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## **Translational Aesthetics of Religious Kitsch as Illustrated by Polish Catholic Popular Culture**

### **Introduction**

The article focuses on the specificity and aesthetic coding of religious kitsch seen as representative for popular culture aesthetics in communities with high degree of religious homogeneity. Kitsch studies have been conducted in Catholic communities of Spain, Italy or Latin America, usually focusing on the realm of strictly religious art and its cultural patterns, frequently rooted in ingenious folk art. In the paper I present Polish Catholic kitsch as merged rather with mass culture as with vanishing folk traditions which allows it to enter the wide spectrum of aesthetic practices without losing its initial characteristics. Consequently, religious kitsch motifs become involved in aesthetic and artistic processes that I would define as translational, referring to Roman Jakobson's notion of intersemiotic translation, and they circulate among diverse planes of visual presentations, two extremes being mass culture and high art. This "translational" quality appears to be the underlying principle of popularity of the aesthetic of religious kitsch and the source of its manipulative power.

## 1. Notes on kitsch

Kitsch, a rearguard of avant-garde modernist art<sup>1</sup>, an epitome of emotional and somatic popular culture is a phenomenon typical for industrialised societies, originating in the final decades of the 19th century, when the functions and competences of Western art – in collision with mass production and mass culture – changed significantly. The musealization and commodification of high art, its resulting alienation from everyday existence of vast masses of people, who, starting a new life in the cities had left behind safe blankets of folk culture, opened an empty space, waiting to be filled with some comforting system of signs.

This space has been to a large extent filled with kitsch – the term referring, among other notions, to the German word *verkitschen*, to make cheaply – characterized by worthless pretentiousness of variety of its mass produced objects mimicking and manipulating the imagery frequently ‘borrowed’ from art. Among the multiplicity of kitsch definitions the best option – in the light of this paper – appears to be found in Abraham Moles’ functionalistic claim: “kitsch is essentially an aesthetic system of mass communication”<sup>2</sup>.

However, this communication seems to be rooted in “an inner lie” embodied in kitsch objects. The category of truth is fundamental for negative judgement of kitsch. If contemporary art is the practice of posing questions about Truth perceived ontologically as Heideggerian *aletheia*, unconcealment, kitsch with its deceptive qualities, shallow sentimentality and lack of formal balance evoking lukewarm tears has to be evaluated as the antithesis of art, moreover, it had been seen as an antithesis to reality itself<sup>3</sup>. Manipulative powers of kitsch, its predictable emotional impulse and psychological appeal as well as stable, standardized aesthetics have made it a perfect instrument for ideological propaganda, politics but also religion where universal parameters of kitsch are adapted to the thematic range and the purposes and needs of a community.

Contemporary Polish Catholic kitsch may be used as an example of this cooperation of universal aesthetic patterns and strictly defined symbolism. Its dominant position in the sphere of contemporary Polish religious art and imagery is the product of several factors, focused around the situation

<sup>1</sup>Cf. C. Greenberg, *Avant-garde and Kitsch*, “Partisan Review” 1939, no. 6; <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR2/greenburg.pdf> (17.04.2018).

<sup>2</sup>A. Moles, *Kitsch*, [in:] M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham 1987, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. H. Rosenberg, *Pop Culture: Kitsch Criticism*, [in:] *The Traditions of the New*, London 1956.

of religious art and cultural-historical conditions: 1. Virtual absence of any other form of contemporary religious art which might be considered competition for mass art, excepting individual cases (among others Jerzy Nowosielski, Elżbieta Wasyłyk, Stanisław Rodziński, Stanisław Białogłowicz). As a result, the only traditions present are the great painting of past epochs – renaissance, baroque and especially romanticism, from which kitsch takes more than a fair share of its inspiration. 2. Disappearance of traditional folk sacral art in the context of high degree of religious and cultural homogeneity of Polish society. 3. “Magical” character of Polish popular Catholicism as the result of cultural and historical contexts to which I refer below.

## 2. Polish Catholic traditions and kitsch forms

Christian kitsch in general, especially in Spain, Italy or Latin America countries appears to be a “non-descript territory” between religion, folk traditions and popular culture<sup>4</sup>. Polish religious kitsch – due to the aforementioned factors – is today merged almost entirely with mass culture; however, it still maintains the high status of religious symbolic language.

On the territory of Poland, *Christianity*, introduced in 10th century, almost freely intertwined with the old pre-Christian native traditions that shaped its form and influenced some aspects of the faith; its nature has been perfectly grasped by the term ‘enchanted’ or ‘magical’ Catholicism<sup>5</sup>, where the older elements have survived – mostly as the deeply embedded trust in the communal ritual gesture as the core of both cult and faith.

The ritualistic character of Polish Catholicism<sup>6</sup> has been accompanied by the second element which has made it prone to the implementation of kitsch: the unquestioned superiority of *fides ex visu* over *fides ex auditu*, or Image over Word. Consequently, it was mostly visual representations, performing functions of *biblia pauperum*, educating the believers and expressing the ultimate reality through symbols and signs. The reasons of this state of things might be found primarily in the limited – in comparison to Protestant traditions – access to The Bible in Polish and in the minor role

<sup>4</sup>B. Spackman, *Reconsidering kitsch*, “Material Religion” 2005, no. 1, vol. 3, 2005, p. 404.

<sup>5</sup>Cf.: S. Czarnowski, *Kultura religijna wiejskiego ludu polskiego*, [in:] *Dzieła*, vol. 1, Warszawa 1965, p. 88–107; E. Ciupak, *Katolicyzm ludowy w Polsce*, Warszawa 1973.

<sup>6</sup>Paul Tillich pointed out five main styles of religious art: numinous realism or magic realism; mystical pantheistic style of non-objective reality realism and prophetic religion, idealism and religious humanism and Ecstatic-expressionism. In studies on Polish religious kitsch we should focus on “magic realism” closely related to sacramental art. Cf. also: R. Viladesan, *The Beauty of the Cross*, [in:] *Theological Aesthetics After Von Balthasar*, ed. O. Bychkov, J. Fodor, London - New York 2016, p. 145.

of contemplative practices: until 1965, the mass was performed in Latin; even today, individual reading and experiencing the Bible is not common practice and the source of theological knowledge is above all the teaching of the Church.

A substantial role was also played by political and historical processes; in the years 1772–1917, during the partitions, the absence of political autonomy, the long period of communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and finally, the enthusiastic embracing of the mass culture of the West in the last decades. None of these favoured a development of standards of contemporary local religious art as “high” art and visual piety itself drew from romantic models, strongly intertwined with patriotic attitudes which were the most prominent presence in the history of the last two centuries. As a painter Stanisław Rodziński puts it:

The Church, concerned with the clarity of its magisterium, was even more reserved than before about introducing the new art into the temples. Hence the preference for eclecticism and stylisation. A reflexive defence against the mistakes of modernity made us lose, or at least postpone, the possibility offered by it<sup>7</sup>.

What we see as Polish religious kitsch appeared at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Visual elements of romantic art found their place in mass-produced cheap “holy pictures” and “holy objects”, which spread in urban communities, quickly reaching the countryside as well, where they successfully displaced folk sculpture and sacral painting, including painting on glass. Contemporary holy pictures are mainly represented by works of two types: the first are big chromolithographs and hung on walls; selected scenes from the life of Jesus, representations of Christ’s Heart, the Madonna and Child, popular saints, and in children’s rooms – the Guardian Angel. Since the pontificate of the Polish pope, John Paul II, his images are found in private houses as well as in almost all religious institutions. The other type is represented by small, mass produced pictures which continue the tradition of tiny hand-decorated reproductions, the oldest of which date back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Among those, apart from reproductions of works of great sacral art, we find above all sentimental representations of saints, the Madonna and Child or holy family. Holy objects category covers the wide spectrum of forms from micromaterialities such as religious keepsakes to macromaterialities like interior design of Łagiewniki or Licheń Sanctuaries or gigantic statues of Jesus Christ or Polish Pope erected in Poland.

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<sup>7</sup>S. Rodziński, *Dzieła, czasy, ludzie*, Kraków 2007, p. 178.

Aleksandra Brzozowska distinguishes two types of Catholic kitsch objects, that may be described as follows:

- badly-made objects of poor quality material, showing no talent or care – this kind of kitsch includes the production of keepsakes, subject to the demands of mass production;
- secular objects using religious feelings – this is connected with a distortion of the religious function<sup>8</sup>.

Religious kitsch, by principle situated by critics outside the realm of art as such, regardless of one's position in this respect, possesses distinct and recognisable aesthetic qualities; what is worth noting is above all the skilful juggling of those qualities which allows us to speak about something like an aesthetic system of kitsch.

### 3. Kitsch aesthetics and its translational properties

If we choose to see Polish Catholic kitsch as a complex aesthetic system of mass communication we attribute to it on the one hand the laws of a semiotic system with an open option of semiosis, and on the other – aesthetic qualifications which make up this system. The most promising development in the field of aesthetics research is Richard Shusterman's practice-oriented aesthetic theory, regardless of the evaluation of kitsch in the context of contemporary culture, since the basis of religious kitsch lies, beyond any doubt, in the features which link it to mass culture, and for which the latter is criticised: "(a) spuriousness, (b) passivity, (c) superficiality, (d) the lack of autonomy, (e) the lack of form, and (f) the lack of creativity"<sup>9</sup>.

However, I also tend to agree with Matei Calinescu's claim that defining an object as kitsch "always involves considerations of purpose and context"<sup>10</sup>. It's precisely the dynamics of changeable purposes and the broadening of available contexts that are the basic defining features of religious kitsch in Poland, where Catholic tradition enters into broad currents of everyday life, as well as into ideology and politics. The eclectic character of religious kitsch and its high translatability are conducive to these transpositions.

<sup>8</sup> A. Brzozowska, *Rola kiczu na przykładzie pamiątek pontyfikatu Jana Pawła II*, "Artmix" 2011, no. 34/24, <http://obieg.pl/artmix/21850> (20.06.2016).

<sup>9</sup> S. Snaevarr, *Pragmatism and Popular Culture: Shusterman, Popular Art, and the Challenge of Visuality*, "Journal of Aesthetic Education" 2007, no. 41/4, p. 1-11; [http://www.fau.edu/humanitieschair/pdf/Snaevarr\\_citation\\_of\\_Shusterman.pdf](http://www.fau.edu/humanitieschair/pdf/Snaevarr_citation_of_Shusterman.pdf) (20.06.2016).

<sup>10</sup> M. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham 1987, p. 257.

The position of religious kitsch aesthetics might be located within the frames of a “very weakened aesthetic functionalism,” where practical function is always intertwined with the aesthetic, and “aesthetic valuations that refer to a practical function are in most cases correlated with satisfaction of that function”<sup>11</sup>. The dynamics of interpretative readings of religious kitsch fit within this framework, where what is contemplative, spiritual, is appropriated by the practical, at the same time performing specific emotive, ritualistic or purely instrumental functions; aesthetic value turns out to be the connector of this relation.

The part of the aesthetic judgment that concerns practical function includes reference to the object from a dynamic point of view i.e., to its movements when used for its intended practical purpose. The other part of the aesthetic judgment is, in typical cases, more focused on the object’s static, or statuesque, properties (ibid.).

Aesthetic renderings, to which – within the borders of what we perceive as kitsch – a source visual presentation is subjected, may well be researched from the point of view of aesthetics, which I would like to call, at least for the purposes of the present text, translational aesthetics. Referring to Ernst-August Gutt’s view on translation as interlingual interpretation<sup>12</sup>, as a working definition I would propose to see translational aesthetics of kitsch as intra or inter-semiotic interpretive use. The idea of semiotic transfers in translation was introduced by Roman Jakobson as one of the fundamental types of translation. Intersemiotic translation or transmutation, as Jakobson names it, is “an interpretation” of one type of signs by means of some other sign system<sup>13</sup>.

Within the frames of translational aesthetics, aesthetic values are derived not only from actual physical appearance of an object but in the process of interpretation of its resemblance to the source visual representation. As Abraham Moles stated, “it is not a semantically explicit denotative phenomenon, it is an intuitive and subtle connotative phenomenon; it is one of the types of relationships that human beings have with things, a way of being rather than an object, or even a style”<sup>14</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> S.O. Hanson, *Aesthetic Functionalism*, “Contemporary Aesthetics” 2005; <http://www.contempaesthetics.org> (26.06.2016).

<sup>12</sup> E.A. Gutt, *Translation as Interlingual Interpretive Use*, [in:] *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. L. Venuti, London–New York 2000, p. 376–397.

<sup>13</sup> R. Jakobson, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*, [in:] *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. L. Venuti, London–New York 2000, p. 114.

<sup>14</sup> A. Moles, \*\*\*, [in:] D. Riout, *Kitsch*, [in:] *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. B. Cassin, E. Apter, J. Lezra, M. Wood, Princeton–Oxford 2004, p. 538–539.

Thus the target aesthetic object is experienced by a target community as a “translation” that interpretively resembles, or “imitates the pleasure of discovery” – as Umberto Eco notes – of the original<sup>15</sup>. The aesthetic experience embraces both the response to the actual object and the specificity of its indexicality which in turn is determined by its communicative function and context. The translational process of interpretation of a kitsch work “includes [...] the agency of the believer in the construction of meaning for the object”<sup>16</sup>.

In the case of semiotic transfers within the area of Polish religious kitsch, the pragmatic aspect of the aesthetic is distinctively modified by a set of model, repeatable practices, which – in the light of the above assumptions – I call translational. Below, I would like to signal two main types of such practices: *refraction* and *transcoding*.

For the first one, altering the function of a source visual representation in ritual communication, I suggest the term ‘refraction’ introduced by André Lefevere as helpful in exploring methods of adapting kitsch aesthetics to certain target groups or ideologies. Lefevere employed the term refraction referring to the adaptation of a literary work “to a different audience, with the intention of influencing the way in which that audience reads the work”<sup>17</sup>. In the case of religious kitsch, a refracted visual representation mediating religious ideas and emotions is being processed for a desired practical purpose.

The practice of translation is represented here by the simple, repeatable procedures: *borrowings* and *calques*<sup>18</sup>. Borrowing is a direct transfer of a visual representation introducing it into a new context and adapting it to a desired purpose as a fetish and a mark of religious status of both: an object and a believer. The best example would be a direct transfer of a photograph of pope John Paul II onto such objects as a bottle opener of a cigarette lighter.

A calque is a specific type of borrowing whereby a successful<sup>19</sup> visual representation is not “borrowed” directly but processed in its form to meet the needs of a target object; e.g. the same photograph of John Paul II is translated into a painting and glued onto a bottle opener. In both cases the

<sup>15</sup> U. Eco, *The Open Work*, Cambridge 1989, p. 205.

<sup>16</sup> E. McIntyre, *Rescuing God from Bad Taste: Religious Kitsch in Theory and Practice*, “Literature and Aesthetics” 2014, no. 24/2, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> A. Lefevere, \*\*\*, [in:] E. Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories*, Shanghai 2004, p. 137.

<sup>18</sup> It was Clement Greenberg who describing kitsch insisted on the vital importance of “borrowing” themes, motifs and other elements in its production, although he did not clarify exactly how it worked. Cf. T. Kulka, *Kitsch and Art*, University Park 2002, p. 102.

<sup>19</sup> Referring to Umberto Eco’s description of imitative processes in kitsch. Cf.: U. Eco, *The Open Work...*, p. 201.

resulting aesthetic is typical for religious kitsch objects. Borrowings and calques may be further developed by transpositioning the source visual element in a target work in order to imply its desired reading, e.g. a portrait of John Paul II or a figure of blessed sister Faustine are jiggled in the target image creating new semiotic relations.

For the second type of practices, altering initial semiotic indexicality of religious kitsch while retaining its visual form I use the term *transcoding*. Transcoding introduces kitsch aesthetics into aesthetic contexts that are foreign to it resulting in distanced optics, i.e. those of high art. The term transcoding is constructed here in reference to the second of Lefevere's notions, namely *rewriting* understood as bridging two different systems while altering the purpose of a translated element. Translation is again produced on the basis of an original text with the intention of adapting the original to the needs and expectations of a different audience, but it is an activity performed under certain constraints i.e., poetics or ideology initiated by the target system<sup>20</sup>.

Transcoding practices are usually represented here by the procedures of direct borrowing and calque, but also transpositioning or modulating the source visual element seen as a message carrying certain information and connotations. Another typical example is the incongruence of the "calqued" monumental renaissance composition of the painting and mannerist representations included in the picture of figures from contemporary Polish clergy in Łagiewniki.

Here *transposition* involves a change in positioning of a kitsch element within a target work, e.g. a figure of Jesus Christ is introduced into a high art object – I would like to mention here a painting of Julia Curyło<sup>21</sup> – taking a new role in its composition and urging the viewer to investigate an altered context-oriented evaluation of its significance. *Modulation* involves a change in the point of view and altered usage of kitsch aesthetics; a good example would be the aesthetics of camp. These operations allow us to translate the specific aesthetic quality of kitsch into the language – or, rather, languages – of contemporary art.

In reference to works using kitsch deliberately, Maria Poprzęcka employs the well-justified term post-kitsch, which might be considered as a kind of refraction of the practice of intentional kitsch or camp. Interestingly, for Poprzęcka the basic reason for the creation of kitschy works is transpositioning: she writes about transpositioning a work from

<sup>20</sup> E. Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories...*, p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> E. Sulek, *Kicz, magia, religia. Katolicka popkultura w obrazach Julii Curyło*, "Artmix" 2016/2017, no. 26/27; <http://www.obieg.pl/artmix/21214> (20.05.2016).



one means of expression to another, from one medium to another which is in line with the notion of translational aesthetics proposed here<sup>22</sup>.

In the age of mass culture, despite historical prevalence of opinions critical of kitsch<sup>23</sup>, we have no choice but to accept Jonathan Jones's opinion, stating that almost everything Clement Greenberg considered kitsch has been reclaimed as art<sup>24</sup>. The flow of data and its proportion has been reversed; what, until recently, we considered as the synonym of bad taste, as ersatz culture<sup>25</sup> or even "the evil within the value-system of art"<sup>26</sup> has been elevated by critics and viewers to the status of art and kitsch now quite happily borrows or calques motifs or formal means of the so-called high art, appropriating them again by incorporating them into its own bloodstream. It is worth recalling here the so-called "Kitsch movement" initiated in 1998 by Odd Nerdrum who was followed by artists<sup>27</sup> who proudly accepted the label of kitsch artists, liberating kitsch<sup>28</sup>.

#### 4. The issue of inner of kitsch

Roman Jakobson suggested that in intersemiotic translation only creative transpositions are possible<sup>29</sup>. However, "kitsch does not analyze culture but repackages and stylizes<sup>30</sup>". In the dynamics of translational practices and procedures of Polish Catholic kitsch the creativity is limited to the search for new contexts or new functions for the chosen

<sup>22</sup> M. Poprzęcka, *O złej sztuce*, Warszawa 1998, p. 220–243.

<sup>23</sup> A radical criticism of kitsch was carried out first and foremost in the modernist circles. However, as Patricia McBride writes "already in the 1960s, the term came to be seen as symptomatic of a conservative elite that was suspicious of mass culture and mass society and endeavored to resurrect the bourgeois discourse of autonomous, "pure" art as a privileged moral perspective on culture and society" (P. McBride, *The Value of Kitsch. Hermann Broch and Robert Musil on Art and Morality*, "Studies in Twentieth and Twentieth first Century Literature" 2005, vol. 29/2, p. 282.

<sup>24</sup> J. Jones, *Kitsch art: love it or loathe it?*; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjones-blog/2013/jan/28/kitsch-art-love-loathe-jonathan-jones> (15.06.2017).

<sup>25</sup> „To fill the demand of a new market a new commodity was devised – ersatz culture, kitsch – destined for those, who insensible to values of genuine culture are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide" (C. Greenberg, *Avant-garde and Kitsch...*, p. 39).

<sup>26</sup> P. McBride, *The Value of Kitsch. Hermann Broch and Robert Musil on Art and Morality*, "Studies in Twentieth and Twentieth first Century Literature" 2005, vol. 29/2, Article 5.

<sup>27</sup> Jan-Ove Tuv, Helene Knoop, Hege Elizabeth Haugen, Monika Helgesen, Kjetil Jul, Brad Silverstein, Carlos Madrid, Stefan Boulter, Brandon Kralik, Nanne Nyander and others. Contemporary kitsch painters were invited to contribute essays to Nerdrum's book *Kitsch: More than Art*, Schibsted Forlag 2011.

<sup>28</sup> The expression used by Michael Gornley, the editor of American Artist Magazine, in his introduction of Nerdrum, at Weekend with the Masters in New York, 2011. Cf.: B. Kralik, *The Dawn of the Kitsch Movement*, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brandon-kralik/the-dawn-of-the-kitsch-mo\\_b\\_4013483.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brandon-kralik/the-dawn-of-the-kitsch-mo_b_4013483.html) (10.06.2016).

<sup>29</sup> R. Jakobson, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation...*, p. 118.

<sup>30</sup> W. Rugg, *Kitsch*, <http://csmt.uchicago.edu/glossary2004/kitsch.htm> (12.05.2016).

visual elements; consequently, translated motifs might be frequently seen as false friends of their source equivalents. The consequences of this policy influence significantly the religious awareness of individuals and communities altering the perception of the holy and the sacred. Rodziński, a painter with a profound interest in iconographic motifs of Christianity, stresses that Polish religious art language is fabricated for the use of the faithful and the clergy. It is the chosen kitsch costume that allows it to preserve communicative properties, while the absence of spiritual tension and private fervour maintains a decent emotional tepidity and aesthetic level<sup>31</sup>.

The semiotic system of Polish Catholic kitsch constructing the sentimental “cheap” refraction of kalos kagathos and religious truths produces a multi-layered “inner lie.” It is grounded in a striking contradiction within the aesthetic object itself: discontinuity or forced false continuity of aesthetic or potentially aesthetic qualities and pragmatic qualities best represented by an image and a function, which I have earlier presented as synergic elements in weakened functionalist aesthetics. Examples include “ugly” plaster figures of the Pope, placed in private gardens as calques of the function of plaster gnomes and deer, or “borrowed” visual elements of representations of Virgin Mary: the delicate bright blue colour of the robe of her – empty inside – figure, and the cap in her crown, allowing any liquid to be poured inside, endowing it with a function of a bottle.

The other dimension of the inner lie is the evaluation of kitsch in reference to the notion of truth perceived as the cognitive foundation of art, as I have already mentioned. In this respect, kitsch “using as raw material debased simulacra of genuine culture”<sup>32</sup> fulfils the requirements of a specific type of contemporary academicism, which – distant from museum halls, and in fact actually immersed in the everyday reality of religious communities – is equipped with incredibly effective means of affecting its viewers. Following this line of thought, Denys Riout draws attention to questionable – to say the least – aesthetic qualifications of kitsch: “The term [kitsch] designates a category of taste, certainly linked to an aesthetics, but even more so to an ethics whose [...] consequences are obvious”<sup>33</sup>.

Religious kitsch as an aesthetic phenomenon plays with the viewer’s emotions abolishing the Kantian dogmas of disinterestedness and distance, and in this respect it might be perceived from the perspective of Arnold

<sup>31</sup> S. Rodziński, *Dzieła, czasy, ludzie*, Kraków 2007, p. 178–183.

<sup>32</sup> C. Greenberg, *Avant-garde and Kitsch...*, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> D. Riout, *Kitsch...*, p. 538.

Berleant's engaged aesthetics, but on the other hand its appreciation appears to be again "a false friend" of aesthetic engagement, basing on stable passive emotive response and static, idealized versions of religious concepts. This inner lie, paradoxically, protects the autonomy and integrity of kitsch's semiotic system<sup>34</sup> mimicking depths of religious emotionality. Thus most critics express their deep concern evaluating Catholic kitsch as a representation of "a massive crisis not only of Christian taste, but Christian confidence"<sup>35</sup> in a real sense. The "translational" aesthetics appears to be not only the underlying principle of popularity of religious kitsch but also the source of its manipulative power. As David Morgan notes:

These images and many like them have served as powerful symbols [...] because believers have learned from childhood to regard them as illustrations, as untrammelled visualizations of what they profess. Understanding why this is so and how it occurs requires that we see popular religious imagery as a part of visual piety, by which I mean the visual formation and practice of religious belief<sup>36</sup>.

The appreciation of the popular religious aesthetic and its investigation opens a path into the very construction of visual structure of a believer's world as image and imagination strengthening the bond with the idolized elements of common tradition<sup>37</sup>. Far from being isolated illustrations of religious notions and cult figures the popular images articulate the social patternings of religious practices, they shape personal narratives and approaches becoming "prayers in plaster and plastic"<sup>38</sup> they also build the sacred of the home space.

## 5. Final remarks

Summing up this short reflection on religious kitsch, it might be worth trying to refer to Stanley Fish's criticised but still influential concept of interpretive communities<sup>39</sup> and to the idea of "a work of art through appropriation" used by a British art anthropologist Alfred Gell in reference

<sup>34</sup>U. Niklas, *Kitsch; a semiotic approach*, [in:] *Semiotics 1981*, ed. J.N. Deely, M. Lenhart, New York - London, p. 273-279; <http://www.springer.com/la/book/9781461593300> (02.07.2016)

<sup>35</sup>M. Nowakowski, *The Age of Glowing Artifice: Against Catholic Kitsch*, <http://www.onepeterfive.com/age-glowing-artifice-catholic-kitsch> (08.08.2016)

<sup>36</sup>D. Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images*, Berkeley - London 1998, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup>U. Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, Orlando 1983, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup>R. Westerfelhaus, *Prayers in Plaster and Plastic. Catholic kitsch as a Ritual Habit*, [in:] *Saints and Their Cults in the Atlantic World*, ed. M.J. Cormack, Columbia, p. 90-111.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. S. Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge 1980.

to a dynamics of interpretative processes forming the totality of reading of a given work of art<sup>40</sup>. In the case of Polish religious kitsch these cognitive interpretative processes are double-bound; on the one hand, governed by universal rules of mass culture, on the other – caught in the trap of ritualistic practices of centuries old Polish magical religious tradition. Some of these complex meanings are ascribed to them during the production process, while other appear during the process of their use or reception. However, the translational aesthetics of kitsch visual representations acting as intersemiotic interpretive use offers them an open space once they enter the realm of autonomous art. In this dimension “kitsch remains an open term”<sup>41</sup>.

### **Estetyka translacyjna kiczu religijnego na przykładzie elementów polskiej katolickiej kultury popularnej**

Artykuł koncentruje się na estetycznych procesach charakteryzujących kicz religijny jako reprezentatywny dla kultury popularnej, która jest zakorzeniona w wielowiekowej tradycji kultury i korzysta z instrumentarium estetycznego współczesności. Metodologia badań zaproponowana w tekście odwołuje się do strategii zapożyczonych z teorii przekładu, zarówno do przedstawionej przez Jakobsona teorii przekładu intersemiotycznego, jak i koncepcji opracowanych przez Lefevere’a, przede wszystkim refrakcji i przepisywania tekstu. Na tej podstawie formułowana jest teza o możliwości wprowadzenia pojęcia estetyki translacyjnej, która w swoich procesach posługuje się – zgodnie z założeniami Lefevere’a, potrzebami wspólnoty i określonej ideologii. Korzysta z istniejącego bogactwa zjawisk artystycznych i estetycznych, tłumacząc je doraźnie zgodnie z wymogami reprezentowanego przez siebie sposobu ekspresji.

**Keywords:** kitsch, religious kitsch, popular culture, aesthetics, intersemiotic translation

**Słowa kluczowe:** kicz, kicz religijny, kultura popularna, estetyka, przekład intersemiotyczny

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford 1998.

<sup>41</sup> J. Attfield, *Redefining Kitsch; The Politics of Design*, “Home Cultures” 2006, vol. 3/3, p. 201–212.