempted to use the antonym 'Christ versus Anti-Christ'<sup>8</sup>. Traditional reflections about art concentrated on creating norms and principles of good art thereby allowing the reconstructing of its negative side. By reading the recommendations of Alberti, Leonardo or the strictly private reflections of Delacroix we are able to reconstruct what in their estimate was bad or improper in art and does not deserve to be called art. One could even undertake the construction of an imaginary anti-masterpiece. At present, there is no positive model, not only for contemporary art but also for art of the past, although various routine habits of evaluation camouflage this situation. This is the reason why all the very numerous definitions and characteristics which are based on negations, contradictions and on the prefix 'anti', encounter a void.

Many scholars, aware of the difficulties, attempted not so much to describe the phenomenon of kitsch as to indicate periods which favour the appearance of bad art. This historical interpretation of kitsch is an illusory solution since the reason for a given choice must also be defined in this case or else they are revealed by that very choice and its argumentation. When and under what circumstances does kitsch appear? The answers vary. Some say that kitsch was a product of the 19th century as a vulgar version of Romanticism<sup>9</sup>, others claim that kitsch has always existed. At this point, a rain of *Schadenfreude* will ensue resulting from the abuse of various

<sup>6</sup> H. Broch, *Quelques Remarques sur le problème du Kitsch* (original text 1951), quoted according to: Dorfles, *Le Kitsch...*, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> Beylin, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>8</sup> Broch, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>9</sup> Broch is an ardent spokesman of this view: 'Romanticism is the father of kitsch and



museum sanctities. One could conduct a long discussion with the 'historical' interpretations of kitsch, beginning with correcting the common factual errors with which they abound. The factor which disqualified them in the first place is the pride and self-assurance of certain authors, for whom a centuries-old artistic accomplishment is neither an object or source of cognition but, like the accused, it is either condemned as 'an excellent and pure example of kitsch in its entirety' or generously pardoned because it is, on the whole, distant from kitsch although it includes some of its elements'. This is the same mechanism based on a method of art criticism which gave rise to the mode of 'progressive Art'. This mechanism can also work in the opposite direction, not supporting but condemning. Evaluating artworks from the perspective of their subsequent influence results in their devaluation. This method of evaluation was commonly employed by authors of the historical interpretations of kitsch who in a sacrilegious ecstasy conducted a supposed demystification of the canonised artistic giants. 'At present... the inclusion of Raphael in the group of great authors of kitsch is in Western literature accepted to such an extent that it borders on the banal', wrote Andrzej Banach in a work published in 1968, in which he further wrote that: 'Three schemes of artistic kitsch, exaggeratedly employed during the 19th century, namely: the too-likeable beauty of Raphael's works, the naturalism of Leonardo's and the brutal expressionism of Michaelangelos's, force us to critically evaluate 16th century art'<sup>10</sup>. Actually, the same scheme of precursorship is at work here, with the difference that Raphael and the others became the precursors of kitsch because a few hundred years later their works supplied models for cheap souvenirs and religious trinkets.

Apart from a search for historical rules and the searching for the origin of kitsch, attempts are also made to define its typology. These efforts, depending on the author's *esprit de système*, are of a more or less systematic nature, while their learned character is supposed to be guaranteed by various tables, diagrams, mathematical curves and vectors (which abound in the study by Moles). In the first place, it is noticed that the concept of kitsch is used in extremely varied ways, both as regards the features of artworks, and in connection with their functions, in relation to objects as well as towards people, attitudes, experiences and behaviour. Kitsch can be understood intentionally or unintentionally, subjectively or objectively; it can be characterised externally or internally. It can be seen as a product of nature or of man. The concept of kitsch can be historical or universal; it can also classify<sup>11</sup>. Once again let us return to the question what are

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sometimes the son is alike the father so much that it is impossible to tell them apart'.

<sup>10</sup> A. Banach, *O kiczu (On Kitsch)*, Kraków 1968, p. 298, 300.

<sup>11</sup> T. Pawłowski, *Pojęcie kiczu (The Concept of Kitsch)*, "Studia Filozoficzne", 1972, No 6, p. 76–96; idem, *Kicz i powtarzanie (Kitsch and Repetition)*, "Studia Estetyczne", November 1974, p. 51–55.

regarded to be the traits of kitsch? The answers, whether formulated in learned dissertations or in journalistic pamphlets turn out to be quite similar; kitsch is devoid of originality, it is based on repetition, it copies, it is secondary, conventional, and superficial and its attraction lies in its most primitive feature. It is characterised by an easily accessible form and lucidity of contents well-known to everyone. The five principles of kitsch, formulated by Engelhardt and Killy, and later developed by Moles, are: unadaptability, cumulativeness, synesthesia, averageness and comfort. Lack of space prevents any debate with the copious literature on this subject in which originality is combined with the commonplace, acuteness with conceit and sensitivity with doctrinaire opinions. One is reminded of Pawel Beylin's warning 'that it would be a Herculean task, to clean out this stable of ambiguity and introduce conceptual order to the multi-storied structure of aesthetic evaluation'<sup>12</sup>. The introduction to such order, the author goes on, would call for the creation of a more adequate language of aesthetic concepts. Although we shall not undertake such an attempt, we shall also not limit ourselves to the ascertainment of ambiguity or the enumeration of the greatly varied meanings of ambiguous terms; let us take a closer look at certain premises and criteria for a negative evaluation. One of the most frequent sources of poor standard artworks is the transposition from one medium to another. Gillo Dorfles described this as the 'betrayal of the medium'<sup>13</sup> embracing a variety of pictures from books, films based on books, books inspired by films, musical comedies based on dramas, television adaptations, comics or photo-stories. A transposition can be the film version of *Swann in Love* and a plastic locket with Leonardo's *The Lady with the Ermine*. In both cases, the original work was transposed onto another, unsuitable language, giving an inadequate effect or one in bad taste. Everyone is familiar with failed adaptations. Literature in particular suffers from a transposition into the multi-substance language of the cinema; in this way *Crime and Punishment* becomes a crime story and *War and Peace* changes into a costume melodrama while the fate of Swann in Proust *Remembrance of Things Past* is presented as a love story. But the universal nature of a certain phenomenon, after all, does not constitute a rule. Among the countless banal *Carmens* there was the splendid *Carmen* by Saura. What is in this case the original, primary medium? Is it music or literature? Was Bizet's *Carmen* the 'betrayal' of a novel by Prosper Mérimée, which became the basis of the libretto? This question gives rise to further doubts. Contemporary adaptations and especially the vulgar versions of great literary works by the cinema and all devouring television serials arouse an understandable hostility. But one cannot forget or not know that the overwhelming majority of the European visual arts came into being precisely *via* transposition. From the end of antiquity

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<sup>12</sup> Beylin, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> G. Dorfles, *Les Monuments*. [in:] idem, *Le Kitsch...* p. 85 sqq.



up to the 19th century the main task of a painter or sculptor was to translate words into visual forms. All the paintings portraying scenes from *The Bible*, mythology, poetry or literature – and they, after all, constitute the core of European art – were products of this ‘betrayal of the medium’. That very ‘betrayal’ was recommended by the principle *ut pictura poësis*. Moreover, the history of art furnishes many examples of entire chains of inspiration which combine not only the most varied media, but also materials, styles or means of expression. Holy or literary texts were topics for paintings which, in turn, were transposed to the graphic arts, frescoes, goldsmithery; they became the source of inspiration for poets and had their musical equivalents. The avant-garde of the 20th century further intensified the ‘interdisciplinary’ approach by adding to the traditional media all that which was introduced by contemporary technology. Art gives birth to art, and this is a source of its vitality, and not of weakness or degeneration. Transposition embraces masterpieces as well as mediocre or simple bad works, but the very fact of transposition does not decide their value. The argument of the ‘betrayal of the medium’ is made topical and expanded so as to include contemporary adaptation techniques by means of the 19th century argument of the adherents of ‘pure painting’ who opposed ‘literature’ in painting; its source should be sought in Lessingian distinctions. The mechanism of the illusory diagnosis is based on the simple fact that anything viewed from one side only will seem so superficial and straight forward that no historical confrontation or verification is ever given.

The situation is similar as regards another, apparently simple rule – ‘the falsehood of the material’. Here ‘the source of failure is perceived not in the application of an unsuitable medium, but in the employment of unsuitable material. Unsuitable as a rule means cheaper, substitutive, and imitative. Thus – plaster instead of marble, plastic instead of metal, rhinestones instead of diamonds, tombac instead of gold and all kinds of synthetic imitations in place of wood, brick, stone, bronze and leather. The enormous number of objects described as kitsch or in bad taste includes mass-produced objects from new, cheap materials which were once unique and hand-made from ‘noble’ materials. The ‘suitability of material’ principle belongs to the same set of norms as ‘beauty which consists of its subjugations to function’, ‘truth based on the materials used to create the work’, ‘forms corresponding with function’ etc. These principles, although usually formulated in a very determined manner, are not ‘eternal’ but are shaped according to concrete historical developments and within the context of problems emerging from mass industrial production and technological innovation resulting in the conflict between mechanised and manual labour, between art and technology. These problems which were fundamental in the evaluating of art during the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, appear today not so much solved as no longer topical because of the subsequent development of art and, above all, in-

dustrial design which in many of its achievements has overcome such conflicts. Only those who look for traces of kitsch still continue to anachronically see a remedy for the tide of cheap objects in 'the truth of material', and seem not to notice the expensive kitsch made of real marble, bronze, wood or oil painted canvas.

Both the question of the 'betrayal of the medium' and of the 'falsehood of material' lead to a superior criterion, that is, imitation, which is universally recognized as a source of kitsch. In an analysis of originality as a criterion for excellence, Horst Janson<sup>14</sup> pointed out a variety of dangers connected with its use. 'Originality' signifies not only the unique character of an artwork as a physical object but, above all, its uniqueness and inimitability as the expression of a creative personality. This is the 'water on which no one has sailed' in Dante's *Paradise*. Original – means exceptional, different from others but also 'new'. Originality, as a yardstick for artistic values, conceals traps because it makes it necessary to presume that no judgements based upon it are final since we can never be sure that we have made all the possible comparisons. A work detached from its context can be for us unusual but we are, after all, incapable of saying what is original in it and what is repetition or universal convention. Hence it is commonly understood that rare things are described as 'original' while things which appear on a mass scale are automatically deprived of originality. The greatest trap in using the criterion of originality is the fact that it is so often identified with 'newness'. The consequence of this was an indiscriminate affirmation of 'modernity' which only recently has been overcome. One must remain aware of the fact that change itself does not contain any essential value, just as value is no greater in the absence of change. Art does not become good or bad only because it reveals new traits, although from the time when the concept of progress was added to art<sup>15</sup>, it was expected to supply newness in various forms. We can see, on the other hand, how futile conceived innovation is, beginning with futurism which in its acquisitive search for newness left behind so few meaningful works which look just as old-fashioned as the 'broadchested locomotives' and 'gliding flight of airplanes' praised by Marinetti. The 20th century acceleration of the course of artistic life, on the other hand, brought about an extraordinarily swift process of surrounding 'original' and 'new' works with mass-scale produced copies in which the original works seem to dissolve themselves, helpless in the face of their own progeniture, and at best defended by the critics who remember and protect the right of priority. Hence no one has fought as the members of the avant-garde did for the right of priority, for the sake of newness seen as a primary

<sup>14</sup> H. Janson, *Originality as a Ground for Judgement of Excellence*, [in:] *Art and Philosophy. A Symposium*, ed. S. Hook, New York 1966, p. 24–31.

<sup>15</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *The Renaissance Concept of Artistic Progress and Its Consequences*, [in:] *Actes du XVIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès International de l'Histoire de l'Art*, Amsterdam 1952, p. 291–303.



and independent value, even going so far as to antedate artworks (Malevich). On the other hand, let us note how a great number of objects which are condemned in various anthologies of bad taste, are strikingly original – all those camping huts in the shape of a hiking boots, lamps with revolving shades imitating goldfish in a bowl, thermometres in the shape of Coca-Cola bottles etc. They are not, after all, a copy of any 'superior' model which they make vulgar or of which they are a caricature. The vulgarity in this instance was the tendency to treat as a fetish all newness regarded as a value characteristic for superior art. Beylin's opinion that kitsch imitates authentic art indirectly, by copying not so much concrete elements and ideas but conventions under which the imitated works were created<sup>16</sup> can be expanded to include the imitation of attitudes, general premises and aims.

Another often mentioned trait of kitsch and bad art is the 'incoherence' resulting from mixing styles and material; in confronting elements or objects of different origin, age or value. This charge was probably the main premise for condemning the stylistically 'impure' architecture of the 19th century and it shows distinctly how negative criteria are involved in the not always consciously adapted traditions of an aesthetics generally described as classical, for which such features as 'uniformity' and 'cohesion' were one of the basic principles. They are the outcome of the rules of ancient rhetorics and its demand to observe a concrete style. It would appear that 'a combination of heterogenous factors', which the aesthetics of that era regarded as unacceptable, was rehabilitated by 20th century art in cubist collages, ready-mades, happenings, surrealistic encounters of an 'umbrella and sewing machine on the operating table'. In addition, the history of art already at the beginning of our century gave an affirmative answer to the 'mixing of styles' (Wickhoff). Attention was drawn to the fact that in contrast to the principle of distinguishing styles, their mixture is an 'open' way of acting, with the aid of which already from the Middle Ages ever new aspects of everyday life, ordinary and trivial, would be included within the artistic medium. Such an attitude enabled the rehabilitation of various periods associated with the decline of art, which are usually characterised by their heterogeneous nature and 'stylistic impurity': the late antiquity, the Late-Middle Ages, Mannerism. This rehabilitation did not include, at that time, 19th century art, since it was too contemporary and violently contested by emerging 'modernity'. Its re-evaluation occurred much later, and has been continued to the present day. Moreover, contemporary art history questions the conviction, as was the habit of Schmoll (gen. Eisenwerth)<sup>17</sup>, of the existence at any time of artistically homogenous and stylistically

<sup>16</sup> Beylin, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> J. A. Schmoll gen. Eisenwerth, *Stilpluralismus statt Einheitszwang. Zur Kritik der Stilepochen-Kunstgeschichte*, [in:] *Argo. Festgeschrift für Kurt Bad*, Köln 1970.

pure periods, seeing in such a conception an idealistic construction of 19th century historiography.

The conception of kitsch as a result of 'mixing styles' is, therefore, the last domain in which old aesthetic prejudices have managed to survive. This is an extremely delicate matter since one feels intuitively and easily which 'mixture of styles' is innovative, provocative, sophisticated and creative, and which is only the outcome of a greedy or accidental accumulation. 'Incoherence', 'mixed styles' and the divergence of artworks can be regarded as part of a much wider problem – the moving of art beyond its own area, the mixture not so much of styles, but of media of expression and language, the combination of 'art' and 'reality'. Reaching for what is beyond art, and exceeding the framework of artistic borders, are specific features of 20th century art and not only of the plastic art at that. Phenomena which occur in contemporary art represent only the most distinct and simplistic symptoms of mixing art and 'non-art'. A wider perspective on the issue makes it possible to see that fine arts were always characterised by a tendency to 'surpass oneself' and, as Gombrich proved<sup>18</sup>, to overcome the limits of one's means of expression and to enter into unsuitable or alien terrain – hence the phenomenon of the 'betrayal of the medium'. Throughout the centuries various attempts were undertaken to make paintings speak. The illusion of triple dimension on a two-dimensional surface was created in different ways. Deceptive depth was painted on flat surfaces. The illusion of movement and action was created in sculptures and paintings. By using the entire arsenal of talent and artistic skills, attempts were made to seize the spectator, together with his surrounding space and hurl him into the framework of artistic space. During the period when mimicry was at its intensest, obliterating the border between art and reality in 19th century panoramas became no longer a medium but the main aim. The 20th century inclusion within art of 'residues of life and reality' signified a breach with mimetic trend but simultaneously constituted another step towards joining together art and reality; art and what lies beyond it.

By employing its own categories, aesthetics is unable to reach those processes which lay at the heart of conventionality and anticonventionality in art, and which themselves are no longer of an aesthetic nature<sup>19</sup>. Here also seems to be the reason for the majority of the "innumerable problems and misunderstandings found in studies on kitsch, bad art and other off-artistic phenomena that aspire to be art. This trend is accompanied by an apologetic tendency, typical for the history of art, which paralyzes an analysis of that which cannot be regarded positively as 'artistic'. The acceptance of the

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<sup>18</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Action and Expression in Western Art*, [in:] *Non-verbal Communication*, Cambridge 1972, p. 375–394.

<sup>19</sup> Beylin, *op. cit.*, p. 201.



'open concept of art', postulated by Werner Hoffman<sup>20</sup>, does not solve anything; even if we were to agree to include within its range everything that at a given moment is considered art, or simply difficult to classify otherwise, we would still be without definite criteria enabling us to examine and evaluate phenomena thus described. Even if we were to paraphrase Hoffman to include within the concept of art the epigones of Andy Warhol, we shall still be unable to answer the basic question — what is the qualitative difference between him and his imitators. Therefore, reflections on kitsch or bad art, although seemingly the product of problems created by contemporary art and mass culture, remain a continuation, not always conscious, of the old school of art theory. Now, only the point of gravity has been transferred — formerly in the normative and commentative theory of art, the primary position was held by good art, which today has been replaced by bad art. It is the latter which occupies the mind, demands a diagnosis, and for which remedies are sought. Is it possible to find a dominant opinion expressed on this subject? It seems that even all deformities which resulted from placing originality very highly in the hierarchy of artistic values did not change the universal and very deep conviction that bad art is predominantly unauthentic; i.e. art which pretends to be something that it is not. 'Unauthenticity' includes all such traits as imitation, inferiority, deceitfulness, pretentiousness and the creation of appearances. The evil inherent in art is, therefore, predominantly falsehood. It is the negation not of art, but of truth. Much is said on the subject that bad art deceives people and that people want to be deceived. This is true only as regards the compensatory function of art. No one, after all, accepts falsehood. The adherents of kitsch treat it with trust and in earnest. Of course, an entire series of conventions enables the functioning of surrogates whose deceitfulness and illusory nature will be highly regarded. However, when something becomes exposed as a concealed falsehood, or intentional fraud then it will be rejected. This discovery and rejection are conducted on different levels of aesthetic consciousness but they nevertheless remain a common reaction. The stubborn conviction and feeling that associate evil in art with that which is untrue, indicate the inseparability of aesthetic, ethical and cognitive criteria. Somewhere at the bottom there seems to have survived the old conviction that *verum, bonum et pulchrum convertuntur*.

It might well seem an exaggeration to refer to the highest axiological ideals in such a context as reflections on contemporary kitsch. Twentieth century 'high' art, together with its autonomy and the splendid isolation of galleries, forces us to judge only according to the suitable aesthetic criteria. Paradoxically perhaps the need to discover in art additional values is reflected precisely

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<sup>20</sup> W. Hofmann, *Kitsch und Trivialkunst als Gebrauchskünste*, [in:] *Das Triviale in Literatur, Musik und bildender Kunst*, ed. H. de la Motte-Haber, Frankfurt/Main 1972, p. 210–225.

in the evaluation of low, common, mass-produced art. This does not mean, of course, that this type of art offers any values. On the contrary, it enables us to experience their absence also in 'high' art. Herein lies the answer to the query which perhaps should have been posed at the very beginning – why should one deal at all with bad art? The answer is: in order to experience that gap between good and bad art and not only to bring out the lighter aspects by making the dark ones even darker.

Other uses of kitsch and trivials were described by the outstanding author Jerzy Andrzejewski who wrote that 'contempt for substantive and artistic kitsch seems to me as absurd as contempt for manure which, perhaps is unpleasant to look at and to smell, but thanks to which the plant world achieves its bountiful fertility. I would even risk the statement that the majority of works to a certain measure owe their excellence precisely to the elements of kitsch, both past and present, since it is kitsch – facile, impatient, and flattering even in rebellion – which reacts in the most direct way to the vast manifestations of life. It makes them trivial, and simplifies them of course! But in the ultimate effect it acts as a beneficial manure because it has always been and continues to be that lofty art is nourished not only by life and its own artists but also by the most divergent symptoms of art, including the bizarre, every day and trivial ones although the great masters usually dislike admitting to such affiliations. I would say even more, that I do not trust masterpieces which due to their petrified perfection make it impossible to convey the disappearing echoes and shades of vulgar and intrusive kitsch. A great talent does everything which he wants to do and a genius only that which he is able to. I fear I have stolen this last sentence from someone, but I have no idea from whom'<sup>21</sup>.

Translated by Aleksandra Rodzińska

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<sup>21</sup> J. Andrzejewski, *Miazga (Pulp)*, Warszawa 1979, p. 6.