

Be Tasteful! Be Kitsch!

A critical analysis of social standards of beauty

Waldenyr Caldas

Abstract

For a better understanding, this article seeks a more precise delineation of the differences, in the broadest sense, of these two qualifying adjectives—"tasteful" and "kitsch." Thus, we must consider social, economic, and cultural barriers and the ever-present class prejudice. Without a social analysis, this kind of criticism would be impaired and, by extension, superficial. We can already see that many obstacles separate these two concepts, and the difference between both terms shows a social border. By analogy, the concepts that separate these two terms can therefore be understood, not just a limit. This separation, it seems, is much more identified with a border—the outer edge of something—than a barrier—a structure that bars passage. It would be naive to deny or ignore this conceptual tension between "tasteful" and "kitsch," although there is a stratified consumption of cultural production. The capital society, always very smart and consistent with its origins, can deal with this stratification. In this sense, a way is sought to satisfy everyone, maximize profits, and keep the status quo unchanged, which has been the logic of Capitalism since its origins and, therefore, nobody denies it. Agreeing or not, with its political-ideological practices is another issue on which we have the free will to accept it or not. This frontier has been consolidating and, at the same time, become a recurrent theme of academic discussions, mainly due to the subjective aesthetic criteria of judging an artwork, qualifying a design, or choosing a musical concert or piece of clothing, among other things. This article mainly embraces the dichotomy created over time about these two terms and its social meaning.

Aesthetics and Politics

We begin our analysis with a matter of extreme subjectivity, which necessarily involves the aesthetic values of class culture. Loosely and with possible exceptions, it is almost always dogmatic content analysis that is read, seen, or heard. Being kitsch is tasteless, and being tasteful is suitable for cultured and refined people. This affirmation is a syncretism that places modest products of mass culture and popular culture as something of the subaltern classes alone. Indeed, this attempt at such fusion is accurate, and there is a logic to it, although not as precise as it may seem. The cultural industry stratifies its production precisely to reach the consumer market of all social classes. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947), in their well-known analyses of "the cultural industry" in the humanities, have already taught us that the masses are not the measure, but the ideology of the cultural industry, even though the latter cannot exist without them. Empirical observation of the facts makes it current, as long as one thinks of the society of Capital, where the ideology of profit and the masses become inseparable and interdependent. The syncretic misconception, however, is the aesthetic evaluation (sometimes also political) that some critics make of these products.

Its consumers are almost always of low income, low education, with restricted repertoire, a low level of information, and residents on the periphery of large and medium-sized cities. This model is almost a standard of the analysis and reviews that we see in journalistic texts—academic as well—when we think of art criticism, whatever its origin. In this sense, the syncretism is always present. For these reasons precisely, the aesthetic evaluation of products aimed at the subaltern classes or produced by them, with very few exceptions, is always very unfavorable. These products are considered unimportant and of dubious taste at least. But, this facet is only part of the question. There is another, which, in my view, is even more critical. The "aesthetic" analysis of these products is always full of qualifying, repetitive, innocuous adjectives that, strictly, say nothing or almost nothing.

Some of them seek, among other things, to analyze the possible political-ideological content of the work, as if the author had an obligation to publicize their political engagement, their option for a political ideology. Often, this approach has the background and objective of establishing a serious tone and depth to the analysis. In Brazil, in the face of a troubled and broken political trajectory of systematic authoritarianism, this is very noticeable, even though we have been searching for democratic consolidation since 1985. During the 1960s to 1980s, the

political and ideological issues were a kind of "aesthetic thermometer" of any cultural product. To be respected, artists would have to declare themselves and engage politically by showing the ideological profile of their artworks. Then, by most of the criticisms, their artworks were considered good. Now, we all know that aesthetics and politics have always been *pari passu*, but not exactly in this way.

An artwork may incorporate profound political-ideological issues, but that does not necessarily mean that, because of this incorporation, it is of good quality, which is a mistake mainly because the issue of the quality of work is something much more complicated than it may seem. Thus, but not only, these evaluations are almost always empty text. An attempt to explain the quality of the work aesthetically, but without any substrate or upholstery, is something notoriously sterile. In other words, reading or not reading this assessment would be almost the same. The readers leave the text as if they had not devoted their time to reading.

It is necessary to understand, for example, that when Pablo Picasso made *Guernica*, he intended to denounce and protest against the arbitrariness, violence, and horrors practiced in this city in his country. The Nazis were ruthless. However, it would be unreasonable, I think, to expect that visitors to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where this artwork remained for a long time, see *Guernica* for the same purposes and with the same criticality as Picasso. Many museum visitors want to know the artwork itself without worrying about its political-social significance.

This approach, of course, does not mean alienation. However, this aesthetic experience may or may not, in some cases, emerge at the time of the visit, depending on the viewer's repertoire. Knowing an artwork of the magnitude of the *Monalisa*, *Guernica*, and others is already something pleasing to the visitor. Thinking about its socio-political relevance as the author did at the time of its creation is an attitude, a very personal option for its visitors. It is known that great works are almost always disputed by people for their mythical figure and iconic character, understandably so. The crowd that annually visits European, American, and Asian museums, among others, is not interested in or simply does not know the history of that artwork. They do not know how artist arrived at the result displayed in the museum. With some exceptions, this view is limited to specialists and scholars of the arts, which is the prevalence.

Toward Kitsch Art

The aesthetic concepts used by professionals in the analysis of any cultural product could have more precise and explicit arguments and theoretical foundations. The reader must objectively know the reasons why the critic refutes a specific artwork and places it on the level of the artwork of "dubious taste." But after all, what are the objective criteria that led the critic to assign that work an uncertain status? This objectivity strictly does not exist, and the whole argument is lost at the level of subjectivity. Prevailing in the preparation of the aesthetic evaluation of criticism, the individual critical opinion—in the absence of more consistent arguments—chooses the path of "wishful thinking," which is the most modest empirical way of making a qualitative assessment (if possible) of artwork when there is neither theoretical resources nor an adequate and sufficient repertoire to do so. In the absence of these elements, the critic, consciously or not, uses a resource and strategy terribly similar to that of television presenters. It is the so-called "factual function" of language, as the French linguist and semiologist Georges Mounin explains in his work (1974). He says that for the factual function, the language seems to serve only to maintain among the interlocutors a sense of acoustic or psychological contact and pleasant proximity—for example, in social, hollow, or loving talk wherein nothing is said.

Apart from matters of love, empirically, the presenters of television programs make use of the phatic function of language. They need to speak without interruption when they are not showing the planned attractions in their programs. If they do not, there is a severe risk that the viewer will change channels due to a lack of motivation in the program itself. The viewer loses this dynamic due to the absence of gestural stimuli, so crucial in the process of mass communication and dialogues with audiences. It should be noted, however, that the program presenters are not making any aesthetic evaluation of any product. They are merely doing their television work. If they use it consciously or not, the phatic function of language is another issue that could undoubtedly be the subject of further study. It does not seem to be the right or correct option to leave thinking about "aesthetic quality" under the responsibility of this intelligentsia. Consequently, merely accepting that it establishes within its criteria and knowledge what is of good quality or beautiful is, in short, a judgment of taste that implies the quality of a product, an artwork, a handcrafted piece, and more. In this case, all the educated and specialized people in their respective areas would have the intellectual authority to establish the criteria for the aesthetic taste of any work related to their *métier*.

However, it is not exactly this. It is not correct (and perhaps not even fair) to attribute to educated people—even with a solid academic background and specialized in the arts, for example—the ability to determine what is beautiful, artistic, good taste, dubious taste, or even distasteful. If so, we would be sanctioning an authorization for educated people to dictate the rules and criteria of what is considered beautiful, of good taste, and good aesthetic quality. I do not think this approach would be the best thing to do, because situations like this have already produced great mistakes and will undoubtedly continue providing them. An example, in my view, quite enlightening to this issue is the following: Initially, it was registered in the work of Stanley Edgar Hyman¹ (1948) but was carefully interpreted by Professor Antonio Candido² in his work (1978). In 1837, Liszt gave a concert in Paris, which announced a piece by Beethoven and another by Pixis, an obscure composer already considered of low quality. Unintentionally, the program changed the names, attributing the work of Pixis to be from Beethoven. The audience applauded Pixis thinking it was Beethoven and disqualified Beethoven thinking it was Pixis. Cases like this one are not unique, and scholars of art and literature, from time to time, record cases similar to what happened here.

It is quite likely that a person who is cultured, sensible, and with a more refined degree would refuse to make any aesthetic judgment as if its result were something definitive. However, it would not happen. They would do it knowing that their evaluation is only one among so many other meanings in the face of subjectivity and aesthetic values. Therefore, in fact, it makes no sense for the art critic to label such an artwork as kitsch while exalting another artwork as excellent with complimentary adjectives. Collectively—that is, for the public—criticism does not contribute at all. Individual experiences have their importance and contribution in the field of cultural criticism, there is no doubt, but they cannot be extended to a universal participation and acceptance. No evaluation, no objective principle of taste is possible. There are many subjective factors that interfere in the faculty of judging and creating means to justify what is beautiful, forming a judgment of taste. But there may be some affinities between the art critic and a select group, even taking a universal dimension to like an artwork or not.

At first, one has to think about the following: if we analyze an artwork, or merely a street event that we witness, we do so with our repertoire and knowledge of our class culture. This is understandable and would happen spontaneously, mainly because we do not know enough about the culture of other social classes and their respective strata, hindering a more in-depth analysis of the cultural ethos, its intricacies, and subtleties of everyday events, which could compromise, among other things, the quality of empirical information on the artwork. This limitation would be enough for us to understand that it is not possible to carry out a more in-depth analysis, and, more than that, we would certainly not feel comfortable doing so. Empirically, it is easy to understand this issue, and the examples seem to be quite illuminating. Think of one of them: a young worker leaving the industry at the end of her workday looks vastly different from the president of the company. The difference in socioeconomic level, educational background, and repertoire creates the values and judgment of different tastes.

With some exceptions, this becomes visually perceptible, not only in the appearance revealed by their clothing but also in their personal adornment. This entire set of seemingly unimportant factors shows the differences and aesthetic conceptions of class cultures and, of course, of socioeconomic level. Under these conditions, therefore, the concepts of kitsch and tasteful could be misused, as almost always happens, moreover, with a powerful charge of social prejudice. It is, above all, a matter of citizenship, respecting the class condition without an aesthetic assessment of who is kitsch or tasteful, based merely on the subjectivity of an isolated opinion and without theoretical support. Thus, even with distinctive visual evidence between the worker and president of the industry, it would not be possible for us to say that the aesthetic taste of one is superior to that of the other. This attempt, most likely, would lead its author to make conceptual errors in search of positive results that would undoubtedly be imprecise and full of redundancies and innocuous and unnecessary words for their explanations, as always happens. The factual discourse on the aesthetic evaluation of cultural products is always full of adjectives that clarify little. And what we have seen so far not only occurs with so-called tacky or old-fashioned products. Everything is repeated precisely the same way for the evaluations of products considered in good taste. In the arts, for example, products of tasteful people are predicated on words that say nothing; the logomachy, factual speech is also present, just set up to a degree of greater

complexity, while the speech goals are the same, valuing the product and making it as profitable as possible, even if it uses logomachy discourse. There are exceptions to be considered, but it is not unusual to have an unofficial partnership between the entrepreneur of the arts and the art critic, in the sense of providing greater visibility and seeking to value an artwork so that they will be well quoted in the art market.

Thus, the art critic, through the media, must create the image of an artist and artwork of special relevance. With this agreement, the art critic transfers his or her prestige (if he or she has some) to the artist and unofficially fulfills what was previously agreed with the entrepreneur of the art market. Under these conditions, the quality of that artist's work is not discussed, even subjectively. What is on the agenda is another matter. There is interest where marketing overlaps with aesthetic evaluation, though when the artist has no talent, it requires a set of words, a critical speech in the criticism writings, testimonies, or other forms of communication. Such "talent" can indeed be manufactured in the media as it occurs in all segments of the arts. Now we return to a central question in this article: how to justify an artist's talent, if not with personal and subjective opinions about their artwork and, therefore, open to doubt? This is a question with answers that remains unsatisfactory. In a Capitalist society, often, having talent is not enough for the artist to receive recognition for their artwork.

The term "kitsch" that is used to disqualify is also understood as a means by which the "substitution" of values shows the viewer simpler forms of perception and interpretation (and this offers greater emotional strength). In this sense, what is the need to make a highly intellectualized analysis of the work of art, if the person who makes it only offers his opinion and nothing else? Well, this does not mean that they are right or wrong in their aesthetic concepts; they are solely giving opinions. It also does not mean that the analyzed work is an excellent artwork or a kitsch one. There are no universal taste standards, and there is an internal taste logic that differentiates aesthetic taste between different social classes. And this, of course, does not mean that a social class has a more refined aesthetic taste, more sophisticated than the other. It just means they are different and nothing more. Even the taste for classes also differs internally between people. If, for example, a person with a rather modest repertoire is dazzled by *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and

another viewer with a solid intellectual background falls in love with Jeff Koons's sculpture *Tulips*, undoubtedly the "status" of both will remain the same. Pablo Picasso's artwork will maintain its prestige as a great work of art as for being the first cubist painting, while Jeff Koons' sculpture *Tulips* will retain its "status" as consecrated work by the general public.

Indeed, the set of artistic works by Koons has a very critical purpose, as Professor Christiane Wagner shows in her article entitled "Kitsch, Aesthetic Reminiscences and Jeff Koons" (2016). She explains that Koons has been collaborating with the public's self-esteem through his artworks, destroying guilt or shame in people who, in their banalities, immerse. *Tulips* sculpture—seven tulips of varying colors fabricated from mirror-polished stainless steel—is part of the *Celebration* series, in particular reports the day-to-day aesthetic values added to the celebration symbols. Moreover, Koons also emphasizes these common aesthetic values with another sculpture series called *Banality* that sets the kitsch as the high motivation for the audience.



Sculpture *Tulips* (1995-2004) by Jeff Koons. Photo by Pawel Biernacki. June 10, 2018. Licensed under CC BY 2.0.

Aesthetics of Imposture

We are here in the face of what we might call, for lack of a better term, an “aesthetics of imposture,” because of logomachy discourse as an artifice that consists of presenting subterfuges and arguments that are not true and, thus, an imposture. Certainly, this is not an intentionally artful language, which would be unacceptable. It seems to be, rather, the lack of objective arguments to better spell out the aesthetic values of the work. This lack is quite common among so-called art critics without the resources to make their opinion explicit.

However, this art criticism may not exist as universal participation, but only as subjective judgment. Aesthetics is part of the philosophy that reflects on art and beauty. All the literature in this regard does not propose, approve, or accept consolidated judgments. In the Platonic sense, there is a reflection on the absolute beauty in aesthetics, or in the Kantian sense for the universal taste, but there is no unanimity among thinkers in aesthetics. Among them, we highlight Hegel, who is opposed to both the Platonic and Aristotelian senses. He instead considered the principles of the relationship between form, sensitive, artistic achievements and content, the idea, in a process of synthesis and evolution of the spirit as a historical moment. Therefore, art is part of a historical and cultural context. In this path, it is considered that the art's meaning is related to time and culture as well as social class. This approach is one of the largest problems of art criticism.

Exceptions aside, when critics make their aesthetic assessments of taste and the idea of beauty, it is as if they are talking about a universal truth. However, there is no replica of their text. Their words reverberate strongly with the public, as if it were, in fact, a universal truth. Thus, this criticism can consecrate a specific artwork, creating an “untouchable aura” of the ideal of beauty and quality about it or destroying it by labeling it as inferior quality or of a dubious taste.

This discussion aligns with some illuminating observations made by Immanuel Kant (1790), precisely because this thinker analyzed taste and beauty from the perspective of objectivity and subjectivity. Kant argues that there is not an objective taste that determines by concept what is beautiful because every judgment, itself, is aesthetical—as such, it is a perception that determines the motive and the subject's feeling and not the quality of an object. Thus, the search for a principle or general criterion for beauty and taste through certain concepts is senseless since what is sought would be impossible and contradictory in itself.

Kant's lessons lead us to believe that art critics—who use factual discourse—do not know these lessons, have forgotten or misinterpreted them, or at least have not yet read them. Instead, the reader receives elusive explanations that cannot be sustained with a closer reading. Now, if this is something partially or entirely intentional, this approach creates is another situation. Each case must be viewed and analyzed separately, avoiding injustices. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that responsible criticism does not act in this way.

In any case, the dichotomy that I mentioned at the beginning of this article prevails. The product of educated people is also seen as tasteful by much of the population, especially of the more modest strata, but not only. This is the ground to be protected by an "aura" that exerts a psychological influence of respect and admiration in people, even by the combination of these two adjectives.

There are two aspects to be highlighted for specific segments of society to reach these concepts mentioned above. The first is the ignorance, or almost, of the cultured people's products. The second is a little more complex and depends on the socioeconomic status of each social class. The subordinate classes, or at least some segments of them, tend to mitigate and psychologically revere the consumption of the so-called more affluent social classes, precisely given the considerable difference in purchasing power between them. This is the "aura" that I referred to earlier.

To illustrate empirically, it is worth mentioning one example, but there are many others. In São Paulo, the Municipal Theater, located in the so-called old city center, keeps an intense program of musical concerts and other cultural events every year. On show days and just before the start, while people are arriving, there are other people on the sides of the entrance door who, most likely, pressed by economic scarcity, look respectfully at people entering the Theater. It is the curiosity and natural desire of a notoriously modest audience who could hardly buy tickets to attend a musical concert. It is not about homeless people (these appear in small numbers), but about people who have not had the opportunity to see a "tasteful" show full of cultured people. But at this point, if any of those people wanted to come to watch the show, it would not be possible if it were not with ticket in hand. In this case, there is no alternative but sublimation or to seek other forms of entertainment and social interaction. As known, sociability in large cities, although essential for all of us, is something a bit more complicated. This topic is not part of this article, but it is worth reading David Riesman's work, *The Lonely Crowd* (1961).

But everything does not always happen as described above. There are situations in which the so-called kitsch and tasteful products come to have a close and pleasant view. In São Paulo (not an exception), the government sometimes organizes free shows that include the presence of artists highly considered by the cultured public and the specialized press. It is worth remembering, as an example, the outdoor musical concerts in Ibirapuera Park, which in those moments becomes a democratic space. On these occasions, the public is undifferentiated because it contemplates all social classes and their respective segments; thus, the concepts treated here are irrelevant. This issue of kitsch and tasteful goes unperceived precisely because it is unimportant, but also because the people who are there at that moment come willing to participate without worrying about these irrelevant and imprecise aesthetic issues. This audience is presently interested in leisure, entertainment, not dwelling on subjective aesthetic evaluations that explain nothing. It is much better this way. Public parks, among other things, even have the virtue of eliminating at the base this tension between kitsch and tasteful, although visually, the socioeconomic differences between their visitors are realized. It is at this moment that people have the same focus on enjoyment, finally, for recreational pleasure. Fraternalization and sociability prevail as something essential, especially in cosmopolitan cities like São Paulo.

Final Considerations

To finish this article, I want to again raise the lessons of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790) when considering the issues on the judgment of taste. He says that the unfavorable judgment of others can arouse in us justified reservations about our judgment; however, it can never convince us that our judgment is incorrect. Therefore, there is no empirical argument to impose on anyone the judgment of taste. That is right, perfect! There is nothing more just, more libertarian and democratic, than to respect people's judgment of taste without any aesthetic bias, especially when we lack solid arguments and fundamentals. This approach is what is routinely seen. It is necessary to make this assessment accurately, from within oneself and not in a protocol way, just to let others know that we "respect" people's right to like anything kitsch or tasteful.

The Kantian lessons, in my view, should be read by some art critics before they disregard any artistic work. Their opinions and ratings are just more such thoughts, even though each critic considers them as teachings for the public accustomed to the arts. Nonsense. They should be regarded as, of course, exceptions. It is natural, for example, for the art critics to give their opinion. What is not reasonable is that they believe themselves to present the truth and expect their ideas to prevail as a kind of a consolidated norm as aesthetic criteria of an artwork evaluation. This is unwise, much less acceptable. It is a childish narcissism that cannot be accepted.

And, to conclude, I want to register the following: when a work of art becomes public, at the same time, it also becomes subject to the most diverse interpretations. Naturally, viewers experience your reading just from the elements they perceive in the work. Of course, for this, they will be based on their repertoire, their experiences in everyday life, and, above all, their class condition, among other things that, together, will enable them to read the work.

Therefore, we will have an opinion, an analysis no less critical than that of the critic specialized in the subject. If both interpretations (that of the critic and that of the ordinary citizen) are convergent and complementary, the interested public will benefit from knowing the subtleties that a work of art may have. But if they are divergent, there is no need to prioritize the words of the art critic.

After all, it is just one opinion among many others. In some cases, as I already demonstrated at the beginning of this article, the critic's opinion may even be committed to market values, which would be natural because, after all, the work of art is, among other things, fundamentally merchandise, like almost everything in capital society. At that moment, it is very convenient to remember the work of the Italian literary critic, philosopher, semiotician, Umberto Eco, in his work *Opera aperta* (1962) translated in English as *The Open Work* (1989). Still, which has crossed time and remains current, he teaches us that any work can enable us to interpret it. The artwork is open because it does not have a single interpretation. It is polysemic, and therefore open to the most diverse analyses. There is no way to disagree with Umberto Eco in his arguments mainly because no model of theoretical analysis can cope with revealing the aesthetic characteristics of a work, but only how to perceive that work according to its assumptions.

Author Biography

Waldenyr Caldas is a full professor in Sociology of Communication and Culture at the University São Paulo. He was a visiting professor at University La Sapienza di Roma and the Joseph Fourier University in Grenoble, France. Professor Caldas has been a professor since 1996 as well as the vice-director (1997-2001) and Director (2001-2005) of ECA - School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo. In his academic career, he obtained all academic titles until the highest level as a full professor at the University of São Paulo. Currently, he is a representative of the University of São Paulo, together with the Franco-Brazilian Committee of the Agreement "Lévi-Strauss Chairs," and a member of the International Relations Committee of the University of São Paulo. Its scientific production records many books published and several essays published in magazines and national and international collections.

Notes

1. Stanley Edgar Hyman, *The armed vision* (Knopf, New York, 1948) 323-324.
2. Antonio Cândido, *Literatura e sociedade* (Editora Nacional, São Paulo: 1978) 41.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. *Théorie esthétique*. Translated by Marc Jimenez. Paris: Klincksieck, 2011.
- Eco, Umberto. *The Open Work*. New York: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Le jugement esthétique*. Textes choisis. PUF, 2006.
- Mounin, Georges. *Histoire de la linguistique des origines an XXe siecle*. Paris: PUF, 1967.
- Riesman, David. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.
- Wagner, Christiane. "Kitsch, Aesthetics Reminiscences and Jeff Koons," *Revista Visuais, Institute of Arts* (Sep 24, 2016), UNICAMP.