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Kitsch and Perception: Towards a New ‘Aesthetic from Below’

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### Abstract

Although kitsch is one of the most important concepts of twentieth-century art theory, it has gone widely unnoticed by empirical aesthetics. In this article we make a case that the study of kitsch is of considerable heuristic value for both empirical aesthetics and art perception. As a descriptive term, kitsch makes a perfect example of hedonic fluency. In fact, the frequently invoked opposition of kitsch and art reflects two types of aesthetic experience that can be reliably distinguished in terms of processing dynamics: a disfluent one that promises new insights but requires cognitive elaboration (art), and a fluent one that consists of an immediate, unreflective emotional response but leaves us with what we already know (kitsch). Yet as a derogatory word, kitsch draws our attention to a general disregard for effortless emotional gratification in modern Western aesthetics that can be traced back to eighteenth-century Rationalism. Despite all efforts of Pop Art to embrace kitsch and to question normative values in art, current models of aesthetic liking—including fluency-based ones—still adhere to an elitist notion of Modern art that privileges style over content and thereby excludes what is essential not only for popular taste and Postmodern art but also for premodern artistic production: emotionally rich content. Revisiting Fechner's (1876) criticism of highbrow aesthetics we propose a new *aesthetic from below* (*Asthetik von Unten*) that goes beyond processing characteristics by taking content- and context-related information into account.

*Keywords:* empirical aesthetics; art perception; kitsch; hedonic fluency; pleasure; interest; Fechner; aesthetic from below

## Kitsch and Perception: Towards a New 'Aesthetic from Below'

**1. Introduction**

In his influential essay on *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* art critic Clement Greenberg (1939) once expressed his wonder about the coexistence of two such irreconcilable things in modern Western aesthetics as a Cubist painting by Braque and a flashy cover illustration of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Today, we have come to take these disparities for granted as the line between kitsch and art has blurred: In a show of twentieth-century art we discover action paintings by Pollock next to comic-style pin-ups by Mel Ramos and when we leave the museum through the gift shop we are surrounded by coffee mugs, umbrellas and fridge magnets adorned with sunflowers by Van Gogh. Finally, in the queue at the cash register we realize: there is a market for these things! With Pop Art using kitsch elements and, conversely, with merchandise capitalizing on iconic artworks (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008), kitsch has become “one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics” (Călinescu, 1987, p. 232). But is there a perspective in empirical aesthetics broad enough to deal with it? When we think of empirical aesthetics, we usually think of art perception. Alike other phenomena of popular taste, kitsch has so far received hardly any attention. In the following, we therefore raise the questions why one of the most important concepts of twentieth-century art theory has been overlooked and why the study of kitsch might be of relevance for empirical aesthetics in general and art perception in particular.

In the first section, we touch upon the origins of the word kitsch and the aesthetic concept it designates (Where does “kitsch” come from?). Subsequently, a definition by Kulka (1996) is introduced, elaborated and formalized to clarify our understanding of kitsch (What is kitsch?). The third section accounts for the mass appeal of kitsch (Why is kitsch so popular?), while section four deals with its supposed aesthetic deficiency (Why is kitsch considered aesthetically worthless?).

Finally, we discuss possible reasons for a persistent disregard of kitsch in empirical aesthetics and close by renewing Fechner's (1876) criticism of highbrow aesthetics that led to the establishment of experimental aesthetics in the first place.

## 2. Cheap artistic stuff: Where does “kitsch” come from?

This section is about the origins of the word kitsch and the aesthetic concept it represents. According to Călinescu (1987), it was in Munich between 1860 and 1880 that “kitsch” entered the jargon of painters and art dealers as a synonym for “cheap artistic stuff” (p. 234).<sup>1</sup> Despite its rather recent appearance, etymology of the word kitsch still lies in the dark and has been subject to wildest speculation (Kluge & Seebold, 2011).<sup>2</sup> From his personal recollections, Avenarius (1920) reported that the German “Kitsch” comes from a mispronunciation of the English “sketch” that was widespread among artists who sold oil paintings of poor quality as souvenirs to Anglo-American tourists visiting Bavaria's capital. Although Avenarius claimed to be an ear witness in the case, his theory seems highly improbable as a typical German mispronunciation of “sketch” [skɛtʃ] does not sound similar to “kitsch” [kitʃ]. Derivations from other European languages appear equally far-fetched (e.g., the French “chic” pronounced backwards, Kulka, 1996) since the word “kitsch” is detectable in some German dialects before it became a label for bad taste. According to Best (1985), the noun “Kitsch” originates in Swabian dialect where it was used to designate scrap wood, flotsam, or crude wooden objects, while the corresponding verb “kitschen” referred to peddling but also to carrying a heavy burden on one's head or by means of a back-basket. Related expressions from Alsatian dialect (noun “Ketsch”; verb “ketschen”) support the hypothesis that

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<sup>1</sup> The earliest written account of the word kitsch is a satirical poem by art critic Max Bernstein (1884) making fun of a contemporary genre painting displayed at the annual show of the Munich Art Society in 1883.

<sup>2</sup> See Călinescu (1987) for a comprehensive overview of etymological theories.

the semantic field originally comprised the content of a peddler's carrying frame (noun "Kitsch") as well as the act of petty trading (verb "kitschen"). Apart from allocating the origins of the word kitsch to German dialects from the region where it first appeared in its modern sense, Best's etymological theory also touches upon two influential socio-economic developments of the nineteenth century that have been regarded as prerequisites for kitsch production: Industrialization and universal literacy (Greenberg, 1939). It was with increasing literacy that mass-produced paperbacks became a profitable trading good for haberdashers who carried their merchandise in wooden crates or back baskets (Best, 1985). This 'reading frenzy' of the early 1800s also gave reason to a controversy among writers and literary critics foreshadowing some of the main tropes of the later kitsch discourse (Schöberl, 1984; Niehaus, 2002): Pulp literature was rejected as trivial and sentimental, produced for the sole purpose of giving immediate affection and cheap thrills in exchange for quick money. By the end of the 1920s, the word kitsch had entered many modern languages (see Ortlieb, Stojilović, Rutar, Fischer, & Carbon, 2017) and its context of use gradually extended beyond bad taste in painting and literature (Călinescu, 1987): Today, it applies to music (e.g., folk-like pop music), filmmaking (e.g., romantic love films), TV formats (e.g., telenovelas), and gardening (e.g., garden gnomes), as well as to architecture (e.g., fake antique columns), fashion (e.g., heart-shaped sunglasses), furnishing (e.g., Cuckoo clocks), and interior decoration (e.g., plastic flowers). Yet there still are certain limitations to its use: Curiously, the word kitsch is not applicable to anything smelt, tasted or touched, although the adjectives "touching" and "tasteless" may be used interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> In the following we clarify our understanding of kitsch by examining its preferred subjects and stylistic devices in the visual domain.

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<sup>3</sup> Certainly, a sentimental love story can be encoded and decoded using Braille alphabet. The concept of kitsch can thus be acquired by a blind person via haptic sensations. The point is, that the word "kitsch" is never used to describe a tactile or a haptic sensation (e.g., we do not say "the silky texture of this heart-shaped pillow *feels* kitschy"). Conversely, however, the adjective "touching" may be used as a synonym for "kitschy." A corresponding

### 3. Anything but art: What is kitsch?

Over the last one hundred years, the term kitsch has been frequently used to contrast different notions of art (Pazaurek, 1912/2012; Greenberg, 1939; Simon-Schäfer, 1980; Kulka, 1996). In the present section we introduce three necessary conditions for kitsch classification, mainly proposed by philosopher Tomaš Kulka (1996), which reliably distinguish kitsch from Modern art: (A) content charged with positive emotions, (B) immediate identifiability of the depicted subject matter and (C) a perfectly conventional manner of representation. Based on concrete examples we relate these criteria to findings from empirical aesthetics. Furthermore, Kulka's definition is formalized and operationalizations for the empirical study of kitsch are derived.

*Emotionally rich content.* Whether something is regarded as kitsch largely depends on its content. Certain themes and subjects are simply more evocative of kitsch than others (Simon-Schäfer, 1980). What do they have in common? According to Greenberg (1939), kitsch prefers the “lowest common denominators of experience” (p. 16) such as love, birth, family, and nostalgia. In addition to these universal themes of human existence, Pazaurek (1912/2012) mentioned patriotic feelings (“Hurrakitsch”) and devotional sentiments as shared by the supporters of a sports club, an ideology, or a religious confession (“Devotionalienkitsch”). More specifically, Kulka (1996) claimed that “[t]he subject matter typically depicted by kitsch is generally considered to be beautiful (horses, long-legged women), pretty (sunsets, flowers, Swiss villages), cute (puppies, kittens), and/or highly emotionally charged (mothers with babies, children in tears)” (p. 26). In perfect agreement with Simon-Schäfer (1980) and others, Kulka (1996) arrived at the conclusion that kitsch generally requires a theme or a subject matter that will “spontaneously trigger an

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asymmetry is observable in the gustatory domain: Although one would never say “this cake *tastes* kitschy,” the term “kitsch” itself is a “taste judgement” and “syrupy sweetness” may be used as a metaphor to describe something “kitschy.”

unreflective emotional response” (p. 26) and that whatever adds to the emotional charge of a subject matter, will also increase its potential to provoke kitsch classification. According to this premise, the theme “mother with child” (Fig. 1A) should make a particularly gratifying kitsch subject. Firstly, because it alludes to basic needs for security and nurturance and is therefore universally understood (Dissanayake, 2015) and secondly, as it can be tailored to the yearnings and sentiments of a more specific target group: Simply by adding nimbuses, mother and child will be identified as “Virgin Mary and baby Jesus” (Fig. 1B) and the image will tap into the emotionally rich associations of religious Roman-Catholics. In Bavarian Catholics it is even likely to arouse patriotic feelings since the Mother of God is officially recognized “Patrona Bavariae” (Kreiml & Neumann, 2017).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Apart from a contentwise enrichment of the theme “mother with child” (e.g., Mother of God), Figures 1A and 1B illustrate two stylistic devices that will add to its emotional charge by bringing conventional beauty and cuteness into play: the “beauty-in-averages-effect” (Halberstadt, 2006) and the “baby scheme” (Lorenz, 1943). In both figures the mother is not portrayed as an individual person; instead her facial features represent a perfectly prototypical female face. Most likely, this manner of representation will add to the emotional impact of the depicted subject matter, since facial averageness is positively associated with judgements of attractiveness, good health and desirable personality traits (Fink, Neave, Manning, & Grammer, 2006). With “a head large in relation to the body, eyes set low in the head, a large protruding forehead, round protruding cheeks, a plump rounded body shape, short thick extremities, [and a] soft body surface” (Morreall & Loy, 1989, p. 68) the two babies ideally represent the well-known “baby scheme” (Lorenz, 1943). As part of an innate releasing mechanism for nurturing behavior this set of physical features

in babies and toddlers is universally understood. Besides, attracting the perceiver's attention, it will reliably elicit a spontaneous affective response that enhances care-taking behavior and deters aggression (see Zebrowitz, 1997). Responsiveness to this pattern is in fact so strong, that immediate affection also strikes us when we detect it in other mammalian infants (e.g., puppies and kittens). In kitsch one typically finds exaggerated versions of the baby scheme with an excessively large head and big round eyes. The use of such supernormal key stimuli makes juvenile features even more salient and further increases likeliness of a spontaneous emotional response (peak-shift principle; Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999).

*Positive valence.* Does kitsch draw on highly emotional content per se? Disturbing and saddening events such as illness, death, loss, and separation also form part of the human condition and images of snakes or spiders may reliably trigger strong feelings of fear and disgust due to a 'hard-wired' response mechanism (Hoehl, Hellmer, Johansson, & Gredebäck, 2017). In spite of their strong emotional charge, these themes and subjects do not work for kitsch. According to Kulka (1996), kitsch "avoid[s] all unpleasant or disturbing features of reality, leaving us only with those we can easily cope with and identify with" (p. 27). Although he agrees that the affective palette of kitsch is confined to positive emotions, his first precondition does not exclude negative emotional content. We therefore suggest to make a slight but significant modification: First and foremost, kitsch requires a subject matter with a *positive* emotional charge. On a rough two-dimensional scheme, emotional states can be described in terms of valence (how positive or aversive does it feel?) and arousal (how activating or deactivating does it feel?). Although limited in terms of valence, it seems unspecific with regard to activation: It may cheer us up on a rainy day or calm us down when we feel upset (Norman, 2004). By confining kitsch to agreeable content, we are able to distinguish an unadulterated heartwarming response to kitsch from the more



complex aesthetic experience of being moved (Menninghaus, Wagner, Hanich, Wassiliwizky, Kuehnast, & Jacobsen, 2015), that is characterized by mixed emotions (Weth, Raab, & Carbon, 2015) including physiological markers for negative affect (Wassiliwizky, Koelsch, Wagner, Jacobsen, & Menninghaus, 2017).

*Identifiability.* Is positive emotional content sufficient for kitsch classification? Certainly not. After all, many acclaimed artists deal with the most agreeable aspects of human existence. The celebrated sculptor Henry Moore, for example, has created an extensive series of works dedicated to the subject of “mother with child” (Fig. 2). In spite of their heartwarming subject, these works are recognized as icons of modern sculpture. Yet, unlike the makers of the previous versions of “mother with child” (Fig. 1 A/B), Moore chooses a manner of representation that makes it very difficult for us to identify what is depicted. Without the descriptive title “Reclining mother with child” we would be absolutely clueless. It is even with this piece of information that Moore’s sculpture persistently defies categorization.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

Even the most touching subject will not release an unreflective positive response, unless it is fairly recognizable. Kulka (1996) therefore claims that “instant and effortless identifiability of the depicted subject matter” (p. 29) is the second sine qua non for kitsch classification. But how can immediate identifiability be attained? First of all, one should refrain from any inventive manner of depiction which is sure to spoil the intended unreflective emotional response. A Cubist style interpretation of “maternity” (Fig. 3A), for example, that dissolves the subject into disparate patches of paint or plaster will certainly impair instant recognition and Gestalt detection (Muth, Pepperell, & Carbon, 2013). Thus, with regard to formal aspects, kitsch prefers conventional realism to any kind of idiosyncratic rendering or even indeterminate display (Muth & Carbon,

2016). Apart from non-figurative works of art, still countless celebrated artworks come to mind that are perfectly compliant with Kulka's first and second preconditions. At this point, we have to clarify what we mean by "art," in order to further specify what we mean by "kitsch".

*Conventionality.* In 1920 the artist Paul Klee famously wrote that "[a]rt does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible" (Klee quoted from Chipp, 1968, p. 182). This idea—that artworks transform the way we see the world, instead of faithfully imitating it—has been expressed in many different ways by scholars and artists alike: Goodman (1984), for instance, remarked that "[w]hen we leave an exhibition of the works of an important person, the world we step into is not the one we left when we went in; we see everything in terms of those works" (p. 192). How does art bring about such changes? Through an unconventional rendering of a familiar subject, artists like Moore (Fig. 2) and Villon (Fig. 3A) deliberately "complicate [...] what is presented to us so that we must *see* it, not merely recognize it in the routine habitual way of ordinary experience" (Dissanayake, 1990, pp. 69-70). Likewise, Shklovsky (1917/2002) spoke of the dishabituation function of art: It challenges our perceptual routines by breaking up the familiar and acquainting us with the unusual. Recent empirical findings support these notions by showing that appreciation increases, if spectators report insight moments while engaging with ambiguous stimuli (*Aesthetic Aha*; Muth & Carbon, 2013) or artworks that allow for multiple interpretations (*Semantic Instability*; Muth & Carbon, 2016). Moreover, there is preliminary indication that artworks with distinguishing stylistic features transform the way we see the world by readjusting the viewer's perceptual system (Carbon, 2011): In a study by Carbon, Leder and Ditye (2007) participants adapted their face prototypes to elongated faces in portraits by Amedeo Modigliani, while a complementary style-related adaptation effect was observed for the excessively round proportions in artworks by Fernando Botero. It seems that, after looking at portraits by Modigliani or Botero

for some time, people literally “see everything in terms of these works” (Goodman, 1984, p.192). However, artworks may also challenge our mental representations on a semantic level. The painting “Virgin Mary chastises the Infant Jesus before the eyes of three witnesses...” by Max Ernst (1926), for example, shows precisely what the title suggests (Fig. 3B). Nevertheless, there is something outrageous to its subject matter as the artist makes ironic reference to two tropes of Christian art by combining them in a domestic scene: the ever-harmonious mother-son relationship and the flagellation of Christ. Although Ernst adheres to conventional realism and even borrows his composition from famous artworks,<sup>4</sup> he deliberately thwarts the observer’s expectations in terms of Christian iconography.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

Altogether, we conclude that Modern art is valued primarily for its ability to reshape and extend our mental representations in a meaningful way (Armstrong & Detweiler-Bedell, 2008; Muth, Hesslinger, & Carbon, 2015). Kitsch, however, does not aim for new insights. Instead, it takes advantage of people’s standard associations and confirms them by employing stereotypes and well-tried clichés. According to Kulka (1996) it is the capacity of art to “enrich our associations relating to the depicted object or theme” (p. 37) that is absent in kitsch. In opposition to avant-garde art “[k]itsch comes to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them” (p. 27).

Mainly based on Kulka’s (1996) definition we suggest that the application of the concept of kitsch requires three things: (A) a subject matter charged with positive emotions, (B) instant and

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<sup>4</sup> Infrared reflectography of the underdrawings showed that the artist used reproductions of works by Michelangelo and Tintoretto as templates for the figure composition of “Virgin Mary chastises the Infant Jesus...” (Krischel, 1998).

effortless identifiability and (C) a perfectly conventional manner of representation that does “not substantially enrich our associations relating to the depicted objects or themes” (p. 37). We also agree with Kulka, that, although each of these three preconditions is a necessary one, only a combination of all three is sufficient for kitsch classification. Since positive emotional charge, identifiability and conventionality may vary considerably between perceivers of different age or cultural background, a classificatory definition with three dichotomic criteria seems impractical, especially for the empirical study of kitsch. We therefore follow Kulka’s (1996) suggestion of conceptualizing the three kitsch criteria as continuous dimensions: “The more clearly, saliently, and unambiguously the picture complies with our three conditions, the more paradigmatic an example of kitsch it is” (p. 38). Based on this modified definition, we claim that kitschiness of a visual stimulus array can be estimated based on the product of three continuous variables:

$$\text{Kitschiness} = \text{positive valence of the depicted subject matter} \times \text{identifiability} \times \text{conventionality}$$

**Equation 1** (codomain of dependent variable and independent variables: 0-1)

This formula allows for straightforward operationalization and empirical testing: Of course, the dependent and the three independent variables could be assessed using standardized rating scales (e.g., 0=*not at all kitschy*; 6=*very kitschy*). Since kitsch is a highly derogatory term, it is probably advisable to use implicit measures in addition to self-reports (see Reiter, Ortlieb, & Carbon, 2015): Valence and intensity of an emotional response could be assessed via facial expressions (*sEMG*; Cacioppo, Petty, Losch, & Kim, 1986; *FaceReader*; Weth, Raab, & Carbon, 2015) or implicit associations (*md-IAT*; Gattol, Sääksjärvi, & Carbon, 2011), while naming latencies and name agreement might serve as behavioral measures of identifiability and

conventionality (Snodgrass & Vanderwart, 1980). In the following, we intend to show that our ‘formula for kitsch’ is also key to a preliminary understanding of kitsch as a mass phenomenon.

#### **4. Instant beauty: Why is kitsch so popular?**

Unlike Abstract Expressionism, kitsch proves tremendously popular. What do people like about kitsch? In this section, we identify three potential sources of its mass appeal: The positive emotional charge of its content and the inherently pleasant experience of fluent processing on a perceptual and a conceptual level.

According to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984), it is one of the main characteristics of popular aesthetics that content is more important than form (‘style follows content’). Above all, works of popular taste have to represent something that perceivers can easily relate to their everyday experience, while stylistic choices are made to ensure immediate apprehension of the depicted subject matter (Hanquinet, Roose, & Savage, 2014). Faithful imitation and the classical ideals of beauty and harmony are thus preferred over formal experimentation that is likely to put general accessibility at stake. According to Kulka (1996), the popular principle of ‘content over form’ holds particularly true for kitsch: “In kitsch paintings, unlike in real art, what is represented is more important than how it is rendered. The *what* overshadows the *how*” (p. 80). From this observation he somewhat prematurely concludes that the appeal of kitsch must be 100 percent content-driven: “People are attracted to kitsch because they like its subject matter” (p. 28). Is it really that simple? Do people like kitsch just because they feel passionate about its content? A large body of research from empirical aesthetics suggests that some of the content-independent characteristics of kitsch might also have a share in its popular success. For example, there is strong indication that people prefer familiar (e.g., mere exposure effect; Zajonc, 1968) and prototypical stimuli (e.g., averaged objects; Halberstadt & Rhodes, 2003; prototypical colors; Whitfield &

Slatter, 1979; Martindale & Moore, 1988; Rhodes & Tremewan, 1996) if they are depicted in an unambiguous, clear-cut manner (e.g., clarity of contours; Reber, et al., 1998; canonical perspective; Palmer, Rosch, & Chase, 1981; Khalil & McBeath, 2006). Altogether, these findings have amounted to the hypothesis that any aspect of a visual stimulus that facilitates the ability of our mind to process it efficiently and with relative ease has a positive effect on aesthetic liking. The *Hedonic Fluency Model* (HFM) by Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman (2004) postulates a monotonically increasing relationship between processing speed and liking: “The more fluently the perceiver can process an object, the more positive is his or her aesthetic response” (p. 366).<sup>5</sup> According to the HFM, processing fluency is an inherently pleasurable experience that is then attributed to the object itself (for empirical support see Winkielman & Cacioppo, 2001). Furthermore, Reber and colleagues (2004) discriminate between fluency at two different levels: Perceptual fluency is defined as “the ease of identifying the physical identity of the stimulus” (p. 367), while conceptual fluency refers to the “ease of mental operations concerned with stimulus meaning and its relation to semantic knowledge structures” (p. 367). It seems safe to assume that kitsch makes a perfect example of perceptual fluency. After all, effortless identifiability is one of its defining properties (identifiability). But is there any indication that kitsch also features conceptual fluency? In accordance with Kulka, (1996) we have found that kitsch does not question standard associations relating to its subjects or themes. Instead, it confirms and protects existent semantic knowledge by “avoid[ing] all unpleasant or disturbing features of reality, leaving us only with those we can easily cope with and identify with” (p. 27). From these considerations

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<sup>5</sup>Albrecht and Carbon (2014) found that fluency increases intensity, but not necessarily positivity of a stimulus. Thus, the fluency-positivity-hypothesis seems to be limited to stimuli with a positive valence. In the case of aversive stimuli, fluency amplifies negative valence accordingly. Since kitsch is, by definition, limited to *positive* emotional content, this limitation of the *Hedonic Fluency Model* is of no concern here.

we predict that kitsch will also feature a high level of conceptual fluency (conventionality). Practically all authors who have ventured to express their thoughts about kitsch are agreed in that its appeal consists of an immediate emotional response, without intermediate reasoning (e.g., Greenberg, 1939; Simon-Schäfer, 1980; Călinescu, 1987; Kulka, 1996; Benjamin, 1982/2002; Menninghaus, 2009). Like no other aesthetic concept, kitsch embodies the “principle of immediacy, immediacy of access, immediacy of effect, instant beauty” (Călinescu, 1987, p. 8). If this is the case, we expect hedonic fluency to contribute to the appeal of kitsch in addition to the positive emotional charge of its content. In sum, we postulate that the popular success of kitsch is driven by the following three factors:

$$\text{Kitsch appeal} = \text{positive valence of the depicted subject matter}^{[\text{perceptual fluency} \times \text{conceptual fluency}]}$$

**Equation 2** (codomain of the dependent variable and the independent variables:  $0 < x \leq 1$ )

Note that, apart from Equation 1, the appeal of kitsch does not result from three equally weighted variables. Equation 2 accounts for the popular principle of ‘content over form’ by placing special emphasis on the emotional charge of the depicted subject matter. In terms of liking, lack of emotional charge cannot be fully compensated by content-independent aspects. Jointly, this triad of pleasant content-related associations, perceptual and conceptual fluency may account for the appeal of kitsch. Yet it certainly cannot explain why kitsch is a derogatory term above all. What is wrong with ‘instant beauty’ and unconditional accessibility?

## 5. Unbearable lightness: Why is kitsch considered aesthetically worthless?

Despite its popularity, kitsch is a term of abuse. Why would people dispraise of something that is perfectly agreeable? In the present section, we fathom into the origins of a peculiar aversion

towards effortless emotional gratification in modern Western aesthetics that can be traced back to eighteenth-century Rationalism when aesthetic value was linked to epistemic interest and cognitive enrichment.

In his *Critique of Social Judgement of Taste* Bourdieu (1979/1984) remarked that “the whole language of aesthetics is contained in a fundamental refusal of the *facile*” (p. 486). Drawing on everyday examples, he revealed a dismissive attitude towards anything that appears “easy in the sense of simple, and therefore shallow, and ‘cheap’, because it is easily decoded and culturally ‘undemanding’” (p. 486). Furthermore, he pointed out that whatever “offers pleasures that are too immediately accessible [is contrasted with] the deferred pleasures of legitimate art” (p. 486). Again, kitsch makes a prototypical example of Bourdieu’s claims as it represents the “principle of immediacy” (Călinescu, 1987, p. 8) in contrast to art. But where does this aversion to instant enjoyment come from? It was in the eighteenth century, that aesthetics was first established as a distinct matter of study by philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1750/1983). For Baumgarten, aesthetics was not merely a philosophy of art and beauty. In fact, he envisioned a new branch of epistemology dedicated to the preconditions of gaining knowledge from sensual experience (“*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*,” p. 79). In the following we make a case that it was precisely this confusion of aesthetics and epistemic interest that prepared the ground for a “refusal of the *facile*” (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, p. 486).

*Beautiful and sublime.* Edmund Burke (1757/1990), a contemporary of Baumgarten, was among the first to distinguish two aesthetic ideas by means of their accessibility: the beautiful and the sublime. Whatever is beautiful, according to Burke, conveys a clear idea of an agreeable subject. Its “smooth and voluptuous satisfaction which the assured prospect of pleasure bestows” (p. 35) inspires the perceiver with “sentiments of tenderness and affection” (p. 39). While beauty



instils ‘love at first sight,’ the sublime strikes us with confusion and awe resulting from the obscure notion of an unsettling subject matter (Burke, 1757/1990). By comparing the Burkeian sublime to the process of accommodation, Keltner and Haidt (2003) revealed an interesting parallel between Burke’s aesthetic theory and Genetic epistemology by Piaget and Inhelder (1969). Sublimity is fascinating, yet disturbing, because it transcends the perceiver’s previous experience. Thus, encounters with the sublime defy integration into existing mental structures unless these are successfully modified (i.e., accommodated). Conversely, Burke’s notion of beauty resembles what Piaget and Inhelder (1969) referred to as assimilation. While the sublime forces us to see the world differently, the beautiful validates our cognitive structures by conveying a clear-cut idea that perfectly accords with our expectations. In his own words Burke (1757/1990) asserts that “we submit to what we admire [i.e., sublimity], but we love what submits to us [i.e., beauty]” (p. 103). This quotation also shows a patronizing attitude towards the beautiful. Elsewhere Burke further stipulates that truly important ideas cannot be expressed by beauty since “[a] clear idea is [only] another name for a little idea” (p. 58). Apart from immediate accessibility Burke’s condescending notion of beauty already bears a considerable ‘family resemblance’ with the concept of kitsch.

*Dependent and free beauty.* Contempt towards the ‘facile’ is also inherent in Kant’s (1790/1951) complementary ideas of *free* and *dependent* beauty. In his *Critique of Judgement*—a reply to both Baumgarten and Burke—Kant claims that an experience of beauty is “merely dependent” (p. 81) whenever it results from an object that adheres perfectly well to some prototype the beholder has in mind. Thus, whatever is dependently beautiful in a Kantian sense “immediately succumbs to conceptual understanding because it perfectly satisfies the ‘rules’ for the application of a concept” (Armstrong & Detweiler-Bedell, 2008, p. 310). This would certainly apply to the conventional renderings of “mother and child” in Figures 1A and 1B. Here there is no need for a

descriptive title as the meaning of both images is obvious. In the case of free beauty, however, the perceiver fails to apply a definite concept to the object in question. Nevertheless, he or she “senses an abstract, potential unity of the features suggested by the object” (p. 310). This would correspond to Moore’s sculpture (Fig. 2) and Villon’s Cubist interpretation of “maternity” (Fig. 3).

*Pretty and beautiful.* Armstrong and Detweiler-Bedell (2008) have proposed a distinction between the *pretty* and the *beautiful* that maps the Kantian ideas of dependent and free beauty onto cognitive processing dynamics. They made a case that “Kant’s notion of dependent beauty nicely describes the aesthetic pleasure associated with fluent processing” (p. 310) and argued that we experience pretty objects whenever our “‘normal’, concept-bound cognition is particularly successful” (p. 310)—for instance, when we recognize an iconic image, a brand logo or a popular advertisement jingle. Obviously, it is but a small step from prettiness (i.e. dependent beauty) to the concept of kitsch advocated in this article.

*Pleasure and interest.* Finally, the *Pleasure-Interest Model of Aesthetic Liking* (PIA Model) by Graf and Landwehr (2015) combines fluency-based aesthetics with a dual-process perspective and epistemic motivation. It posits that aesthetic preferences are shaped by “two hierarchical, fluency-based processes” (p. 395) with different outcomes: Evaluations of *pleasure* (i.e., immediate affective reactions) result from an initial gut-level process that is stimulus-driven and does not involve cognitive elaboration, while judgements of *interest* arise from a controlled, higher order process that is activated by stimulus-based affordances (e.g., ambiguity) and/or the perceiver’s need for cognitive enrichment. Again, it is the beholder’s epistemic motivation that coins his or her aesthetic judgement: According to Graf and Landwehr (2015), “pleasure is a *backward-oriented process* that is not associated with the motivation for further exploration of the target, whereas interest also has a *forward-oriented character* related to the motivation for

learning” (p. 404, emphasis by the authors). This description of the two hierarchical processes involved in aesthetic evaluation recalls Greenberg’s (1939) famous characterization of kitsch as a cultural “rear-guard” (p. 9) drawing on “accumulated experience” (p. 10) in opposition to a future-oriented artistic avant-garde. This said, the PIA Model offers a plausible explanation for the puzzling ambivalence of kitsch: Designed to create a particularly smooth processing experience that “directly feels good on an affective level” (p. 397), kitsch should excel in the initial “default type of aesthetic stimulus processing” (p. 399). For perceivers with a low motivation to learn, this inherently pleasurable processing experience directly translates into a positive aesthetic evaluation. However, when it comes to controlled processing, kitsch fails to arouse continuing interest: As an easy-to-process stimulus, it frustrates perceivers with a high need for cognitive enrichment in that it leaves them with what they already know. In this case, the positive first impression (“How cute!”) should be overwritten by a negative interest-related judgement (“How kitschy!”). In fact, there is preliminary indication that implicit and explicit evaluations of kitsch stimuli may dissociate (Reiter, Ortlieb, & Carbon, 2015): A within-subject comparison of explicit and implicit attitudes towards decorative everyday objects showed that kitschy objects were received more positively in a multi-dimensional implicit association test (md-IAT; Gattol, Säöksjärvi, & Carbon, 2011) than in self-reports (Likert-scales). Based on the PIA Model, we hypothesize that the magnitude of this discrepancy between implicit, gut-level appreciation and explicit, cognitive refusal should increase with a person’s level of art expertise. Several studies have shown that the acquisition of art-related knowledge raises people’s aesthetic standards in terms of novelty and complexity (McWhinnie, 1968; Smith & Melara, 1990) as well as their appreciation of abstract paintings (Stojilović & Marković, 2014). Palmer and Griscom (2013) obtained a complementary effect for easy-to-process-stimuli that is particularly informative with regard to kitsch: In this case

artistic training reduced an initial preference for conventional harmony. Altogether, the PIA Model gives a plausible answer to our initial question why aestheticians show so very little *interest* in kitsch: Assuming that scholars and researchers are driven by an exceptionally high motivation to learn and explore, they should prefer aesthetic objects that allow for cognitive enrichment (e.g., avant-garde art) and despise of undemanding conventional ones (e.g., kitsch). Looking at the historical precursors of the polemic opposition of kitsch and art, it seems that an early confusion of aesthetic value and epistemic interest gave rise to a latent disregard for aesthetic objects that provide immediate emotional gratification. To what extent is this highbrow attitude still discernible in empirical aesthetics today and how can it be overcome?

## 6. Discussion

“By the association principle I mean a principle, that is already known and recognized in psychology for its significance and its scope, but which is hitherto hardly appreciated in aesthetics” (Fechner, 1876, Chap IX, p. 86, translation by the authors)<sup>6</sup>

When Gustav Theodor Fechner launched experimental aesthetics in 1876, he thought of it as an inductive down-to-earth complement to a philosophical ‘aesthetic from above’ (“Aesthetik von Oben”) without any empirical foundation. With his experimental approach to aesthetic problems (“experimentale Aesthetik”), he hoped to establish an ‘aesthetic from below’ (“Aesthetik von Unten”) that would bridge the gap between high-browed speculation and everyday experience. Fechner himself set a good example in that he sought the rules of aesthetic appeal not in high art but in common things such as cigar cases (Do people prefer cigar cases whose proportions accord

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<sup>6</sup> Original version: “Unter Associationsprinzip verstehe ich ein Princip, dessen Wichtigkeit und Tragweite in der Psychologie längst bekannt und anerkannt, in der Aesthetik aber bisher im Ganzen wenig gewürdigt ist” (Fechner, 1876, Chap IX, p. 86).

with the so-called golden section?) or the cold meats of a butcher's display (Why are sausages cut diagonally rather than perpendicularly?). However, when interest in experimental aesthetics revived in the 1950s, after a longer period of stalemate, the focus had shifted from everyday phenomena to art perception. For the trailblazer of *new experimental aesthetics*, Daniel E. Berlyne (1971), art was essentially a manifestation of exploratory behavior. Resting on the basic assumption that novelty and conflict form the guiding principles behind *any* kind of aesthetic experience, his influential biopsychological model bespeaks a modernist notion of art. To the present day, Modern art is widely acknowledged as the ultimate touchstone for a general understanding of human aesthetic experience. The well-received information-processing *Model of Aesthetic Appreciation and Aesthetic Judgement* by Leder, Belke, Oeberst, and Augustin (2004), for example, centers on the question “why modern art's large number of individualized styles, innovativeness and conceptuality offer positive aesthetic experiences” (p. 489). But can it also account for kitsch? We think not: Since the model is all about mastering the “[c]ognitive challenges of both abstract art and other conceptual, complex and multidimensional stimuli” (p. 489) an unreflective emotional response to kitsch is not provided for.

With fluency-based aesthetics a complementary stream of research emerged, that seems more suitable for the study of kitsch. After all, the main proposition of the *Hedonic Fluency Model* (HFM; Reber et al., 2004), that aesthetic liking is a positive function of processing ease, has already led us to a better understanding of its hedonic value (see section four), while another fluency-based framework—the *Pleasure-Interest Model of Aesthetic Liking* (PIA Model) by Graf and Landwehr (2015)—has been informative regarding the “contradictory preference patterns for easy [e.g., kitsch] versus difficult-to-process aesthetic stimuli [e.g. Modern art]” (p. 396). With epistemic motivation as a moderating variable, the PIA Model gives a plausible answer to our initial question

why aestheticians show so very little ‘interest’ in kitsch (see section five). Does a dual-process perspective on fluency-based aesthetics bring us back onto the right track of Fechnerian aesthetics then? Surprisingly, the answer is ‘no.’ Alike the HFM, the PIA Model is preoccupied with the perceiver’s processing experience and thereby “excludes the influence of content-based object information on aesthetic preferences” (Graf & Landwehr, 2015, p. 406). Drawing on Kant’s (1790/1951) famous dictum of ‘disinterested interest’ the authors of the PIA Model argue that “[e]specially for stimuli with salient semantic content, an ‘aesthetic’ preference judgement may [...] be obscured by content-based stimulus information, making the preference judgement not exclusively aesthetic” (Graf & Landwehr, 2015, p. 406). If we maintain that positive emotional content is a *sine qua non* for kitsch classification and key to its popular success, we have to admit that fluency-based aesthetics cannot fully account for it. A dual-process model of fluency-based aesthetics can reliably distinguish between kitsch and Modern art; yet in an everyday context, where everything features high perceptual and conceptual fluency (e.g., traffic signs), it ignores precisely what makes kitsch special: a heartwarming subject matter.

It was again Fechner (1876) who first criticized a general disregard for content-related associations in aesthetics and it was precisely the Kantian ideal of ‘disinterestedness’ which he held responsible for the widespread misconception that pure aesthetic judgements should be entirely independent from any content-based information (‘free beauty’). From introspection (Why is it that we find an orange more beautiful than a wooden ball of the exact same size and color?) and thought experiments (If our aesthetic judgement was based solely on stylistic aspects wouldn’t we value an equally colorful, but perfectly symmetrical carpet pattern over the Sistine Madonna?), Fechner concluded that content-related aspects (“associative Factoren”) must be *at least* as

important for the formation of aesthetic judgements as stylistic ones (“direkte Factoren”).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, there is substantial empirical support for his claim: A study on the microgenetic processes of art perception by Augustin, Leder, Hutzler, and Carbon (2008), for example, demonstrated that style literally follows content: When presentation times of representational artworks were systematically varied (10 ms, 50 ms, 202 ms, and 3,000 ms), Augustin and colleagues observed that “effects of content were present at all presentation times, [whereas] effects of style were traceable from 50 ms onwards” (p. 127). This finding, that content-related information is processed prior to stylistic aspects, has been confirmed in a follow-up study using a dual-task EEG-paradigm (Augustin, Defranceschi, Fuchs, Carbon, & Hutzler, & 2011) as well as in an ERP-based study on facial attractiveness (Carbon, Faerber, Augustin, Mitterer, & Hutzler, 2018): Upon examining the temporal order and the interplay of gender-specific facial features and facial attractiveness, Carbon and colleagues summarized that “processing of facial attractiveness seems to be based on gender-specific aesthetic pre-processing, for instance via activating gender-specific attractiveness prototypes which show focused processing of certain facial aspects” (p. 186). Furthermore, research on aesthetic preferences in poetry suggests that a predominance of content is also found outside of the visual domain. According to Belfi, Vessel, and Starr (2018), the best predictors for aesthetic liking of a sonnet or a haiku were the “vividness of imagery experienced in reading, valence, and arousal of perceived emotion in a poem’s content” (p. 341). In the light of these findings, it seems that our perceptual apparatus is itself governed by the popular principle of ‘content over form.’ Should this be the case, our aesthetic judgements would never be ‘purely aesthetic’ in a Kantian sense, no matter how much art expertise we acquire. In the following

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, Fechner did not take the possibility of abstract art into consideration. However, with regard to non-representational art it can be argued that content-related associations may also be triggered by colors, shapes and textures.

we intend to show that a disregard for content prevents a comprehensive understanding not only of kitsch but also of premodern artistic production.

### 6.1 Kitsch: A relic of premodern taste?

So far, we have made a case that Modern art is the preferred subject in theory and practice of empirical aesthetics because it is believed to be somehow representative for human aesthetic experience (e.g., Berlyne, 1971; Leder et al., 2004). This basic assumption turns out to be highly questionable if we take findings from sociology, anthropology and art history into consideration. Based on a cross-cultural account of artistic production in premodern societies, Dissanayake (1990) arrived at the conclusion that “modern Western aesthetic sensibility differs from the rest of humankind” (p. 159). She goes on to point out that the function of Western art is, in fact, directly opposed to the purpose of the arts in premodern societies: The core values of Modern art are novelty and change and the artist’s role combines a subjective view on society with criticism of tradition (Călinescu, 1987). In premodern cultures, however, art production was not a “private predilection, separated from primary lived experience” (Dissanayake, 1990, p. 183), but an essential part of communal and spiritual life: Embedded into rituals and customs the arts were used to communicate and reinforce the ‘traditional ways,’ not to question them. Figure 4A, for example, shows a miniature statue of the ancient Egyptian deity Isis nursing her son Horus. Vast numbers of these figurines were produced for devotees of the Isis-and-Osiris-cult which was particularly popular with the common people (Assmann, 1984/2001). For well over a millennium these idols show a remarkable continuity in terms of style and content (Müller, 1963).<sup>8</sup> Centuries later, the

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<sup>8</sup>According to Müller (1963), considerable stylistic modifications occurred during the reign of Hellenistic and Roman rulers. Yet it seems that Hellenistic and Roman fashion and aesthetic conventions were applied to the Egyptian blueprint of “Isis nursing Horus” to make it more appreciable for the new ruling class.



subject of Isis nursing Horus (*Isis lactans*) entered Christian iconography (*Madonna lactans*) and lives on in modern-day souvenirs (Müller, 1963).

[Insert Figure 4 about here]

The Greco-Byzantine tradition of icon painting is another example for art production that has little in common with avant-garde art. Orthodox icon painting confines itself to a pre-defined set of biblical themes (e.g., Mother of God; Fig. 4B). To the present day, traditional icon painters adhere to a scheme of formal conventions regarding composition, color palette, and lighting in accordance with an officially recognized canon of wonder-working icons. Such an affirmative function of art was also prevalent in Western Europe before the onset of modernity: Neither the cave paintings of Lascaux nor the original stained-glass windows of a Gothic cathedral were created to challenge the beholder's worldview. More likely, these works were "designed to impose upon individuals unforgettable patterns of tribally essential knowledge and explanation" (Dissanayake, 1990, p. 154). On the whole, premodern art and modern-day kitsch have something in common that separates them from the avant-garde: Both come "to support our basic sentiments and beliefs, not to disturb or question them" (Kulka, 1996, p. 27). Is kitsch possibly a relic of some primordial aesthetic sensibility? It is one of the most recurrent arguments against kitsch that it relies on second-hand experience and culturally "pre-established forms" (Adorno, 1932/2002, p. 501). In his analysis of Fascist aesthetics historian Saul Friedländer (1985/2007) referred to kitsch as a "run-down form of myth" (p. 55, translation by the authors) haunting an excessively rational modern world as a distant "echo of sunken cultures" (p. 55, translation by the authors). With regard to kitsch in music, philosopher Theodor W. Adorno (1932/2002) spoke of a "receptacle of mythic basic materials" (p. 501) that have lost their cultural significance. After all, kitsch might be regarded as a living fossil of premodern taste that "draws its life blood, so to speak, from [a]

reservoir of accumulated experience” (Greenberg, 1939, p. 40).<sup>9</sup> By drawing on the lowest common denominators of culture Greenberg predicted that kitsch was to become “the first universal culture ever beheld” (p. 6). Its tremendous cross-cultural success, its proclivity to themes of general human interest, its use of innate releasing mechanisms (e.g., baby scheme) make kitsch a particularly promising subject not only for evolutionary aesthetics but for a general understanding of human aesthetic sensibility (Ortlieb & Carbon, 2017). From the supposed roots of kitsch in premodern aesthetics we now turn to its recent manifestations in Postmodern art.

## 6.2 Kitsch: A device of Postmodern art

By the middle of the twentieth century Modernism arrived at a dead end (Eco, 1980/1984): Avant-garde music had advanced from atonality to absolute silence, poetry had reached the blank page and there was nothing left of painting but “the white, the slashed, the charred canvas” (p. 67). Although the historical Avant-garde “had exhausted all its formal possibilities” (Călinescu, 1987, p. 277), the promised unity of life and art remained a distant utopia. Ironically, the divide between popular taste and the arts had never been greater (Greenberg, 1939). In the 1960s and 1970s this sense of crisis gave rise to Postmodernist art theories which expressed a “willingness to revisit the past” (Călinescu, 1987, p. 276) and to overcome the separation of high and low culture by promoting “a ‘playful’ aesthetic which embraces both popular and traditional cultural motifs” (Hanquinet et al., 2014, p. 114). Not surprisingly, kitsch became one of the preferred vehicles of Postmodernist ideas. According to Walter Benjamin’s (1982/2002) striking characterization of kitsch as “art with a 100 percent, absolute and instantaneous availability for consumption” (p. 395),

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<sup>9</sup> We certainly do not wish to imply that premodern or traditional art production is identical with modern-day’s mass-produced commodities or even Totalitarian art. Yet, with regard to their affirmative function and the essential role of emotion, we claim that these artistic streams stand closer to kitsch than to avant-garde art.

it seemed like the perfect intermediary between high art, the popular and the commercial. As a playful element of Pop Art, it attracted people to museums and art galleries, who had hitherto felt alienated by avant-garde art; at the same time, kitsch answered to the expectations of art aficionados by challenging their perceptual habits in an art-related context (Muth, Raab & Carbon, 2017). Under the influence of Postmodernism, the dividing line between kitsch and art may have blurred; but it certainly did not disappear altogether. Based on a survey of museum visitors, Hanquinet, Roose and Savage (2014) found that people's motivation to engage with visual art still followed Bourdieu's basic distinction of popular and highbrow aesthetics. Both Călinescu (1987) and Kulka (1996) are agreed in that a functional distinction between kitsch and art can be maintained: "(1) the avant-garde is interested in kitsch for aesthetically subversive and ironical purposes, and (2) kitsch may use avant-garde procedures (which are easily transformed into stereotypes) for its conformist purposes" (p. 254). Nevertheless, this Postmodern practice considerably complicates the separation of kitsch and art since works of art have become highly context sensitive and socially reflective (Hanquinet et al., 2014). Whether a comic-style pin-up is perceived as garish kitsch or as an ironical artistic statement on 'Capitalist Realism,' depends on the setting. This, again, has far-reaching implications for the empirical study of art perception. For the sake of standardization (as well as convenience), aesthetic research is mostly conducted in a lab setting (Carbon, under revision). This procedure, of course, eliminates the effects of a museum context (Carbon, 2017). In the case of Pop Art, however, this disregard for situational aspects becomes a serious issue since artists aim for the friction that results from mundane objects (e.g., a bubblegum machine) in an art-related context. On a computer screen in a lab environment, such works will appear as plain kitsch as their aesthetically subversive effect only shows in a museum setting, where they appear strangely out of place. If art has become explicitly context sensitive and

socially reflective, shouldn't empirical aesthetics too become more responsive to situational aspects? We think so: As an element of Postmodern art, kitsch forces us "to examine more closely and with more originality than hitherto the relationship between aesthetic experience as met by the specific—not generalized—individual, and the social and historical contexts in which that experience takes place" (Greenberg, 1939, p. 34).

## 7. Conclusions

The aim of this article is to raise awareness for a "gigantic apparition" (Greenberg, 1939, p. 39) of everyday culture that has strangely been overlooked by empirical aesthetics: The pink elephant in the room goes by the name of kitsch. How could it possibly slip our attention? And, more importantly, why is it worth studying? Empirical aesthetics, as presently practiced, is mainly preoccupied with Modern art perception at the expense of a great variety of everyday phenomena. Against Fechner's (1876) original intention, its current theories build on an 'Aesthetic from above' that was invented by a group of art-educated, upper-class men<sup>10</sup> from Central Europe under the impression of eighteenth-century Rationalism. As a result, today's paramount models of aesthetic liking are missing out what makes popular aesthetics popular in that they privilege style over content (e.g., Reber et al., 2004) and cognitive enrichment over emotional gratification (e.g., Leder et al., 2004). Although basic perceptual research (Augustin et al., 2008; Carbon et al., 2018), sociological accounts of popular taste (Bourdieu, 1979/1984, Hanquinet et al, 2014), and the cross-cultural study of premodern art (Dissanayake, 1990; 2015) cast serious doubt on the basic assumptions of highbrow aesthetics, the nature of aesthetic experience is still mistaken for what inquisitive, art-educated researchers like about avant-garde art. Certainly, Modern art is a subject

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<sup>10</sup> Indication for a 'male gaze' in empirical aesthetics is discussed by Ortlieb, Fischer, and Carbon (2016).

worth studying, but we should take it for what it is: a fascinating corner case of art history rather than a touchstone for a general understanding of human aesthetic sensibility. Why should we pay more attention to kitsch instead? As a borderline phenomenon of Modern art, it could be the missing link to a vast variety of popular, commercial, premodern, and postmodern aesthetic phenomena and the key to a new *aesthetic from below* that goes beyond processing dynamics by taking content- and context-related associations into account. In the course of this investigation kitsch has already proved its heuristic value by directing our attention to several blind spots in theory and practice of empirical aesthetics. However, a comprehensive understanding of kitsch is also essential for art perception, if only to keep up with recent developments in the arts. We feel that it is about time to extend our scope of research and that kitsch makes a particularly promising subject to start with.

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**Figure Captions**

1 [Figure 1: “Mother with child” as a universal kitsch subject (A) and “Mary, mother of Jesus” as a devotional modification of this theme (B). Drawings adapted by the first author.]

2 [Figure 2: Henry Moore (1961): *Reclining mother with child*. Adapted by the first author.]

3 [Figure 3: Jacques Villon (1952): *Maternity* (A). Max Ernst (1926): *Virgin Mary chastises the infant Jesus before the eyes of three witnesses: ...* (B). Drawings adapted by the first author.]

4 [Figure 4: Egyptian figurine of Isis nursing Horus from 7th century B.C. (A). Christian-Orthodox icon showing the Mother of God (B). Drawings adapted by the first author.]

Figure 1

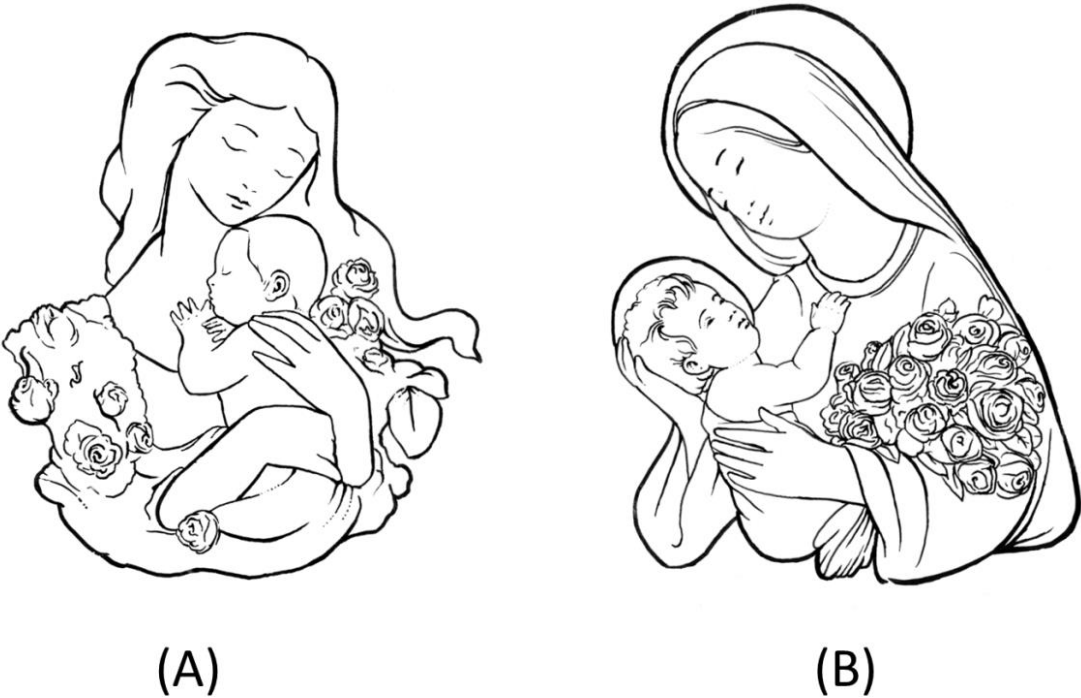


Figure 2

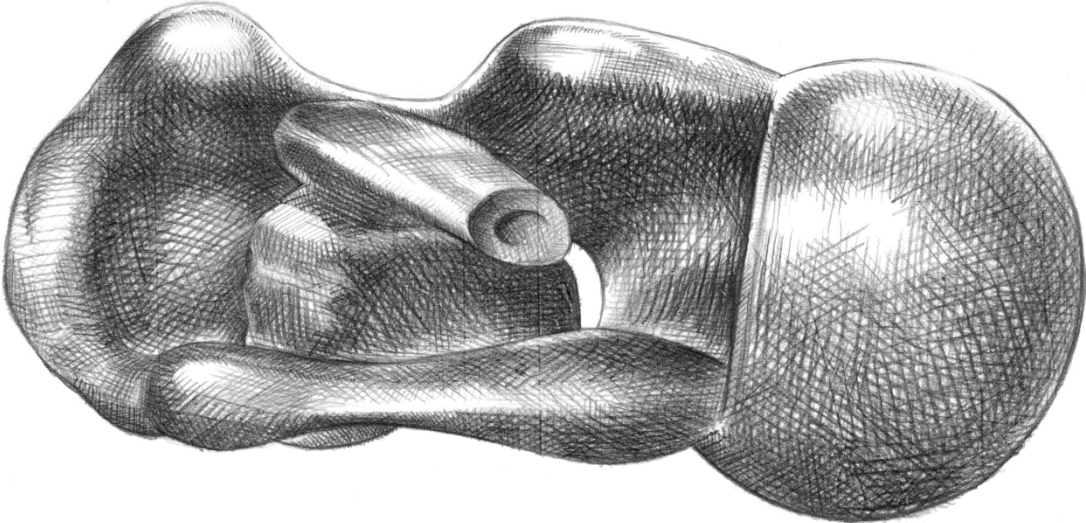


Figure 3



(A)



(B)

Figure 4



(A)



(B)