

# Black Magic

Ever since the Russian variety show teams introduced them to us, these black hussars, these death's head grenadiers, these Arditi seem to exist in every army on earth. They swore an oath of victory or death, and sport tailormade black uniforms with white baldrics that look like the ribs of death; thus adorned, they parade around as they please to the everlasting delight of the ladies until they peacefully die - that is, as long as there is no war. They live by certain songs that have a somber accompaniment which lends them a dark radiance ideally suited for bedroom lighting

As the curtain went up, seven such hussars sat around together on the little stage; it was rather dark and the bright snow outside shone through the windows. With their black uniforms and their painfully propped up heads they were scattered about in hypnotic formation in the dim light and accompanied a loudly singing comrade in a pitch-black luminous pianissimo. "Hear the horses pond the steppes sith their mighty hooves," they sang, all way through to the inevitable "if lady luck should run amuck, when the swallows wander -."

2

An enigmatic soul suggests: if this were a painted picture, then we would have a textbook example of kitsch. If it were a "tableau vivant", we would have before us the unnerving sentimentality of a once beloved parlor game, that is, something half kitsch and half sad, like a glockenspiel that has just been played. But since it is a singing tableau vivant,, what is it then? There is a certain sugary lustre to the trifles performed by these splendid Russian emigrants, but one only snickers in retrospect, whereas one would surely have fumed before an oil painting of the same type: could it be possible that kitsch grows ever more tolerable and ever less kitschy if one, and then two, dimensions of kitsch are added to it?

This hypothesis can neither be presumed nor denied.

But what happens if still another dimension of the same is added, and it becomes reality? Have we not huddled in bunkers, while some premonition of tomorrow hung in the air and a comrade started singing? Oh, it felt so melancholy! And it was kitsch. But it was the sort of kitsch that lay like another layer of sadness over our sadness, like an unconfessed rancor at this forced camaraderie. There is so much that one might have felt at this last eternal hour, and the articulation of the fearful image of death is not necessarily best rendered in oil.

Is not art then a tool we employ to peel the kitsch off life? Layer by layer art strips life bare. The more abstract it gets, the more transparent the air is. Can it be that the far-

ther it is removed from life, the clearer art becomes? What a backwards contention it is to claim that life is more important than art! Life is good as long as it holds up to art: that in life which cannot be employed for art's sake is kitsch!

But what is kitsch?

3

In a somewhat less propitious time, the poet X would have become a popular hack on a family magazine. He would then have presupposed that the heart always responds to certain situations with the same set feelings. Noble-mindedness would always have been recognizably noble, the abandoned child lamentable, and the summer landscape stirring. Notice that in this way, a firm, clearcut, and immutable relationships would have been established between the feelings and the words, true to the nature of the term kitsch. Thus kitsch, which prides itself so much on sentiment, turns sentiment into concepts.

As a function of the times, however, X, instead of being a good family magazine hack, has become a bad Expressionist. Consequently, his work causes intellectual short-circuiting. He appeals to Man, God, the Spirit, Goodness, Chaos; and out of such big words he squeezes his sophisticated sentences. He could not possibly do so, were he to imagine the totality of their meaning, or at least grasp their utter unimaginability. But long before his time, these words had already taken on connotations meaningful and meaningless, in books and newspapers; our Expressionist has often seen them wedged together, and the words need only be loaded with the least little bit of significance for him to perceive sparks flying between them. This, however, is only a consequence of the fact that he had not learned how to think based on the experience of his own imagination, but rather, with the aid of borrowed terms.

In both of the aforementioned instances, kitsch affirms itself as something that peels life off of language. Layer by layer, it strips language bare. The more abstract kitsch becomes, the more it becomes kitsch. The intellect is effective so long as it stand up to life.

But what is life?

4

Life is living: you cannot describe it to someone who does not know it. It is friendship and enmity, enthusiasm and disenchantment, peristalsis and ideology. Thinking has, among other functions, to establish an intellectual order in life. As well as to destroy that order. Every concept combines many disparate phenomena in life, and just as frequently, a single phenomenon will give rise to many new concepts. It is common knowledge that our poets have stopped wanting to think ever since they think they

heard the philosophers say that thought is no longer supposed to be a matter of thinking, but rather of living.

Life is to blame for everything.

But in God's name: What is living?

Two syllogisms emerge from these assertions.

Art peels kitsch off of life.

Kitsch peels life off of language.

And: The more abstract art becomes, the more it becomes art.

These are two splendid syllogisms. If only we could resolve them!

According to the second, it appears that kitsch equals art. According to the first, however, kitsch equals language minus life. Art equals life minus kitsch equals life minus language plus life equals two lives minus language. But according to the second, life equals three times kitsch and, therefore, art equals six times kitsch minus language.

So what is art?

6

A black hussar has it so good. The black hussars swore an oath of victory or death and meanwhile stroll around in this uniform to the delight of all the ladies. That is not art! That's life!

But why then do we maintain that it's just a tableau vivant?