

INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

Spring 2018 Edition, DOI 10.7413/18258630019

NEOKITSCH

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(First published March 31, 2018)

It.,Fr., Germ., Span. *Neokitsch*; or *Neo Kitsch*, *Neo-Kitsch*. The term defines a taste or an artistic perspective that deliberately refers to the contents of kitsch aesthetics, whose principles and values are neither debated nor discussed anymore, but are used instead and exploited for any possible aesthetic, artistic or commercial operation. This perspective is often framed within the most typical manifestations of postmodern aesthetics and, in general, of contemporary processes of aestheticization.

THE DEBATE

The notion of Neokitsch was introduced by Moles (Moles 1971: 168-169) to point out a new phase of the aesthetics of kitsch: on the one side, there is the overcoming of functionalism as the exclusive aesthetics of the modern object; on the other side, the recognition of a new vision of art permanently incorporating the attributes of trivial and bad taste. Therefore Neokitsch presents itself as the aesthetics of the age of mass consumption. By emerging as one of the most recognizable expressions of postmodern aesthetics, Neokitsch reverses, in this way, the traditional hierarchical mechanism which saw its own model in the art and its surrogate in the kitsch. As Baudrillard noted (1998), the pervasive force of the kitsch simulation is opposed, in a winning manner, to the aesthetics of beauty and novelty. Once implanted in the social reality of the consumer society, this simulation does nothing but eliciting the parody of taste (kitsch) and that one of technique (gadget) as its own representations. Neokitsch testifies the affirmation of kitsch not only as an aesthetic category, but as a cultural one too (Baudrillard 1998: 110). Perfectly fit to the quoting poetics of Postmodernism, Neokitsch finds a fertile ground in the idea of the present as an amplified distortion of the past. The value of uniqueness melts in the rhetoric of the permanent replay and the surrogate transforms itself in its own original: the simulacrum becomes a copy deprived of its own model. An idea that had already rooted in the pop aesthetics, capable of transforming any object (as well as any experience) in an "expendable icon" (according to the formula of John McHale), the form and content of the new *continuum* of transmissions of aesthetic values, the media network: "The book, the film of the book, the book of the film, the musical of the film, the book, the TV or comic strip of the musical – or

however the cycle may run – is, at each stage, a transmutation which alters subtly the original communication” (McHale 1969: 108).

In such a cross-reference net, Neokitsch does not manifest itself exemplarily in the singularity of the object anymore, but it does so in the particular kind of the plural object that is the city. Neokitsch transforms itself in the postmodern style by giving to urban realities such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas the task of testifying such a new register. Both these cities have exhibited such a mutation to which Eco (1986) and Baudrillard (1989) made reference with the term of “hyper-reality”. Falsification does not have the status of the copy anymore, but acquires now the status of the original. The kitsch procedures internal to mass-culture are now re-interpreted in light of a new paradigm, “the absolute false”, with which the simulacrum sets itself as the only recognizable and sharable cultural matrix. This “aesthetics of fake” (Mecacci 2016) is the new perspective that plainly shows how the shifting from the ideology of function (Modernism) to the fictional dimension (Postmodernism and/or Neokitsch) is defined within the Neokitsch. The contemporary pervasiveness of Neokitsch is described by Lipovetsky and Serroy (2013) according to whom it would be better to speak in terms of a plural, rather than singular, kitsch, to outline the present-day aesthetics, namely that of aestheticization or “artistic capitalism”.

ARCHITECTURE, DESIGN, ART

Neokitsch may be observed mainly as an operative aesthetics. The notion of double-coding (Jencks 1977) can exemplify the Neokitsch poetics of hybridation as the attempt to overcome the aporias of Modernism, of whom kitsch is the worst enemy: the ability to let two levels of communication – the first addressed to mass and the second to the specialists – coexist in the same text, building or art work, that which realizes a continuous quotation of past and an evident style mixing.

The work that merged hyper-reality, Neokitsch and Postmodernism was *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972) by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, a text written in collaboration with Steven Izenour. Las Vegas is the city where the principle of accumulation becomes the urban landscape, almost an ontological paradigm; that place is an uninterrupted decalogue of stylistic contradiction in which the surrogate emancipates itself and eventually becomes an archetype. Las Vegas gives yet another version of kitsch: it is recognized both as an “anthological” and a “metalinguistical” practice, it presents itself as Neokitsch.

The idea of kitsch as an inclusive poetics for the design, intended to be open and, to the last extent, creative, is what Alessandro Mendini (1979) proposed by the end of the 1970s under the formula of “amoral project”. The petty-bourgeois taste, that is the kitsch, should have been no more judged, opposed and condemned. Conversely it had to be interpreted as an operative possibility, as a “working method”. The massified diffusion of banal now means to the designer the very “projectual awareness of kitsch”, the elaboration of a “culturally self-known kitsch”. A symbol of the Neokitsch is *Proust Chair*, where the poetics of double-coding is at the apex of its recognizability: “In this case, I made references to Proust’s descriptions of place and time on one hand, and the impressionist movement in painting on the other. I found an appropriate ready-made in the replica of an eighteenth century armchair, and chose a

detail from a Signac painting for the pattern that covers the whole armchair, from its fabric to the wooden parts, desolving its shape into a kind of nebula. Besides the idea of obtaining a piece of design based on input that is unusual in a normal design process, I also wanted to reach a different type of result, i.e. to make a culturally grounded object based on a false one, seeing that the redesign in this case has been performed on a piece of kitsch, a fake-antique armchair that is still being mass-produced today" (Mendini 2001).

The Neokitsch also became an identifiable style in some American artists of the 1980s within a strong pop revival atmosphere. Especially in the field of sculpture kitsch was programmatically used. The inauthentic, the vulgar, the copy, the childish defined the poetics of such tendency. Between 1982 and 1984, Allan McCollum conceived a series of plaster-imitations of paintings: *Plaster Surrogates*. Even more faithful to kitsch was a work of 1988 (*Perfect Vehicles*), a series of reproductions of jars characterized by seriality and excessive size. In *Ultra Red #2* (1986) by Haim Steinbach, the accumulation principle is fetishized through the utopia of spatial order: several objects of the same kind are arranged on a shelf. The greatest exponent of Neokitsch art is Jeff Koons: the banal object (Koons prefers the adjective "banal" to "kitsch") is nothing else but a pretext to explore the tastes of the middle class, those aesthetic conventions that the art world actually considers as vulgar, non-artistic. In the year 1988, in the series *Banality*, the kitsch object is artisticized while the luxury object is turned into a prosaic one: "My work has no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication. I believe that taste is really unimportant" (Koons 1992: 31). An exemplification of the notion of artistic capitalism may be found in the work of the British photographer Martin Parr, where, by the means of everyday-life aesthetic experiences as tourism, food and fashion, the contemporary imaginary shows the consumistic frame within which the Neokitsch acts as an absolute aesthetic reference. In Neokitsch the focus is not on the object (the work of art) *per se* or on its mystification anymore, because the attention is shifted on the exploration of average taste, on the building-up of its imaginary and on its projections on extra-artistic objects or behaviours which transgress the codified taste.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

A. Mecacci, *Neokitsch*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Spring 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/spring/Neokitsch.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630019.

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