THE ROLE OF KITSCH AND MEMORY IN SOVIET RUSSIA

The term '*kitsch*' is perhaps one of the oldest and most unclear terms used to describe the popular art of modern society, nonetheless it is a word which is almost universally understood. The origin of the term is uncertain: some attribute it to the Russian '*keetcheetsys*', meaning 'to be haughty and puffed up', though a more widely held view, is that it originated in the Munich art markets of the 1860s, where it was used to describe cheap hotly marketable imitation pictures or 'sketches' taken from the German verb '*verkitschen'*, to 'make cheap' (Binkley, 2002).

Kitsch is perhaps most easily demonstrated through examples: applying to ornamental statuary, chachkas of different kinds, manufactured sentimental knickknacks, souvenirs, posters and other decorative objects reflecting a childlike simplicity. What makes kitsch kitsch, however, is not simply the fact of its being decorative, but that it artificially inflates the comfort of decoration into a unique and fake aesthetic statement. By falsifying perceptions of reality, kitsch helps to evoke sentimental and nostalgic, prescribed, ready-made responses.

Traditionally, Russian kitsch appealed to the tastes of the newly moneyed, though aesthetically naive bourgeoisie who, like most nouveaux riches, thought they could achieve the status they envied in the traditional class of cultural elites by imitating, however clumsily, the most apparent features of aesthetic culture, they thought to be typical of 'high taste'. Before long, kitsch became an integral part of the Soviet landscape, as a leading medium in the material world surrounding people in Soviet daily life, it was charged with meanings that could strengthen the socialist consciousness in the masses. Kitsch is therefore an example of materiality that through being less charged with ambiguous meaning could subtly evoke shared, communal attitudes and reinforce socialist consciousness.

As a result there are two aspects of kitsch that can be considered: first, its historical causes, and second its aesthetic dimensions. Comparing a few of the most widespread uses of the term, I will explore both of these aspects and explain how they are related to memory using the case study of Soviet Russia.

History of Kitsch

Some of the earliest academic work on kitsch was that of Greenberg (1939), who stated that kitsch, was a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of Western Europe and America, establishing a more universal literacy. Initially the peasants who settled in the cities as proletariat and petty bourgeois learned to read and write for the sake of efficiency, but could not afford the leisure and comfort necessary for the enjoyment of the city's traditional culture. Losing, nevertheless, their taste for folk culture and discovering a new capacity for boredom at the same time, the new urban masses set up a pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption. Kitsch helped to fill this void, using for raw material the genuine culture itself.

An important question often raised, is whether kitsch is a universal that crosses cultural boundaries or whether it differs fundamentally according to socio-cultural-political context. In reality, understandings of kitsch are often diverse, with cross-cultural explorations uncovering several untranslatable cultural aspects of commonplace kitsch definitions as well as its critique. In Russia the word kitsch was adopted in the 1970s in a special sub-genre of books on Western mass culture. Furthermore, kitsch is slightly mistranslated in Russian, and its critical history virtually unknown. With the Russian word '*poshlost*' partly overlapping between 'banality' and 'kitsch', but with its own individual cultural history connected to the Russian encounter with Western progress and modernization. (Boym, 1994:19)

Boym's interesting discussion of differing understandings of the term *poshlost* includes the negative metamorphosis of the term to include a connection between poshlost and the devil, suggesting that the term is an umbrella covering many areas of Russian life that refer to low culture.

In agreement with Binkley's (2000) article on 'kitsch as a repetitive system', she states that:

...at the core of the problem of 'poshlost' is the paradox of repetition and of tradition. Repetition and convention are fundamental for human survival, for the operation of memory and the preservation of culture...

(Boym, 1994:46)

Further understanding of the concept of kitsch can be found in Bourdieu's (1984) epic study of the taste habits of the French consuming public (*Distinction)*, where two competing modes of aesthetic valuation were presented. The first: a working class taste or a '*taste of necessity'*, expects a practical, sensual correspondence between content and form, where beautiful art should depict beautiful things (i.e. flowers, sunsets, children). In contrast to this, the second: was the bourgeois or aristocratic taste, or the 'taste of reflection', for whom beauty comes from that which transcends the narrow dictates of artistic convention, and beautiful art should refuse the easy and obvious logic of aesthetic pleasure and surprise us with unlikely choices (i.e. photographs of dirt, cabbages or dead trees). Though Bourdieu

does not discuss kitsch in any manner that might distinguish it from practical tastes in general, he writes:

...the taste for the trinkets and knick-knacks which adorn the mantelpieces and hallways (of the working classes) is inspired by an intention unknown to economists and ordinary aesthetes, that of obtaining maximum effect at minimum cost...

(Bourdieu, 1984: 379)

Whereby kitsch can help to establish social distinction, through the social power exerted by those who have cultural capital, with 'taste' being the giveaway to class and therefore power within society. In many respects, Bourdieu's analysis of kitsch is also consistent with that of Binkley's (2000) study, where his 'taste of necessity' reinstates the detachment and introspection characteristic of more autonomous tastes.

This further reinforces the practical side of aesthetic style and effect, thereby claiming an embeddedness in the practical meter of everyday life. In that kitsch preserves a unique aesthetic sensibility while also endorsing a repetition of the familiar to evoke memory of the past. Thus, the quality of memory evoking possessed by kitsch is interrelated with nostalgia and the association of the symbolism presented. The following section on the 'aesthetics of kitsch' further explains Binkley's ideas surrounding repetition and kitsch.

The Aesthetics of Kitsch

With its lack of novelty and ambition, and its lulling repetitiveness, kitsch allows an artefact to become secure and unquestionable, calling for one unified response that becomes incorporated into daily life, as part of the ordinary, domestic, family life that is taken for granted. By creating this secure understanding of the world where performance, repetition, maintenance and constant reinforcement of an individual's identity in relation to society are acted out, kitsch becomes part of a repetitive system. This repetition is a powerful system reinforcing totality and universality in addition to over-riding the threat from the cultural and social pre-revolution material vestiges.

...the repetitive quality of kitsch provides the existential security of a closed cosmology of cultural objects, where novelty and innovation are safely excluded...

(Binkley, 2000: 145)

Hence, the repetitive quality of kitsch forms the very bases of its relationship with memory and nostalgia. Kitsch repeats the past. Boym argues that within Russian visual culture, there is no space for multiple layers of historical memory. The 'past' is limited to 'old', to the most immediate history being negated by the 'new.' Kitsch helps to integrate this past with the new through repetition.

...kitsch manipulates through objectification of the effects of art, and through ready made formulas that function like pre-modern magical incantations known to trigger specific emotional responses...

(Boym, 1994:16)

In contrast to Binkely's theory Sabonis-Chafee (1999) writes that the Soviet reaction to mass-produced kitsch can be explained using a *'hypodermic effects model'* where the audience absorbs the information immediately and without altering the message. Kitsch's advantage being; 'its power to inject, into the essentially inert audience, both its information and its point of view'. As a result, shared definitions of a society's goals and needs could be conveyed through the kitsch objects present in everyday Soviet life.

In addition to this, the totalitarianism of the state becomes internalized in individuals through the material culture they have been surrounded by, resulting in compliance and auto-totalitarianism. This has led to most cultural critics regarding Soviet kitsch as more dangerous and more potent than its Western versions. Where, according to Kundera (1991), kitsch supports socialist ideologies as it becomes part of a repetitive system geared towards mass production.

... in the realm of kitsch, the dictatorship of feelings reigns supreme. The feelings included by kitsch are the kind multitudes can share. Kitsch derives from the basic images engraved in people's memories...

(Kundera, 1991: 250)

Kitsch & Memory in Soviet Russia

When kitsch is used in a state policy as an approved way of understanding reality, as was witnessed in Russia, it becomes 'totalitarian kitsch'. As such, everything that infringes on it must be banished, and the result is: communist kitsch symbols mass-produced to create sentimentality that reinforces the regime. This is further explored by Friedlander (1990), who states that:

...such kitsch has a clear mobilizing function, probably for the following general reasons: first, what it expresses is easily understood and accessible to the great majority of people; secondly, it calls for an unreflective emotional response; thirdly it handles the core values of a political regime or ideological system as a closed, harmonious entity which has to be endowed with 'beauty' to be made more effective...

(Friedlander, 1990: quoted from Sabonis-Chafee, 1999: 365)

This semiotic aspect of kitsch, signalling socialist realism, collectively aids the spirit of communism, and therefore kitsch objects can be said to possess agency (Gell, 1998). This agency was effectively used throughout Russia during the Soviet period in strategically constructed propaganda, and is still used today in modern day advertising.

In Russian, the word propaganda bears no negative connotations, and can be likened to the capitalist term marketing. If then, we consider soviet propaganda as a marketing of communist ideals; kitsch can be understood as a type of marketing strategy. Through slogans, sculptures, and exhortations, sentiment was packaged and offered with an associated kitsch image which was met by wide appeal. These images of manufactured sentimentality make up the essence of what is recognised as 'totalitarian kitsch'.

In an environment where suddenly unfathomable technology was questioning their ability to understand the materiality of the world, kitsch gave security and comfort, as the mass of unoriginal and sentimental artefacts acted as an anchor for their consumers. By supplying reassurance that what is to come will resemble what has gone before, and that the hazards of innovation and uncertainty are far away, security was promoted.

Lindquist (2002) explains that due to the manufacturing of sentimentality by kitsch, no one is totally immune to it, not even the most sophisticated, as Kundera and Friedlander also admit: most people are, at least at some points of their lives, sensitive to the allure of, say, romantic love, or the beauty of the sunset. In other words, the mode of representation with which kitsch operates, is iconic and indexical: it presents, rather than represents, the widely shared images of happiness, nostalgia, and beauty.

When discussing kitsch and memory, nostalgia is an important area of discussion, where differences between 'high' culture and 'popular' culture and between ideology and everyday life, become blurred. This can be explained by using the example of food culture, where relatively cheap copies of formerly expensive luxury products came to play an ever important role. These items soon became essential to the many official and personal celebrations, which were typical of Soviet everyday life, with the best known examples being, Soviet champagne, cognac, caviar and chocolate. The message that these goods carried was clear: everyone could now enjoy the standard of living earlier restricted to members of Russian nobility or the rich bourgeoisie. (Gronow, 2003: 33)

One could say that the Stalinist Soviets systematically suppressed formal culture and centralized Socialist Realism in the form of kitsch. Yet the question is, had the suppression never happened and there was free choice, would the masses have chosen the alternative? The counter example is not hard to find. Even in the Golden Age of Russian cinema, before 'all cinematic experimentation was frowned upon', Russian masses never crowded into a theatre showing avant-garde directors work, as they did *The Mask of Zorro, Robin Hood*, and *The Thief of Baghdad*. They were so fascinated by this kind of foreign, especially Hollywood, kitsch that even opponents of the policy of imports had to admit that on average foreign films produced ten times as much profit as domestic ones. (Kenez, 1992: 72)

This overwhelming predominance directly caused the control on imported films to gradually increase until they were forced to disappear altogether by the end of the first Five-Year Plan. Yet, after that, the masses still preferred domestic directors who 'wanted to please their audiences and produced romances and adventure stories', to the more avant-garde directors who 'alienated the audiences.'(Kenez, 1992: 103) It was therefore the foreign and domestic mass entertainment products, with adverse ideological content, from whence the totalitarian project saw real power threat come. In other words, instead of protecting kitsch from the rivalry of avant-garde, what the regime was doing was protecting kitsch from kitsch, i.e., centralizing their own preferred type of kitsch and marginalizing or eradicating other types.

Kitsch & Memory in Post-Socialist Russia

Other central discussion points relate to; what happened after the fall of the Soviet empire, examining the impact of the leftover kitsch debris on the Russian people themselves, and exploring the roles communist kitsch plays in contemporary times? It is true that several symbols of communism persist in contemporary Russia, with many of these emblems, integral to architectural monuments, inlaid in glorious detail in ceilings of the metro, or welded onto bridges.

Many additional symbols are also deeply embedded in the Russian psyche by their deliberate use in advertising, campaigning and contemporary art and music. It can therefore be said that communist kitsch has found a solid niche in Russian popular culture. However, the fact that communist kitsch still has a keen audience is hardly a surprise, such utopian-nostalgic kitsch taps into the previous mythology and the people's sense of loss. As Boym explains:

…utopian nostalgia… reveals both nostalgia for totalitarianism and the totalitarian nature of nostalgia itself …

(Boym 1994: 287)

When considering the role of kitsch and memory in contemporary times, an enlightening area of analysis is that of modern day Russian advertising and how this in turn reflects the history of kitsch and the effect it has had on Russian identity. Sabonis-Chafee's discussion of kitsch labels such post-Soviet kitsch as ironic-nostalgic kitsch. It is so labelled in the sense that the nostalgic element of the advertising evokes an idiosyncratic and personal reaction, in addition to the sense that it is ironic to see the widespread use of communist symbols by commercial organisations as marketing ploys.

A good example Sabonis-Chafee uses is that of an Ariel washing detergent advertisement: where a young navy recruit has spilled something on his uniform which he needs for the annual parade. Interestingly, it is not set in the present, when military service is seldom a source of pride and parades are rare – neither is it set in the past. Rather, it exists in an imaginary domain where sons are proud to march in the navy parade and mothers have washing machines at home. Where the advertisement represents a juxtaposition of old and new, making the suggestion that the consumer can have the rewards of Western society yet retain traditional Russian values at the same time. (Sabonis-Chafee, 1999: 370)

In addition to kitsch's role in advertising, kitsch has also become institutionalized through new propaganda in the form of monuments. Post-Soviet public memorials, such as 'Peter the Great', nostalgically reconstruct all the grand styles of the past two centuries, helping people to selectively forget the dark moments of Russian and Soviet history.

Through kitsch and memory, visual and material culture has become a very profitable area. With nostalgic arts and crafts including items from several different cultural arenas. Boym (1999) describes these kitsch items: from official propaganda and state television to the unofficial 'tape recorder culture', Soviet slogans, busts of Lenin, beloved musicals from Stalin's time, slow moving TV serials from the 1970s, to nature programs and nostalgic music (Boym, 1999: 384). All such items, become part of everyday life, and help to aid rituals that form collective frameworks of memory inextricably intertwined with individual remembrances.

Conclusion

In the post-Soviet context, the relationship between kitsch and memory is that kitsch helps individuals to selectively access parts of their memory, without offering a narrative or reconstruction of the past. Linked with the idea of nostalgia, this allows the individual to long for something that no longer exists, or perhaps never existed turning it into a private or collective memory, which is driven by longing for familiarity and stability. Kitsch symbolism consequently moves everyday life to the foreground of the Russian cultural imagination, with the post-Soviet recycling of cultural boundaries and kitsch undermining the traditional Russian prestige of high culture.

In conclusion then, kitsch is at the core of the definition of Russian identity, both national and cultural. It encompasses attitudes toward material culture and historical change, and it determines ethical values. Although everyday society has retreated somewhat into the apolitical, symbols of communism still retain power over the imaginations of the citizenry with several generations unable to eradicate the words and symbols from their memory.

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