

POPULAR

INQUIRY

The Journal of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture

Volume 2 / 2018

**AESTHETICS OF TRASH
SHORT OVERVIEW**

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1. Introduction

Let us start from a very simple question, taken from the famous book *The Revolt of the Masses* by Ortega y Gasset: what happens when “The characteristic of the hour is that the vulgar mind, knowing itself to be vulgar, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the vulgarity and to impose them wherever it will?”¹ It is by such a question, although stated by Ortega y Gasset in a wholly different context, that we can deal with one of the most complex categories of aesthetics: the trash.

As we know, the first appearance of the notion of “vulgarity” is attributed to Madame De Staël’s essay of 1800, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* where the neologism *vulgarité* was introduced. Vulgarity, here, means a sort of populism character that De Staël links to the emerging post-revolutionary political class that proudly supported the idea of seeking a *tabula rasa* of the past. But deleting the past meant to ignore it completely, hence promoting ignorance as ideology:

*J’ai employé la première un mot nouveau, la vulgarité, trouvant qu’il n’existait pas encore assez de termes pour proscrire à jamais toutes les formes qui supposent peu d’élégance dans les images et peu de délicatesse dans l’expression. [...] La vulgarité du langage, des manières, des opinions, doit faire rétrograder, à beaucoup d’égards, le goût et la raison. (I have used for the first time a new word, vulgarity, finding that there are not yet enough words to denote forever all the forms which assume little elegance in the images and little delicacy in the expression. [...] The vulgarity of language, of manners, of opinions, must make retrograde, in many ways, taste and reason).*²

Both Madame De Staël and Ortega y Gasset, though, promoted a logic of contrast: taste versus bad taste, culture against massification. Vulgarity synthesized the negative pole of such

dialectics. But vulgarity, today, is something different. Updating the tri-partition introduced by Dwight MacDonal,³ actually it is the third stage of culture: there is a top-level culture, a mid-level one (the kitsch), and a bottom-level one (the trash). Nonetheless, this last category is decisive as it is a sort of boundary: over and above it, there is only disgust. It represents the vast realm of natural and biological, the menace against culture. Trash (vulgarity) is, therefore, the threshold on which taste (culture) can either still operate or start working. Just this proximity with what is natural explains, as we shall see later on, why trash is a kind of aesthetics strongly attracted by disgust and uses it.

In the first place, it is necessary to remind that with this term - trash (that has a perfect equivalent in German, Schund) – at least three concepts are distinguished and that they are rather unrelated one to each other:

- 1) trash as an artistic trend,
- 2) trash as aesthetics, or better to say poetics, of genre, and finally
- 3) trash as an anthropological dimension with its own precise aesthetics.

We will refer specially to film as a privileged topic for our analysis, especially for what regards the second case on which we will dwell more, by giving some examples of trash film or trash in the films.

2. An Artistic Trend

In the first case, the less common one and also the less relevant, trash indicates an artistic tendency, preferably and more adequately named as *Junk Art*, that bases its poetics on waste materials recycling. The reuse of waste materials becomes a precise philosophy wherein the refuse of traditional materials corresponds to the very act of questioning the modern-society values. From the avant-gardes up to contemporary practices and performances, through the season of *New Dada*, *Arte Povera* and *Pop Art*, this art form represents a „junk culture“, to refer to the first wording given by the art critic Lawrence Alloway in 1961,⁴ put in the sphere of high-level culture and avant-garde. What emerges here is the fetishization of the organic at its highest grade, the excrement, the trash as a conscious threshold that can be overstepped towards the disgust: the „merde d’artiste“ by Piero Manzoni, the *Soft Toilet* by Claes Oldenburg, a pop variant of the Duchampian work, the *Oxidation Paintings* by Andy Warhol, more prosaically called *Piss Paintings* or the *Pissaktion* by Otto Muehl, a member of the Viennese Actionism, probably the most extreme expression of this story described by Jean Clair in his 2004 book *De Immundo*.⁵

A bond between this meaning of trash and that one seeing in trash a genre and, subsequently, a meta-language of vulgar, can be found, albeit tangentially and, one could add, with a camp nuance, in Andy Warhol. In an often-quoted passage of *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, the artist sketches his own aesthetics of recycle but, and this is what must be underlined, he links it to the amusement, to a vague notion of popular taste and to the chance to get elaborate from leftover a possible aesthetic result.

I always like to work on leftovers, doing the leftover things. Things that were discarded, that everybody knew were no good, I always thought had a great potential to be funny. It was like recycling work. I always thought there was a lot of humor in leftovers. [...] I'm not saying that popular taste is bad so that what's left over from the bad taste is good: I'm saying that what's left over is probably bad, but if you can take it and make it good or at least interesting, then you're not wasting as much as you would otherwise. [...] Living in New York City gives people real incentives to want things that nobody else wants—to want all the leftover things.⁶

And it is not by chance that the New-Yorker lifestyle is the scenery of the movie entitled *Trash* (1970), produced by Andy Warhol and directed by Paul Morrissey. The second movie of Morrissey's Warholian trilogy (along with *Flesh*, 1968 and *Heat*, 1972), *Trash* is the quasi-documentary illustration of the marginalization that consumerism produces and discards. The main character, the heroin-addicted Joe, finds himself being a reject „of“ and „into“ the metropolis. The refusal, the trash, is properly the literal metaphor that links the reversal of consumerism ideology: the human and material garbage. Joe's girlfriend, Holly (interpreted by the transsexual Holly Woodlawn), to sustain herself and Joe, collects the garbage along the streets of New York slums, within a crude equation that sees in the garbage the only chance of survival for those who are rejected by the society.

3. An Aesthetics of Genre

The clear operation of *Trash*, in which the poetics of rejection is at the same time signifier and meaning, leads to that, mainly cinematographic, aesthetic universe finding its manifesto in *Pink Flamingos* (1972) by John Waters: the trash as a genre, as „an Exercise in Bad Taste“ (as claimed by the film advertising slogan). As it is not possible discuss here the trash genre in cinema, even to a minimal extent, we will arbitrarily assume *Pink Flamingos* as an example text. Its plot is very simple: Divine (interpreted by the namesake cross-dresser, an undisputable

trash icon with strong shades of camp) holds the title of „filthiest person alive“. She lives in a pink caravan at the borders of Baltimore with her mother (a guêpiere-dressed, egg-devourer obese woman always laying in a children box), her son (a parody of the mildly-retarded young hippy) and a friend (a blonde girl with voyeuristic tendencies). A couple, the Marble spouses, lives committing the most heinous crimes (the most profitable one being kidnapping hitchhiker women to let its butler make them pregnant so to sell their newborns to lesbian couples). The couple tries to dethrone Divine, but it will not succeed. What happens during the about ninety minutes of the movie? An uninterrupted sequence of ironic degradation, of „exercise of bad taste“ in which everything a kitsch movie would never have shown becomes possible: postal parcels containing excrements, a sex intercourse with chickens, dilated anuses that seem to „sing“, down to the final climax, the infamous scene, left uncut so to demonstrate its veracity, where Divine, confirming her status of the filthiest person alive, eats a dog’s feces. Can we draw an aesthetics out of this whole?

In his autobiography, published in 1981, *Shock Value*, John Waters gave us some precious hints. Trash has always to merge, according to Water’s idea, disgust and entertainment.⁷ The distance from kitsch is already plain in this conception: kitsch, in facts, orients itself on the basis of taste parameters (that are later going to be betrayed) and seriousness (the feeling as message). Trash, intended according to the second meaning which we are referring to, activates a complacency of the taste of vulgar and excessive.

It is where kitsch censors itself, that trash shows itself. If kitsch conforms to the moral and aesthetic values of its own social context, trash infringes them with a childish logic. While, somehow, the kitsch, to use some Freudian categories, always configures itself within encoded norms, the trash puts its own pleasure in the transgression of such norms. Almost perpetuating Freud’s oral and anal phases, the trash indulges in outlining its own taste (disgust) by tying it to the most physical spheres of subjectivity: violence, sexuality, food, excrement. It follows that everything, belonging to those spheres that are culturally encoded, here constantly becomes the object of mockery: state, school, religion, marriage, good manners. Foul language is obviously one of the first elementary strategies of such derision. Here are some suggestions by Waters to get some trash: „If you’re ugly, it’s much easier to break into the movies these days. By ugly I mean noticeably hideous, not just run-of-the-mill unattractive“; „Become such an outrageous character in real life that a director will have to notice you“; „My advice to young film makers is always to include plenty of violence in your films—it’s an inexpensive effect, can disguise the fact you don’t have big stars, and it always gets a reaction“; „Another good special effect is vomit.“⁸

The summa of trash aesthetics is summarized by Waters just at the beginning of *Shock Value*:

To me, bad taste is what entertainment is all about. If someone vomits watching one of my films, it's like getting a standing ovation. But one must remember that there is such a thing as good bad taste and bad bad taste. It's easy to disgust someone; I could make a ninety-minute film of people getting their limbs hacked off, but this would only be bad bad taste and not very stylish or original. To understand bad taste one must have very good taste. Good bad taste can be creatively nauseating but must, at the same time, appeal to the especially twisted sense of humor, which anything but universal.⁹

It is on these bases that trash will be developed as meta-language, as aesthetic elaboration of what was originally thought of and made as marginal, repulsive, shoddy, deliberately commercial, artisanal, at times, with minimal technical professionalism, or as a grotesque re-making where the low genre meets the imaginary of television. Quentin Tarantino's cinema fits in this poetics suspended between cult and revival of the genre productions of the Seventies, a poetics in which several layers coexist in the same quotation, according to the most rigorous post-modern logics: the exploitation in all its variants. We can find in Pauline Kael seminal essay *Trash, Art, and the Movies* (first published in February 1969)¹⁰ a first provocative tribute to the enjoyable bad film. Indeed also the programmatically titled *Mondo Trasho* (1969) by John Waters (along with the final "o") was nothing more than a homage to Italian documentary-movies such as *Mondo Cane* (1962) by Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi: films that, with the pretext of documentation, displayed scenes of violence and soft-porn, the latter theme having already been honored by one of Waters' mentors, Russ Meyer in *Mondo Topless* (1966).

4. An Anthropological Dimension

However Waters' cinema shows another aspect of trash. While seeing vomit and feces is „universally“ disgusting, the context wherein it all takes place is not as much universal. As the director himself affirmed, *Pink Flamingos* is „a very American movie“, it is totally rooted in the ideology of competition and has as its own geography or location, the city of Baltimore, dubbed „Trashtown“ by Waters himself and to which, among the other things, the most suggestive part of *Shock Value* is devoted. Indeed, trash is always a language whose grossness is universal but it is also always declined according to its own specific culture. Proof of such characterization is the way by which trash is often accounted: through amused tracking shots of eccentric exam-

ples, direct phenomenologies, frequently captured from television. The „aesthetic populism“, that Fredric Jameson saw in Postmodernism as developed for example by the Bible of Postmodernism *Learning From Las Vegas*, changes to „national-popular“ rhetoric in trash. Being a hybrid of the union between masscult, the lowest grade expressed by the massification of cultural processes, and what remains of the properly understood popular culture, from this perspective trash is primarily defined as an anthropology, this being its third declination. Not anymore a lemma referable to the most iconoclast avant-garde, not anymore a meta-aesthetic genre, but a category per se that finds its own privileged mise-en-scène particularly in the universe of television.

To better focus this trash aesthetics, it is always useful refer to the five characteristics listed by Tommaso Labranca in *Andy Warhol era un coatto. Vivere e capire il trash* [Andy Warhol was boorish. To live and to understand the trash] (1994): 1) absolute freedom of expression of one's own taste; 2) contamination; 3) incongruence; 4) maximalism; 5) failed emulation.¹¹ In trash, therefore, what is operating is a reduction of complexity in favor of an imitation that fails without worry. A great difference with kitsch is established here. The trash never relates to high-level culture, it is wholly not interested to complex models, at best it might retrieve them ex negativo as parody. Kitsch, to the contrary, is obsessed by high-level culture models and turns this obsession into frustration, distrust and, ultimately, grudge. The individual trash translates its own disregard for the intellectual sphere in the accentuation of physicality, almost literally following a Waters' belief according to which „To me, beauty is looks you can never forget. A face should jolt, not soothe.“¹² Flattering (the kitsch) gives way to appearance (trash).

Clothing, make-up, behaviors filed under the comfortable label of „vulgar“, become a transversal-taste binding together - both in local (*coatti, tamarri, truzzi* in Italy, the typology of the Essex Girls in England, the manele music fans in Romania and those of *turbo-folk* in Serbia or those of neomelodic music in Naples) and trans-national variants (the protagonists of reality-shows such as the American *Jersey Shore* and the English version, *Geordie Shore*) - the same ostentatious immediacy. This aesthetic of immediacy, of the first impression, according to which everything that counts has to immediately appear and perceptively „strike“ the others, finds in Italian language its exact representation in expressions like „a pelle“ (skin-deep), „di pancia“ (with my gut). In trash taste, every mediation is banned, because it is interpreted as hypocrisy and cowardice. The trash is always proud to show things the way they are (being „true to the bone,“ in full opposition to the camp assumption of enjoying „things-that-are-what-they-are-not“), absolutizing its own principles or in a tautological seek of objectivity (if a girl is nice it means she is nice) or in an extreme subjective relativism (the only thing that

matters is that I personally like that one girl, the rest of the other judgments being pointless). In trash the gap between reality and judgment does not exist and such an aesthetic appears immune to kitsch's pervasiveness, but it is not so. The final evidence of the outstretching of aesthetic-categories boundaries in the contemporaneity is given by the fact that even the most genuine trash surrenders to kitsch when it is forced to face the universe of inwardness. And while it moves its own horizon from the physical immediacy of appearance to the mediated one of inner reflection, it meets the most stereotyped values: the image transgression is a part of the spiritual conservatism.

¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses*. New York-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994 (1929), 18.

² Madame de Staël, *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*. Paris: Faquelle, n.d. (1800), 5, 249.

³ Dwight Macdonald, "Masscult and Midcult", *Partisan Review*, 2, Spring 1960, 203-233 and 4, Fall 1960, 589-631.

⁴ Lawrence Alloway, "Junk Culture", *Architectural Design*, 31, 3, 1961, 122.

⁵ Jean Clair, *De Immundo. Apophatisme et apocastase dans l'art d'aujourd'hui*, Paris: Galilée, 2004.

⁶ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. New York Harcourt, 1977, 93.

⁷ John Waters, *Shock Value. A Tasteful Book about Bad Taste*. New York: Delta, 1981, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁰ Pauline Kael, "Trash, Art, and the Movies", *Harper's Magazine*, February 1969, 65-68 and 73-83.

¹¹ Tommaso Labranca, *Andy Warhol era un coatto. Vivere e capire il trash*. Roma: Castelvecchi, 1994.

¹² J. Waters, *Shock Value*, 128.