

The age of kitsch: Our culture seen as a period of 'uncertainty of form'; art and Kitsch are not opposites

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The word 'kitsch' is one of those words, including in Dutch, that has had a successful career. I happen to remember that I was well into my twenties when I first became conscious of the term being used; since then I have often worked with the concept 'kitsch', because it can be used to refer to all sorts of tacky and sentimental things that we habitually contrast with 'serious' cultural phenomena. It is possible to say, without exaggeration, that for the average civilised Dutch person, kitsch is today a common expression corresponding to a particular, more or less vague, yet more or less defined conception.

This is not to say that everyone who uses the word 'kitsch' has formed an accurate understanding of the consequences attached to that word. On the contrary, one person calls something kitsch which another calls art; the boundaries between kitsch and art are completely dependent on personal value judgement, because both concepts have a shared basis in the human ability to produce cultural products. The painter, the musician, the writer often feels conscious of their superiority as 'artists', able to refer with some contempt to Bogaerts' [1],[#N1] painting, jazz, and Courths-Mahler [2],[#N2] as 'kitsch' (and to the extent that they draw on common language use, they are entitled to do so); but that does not yet mean that the maid-servant who defends Courths-Mahler with all her heart would not have equal right to regard Pijper's [3],[#N3] music as kitsch. The fact that the maid-servant does not know the word 'kitsch' is naturally no argument against this proposition; because one can be sure that in the cases where she encounters the music of Pijper or a painting by Kandinsky, [4],[#N4] the maid-servant will be no less heartfelt in her scorn for this cultural product than the 'artist' will claim to be in reverse; and that scorn is what it is all about. The scorn expressed by the word 'kitsch' shows that in our culture there is a conflict between those who reject particular products as 'kitsch', and those who nevertheless find full satisfaction in those products, and thus regard the 'artistic' products of the 'upper class' as pure nonsense. In this conflict it is inadequate simply to support those who scorn kitsch, even though that seems easiest; there is still an enormous vitality in the admiration for kitsch, which one can only spurn if one *per se* places the snobbism of the 'artistic' world about all else. That is why it is in the first place necessary to take account of the utility of the concept 'kitsch'; because neither the artist nor the maid-servant have the final say on the question of cultural production.

The historical-materialist approach

An extremely incisive essay on this rich topic can be found in this month's *Die Sammlung* magazine. It is written by Norbert Elias and is titled *The Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch*. The article is based on a historical-materialist world-view; the writer thus does not start from the 'artistic' evaluation of the word 'kitsch', but from the social relationships out of which the word and concept arose. The historical-materialist method is – this article makes it clear to me yet once more – extraordinarily fruitful, when it is applied by an

intelligent person; in the hands of a dogmatist it is appalling to the same degree, because it gives rise to speaking with an air of disdain about culture as a phenomenon that just needs to be turned around to become crystal clear for every Marxist party member. For writers with the intelligence of a Diderot, a Stendhal, a Trotsky or a Marx, however, materialism has been a beneficial response to various quasi-metaphysical presuppositions; as such, it constitutes the appropriate soil for an unconstrained mode of thinking, even today. One must never forget that thought can only be productive when it is personal; and for those who do not want from the outset to declare the spirit as holy and condemn the material as kitsch, materialism is a necessary gateway, because it frees thought from the conventional style of reasoning of the quasi-metaphysical person.

Norbert Elias, the writer of the article in question, is one of those who make intelligent use of materialism. That is why his reflections on the 'age of kitsch' are original and full of insights. Elias broadens the concept 'kitsch' by applying it to our whole culture as such; here historical materialism has shown him the way, because historical materialism shows us, *inter alia*, that changes in social structure are reflected in cultural phenomena. For Elias the starting point is precisely this reflection; kitsch reflects a social order. I'll leave to one side for the moment the extent to which the cultural emerges from the material; because in any case with this method Elias achieves very original things. For me he is the first to have determined the conceptual meaning of the word 'kitsch', without immediately running aground on the prior limitations of the word, by remaining completely detached from the preconceptions about kitsch aimed at the maid-servant.

Court style and kitsch style

Elias begins by showing that the distinction between, for example, 'baroque' and 'rococo' or between Louis XIV and the Régence style, is wholly insignificant compared to the distinction between the styles of the eighteenth century on the one hand and the nineteenth century on the other. This is because, according to Elias, the former differences in style were only differences within the same social milieu, while the differences between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were determined by the rise of a new social order, the capitalist-industrial order, the decline of the old, still more or less feudal, order. 'Court style and taste were replaced by those of the capitalist bourgeoisie'.

Court style is for some the last style there ever was, because the nineteenth century heralded a period of formative chaos. Elias concedes this; and precisely because of this he suggests calling the style of the 'capitalist' or 'liberal' period the kitsch style. Not (and one must understand this properly!) because he wants to lump all the expressions of that period together, but because the rise and development of the bourgeoisie took culture into a completely different arena than before, when the court and the surrounding aristocracy were the 'cultural consumers'. 'Kitsch' sounds very negative, but Elias says quite correctly that the words 'baroque' and 'gothic', which have since become generally accepted, did not have a much more positive ring to them than 'kitsch'. In the first place, the word 'kitsch', as a characterisation of the style of the age, expresses the great uncertainty of artistic production which accompanies industrial, mechanised society. The descent into formlessness in this period is a constant threat even for the greatest minds, because the eighteenth century aristocratic formal tradition had disappeared. Quite correctly Elias remarks: 'The formal tendencies of the works of great artists, whether they were called Heine or Victor Hugo, Wagner or Verdi, Rodin or Rilke, were intimately connected to those displaced by the mediocre works, which we dismiss as aberrations, as products of disintegration and decadence, as "kitsch"; one merges easily and imperceptibly into the other'. I have tried to illustrate that here with contrasting images [below]. [5].[#N5]. Elias concludes that the basic situation of the age of kitsch and art are the same; with the most sublime minds, Gide, Proust, George and Thomas Mann, one sees that their style and manipulation of materials have something cramped about them, resulting from their struggle against their shared basic situation.

One will have to concede that this definition of 'kitsch' is attractive, at any rate significant. Personally, I find the description of the style of the capitalist-industrial period as kitsch style generally justified by the facts.

Tension between specialists and the masses.

In the second part of his study, Elias examines the transitions between the global periods of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These turning points varied depending on the countries with which one is concerned; 'In France it is to be found roughly between Voltaire and Balzac; in Germany between Goethe and Heine. But even Goethe and Voltaire were no longer *ancien régime* in the strict sense, but more or less transitional figures on the periphery of court society'. In relation to painting, Watteau, Fragonard and Boucher were still typical representatives of court culture, while even the 'pre-revolutionary' Greuze and David begin to represent the age of kitsch. In music, Mozart was still entirely *ancien régime*, with Beethoven the fixity of form begins to make way for the transition to the kitsch style.

In a newspaper article I cannot trace all of Elias's argument, unfortunately, by the way, because it is well worth the effort; one can read it oneself. However, Elias arrives at an even clearer description of his term, which I would like to mention here. He concludes that the age of kitsch has eliminated the original function of the 'court artist' who in a certain sense was a 'servant' of the court; consumers now occupy the same social stratum as the artists themselves. As a result, around the artists there forms a group of specialists, collectors, connoisseurs, snobs, etc, who make the existence of art possible; behind them stand the masses, who hear various things about art, but do not experience anything personally in it. Elias then concludes: 'The term "kitsch" is nothing other than an expression of this tension between the highly formed taste of the specialists and the undeveloped, unsure taste of mass society.' The word kitsch originated, according to Elias, in the artistic circles in Munich, where it was derived from the American word 'sketch'; to *verkitsch* something was thus selling something to an American who had no taste but paid well. But although the word expresses the scorn of a small social group, the concept is also applicable to the group using the word disparagingly; because the lack of certainty about form among the masses, who remain the primary consumer, obliges artists in the age of kitsch to create products which they themselves consider inferior and only produce in order to support themselves. It is the great merit of Elias's essay that he does not allow himself to be misled by the initial tone of the word; and it would not surprise me, if in a hundred years distinguished art historians speak as easily about the kitsch style as they do today about rococo or Louis XIV.

Naturally Elias needs, if he is to be consequential, to make his kitsch concept entirely independent from this one particular, capitalist-industrial, period of production. He does do that, and finds that in relation to earlier periods, one can indeed only speak of kitsch when one can point to corresponding relations of production. 'Otherwise, to refer to earlier formal qualities as "kitsch" is no more than an empty analogy'.



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Jan Bogaerts – Still Life with Pink Roses and a Fan 1916



Anton van Roy as Wodan in 'Die Wodan',
Photo: Adolf Depner

[/h/humfig/images/11217607.0007.106-00000002.png]

Anton van Roy as 'Wodan'

Translated by Robert van Krieken

Notes

1. Jan Bogaerts (1878–1962), Dutch painter of still life and landscapes – translator's note. ♣.[#N1-pt1]
2. Hedwig Courts-Mahler (1867–1950), German writer of romance novels – translator's note. ♣.[#N2-pt1]
3. Willem Pijper (1894–1947), Dutch composer, music teacher and music critic, one of the most important Dutch composers of the first half of the 20th century – translator's note. ♣.[#N3-pt1]
4. Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Russian/French abstract painter and art theorist – translator's note. ♣.[#N4-pt1]

5. Two images were placed below the article, with the text: Elias's argument in two images: Left a postcard from the age of kitsch, right Anton van Rooy as 'Wodan' in Wagner's 'Walküre'. The Anton van Rooy image presented here is very similar to ter Braak's. It has not been possible to track down the postcard image of girl in a spotted dress, replaced here with a still life by Bogaerts, which makes the same point – translator's note. ♣.[#N5-ptri]

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