

# The Story of a Certain Illusion

Theories of kitsch and *The Double Life of Veronique*  
by Krzysztof Kieślowski

AGNIESZKA MORSTIN

Maria Poprzęcka in her book *O zlej sztuce (On bad art)* being so far the most comprehensive and the most balanced Polish monograph on kitsch speaks about an axiological paralysis which characterises modern writing dedicated to artistic phenomena. In accordance with the researcher's diagnosis this paralysis results from the chaos caused in the area of art by lack of limitations to aesthetic norms inherited from modernity, which thanks to its subsequent waves of avant-garde movements caused distrust towards all previously recognised canons and systems of values.

So, does it make any sense in the era of triumph of creative freedom and cult of originality to decide what is and what is not worthy to be called art? Art with the capital "A" is so often so far away from any standards that even among specialists it causes consternation and in consequence – fear to evaluate and assess it. And the more art escapes us the more difficult it is to classify kitsch. Having lost positive models of artistic activity from our sight we have increasing difficulty with the identification of their opposites.

The only thing we can do is follow a kind of instinct whose existence is decided by a deeply-rooted conviction that: *bad art is in the first place untrue, that is, pretending to be something in fact it is not. The "untrue nature" contains all such features as imitativeness, lack of authenticity, illusiveness, derivative character, pretentiousness and creation of appearances. Badness in art is in the first place falsehood. (...) The deep conviction and feeling that identifies badness in art with the lack of truth points to the inseparability of aesthetic, ethical and cognitive criteria*<sup>1</sup>. In fact – it is impossible to speak about kitsch, which the author diplomatically but not without cause calls bad art, only in aesthetic categories.

Reflection upon this question requires taking into the account wider existential and ethical perspective whose vastness we owe to a great extent to theories of kitsch formulated in the last century. Laying ground for the analysis of the film by Krzysztof Kieślowski I refer to three of these theories – that is theories of Hermann Broch, Abraham Moles and Milan Kundera reflecting the changes in thinking about kitsch and deepening awareness that analysis of this phenomenon becomes more and more significant for the understanding of the condition of a modern man.

### Radical contempt. Hermann Broch's theory of kitsch

Reflection on kitsch for a long time has run according to a path set by Hermann Broch. In essays and lectures created between 1930 and 1950 the writer presented his theory regarding the genesis of kitsch and the mechanism of its functioning against the background of a wide historical and cultural perspective<sup>2</sup>. The basis of his conception rests on the assumption that kitsch is an anti-system of art – distorting mirror of its values, no matter what forms it assumes, it is always governed by the same rule. This rule is: “Work beautifully!” and it is the negation of the rule “Work well!”<sup>3</sup> which on the other hand governs art.

According to the researcher “work beautifully” from the point of view of the creative process means to prefer the aesthetic value of work over its ethical value which in the process of creation should have a superior position. As value he understands any human activity aimed at cognition, in other words putting chaos in order. Broch calls it forming. In the open system of artistic values, forming is a dynamic process of creating newer and newer artistic values due to the need to incessantly penetrate previously unrecognised areas of reality. From this perspective cognition is the highest value in the system of art and is seen as ethically positive since its aim is to get closer to the “Truth”, an idea understood in Platonic meaning – an eternal, barely sensed, unreachable model. According to Broch's argumentation an artist “works well” when he tries to make his work the best possible reflection of the idea of “Truth” at the same time treating “Beauty”<sup>4</sup> solely as the fruit of the creative effort. This aesthetic value of a work is of secondary meaning as an externalisation of what is ethical.

In the case of kitsch, however, we are dealing with the negation of the above regularity. It is not created in truth-searching process of creation and forming but in the process of manufacturing devoid of a cognitive purpose. From the perspective of hierarchy of values in the system of art, kitsch becomes a lie, an anti-value because in its system beauty takes the place of the truth. The badness here means unconditional aesthetic dogmatism which manifests itself in the derivative nature of kitsch making it a system closed to everything that would force its creator to defy the established models of beauty. For that reason instead of development, constant retreat from what was and instead of a search for a new shape of beauty, in the case of kitsch we are dealing with conservative and conformist multiplication of tested patterns. In result we shift from the area of aesthetics, to the area of aestheticism where beauty, devoid of its essence, i.e. truth, becomes reduced to a conventional effect of beautification.

Developing in the shadow of art the anti-system of kitsch already has its history and its golden age, the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup> – the era in which peak of romanticism goes hand in hand with a sudden expansion of the burgesses and the development of culture of an industrial society. However in the form in which it survived till today kitsch had been born earlier. According to Broch we should look for its sources in the times of Reformation when the burgesses won their own cultural identity. In its first, puritan form the spiritual culture of the burgesses was still an alternative to the dominating court culture. Having assumed a simple and austere form, it expresses the rebellion against the sensual and full of flair and libertine in its spirit aristocratic aesthetic tradition which was expressed best in the rococo art of *ancien*

*régime* where it finally reached its end. Along with the process of transformation of the feudal society into an industrial one, the culture-creative role of the aristocracy gradually decreased and at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this role to a great extent was taken by the burghesses. Thus the attitude of rebellion lost its *raison d'être* and in consequence the bourgeois ideology of asceticism became redundant. Also the previous model of spirituality established during the Reformation and which could be defined as “individualistic” changed. *The Reformation* – argues Broch – *came about due to a great discovery, which was partly mystical and partly theological and rational: this was the discovery of the awareness of the absolute, the infinite, of the divine conscience of the human mind. This brought the act of revelation into every single human soul and thereby saddled it with the responsibility of faith, responsibility that the Church had previously borne* <sup>6</sup>. This responsibility in connection with the ideal of asceticism and Puritanism, however, proved unbearable – the lonely man of the West, left to himself with a Bible in his hands quickly started to look for relief in spiritual exaltation transposing the ideal of asceticism and focus into passion. With the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Broch, *In so doing it simply introduces the most terrestrial aspects of life into eternal and immortal kingdom* <sup>7</sup>. Exaltation as substitute and inept spirituality spreads, borne from excessive pride and self-admiration of an individual treating their body as a temple. On the other hand when from the burghesses the bourgeoisie develops, the attitude of exaltation is an already established convention of communing with art as creation and source of pleasure and with the exalted recipient characterised by predilection to decorativeness, nobility and the tendency to nostalgia and the cult of “internal life”. The dissemination of this attitude created a fertile ground for the superficial assimilation of values that Romanticism brought with it, recognising in the 19<sup>th</sup> century kitsch its unwanted but as it will appear later – eternal child. Broch concludes: *Romanticism (...) was incapable of producing average values. Every slip from the level of genius was immediately transformed into a disastrous fall from the cosmic heights to kitsch* <sup>8</sup>.

Calling kitsch evil, sin, or an artistic blasphemy and comparing its system to the “system of Antichrist” the author in no case tries to take an objective stance towards the object of his deliberations. Quite the opposite, when speaking about kitsch in 1933 he calls for condemnation of all its manifestations: *The maker of kitsch (...) rather he is ethically deprived, a criminal willing radical evil. And since it is radical evil that is manifest here, evil per se, forming the absolute negative pole of every value-system, kitsch will always be evil, not just kitsch in art, but kitsch in every value-system that is not an imitation system (...). Would you like an example of colossal kitsch? Nero strumming his lute as he watches the spectacular burning of Christians: the specific dilettante, the specific aesthete who does everything to make maximum aesthetic effects* <sup>9</sup>.

From today’s perspective these words sound extremely radical. We have to remember, however, that they come from an essay written in 1933 when on the European political stage appeared a new “specific dilettante and the specific aesthete” – fierce painter and lover of mountain landscapes – Adolf Hitler <sup>10</sup>.

As much as the mirage of kitsch and consumerism experienced by us today does not seem especially demonic, its alliance with totalitarianism at the threshold

of 1930s justly seemed very foreboding. Farsightedness of these fears is confirmed for example by the book from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the Croatian writer, Dubravka Ugrešić, entitled *The Culture of Lies*, in which the author dedicates a lot of attention to the ancillary nature of kitsch in relation to the ideology of communism and nationalism <sup>11</sup>.

To sum up let us add that Hermann Broch places the responsibility for the existence of kitsch in the first place on a “kitsch-man” who assumes an instrumental attitude towards art and starts the mechanism of kitsch manufacture. When Broch formulated his first conclusions regarding the psychology of kitsch he clearly underlined that when talking about it, he spoke not so much about art, but about a certain attitude towards life: (...) *In a broad sense art always reflects the image of contemporary man, and if kitsch represents falsehood (it is often defined, and rightly so), this falsehood falls back on the person in need of it, on the person who uses this highly considerate mirror so as to be able to recognise himself in the counterfeit image it throws back of him and to confess his own lies (with a delight which is to a certain extent sincere)* <sup>12</sup>.

#### **An attempt at systematisation. Five rules governing kitsch according to Abraham Moles**

Abraham Moles' *Kitsch, the Art of Happiness*, the monograph created in the second half of the 1970, is an attempt to systemise the phenomenon by making it the object of scientific enquiry in order to enable him to present the problem in a less evaluating and more analytical way. Going beyond the purely intuitive perception of kitsch proved however a very difficult task. Even semantic analysis of the word “kitsch” proved quite problematic due to the connotative character of the term. The area of denotation corresponding to it remains so vast that it is impossible to define semantic borders of the word. Moles' analytical effort does not lead to grasping of the essence of the phenomenon – the ambiguity and great capacity of the notion of kitsch means that it is sometimes identified with a certain attitude, or a process, or atmosphere, while in some contexts the spirit of kitsch is mentioned. In general it tends to be perceived in psychological categories, that is it is seen as a specific relation between an individual and the realm of objects, a relation based on fetishisation. When treating an object as a fetish, man does not use it but relishes it, seeing its value not in its functionality but in the fact that it makes human life more pleasant and beautiful. The existence of this kind of a relation is a specific trait of culture based on possession. Kitsch presents itself as the aesthetics of bourgeoisie prosperity: (...) *contribution to studies on kitsch would consist in redefining a burgess based on the spirit of kitsch* (...) <sup>13</sup>.

Marked with this spirit is especially the sphere of everyday life which in the smallest manifestations and rites undergoes the process of aestheticisation. This process in the first place has physiological grounds: transformation of an object into an aesthetic fetish makes it in the eyes of its owner a materialised representation of happiness. What matters is not its artistic or functional value but about its symbolic function.

Even though we will not find in Moles' work a clear definition of kitsch he points to some of its features that might easily be treated as crucial. In the first

place we have to include universality and ophelimity. The former comes down to formal diversity of this phenomenon and its presence in all the realms of life, both individual and collective. The latter – ophelimity – means “purchasability”, that is, subjection of kitsch to the rights of the market and its absolute dependency on social acceptance.

The author also lists five rules that govern kitsch. He starts with the rule of *unfitness*. It comes down to a certain excess of form over content manifesting its excessive and unnecessary aestheticisation being a complete negation of functionalism. It manifests itself for example in the above-mentioned fetishisation of everyday objects. Instead of a functional they start to perform a decorative role that to a lesser or greater extent is in contradiction with their original purpose.

The next rule consists of an attempt of *accumulation* – it comes from rococo as art of overabundance and eclecticism. On the basic level the rule of accumulation is connected with a typically bourgeois love for gathering objects and filling space with them. It is worth underlining that the notion of accumulation as special because falling into an extreme version of eclecticism fits wonderfully the state of contemporary culture being one of the basic indicators of postmodernism.

From the rule of accumulation results directly the characteristic for kitsch rule of *synesthetic perception*. In this case it is a question of maximum involvement of sensory channels in the process of perception. The accumulation of various means of expression in one work as well as its impact on a number of senses simultaneously requires a multidirectional perception. Everything just to make it possible to maximally intensify the message which due to its pushiness will not leave anybody indifferent.

The fourth rule of functioning of kitsch is the *rule of mediocrity*. The easiest way to identify it is to refer to its opposite which means all avant-garde, innovative and destructive tendencies. Kitsch avoids aesthetic risk, it is characterised by radical conformism and subjection to mass tastes. The dogma or mediocrity is connected with the above-described requirement of ophelimity. Another consequence of this rule is the accessibility of the work-kitsch or object-kitsch, giving the recipient a sense of superiority, domination and control over the object of perception.

The last of the rules defined by Moles is the *rule of comfort*. Thanks to it kitsch is a source of a sense of safety, reward and satisfaction of the need for pleasure.

Thanks to it a specific aura of acceptance is created – being neither a challenge nor a mystery, kitsch does not want to be interpreted but admired. Instead of being an object of cognition, it prefers to become an object of desire and a guarantee of easy pleasure which gives it its hedonistic trait.

The above attempt to analyse the mechanism of functioning of kitsch with all its ambiguity may serve as one of the basic tools for its description. Psychological aspect of the functioning of kitsch and its social conditions were treated here with special attention. Moles also seems to be familiar with semiotic and structuralistic approaches. Justification of such a comprehensive research method is to be found of course in the nature of this phenomenon – its multiformity, heterogeneity and universality.

### Our everyday aesthetics and morality. Kunderian kitsch

If Hermann Broch pointed to the fact that narrowing of the notion of kitsch only to artistic junk is not enough because this phenomenon goes beyond the sphere of aesthetics and should be considered in ethical and existential categories, then Milan Kundera is the continuator of such thinking, his *The Art of the Novel* ends with the following reflection: *Today, fifty years later, Broch's remark is becoming truer still. Given the imperative necessity to please and thereby to gain the attention of the greatest number, the aesthetic of the mass media is inevitably that of kitsch; and as the mass media come to embrace and to infiltrate more and more of our life, kitsch becomes our everyday aesthetic and moral code*<sup>14</sup>.

We might say that Kunderian kitsch is similar to Gombrowicz's problem of form – it constitutes the key perspective from which the creator sees and interprets the reality. In Gombrowicz's world there is no escape from form; one can at most escape from one form to another. In the universe created by Kundera the place of form is taken by kitsch which *becomes our everyday aesthetic and moral code*. Even though life beyond its reach is possible, it is a life paid for with rebellion condemning a person to isolation and rejection by the community. In *The Art of the Novel* the writer introduces important distinction between two elements accompanying the development of modern European culture – “the spirit of a novel” and “the spirit of kitsch”. The latter is an absolute negation of the former which manifests itself in ambiguity, relativity, complexity, tradition and uncertainty as categories from the perspective of which human existential condition is seen. In order to render as faithfully as possible Kundera's idea of kitsch I will use his favourite form of a dictionary. From among notions that he himself considers to be crucial for his work were selected these regarding the notion of kitsch or directly related to it. Together they create a dense, organised whole, a kind of system of thoughts whose elements result from each other.

THE IDYLL – means the fulfilment of a hedonist ideal. It refers to the situation of the world before the first conflict, the existential paradise in which Adam lived, a living reflection of the land of bliss. Adam was not a man, he was a part of the idyll – his existence had a completely positive dimension and was set in time of the cyclically returning happiness. The entire sense of his existence was contained in this undisturbed cycle. Adam's happiness was permanently inscribed in his existence – it was in fact identical with it. Only upon the end of the idyll humanity begins. Then, a man, knocked out from the cyclical time, enters the linear historical time marked with uncertainty. Since happiness ceases to be obvious it appears that human existence may have a negative dimension and this is absolutely unacceptable. Man sees this negative dimension also inside him – recognising it in his corporeality, he learns about the sense of shame and thus says goodbye to the idyll forever.

CATEGORICAL AGREEMENT WITH BEING – an idealistic and irrational existential attitude resulting from the conviction that the world and the man are perfect, the work of God not contaminated by any negative elements. It would be justified only in the situation of the idyll which from the perspective of human condition, however, is not possible anymore. For that reason, man aware of the pathetic impurity of his body faces the inevitable question: why was I created in a way which humiliates me and does not allow me to see only beauty inside myself? In



*The Double Life of Veronique*, dir. Krzysztof Kieślowski (1991)

reply to this question, not able to bear the truth about the ugliness inseparable from human existence and wishing to forget his own imperfection, he creates artificial idylls around him which are at the same time the lands of kitsch. (...) *the aesthetic ideal of the categorical agreement with being is the world in which shit is denied and everyone acts as though it did not exist. This aesthetic ideal is called kitsch*<sup>15</sup>. This ideal takes on various forms. The categorical agreement with being means absolute acceptance of what is its basis and bases may be different. Man, who thinks that such a base is, for example, the communist ideology as exhaustive and the only correct explanation of the world containing its entire sense, is under the influence of communist kitsch which from now on becomes his aesthetics and morality. Similar mechanism accompanies the creation of religious, fascist or feminist kitsch to recall a few key examples mentioned by Kundera.

TERMINAL PARADOXES<sup>16</sup> – these are cracks within the system of modern European culture seen as a building founded on the value of Cartesian mind. These cracks manifested themselves in the strongest way when it appeared that the mind had triumphed completely allowing men to control nature and the course of history. Along with the outbreak of WWI, a great trauma of the European consciousness, it appeared that the mind was an illusion. The more nature was tamed the more it disappeared. On the other hand, history assumed traits of an element which was impossible to control; it changed into a disastrous power controlling human fate and threatening even his internal freedom. As a consequence, civilisation saturated with the spirit of mind was eaten away by irrationalism – this is the basic paradox of modern times. Another decadent paradox is the great expansion of kitsch, that is, “categorical agreement with being” devoid of an existential base.

STUPIDITY OF CERTAINTY – one of the basic indicators of kitsch. Opposite of “the wisdom of uncertainty” being the virtue of a novel. The certainty means belief that it is possible to make unambiguous judgements about reality. Deciding about what is good and what is bad does not pose any difficulties because it is a consequence of adopted in advance assumptions and not a result of critical thinking forcing us to pose questions. The stupidity of certainty manifests itself through platitudes, that is, widespread simplified truths reducing the complexity of reality to a given pattern. It always divides the world into two dichotomous spheres of “good” and “evil”, this – let us notice – in an especially clear way manifests itself for example through present historical policy presenting communist Poland as a dark land in which every sphere of human life was dominated by the ideology of communism.

QUESTION – identifies “the wisdom of uncertainty” and is a condition of all art. By asking questions we overthrow the screen of kitsch when we want to see the truth hiding behind it. The pictures painted by Kundera’s protagonist, Sabina, constitute a visual metaphor of kitsch. Their foreground – studied with a truly photographic precision kitschy landscape whose “perfectness” was destroyed by an unexpected flaw, intended stain of paint suggesting a hidden sense. Failure, doubt and namely the question sneaked into the space of obviousness. The question, being an unexpected breach in the system of kitsch – shifting the centre of gravity from what Sabina calls an understandable lie to the incomprehensible truth.

REDUCTION – the mechanism of creation of kitsch consisting in reducing ambiguous truths to banalities, platitudes and mental stereotypes. The process of reduction is a process of conventionalisation and standardisation visible on all levels



of human activity. It results from helplessness towards the fact that reality has a form of a mad labyrinth in which every path embodies a different system of values and what is even worse – each proves to be a dead end. In the land of kitsch we enter a simple and clear road thanks to which the reality is tamed and adapted to present needs and images. *But the character of modern society hideously exacerbates this curse: it reduces man's life to its social function; the history of a people to a small set of events that are themselves reduced to a tendentious interpretation; social life is reduced to political struggle (...)*<sup>17</sup>.

FEELING – a specific value that kitsch is based on and its entire tactics subordinated to. Its aim is to transform the recipient from a thinking creature into a feeling creature – somebody who prefers emotion to cognition. Feeling is kitsch's "weapon of mass destruction" aimed at crowds on political rallies, in cinema rooms and in front of TVs. The most effective way to move masses is to use archetypical images, strongly rooted in consciousness. Kitsch not only does not need to, but even does not have to be understood, it is enough that a person be moved. Subordination of mass media to the dictate of feeling makes their performances anti-intellectual or hysterical plane of short-term understanding and fusion of the "nation".

DICTIONARY – range of key notions, metaphors and images constituting the language of a given type of kitsch. To the dictionary of American kitsch Kundera adds for example such notions as "our traditional values" or "barbarism of communism". The existence of such a dictionary may be confirmed solely from a distance. Somebody who uses the language of kitsch is not aware of it.

Notion of the dictionary is the last one that seems necessary to grasp Kundera's understanding of kitsch and one that co-creates his original typology of the phenomenon. To sum up it is worth to point out that in the world created by the writer kitsch plays the role of an ominous power which rams all dimensions of protagonists' existence transforming some of them into puppets. It also crushed the cells of collective memory causing mass sclerosis in societies because history and tradition are values that kitsch is not able to digest.

### **Hallmarks of kitsch in *The Double Life of Veronique***

Since we admit that the scope of the phenomenon of kitsch goes beyond the area of the so-called junk we have to agree that apart from clear and easily recognisable kitsch there is also a good kitsch and even a brilliant one as a perfect imitation of art. However as much as it is easy to point to all missed attempts at imitating art it is much more difficult to find the opposite cases. In such situations kitsch transforms from a *gemütlichkeit* that causes us to smile with pity into a manifestation of religion of beauty full of deceptive charm. And it is from this perspective that we can speak about kitsch in the film of Krzysztof Kieślowski.

*The Double Life of Veronique* is a work in every respect subjected to the rule "work beautifully!". Reality is presented here through the filter of beauty thus making it an object of contemplation – we are not dealing here with cognition of new areas of reality but with aestheticisation of the one we already know and which is the easiest to aestheticise. Beauty as a dogma of the religion of kitsch – as opposed to the truth of art – does not refer us anywhere; its truth is an aesthetic truth, one devoid of content. When analysing this question Broch asked himself the question:

*does kitsch try to transform human life? The answer is simple: into a neurotic work of life, i.e. one which imposes a completely unreal convention on reality (...)*<sup>18</sup>. Unreal, that is inadequate and artificial because allowing us to escape from reality. Wishing to point to the elements of kitsch in *The Double Life of Veronique* we would have to in the first place emphasise the escapist character of this film. It is the escapism that I consider to be the main indicator of a work of kitsch which may be impeccably made, however, still aimed at escaping what Kundera correctly and bluntly called shit. Let us see in what way this escapism characteristic for kitsch manifests itself in the otherwise perfect audiovisual show that this late film by Kieślowski is. In order not to assume the safe role of a kitsch buster I will admit right at the beginning that as a teenage girl I saw *The Double Life of Veronique* a few times and I was absolutely enchanted by the charm of this film which – just as many of my peers – I considered to be a revelation. Today however I am not able to remember what in fact was the object of this revelation – the film about Weronika seen after years is like a vial from which the perfume has evaporated. A thirty-year-old woman clearly lacks this emotional predisposition that a teenage girl has – that is being interested in the first place in herself and not the world around her.

Let us start the analysis of the film from the level of its narrative. The function of aesthetic filter is performed here by the motive of the double life. The introduction of this motive allows us to place the experiences of protagonists in an effective frame equipping human life with the value of secret and transforming this life in accordance with an unreal convention which is aimed at its aestheticisation. The motive of double life is also a pretext to visualise and aestheticise the sphere of internal experiences manifesting themselves through premonitions which are the most important content of the protagonists' life under the dictate of feeling – one of the most important categories in Kundera's concept of kitsch. Thanks to the narrative structure based on the motive of double nature, presented events reveal the dimension of "spiritual depth" – thanks to the incessantly felt bond with the double every, even the most banal episode, is emphasised.

In the film by "working beautifully" a charming, ethereal and a bit somnambulist protagonist was created who within the presented world exists as an aesthetic fetish. She is a perfectly narcissistic figure – an object of cult of the religion of kitsch which allows us to turn back from the reality and run to a safe sphere of the internal life. The announcement of escape and radical clamping in the internal is contained already in the words adding a point to *The Decalogue* made two years before. *Everything is inside you* – this is the chorus of the rock song sung by Zbigniew Zamachowski which accompanies the credits to the last episode of the series. This chorus anticipates the optics present in *The Double Life of Veronique* which is an expression of individualistic model of Western spirituality that Broch wrote about trying to point to the genesis of kitsch. Making his film in 1991 Kieślowski turns away from familiar community and things that it experiences at the threshold of the decade. He escapes to the inside of Weronika. The transformation and historical and social changes accompanying it do not fit the scope of the director's interest – his new beautiful protagonist lives in a sterile world to which politics and history – just as Kundera's shit – have no access.

Polish Weronika comes from a small town emanating with the charm of an old province which – characteristically – is almost empty. This space is populated



*The Double Life of Veronique*, dir. Krzysztof Kieślowski (1991)

solely by beautiful choir singers, good-natured father of the protagonist and her loving boyfriend – strangely the society of the era of transformation has completely evaporated. Weronika is a figure living outside the indigestible for kitsch element of history and equally indigestible social element. A clear sign of this is one of the first scenes of the film taking place in a quiet backstreet of the town and showing a passionate kiss of the choir singer and her boyfriend. This closeness is for a moment disturbed by a truck passing – by taking away the Lenin’s monument. However the figure of the leader of the revolution rendered harmless is almost completely ignored by the protagonists – politics does not concern them and does not define them. Let us remember that we meet Weronika at the time when she abandons her family home and leaves to start a new stage of her life and take part in a vocal contest. From now on the plot takes place in the easily recognisable “magical” Krakow in which Weronika keeps meeting mysterious and eccentric figures – the miniature patron, the lady in a black hat and the exhibitionist dandy. Their appearance is strongly justified by the film’s dramaturgy aimed at the effect of strangeness and magic of urban spaces which they decorate. The selection of figures, events and places is decided in the first place by the level of their aesthetical attractiveness. Practicing of the religion of beauty manifests itself in the dogmatic subordination to the aesthetic imperative, an important confirmation of which is the image of confrontation of the Polish protagonist with her French double. It is at the same time the completion of the above-analysed scene of the kiss signalling the withdrawal from history and politics. We see Weronika walking across the Krakow market square from which all the aura of magic and mystery has disappeared due to a political manifestation. *So-viets go-home!* – rhythmically chants the crowd tamed by the militia. One of the participants of the “bovver” bumps into disoriented Weronika and knocks the notations out from her hands. Picking them up from the ground the girl notices a bus with a French group – finding her way towards it through the militia cordon she sees that among the excided foreigners with photo cameras there is her double. Unnoticed by the French Véronique Pole stands there speechless not paying any attention to the political events taking place around her – the premonition that accompanied her since childhood that she is not alone in the world has finally been confirmed. Events connected with the system transformation taking place around Weronika do not draw her attention at all and are not a revelation for her – the revelation is the meeting with her double. This is also supposed to attract the attention of the spectator undermining the weight of political demonstration which belongs to the indigestible for kitsch order of history. This way the world of the film gives in to the aesthetic imperative: what counts are Weronika’s experiences, premonitions and feelings that prove her internal beauty and not the violent and incomprehensible historical events which do not give in to aestheticisation and thus are driven out, symbolically pushed away to the second plane. At the same time the complexity and drama of changes accompanying the fall of communism are subject to the reduction characteristic for kitsch. It takes place through the suggestion that the French and Pole living at the threshold of the 1990s could be identical women who do not differ at all even though they grew up on two sides of the iron curtain. After its fall the meeting of the doubles took place, the doubles between whom there is a deep even though not entirely conscious bond and community of feeling – a picture not so much beautiful but

untrue because replacing a thorough analysis of differences resulting from long-term limitation of communication between Poland and Western countries with an effusive vision of spiritual unity. Undoubtedly this escapist vision had compensation power and helped to escape the most burning problems of the time consisting in the fact that Poland – after 50 years of being frozen in the communist system – significantly differed from the countries of Western Europe. The message of Kieślowski's film – “we are all the same” – at the time could have been credible solely for teenage girls.

Let us notice that it is difficult to create a comprehensive description of the figure of Weronika who is depicted not as a human being but aesthetic phenomenon existing thanks to the merger of three elements: light, music and acting creation of Irène Jacob. A number of tricks by Sławomir Idziak – the cinematographer for the movie – and the use of colour filters make it possible to create this unreal figure whose main attribute on the visual plane of the film is light. It follows her, plays with her, reflects from her body and underlines what is most beautiful in Weronika, visualising her sensitivity and delicateness. The young choir singer is not made from flesh and blood but created from light, and her singing lifts her to the level of complete exceptionality. *You have a strange voice* – says the head of the choir played by Kalina Jędrusik. The protagonist's vocal talent is quickly noticed in Krakow and her strange singing enchants the best experts. However Weronika uttering more and more piercing tones feels acute pain near her heart. After winning the contest she makes her debut in the Philharmonics – where during the performance of her solo part she suddenly dies.

If kitsch offers to its recipient contact with the world in which everything that exists undergoes aestheticisation, then a great example of it is the scene of Weronika's death – it repeats the pattern of depicting death in a popular melodrama analysed by Anna Martuszevska in reference to the top achievement of the literary kitsch that is *Trędowata (The Leper)* by Helena Mniszkówna. *Description of this death* – according to the researcher – *has been almost completely devoid of physiological elements, it lacks everything that could make the protagonist ugly in the eye of spectator. Hence her death from the realm of corporeality is moved to the realm of spirituality, “metaphysics”. It is elevated*<sup>19</sup>.

Weronika's death is the same. We have an impression that the choir singer dies because her delicate bodily cover cannot withstand the power of her talent and the scale of voice at the disposal of the “artistic soul” – for that reason death happens when she reaches the heights of her expressive possibilities. It is not physical descent but spiritual ascent – Weronika sings, camera goes mad, music thunders. And the spectator? The spectator forgets about himself for a moment, giving in to the impression that death can be a noble act coming in the most appropriate moment and in a very lofty setting: beautiful death of beautiful Weronika is a punch line of her beautiful life. Nothing disturbs the impressions which are pleasant for the eye, ear and spirit – the death scene is equally pleasant in perception as all the others. Dying with piercing singing on your lips – this is a classic motive of the art of kitsch which transposes the physical pain and brutality of death into a swan song of a young beauty.

Maria Poprzęcka notes that it is typical for kitsch to use motives whose appearance guarantees strong emotional resonance in the recipient. Death of young women next to misery of hurt children and secret murders is on a leading position



*The Double Life of Veronique*, dir. Krzysztof Kieślowski (1991)

in this set. And what is equally important, death depicted in Kieślowski's film is not final – even though Weronika dies, she lives on in the body of Véronique – her French double whose introduction neutralises death. Again aestheticism goes hand in hand with escapism. Their alliance causes that the place of true art trying to measure up with death is taken by aesthetic truth of kitsch encouraging us to escape into the film vision of “spiritual connection” of two identical girls.

The way Weronika's death is presented is an illustration of the “effect” technique typical for kitsch which in Kieślowski's film is mastered to perfection. The scene of pre-death swan song is supposed in the first place to give aesthetic pleasure. The mechanism of functioning of the “effect” technique may be successfully described by reference to the rules governing kitsch introduced by Abraham Moles. In reference to the scene of the protagonist's death we may talk about the rule of accumulation and synesthetic perception. The first is manifested here by the condensation of means of expression which are maximally used. Both in the sphere of the image and the sound we are dealing with intensification of the message – incredibly expressive music full of pathos is accompanied by dizzying dynamics of subsequent frames, changing of the camera's points of view, camera's great mobility. It leads to the impression that images are “spinning”, this is intensified by the increasing power of musical expression. Disturbing mood of secrecy, so far built successively, this way is rapidly accumulated and additionally enhanced by the exceptionality of the event itself which is the sudden, highly dramatic death of the protagonist. This overwhelming message constitutes a simultaneous attack on the spectator's sight and hearing who is to get involved in the reception of the film to the fullest extent. Under the pressure of aesthetic stimuli, however, the meaning as such is lost and in consequence the protagonist's death does not cause in the spectators a sense of grief but the sense of spiritual elevation. Power of aesthetic impact deafens the sense of the entire event.

When explaining the way the rule of accumulation and synaesthesia functions, Moles refers to the Wagnerian idea of total art. The same example is used by Broch when speaking about the existence of brilliant kitsch. The above analogy lets us draw certain conclusions as to the way of creation of film kitsch. Let us underline the fact that in purely formal terms the film is in a way a fulfilment of the synthesis of arts postulated by Wagner. The polyphony of means of expression innate to it – affecting spectators through image, word, sound, music and rhythm – constitutes a great base for the occurrence of art that the German creator thought about. Let us also remember that in his opinion a common, basic feature of all arts was rhythm. The latter from the perspective of film art is, as we know, of a fundamental meaning. Characteristic for the film condensation of means decides on the one hand about its attractiveness as compared to other arts, on the other hand however in a special way, exposes it to the risk of becoming kitsch, which may be not only a common junk but a trap of hyper-aestheticism consisting precisely of love of aesthetic values and practicing – according to Broch – earthly religion of beauty. Its existence is according to the writer a consequence of the process of laicisation and rejection of the transcendental God that has its origins in the Enlightenment. In consequence of this process in the Western culture a new, individualistic and thoroughly lay model of spirituality appeared whose modern manifestation we can notice in *The Double Life of Veronique*. One of the forms of this lay spirituality is the attitude of gushiness connected with kitsch in one of its most refined forms.

We can talk about kitsch as the religion of beauty using two categories: hyper-aestheticism or spiritual exaltation. The functioning of the first of them I have discussed when talking about the part of the film that regards the life of the Polish Weronika. Now we have to look at the second part concerning the figure of the French Véronique.

Apart from the notion of the religion of beauty Broch uses the notion of the religion of reason resulting from the ideas started by the French revolution. After the dethronement of God, mind was enthroned and in consequence the so-called spiritual needs of a man were pushed aside to the second plane. This order was destroyed for some time by Romanticism. The need for spiritual exaltation and corresponding effusive imagination was widespread due to the mediocre version of Romanticism in which Broch sees the source of kitsch. Typical for the world view of the era, ennoblement of the emotional sphere was quickly absorbed and transformed into kitsch. Then the mirror of Romantic kitsch started to reflect a man whose value was to be decided by his “internal wealth”. In love with his soul he looked for absolute values in it, in a way worshipping its feelings.

The figure of Véronique may be treated as a creation of modern exalted imagination. *Listening to the voice of her soul* she lives convinced that she is not alone in the world. For that reason when her Polish counterpart dies, Véronique feels sudden anxiety, unjustified internal commotion and sorrow. This incomprehensible impulse tells her to give up her promising career – of course that of a singer. For the protagonist following her internal voice is something natural even when it pushes her towards completely incomprehensible decisions. Her behaviour is not governed by mind but emotional imperative which is explained by the existence of the other Weronika. Various premonitions, dreams and signals gnawing Véronique come precisely from her double. We realise that somewhere deep in

their souls without their knowledge important communication takes place. External void surrounding Véronique is compensated this way by the wealth of internal experiences which say to her: *You are not alone!*

Similarly to her Polish predecessor Véronique has an impression she is a creature who has little to do with reality. Episode that is to make her image a bit more authentic is her involvement in a friend's divorce case. Even Kieślowski himself admitted that attempts to eliminate this episode caused that (...) *the protagonist did not walk on earth at all; she floated above it. For her only the soul, premonition and magic existed. So I had to come back to the divorce motive in order to bring Véronique down to earth. Make her a normal human being. This trick fulfilled its task. However this motive in the film is artificial. But maybe at least for a moment the spectator feels that she could be a friend, a neighbour, that she is simply a person who daydreams all the time*<sup>20</sup>. In fact – the role of a divorce witness is completely incompatible with the image of the protagonist. The subordination to the unreal and the exalted does not tolerate any exceptions from the adopted way of telling the story. Véronique as a creation of effusive imagination may not be somebody else at the same time.

I have already mentioned that the effusive 19<sup>th</sup> century imagination drew from appropriately transposed values of Romanticism. Taking into the account its modern form, on the one hand we can speak about the continuation of the Romantic model and on the other certain new influences can be seen. If the attitude of spiritual exaltation constitutes a negation of the rationalised, cold view of reality, then from this perspective *The Double Life of Veronique* may be seen as an unintended illustration of the concepts promoted by the New Age movement. Kieślowski's film was an offer meeting the spiritual needs of a modern recipient. Hence “new” style, “new” topic and finally corresponding to them “new” spirituality moving with times in which Kundera's terminal paradoxes started to gain voice with increasing clarity.

In the case of *The Double Life...* this lay metaphysics which is usually mentioned in reference to the spiritual message of the film may be successfully identified with historical metaphysics promoted by the followers of the Age of Aquarius. This is how this new philosophy of man and world is described by Michel Lacroix: *The Age of Aquarius announces itself as a period of harmony and reconciliation of opposites. (...) The problem of unity fits the comprehensive vision called holism or holistic paradigm (from Greek “holos” – everything). It says that the physical and spiritual worlds are not separate parts but a homogenous reality. (...) We could say that the image of reality depends on modification of the field of view. At the level of phenomena division rules, but after small adjustment of the perception apparatus the unity becomes apparent. Man is not a separate being from his neighbours any more. The concept of God changes since deity loses the character of separate and transcendental reality: God melts with men. Diversity is replaced by merger. Loneliness loses its sense, past and future merge, even death is defeated*<sup>21</sup>.

Holistic metaphysics of New Age comes from the conviction about the panpsychic nature of reality which is governed by one common mind joining all the elements into one. Everything thinks, everything feels and everything is able to communicate due to what the matter in fact is immaterial. In accordance with these ideas it is necessary to change the way of perception of a human being resulting from the assumption that: *modern man (especially a Western man) is sick – sick due to his isolation. He tore bonds connecting him with neighbours and the world*



and his awareness was closed within ego which looks for shelter on “lonely islands”. Crippled and ossified soul needs treatment<sup>22</sup>. This sick man of the West willing to perform the healing transformation of his personality should realise the existence of the phenomenon of “trans-personalisation”. Faith in its existence is one of the ways to come out of the state of isolation. Trans-personalisation means unlimited identification of an individual with all things and beings in the universe as a result of internal self-cognition.

Do the above concepts not constitute a convincing context for interpretation of *The Double Life of Veronique*? Confrontation of the film with the worldview of the New Age makes us see it as a “product of its times” – since we are dealing here with the phenomenon of trans-personalisation inscribed into the holistic and panpsychic image of reality.

Trans-personalisation takes place between Weronika and Véronique. The women are identical because the world is a unity. They are not each others’ doubles; their coexistence proves rather the annihilation of diversity of beings for the benefit of a merger. Having modified the field of vision, Véronique starts to sense the operation of this merger understanding at the same time that the conviction about the existence of “somebody else” in her life is not an illusion. Death of Weronika which is only feigned since she lives on in the person of Véronique takes place as a result of trans-personalisation. Death and loneliness are defeated through the spiritual self-cognition and unification with other beings.

Everything thinks, feels and sends information – going by train to Krakow, Weronika looks at the world through a glass ball and sees in it the “deeper” dimension of reality. The same extraordinary image of the world seen through a thick glass will be later seen by Véronique in her dream. When in the film finale she touches a tree trunk she brings out the music heard every time when the above-mentioned panpsychic communication takes place. Thanks to it also Véronique’s father will hear the sounds playing in the tree trunk. The scope of the communication in the depicted world seems cosmic – both the stars and small, fragile leaves contemplated by the protagonists in the initial sequence of the film participate in it.

*The Double Life of Veronique* seen today appears to be a symptomatic creation of its time – a film which contains the material helpful in answering the question posed by Anna Sobolewska in her book *Mapy duchowe współczesności, czyli co nam zostało z Nowej Ery*<sup>23</sup>. In the first place, however, the analysis of this film allows us to point to the notions which create the dictionary of good quality kitsch defined by hyper-aestheticism, spiritual exaltation and escapism, that is everything that is contained in the notion introduced by Hermann Broch of the religion of beauty. Despite his alarmist diagnosis I do not think that this is a dangerous kitsch – the very fact that we are able to identify it and analyse it critically means that the awareness of kitsch today is much better than in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today kitsch is rather used than experienced, we allow ourselves to try various styles of participation in culture which offers both junk treats and effusive aesthetic ascents in the form of the film by Krzysztof Kieślowski.

AGNIESZKA MORSTIN

Translated by AMALIA WOŹNA

- <sup>1</sup> M. Poprzęcka, *Złoty wiek zlej sztuki*, in: eadem, *O zlej sztuce*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 204-245.
- <sup>2</sup> See H. Broch, *Notes on the Problem of Kitsch*, in: *Kitsch: An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. G. Dorfler, Universe Books, New York 1969.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 63.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.
- <sup>5</sup> See M. Poprzęcka, op. cit., pp. 161-205.
- <sup>6</sup> H. Broch, op. cit., p. 55.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 56.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 52.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.
- <sup>10</sup> Delivering his lecture *Notes on the Problem of Kitsch* Hermann Broch said: *It is not mere chance that Hitler (like his predecessor Wilhelm II) was enthusiastic disciple of kitsch. He liked the full-bodied. He lived among bloody kitsch and loved kitsch sweet as saccharin and the saccharine type.* *Ibidem*, p. 65.
- <sup>11</sup> See D. Ugrešić, *Sweet Strategies*, in: eadem, *The Culture of Lies*, transl. C. Hawkesworth, Orion House, London 1999, pp. 47-86.
- <sup>12</sup> H. Broch, op. cit., p. 49.
- <sup>13</sup> A. Moles, *Psychologie du kitsch*, Denoël, Paris 1977, quoted after the Polish edition: idem, *Kicz, czyli sztuka szczęścia. Studium o psychologii kiczu*, transl. A. Szczepańska, E. Wende, Warszawa 1978, p. 218.
- <sup>14</sup> M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, transl. L. Asher, Grove Press, London 1988, p. 163.
- <sup>15</sup> M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, transl. M. H. Hein, Harper&Row, New York 1984, p. 248.
- <sup>16</sup> M. Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, op. cit., p. 41.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 17.
- <sup>18</sup> H. Broch, op. cit., p. 63.
- <sup>19</sup> A. Martuszczyńska, *Wniebowzięcie heroiny*, in: eadem, *Ta trzecia. Problemy literatury popularnej*, Gdańsk 1997, p. 72.
- <sup>20</sup> K. Kieślowski, *O sobie*, Kraków 1997, p. 144.
- <sup>21</sup> M. Lacroix, *L'Idéologie du New Age*, Flammarion, Paris 1996, quoted after the Polish edition: idem, *Ideologia New Age*, transl. M. Gałuszka, Katowice 1999, pp. 34-35.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 42.
- <sup>23</sup> See. A. Sobolewska, *Mapy duchowe współczesności, czyli co nam zostało z Nowej Ery*, Warszawa 2009.