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Opinion

Proposing a Workshop on Art Evaluation in University Teaching

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Abstract: The article presents a workshop on art evaluation addressed at university students of the humanities. The aims of the workshop involve defining the terms 'art' and 'kitsch', analysing the functions of art throughout the ages, understanding the difference between an educated and uneducated art viewer, the importance of a canon of masterpieces of art for preserving the cultural heritage of Europe, and the problem of personal expectations concerning art. Scholarly content is presented to the students via a workshop based on coaching methods developed by cognitive psychology. The choice of this mode of work allows students to express themselves freely, teaches them how to defend their own opinions, improves their ability to see different points of view, and develops creativity. The workshop begins with a preliminary survey to identify the issues the students need help. It consists of 4 sessions (1.5 hours each) and ends with an evaluation. The proposed workshop can be extended with additional modules, tailored to the participants' specific needs.

Keywords: academic teaching, art evaluation, kitsch, coaching methods.

Introduction

Today's media-promoted mass culture focused on consumer lifestyle and geared to the aggressive promotion of visual discourse and the belief in "the end of the Gutenberg era", poses, for its conscious recipients, a number of dilemmas with the evaluation of its multiple products. Analysing the complex reality behind semiotically-understood cultural texts and interpreting them are just the initial steps towards the most challenging third stage, namely their evaluation. This problem primarily concerns contemporary art in the context of people communicating within a social space that has many features of liquid modernity.

The concept of *liquid modernity* (in Polish: *płynna nowoczesność*) as defined by Zygmunt Baumann (2011) is intended to serve as the principal descriptive category in contemporary culture, but also as the point of departure for its evaluation. Culture is perceived as a sphere that is full of ambivalence and uncertain choices for its consumers, known until now as recipients of culture. Baumann argues that in the era of liquid modernity the normative role of culture – of pointing to what is valuable – has been replaced with an invitation to choose from what is available, i.e. the role of supplier. Participation in cultural events today depends on one's

individual needs and no longer on arbiters' recommendations of what one should go and see if one is to be perceived as a "cultured person". The paradigmatic categorisation of artefacts or cultural products into high or low art no longer applies, simply because liquid modernity equals "war on all kinds of paradigms and homeostatic devices that support conformity and routine, thus burdening culture with monotony and sustaining the repeatability of events" (Baumann 2011: 14). Richard A. Peterson (2011) puts at the top of the cultural hierarchy those who consume all components of the available repertory, from theatre productions to breakfast television, and do not criticise anybody simply for choosing something that has so far been considered – by the elites – as inferior.

Such a context renders evaluation as an element of sui generis metaphysics of the everyday even more difficult, as it is expected to consist in autonomous evaluation, to the exclusion, or at least reduction, of the role of experts who would recommend the "correct" choices. That autonomous evaluation, when occasionally verbalised in the social space, will become its component forming a representation of selected works. That is why the preparation for this process of university students, who on the whole are rather competent "consumers" of culture, should be an important element of their education.

As it was noted by Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 29), works of art were addressed in the past to a definite social class, by whom they were almost exclusively received. All artistic products had to be ascribed to one of the mutually exclusive sets whose contents were not to be mixed with those of other sets. Consequently, no intercrossing was possible between elite tastes derived straight from "high culture" with average ones characteristic of the middle classes, or vulgar ones subscribed to by the lower class. The culture was thus used to mark off the differences between social classes and to perpetuate them. Such a situation left a lot of room for arbiters to issue the "paradigms" of art and evaluate each of them. Today there is a reverse tendency: the liquid-modernistic mixing of genres creates a completely new perspective on the evaluation of art, due to the frequent need for its consumers to decide independently on the evaluation criteria, not least in the context of the "evaluation noise" generated by other consumers of contemporary works.

The existence of many scholarly publications devoted to the issues of art evaluation is not fully conducive to developing "evaluation self-awareness" among university students, especially in the constantly evolving area of language communication dominated, among other factors, by liquid-modernistic colloquialisms, obscenities and oversimplifications. That is why texts written in scholarly style make hard reading for the young people, or it may be the case that they simply do not find the time to read them. At the same time, there is still a shortage of publications on art evaluation written from the teaching perspective and relating theoretical knowledge to the undergraduates' actual experience. We, therefore, believe that practical workshops rather than theoretical courses can be a much more effective way to involve students in the

issues of art evaluation, simply because they offer room for discussion and interpretation based on young people's personal experience.

The aim of this article is to outline a workshop that can serve as a template for introducing university students to the issues of art evaluation. Our proposal is based on problems raised in an introductory survey and, we believe, meets the real needs of our academic community. Its usefulness is reflected in the workshop evaluation feedback.

Issues of art evaluation – preliminary questionnaire

The workshop was preceded by an anonymous survey. The participants were asked to write an answer to the question "What problems and dilemmas do you have with evaluating works of art?", and do the task "Think of and write down a question concerning evaluation of works of art" The responses were intended to help determine the objectives of the workshop and select suitable methods of work. After sorting, the responses were divided into several groups.

Most of the answers to the first question were related to defining the concept of 'art'. The students wrote: "art today is not clearly defined", "anything can pass for art", "anyone can decide whether something is art", "I have a problem with defining what is and what is not art". Another set of issues concerned the definition and evaluation of the phenomenon of kitsch. Recurring in the questionnaires were such answers as "I don't know how to tell a work of art from kitsch", or "I am afraid that what I consider art will be declared by specialists as kitsch". Numerous dilemmas stemmed from incomprehension of the goals and functions of contemporary art. The students wrote: "I don't understand the sense of contemporary art, it has no norms or boundaries and I may miss the artist's intentions", "at present, art just shocks and crosses the borders of good taste, it has no other value than the shocking effect". The answers often revealed concerns about expressing one's own value judgments and fears of making a fool of oneself, as reflected in such statements as "there is always a risk that my reception of a work of art will go too far, be incorrect", "something must be wrong with me if I am not thrilled with what everybody else admires", "I am not bold enough to express judgments", or "I don't know if others will accept my opinions".

The responses to the second item on the questionnaire, the task of formulating a question concerning art evaluation, were varied. They made the instructors aware of what contents should be included in the workshop. The questions proposed by the students referred to art's reception, its essence, aims, functions and significance in everyday life, and the phenomena of scandal, pornography, etc. – for example, "why does each of us receive a work of art differently?", "why is contemporary art so difficult to receive?", "on the basis of what criteria do people evaluate art?", "can someone not professionally involved with art be its critic?", or "in what way does one's level of education influence the evaluation and reception of art?".

Many of the above responses are compatible with fluid modernity, first of all, because they focus on uncertain choices and evaluation criteria. We are dealing here with a paradox of sorts, namely that despite their uncertainty the recipients of art have no choice but engage in evaluation, which in today's reality they are drawn into all the time (for example by being asked to put in stars, hearts or other emoticons in the best book or the best film rankings, etc.). The proposed workshop should, therefore, help the students to better cope with the challenges of evaluating, especially in its simplest and thus the most common instances.

The workshop's objectives and its addressees, the length of the event and suggested reading

The issues and questions elicited in the questionnaire effectively led to the formulation of the workshop's objectives. No provisions were made to teach art evaluation, an impossible goal in the time available. Nor was it our intention to address all problems posed by evaluation of art. What proved essential, however, was to develop an awareness of where they stem from, verbalise them, and understand their consequences.

The adopted objectives are oriented towards the issues of defining art and kitsch, describing the functions of art throughout the centuries, and expressing one's own needs in experiencing art. Those objectives have been grouped according to the scope of knowledge, skills, and social attitudes that we expected the students to acquire. In terms of the scope of knowledge, the students should be able to formulate the definitions of 'art' and 'kitsch' and explain why 'art' is an open concept. In terms of skills, they should be able to name the functions of art from the antiquity to the present; explain what those functions consist in, and provide examples of works fulfilling the given functions; explain how the difference between an educated recipient and an uneducated one influences the way art is evaluated. In terms of social attitudes, the students should become aware of, and be able to verbalise, their own expectations towards art; explain the role of the canon of art masterpieces in preserving Europe's cultural heritage.

The workshop is targeted primarily at university students from humanity departments (except for those specializing in the history of art), i.e. at "non-professional art receivers" (Poprzęcka 1998: 24). The range of topics covered is sufficiently universal to be of interest also to science students. The workshop consists of four sessions, each lasting one and a half hours. The workshop can be offered as part of an introductory or specialist course (for example concerning the analysis of cultural texts) already on the curriculum, or within the framework of a general liberal-arts module for non-humanity students.

The bibliography at the end of this paper is intended to be of help to university teachers who do not specialise in art history but, as conscious receivers of art, can understand and explain the issues of its evaluation. As realists, we have intentionally kept this reading list to a bare minimum, with the understanding that anyone genuinely interested in these issues

will have no difficulties reaching for other sources. Some of the proposed items focus on art and others on the methodology of coaching, which can be applied to university teaching.

Methods applied

The teaching methods were chosen with the aim of giving the students an opportunity to express themselves freely, but also to improve their ability to spot different vantage points and ways of perceiving the reality. Emphasis has been put on creative teamwork. Apart from the standard forms of university teaching such as lecture or debate, we have proposed methods developed in coaching, namely brainstorming, switching between the points of view, and the circle of priorities. Brainstorming develops multidirectional thinking and facilitates finding new ideas and non-standard solutions. The method of changing the vantage point enables perceiving the given reality from different perspectives, which leads to a deeper understanding of the complexity of the analysed phenomena (Wilczyńska i in. 2013: 62–68). The circle of priorities in turn "affords the exceptional possibility of looking at the given area from a broader perspective and evaluating the current situation within it" (There: 74).

It is important to preserve the proposed order of the sessions, starting from defining the terminology and ending with the participants' summing up of their new awareness of their needs and expectations concerning art.

Session One

The students collectively formulate the definition of 'art' and explain why it is an open term.

Methods: brainstorming, mini-lecture.

Forms of work: group work.

Teaching aids: two cards, one labelled "ART" and the other "NON-ART", blank sheets of paper, markers.

Activities:

The instructor places the two cards labelled "Art" and "Non-Art" so that they are visible, some distance apart. He/she proposes a brainstorm aimed at defining the term "art". The participants discuss what, for them, is and is not art. They write down their answers on the sheets of paper, and then put the sheets around the two cards, respectively.

The participants discuss and verify the contents of the sheets. Together with the instructor, they compare their collectively formulated definition with that presented by the instructor in a mini-lecture explaining how the term 'art' evolved over the centuries (Tatarkiewicz 1982: 21–61) [1]. In the Antiquity and the Middle Ages, it was a skill-based on knowledge of the rules, handicraft. The seven liberal arts included grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. In the Renaissance, the rank

of the artist increased considerably. In an effort to separate art from handicraft and the liberal arts, the term 'fine arts' was introduced in the seventeenth century comprising painting, sculpture, architecture, music, elocution, poetry, dance, and theatre. In the nineteenth century art was associated with creativity, originality, individualism and inventiveness. Today, 'art' is put in the category of open terms, i.e. those for which it is impossible to formulate the necessary and sufficient defining features. An alternative definition has therefore appeared, based the "either ... or ... or" pattern:

> Art is either the replicating of objects, or constructing of forms, or evoking of experiences – provided that the product of this replicating, constructing or expressing is capable of evoking admiration, or moving, or shocking the experiencer (Tatarkiewicz 1982: 52).

It is worth summing up the discussion with this quotation:

> The opponents of defining art claim that it lacks a feature shared by all works of art, and it lacks general rules, standards, touchstones, canons or laws that could apply to them. Renouncing a definition is therefore tantamount with the renunciation of evaluating. There are, however, views to the contrary, according to which the consequence of today's variegation of art should not be the renunciation of defining it but a search for its other, new, definitions (Poprzęcka 1998: 10).

At the end of the session, the instructor asks the participants to bring to the next session objects which they think are examples of kitsch.

Session Two

The aim of this session is to analyse and collectively define the phenomenon of kitsch.

Methods: brainstorming, mini-lecture(s).

Forms of work: group work.

Teaching aids: a card labelled "KITSCH", a card labelled "NON-KITSCH", blank sheets of paper, markers, and objects brought by the participants (considered by them to be kitschy).

Activities:

By brainstorming and using the 'Kitsch' and 'Non-kitsch' cards, the students define the phenomenon of kitsch. They refer to the 'kitschy' objects they have brought with them. Then, together with the instructor, they compare their collaborative definition of kitsch with a dictionary one: "an informal name for a tacky, worthless item of art" (*Słownik...* 1967: 167). If the time allows, a definition from Wikipedia [2] can be used. The discussion is summed up with this quotation:

> Kitsch is a shoddy piece of art, produced "not in earnest", cheap, characterised by a facile form and a message that is obvious to anybody. ... A large number of pieces described as kitsch or "in bad taste" are objects that are mass-produced from today's cheap stuff which in the past were hand-crafted from "precious" materials.

In preparation for the next session, the instructor asks each participant to make a list of what he/she believes to be the ten greatest works of art and bring it with them.

Session Three

The aim of the third session is to examine the functions of art from the antiquity to the modern times, and in so doing to appreciate the role played by the canon of great works of art in the preservation of Europe's cultural heritage.

Methods: discussion and debate.

Teaching aids: The lists of ten greatest works of art prepared at home by the participants, a card labelled "FUNCTIONS OF ART", blank sheets of paper, markers.

Forms of work: group work.

Activities:

The instructor collects the lists of ten greatest works of art prepared by the students at home and hands them out to them at random. Each student reads out the contents of the lists they have received. After all the works of art have been mentioned, the students are given time to think of and discuss what were their functions in the past and what they are today. The instructor displays the 'Functions of art' card. The participants write down the functions on the provided sheets of paper and put the sheets around the labelled card.

Next, the group check which works of art had originally been listed by at least two participants. The instructor moderates the discussion on the significance of the great works canon for the cultural identity of Europe and of Poland. (The canon constitutes the paradigm of, and the point of reference for, defining the standards of ideal beauty, and at the same time becomes a symbolic portrait of culture).

This part of the session is best concluded with this quotation:

> Art has always been connected with religion: it played a role in worship, represented deity and holiness, provided the settings for liturgy, enhanced people's personal devotion, and was the Bible of the illiterate. Its time-sanctioned task was ... to arrest time, to commemorate persons and their actions, and preserve what is mortal and impermanent. Also, art was in the service of rulers. By symbolizing their power and glory, it lent them splendor and magnificence, gave them support and spread their fame. Another important task of art was moral teaching and providing models of how to live and die, which was done by providing explicit examples or sophisticated allegories. By pursuing the ideal beauty and picturing things "as they should be", art fulfilled dreams and created an illusion of a different life, it provided refuge and respite. It was meant to make up for hardships, soothe and bring happiness. Finally, it was to delight with its beauty and give pleasure to the eyes. ... This order of things began to collapse at the time of the great transition at the turn of the nineteenth century. ... New needs appeared, patrons and commissioners of art changed together with the surrounding reality. The profound changes ... concerned first of all the answers to the basic questions: what is art for?, what are its sources and goals? ... The rush for creative self-realisation and the tendency to separate art from all its other uses apart from art for art's sake or expressing the artist's individuality, upset the hierarchy of its functions and its meanings stemming therefrom. ... Simply because art started to be looked upon

as sheer creation rather than skillful execution of pictures, buildings, or any other artifacts. From now on art had no other functions besides the aesthetic and self-expressive ones (Słownik 1967: 299–302).

Session Four

The aim of this final session is to bring out awareness of one's own expectations concerning art and to realise what factors influence its reception (the difference between a professional and non-professional receiver).

Methods: change of perspective, the circle of priorities, discussion

Teaching aids: a reproduction of a work of art chosen by the instructor (e.g. a painting or a sculpture), a multi-media projector, sheets of paper with a circle on them, one for each participant.

Forms of work: group work, individual work

Activities:

The instructor projects the chosen reproduction onto a screen. It would be best if most students were not acquainted with reproduction. The group work together using the method of changing perspective. The instructor distributes among the students, on a voluntary basis, the roles to play in the next activity. Then the students talk about the displayed work of art from the perspective of the person whose role they have opted for. They talk about their emotions, impressions and thoughts that accompany them when looking at the displayed work. The group do not know which role the given student has been given, and they are to guess it on the basis of what has been said. This task involves activating one's imagination. The choice of the roles is free, but it is a good idea to take into account such factors in the work's reception as age, level of sensitivity, educational profile, mood, ease of associations, and experience of contacts with art. The sample roles are: a seven-year-old child, a rich art collector, a frequent museumgoer. Then the instructor professionally interprets the self-chosen work of art, taking the role of an art historian. The discussion is summed up with Maria Poprzęcka's opinion: "A non-professional recipient will either end up confused, or will trustingly succumb to other people's judgments, or – the worst-case scenario – will find himself disguising his true tastes or live with the frustrating awareness of not being «up to» genuine art." (1998: 24).

The second part of this session is focused on bringing out awareness of one's own needs and expectations connected with art. The introduction to this issue came in the session devoted to the different functions of art over the centuries. Now is the time to evoke one's personal life experience and juxtapose it with the acquired knowledge. The students work alone using the circle of priorities method supplemented with scaling. Each student gets a sheet featuring a circle with its centre marked. He or she divides the circle, with lines running through the centre, into as many sections as he/she has expectations or needs connected with art (e.g. 6–8), and then, outside the circle, writes the descriptions of each section. As the next stage, the students rank the importance of the given need or

expectation of the scale of 1 to 10 (1 – the centre of the circle – means 'least important', while 10 – the edge of the circle – indicates the highest priority (Wilczyńska et al. 2013: 77). [3]

After scaling all their needs and expectations in this way, each participant finds an answer to the following questions: What is most important for me in the reception of art? (the sections of the circle which I have given 10 points). Which aspect of art's reception (aesthetic, ideological, moral, etc.) do I focus on the most? Which functions of art are for me less important of unimportant, and why? What does the circle tell me about my way of evaluating art? In the end, those participants who are willing present their priority circles to the group. The instructor sums up all the sessions, and sets an optional assignment: Write an essay commenting on the statement: "It is not us who put great works of art to a test, it is them that test us" (Poprzęcka 1998: 66).

Evaluation of the effects of attending the workshop

The workshop's evaluation can be done right at its end or at a later time. The simplest way to check on the achieved effects is a written test in which suitable open questions are set for each of the adopted objectives (e.g. List the characteristics of kitsch. Provide 8–10 functions of art together with examples of concrete works that fulfill those functions. What are the differences between professional and non-professional recipients of art?). In the case of our edition of the presented workshop, we used an anonymous questionnaire survey in which each participant was to respond to the question: "How has your attitude to the evaluation of art changed as a result of your participation in the workshop on this topic?". The selected responses quoted below clearly indicate that workshops of this kind make very good sense.

"I have revised my attitude to art. I now realise that the value of art depends on our knowledge, sensibility and culture", "The workshop activities have given me an impulse to make an effort at interpretation. I will now use the term 'art' more carefully", "The sessions have confirmed my view that contemporary art is characterised by a lack of norms and it is hard to evaluate it. One should not uncritically accept other people's judgments", "I am glad that I am not the only one to admit to not understanding contemporary art. The more do I now appreciate traditional art", "I find it easier now to tell art from kitsch, I am more critical", "Now I am confident that I don't have to like everything. Everyone can have their own opinions and judge the given works".

Conclusion

The proposed workshop was tailored to the expectations and needs of recipients indicated by them in the preliminary survey. It should be pointed out that the four sessions are not sufficient to do justice to this extensive but challenging issue. That is why, if necessary, the workshop

should be extended with subsequent modules illuminating other aspects of art evaluation. It would be worthwhile to look into such issues as the relationship between nudity in art and pornography, the role of an artist, the pressure from gurus or experts and snobbery in the reception of art, or the significance of scandal in the promotion of contemporary art. Such methods as the Oxford debate or Edward de Bono's seven-hats method could be used because they put emphasis on creativity while promoting tolerance and good manners in a debate.

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Notes

1 The entry 'sztuka', https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sztuka [accessed 28 January 2019].

2 cf. entry 'kicz', https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kicz [accessed 28 January 2019].

3 The circle of priorities is drawn in the same way as 'koła życia' [circles of life], http://www.jestesnajwazniejszy.pl/pierwsze-cwiczenie-coachingowe/ [accessed on 28 January 2019].