

In defence of kitsch

by Jan-Ove Tuv

Edited version of a speech from a panel debate on Kitsch Day in Tønsberg, May 20th, 2000.

In the autumn of 1997, Jan Sæther, professor of figurative painting at the Academy of Art in Oslo, unwittingly instigated Odd Nerdrum's interest in kitsch, by stating that the most important thing for a figurative painter to remember, was to stay clear of kitsch. Nerdrum recognized, in Sæther's statement, the criticism he and other classical figurative painters had experienced. After reading Hermann Broch's infamous essay on kitsch, «The evil within the value system of art» from 1933, Nerdrum realized that the criticism he had been exposed to was similar to that which Broch had promulgated. The ultimate confession that he himself was a kitsch painter, was delivered in a speech held at the opening of his own retrospective exhibition at the Astrup-Fearnley Museum in Oslo, in 1998. Nerdrum's speech was ridiculed, in a humorous way by Kjetil Rolness, and more seriously by Lotte Sandberg, in an article appearing in the major Oslo newspaper, *Aftenposten*, on September 25th, 1998. Here, Odd Nerdrum is suddenly dubbed a modern painter. Later, in true Broch spirit, Sandberg criticizes what she calls the sentimental style of Nerdrum's paintings.

In the following, I will clarify what I consider to be the six most important aspects of the kitsch concept, based on the manner in which kitsch has been described in literature I have read and will refer to in this article. My purpose is to demonstrate that if one understands the characteristics which constitute the kitsch concept in a positive sense, one will realize why Kitsch must be the correct name for classic figuration in our time.

1. Tomas Kulka proposes the criterion, «the directly recognizable», in his book, *Kitsch and Art*.¹ The human body must always be recognizable. The skin must look authentic. Human beings must be sensual, substantial. Low kitsch will only be able to portray the sense of skin to a variable degree. It is when figurative painting does not even have the presence of skin, that it all becomes ridiculous.

2. The fact that the motif must be easily recognizable, makes

skillfulness the most important qualification for kitsch. Most kitsch critics will agree on this point. Kulka believes that kitsch is, by definition, poor. Logically speaking, however, if one can say that something can be painted poorly, one is already speaking in terms of quality. A poorly painted crying child can be painted with greater life by a more skillful painter, but it does not, for this reason, become art!

3. As a natural consequence of wanting to learn painting techniques, a kitsch painter will be interested in learning from the old masters. This is what Greenberg describes as, «sucking the life blood from past cultures».² Broch provided me with the final, irrevocable evidence that I am kitsch, when I read his moral requirement of art: «You must neither completely nor partially copy the art of others. If so, you will be producing kitsch.»³

4. Kitsch is never ironic! This is why it may easily be perceived as pathetic. The higher or transcendent kitsch strives to give the human being dignity – not to show how hopeless things look. José Ortega y Gasset discusses, in his essay «The Dehumanization of Art», from 1925, the new artist's aversion to taking on the task of elevating the human being. He writes, in conclusion: «Art that has rid itself of human pathos is a thing without consequences – just art with no other pretences.»⁴

The ironic figurative painter is «camp», not kitsch, and belongs in the art world. An artist who creates camp will typically use a kitsch motif in an art context. To illustrate, one can try to imagine a painting of a moose by a clear lake, where the artist has also painted a No Swimming sign. In this case, kitsch achieves «negative prestige», as Calinescu says, and one can like kitsch because one knows that ironic distance is present. Kitsch, on the contrary, is something one creates with an earnest fervency. Where is the human earnestness in a miniature copy of Michaelangelo's *David*, painted pink?

5. The kitschmaker is interested in archetypes. Kulka writes of motifs in «universal kitsch», and states: «They play on basic human impulses irrespective of religious beliefs, political convictions, race or nationality. They exploit universal subjects such as birth, family, love, nostalgia, and so forth, which could, perhaps, be further analyzed in terms of Jungian archetypes.»⁵ This is confirmed negatively by Ortega y Gasset, who

2 C. Greenberg: «Avantgarde and kitsch», *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press 1965, p. 10

3 Hermann Broch: «Schriften zur Literaturtheorie», Kommentierte Werkausgabe, Band 9/2, Frankfurt am Main 1975

4 José Ortega y Gasset: «The Dehumanization of Art», Doubleday Anchor Books 1956, p. 48

5 Kulka: op. cit. p. 27

1 Tomas Kulka: *Kitsch and art*, The Pennsylvania State Press 1996, p. 33