EWA NIESTOROWICZ*,
MAGDALENA SZUBIELSKA**

*Maria Curie Skłodowska University in Lublin, Faculty of Arts
**John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Institute of Psychology

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5837-6332; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8437-0871

The Influence of the Description
of a Work of Art on Its Perception

SUMMARY

The following article deals with the problem of the perception of aesthetic ugliness in art. The research presented in the article focuses on the reception of contemporary art assessed by two groups of students of the Faculty of Arts of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. One of the groups has got acquainted with the description (in the form of a text and guided curatorial tours) and other one has not. Students' assessments from the two groups are later on compared.

The aim of the article was therefore an attempt to answer the question: does being familiar with the description of studied works of art and their authors in the form of a text and curatorial guidance influence the scope of understanding and assessment of the work being watched, and therefore how the information about the work or its lack affect the perception and aesthetic value of the work?

Key words: descriptive, reception of a work of art, aesthetics of ugliness, expertness

INTRODUCTION

It is a common fact that the reading of values encoded in the message, which is a work of art, depends on the recipient. In Ingarden's (1958) theory, aesthetic values are treated as objective beings immanent in the object, and in order to perceive them, a specific attitude of the interpreter is needed. The observer must therefore be prepared to receive and experience these values (Niestorowicz, 2007 after: Ingarden, 1958; Gołaszewska, 1973; Hohensee-Ciszewska, 1976). According to Gołaszewska, the aesthetic reception of a work of art depends on many factors, such as level of knowledge, personality of the recipient, culture of the society in which the recipient operates. Undoubtedly, the knowledge of the visual

language of art changes the aesthetic attitude making it more flexible and capable of adopting various artistic forms. It also helps in perceiving difficult and new art. The type of work of art that the recipient deals with also affects the course and structure of the aesthetic experience (Niestorowicz, Szubielska, 2017 after: Gołaszewska, 1973, pp. 331–332).

The reception of contemporary art is not easy. Sometimes it causes the so-called aesthetic shock, which results from the clash of the recipient's preferences and avant-garde actions of the artist (Niestorowicz, Szubielska, 2017 after: Gołaszewska, 1973, p. 426). As Gołaszewska writes, the art from the past is definitely a safe and well-known area that protects us from the terrifying new art (*ibid.*). The ugliness in art seems to be particularly complicated in the reception as for centuries it was associated with evil. Evil, synonymous to hell, is the opposite of good, and "ugliness is a hell of beauty", as K. Rosenkranz wrote in his work *Aesthetic Ugliness* (Eco, 2009 after Rosenkranz, 1984, p. 16). It was not until the 19th century that ugliness appears as a separate aesthetic category, gaining a positive value (Eco, 2009). However, professional viewers who have artistic preparation are expected not only to read and understand the assumptions of contemporary art, but also to present an active attitude that makes them participate in the work, or complement it, and not only act as a contemplative person (Gołaszewska, 1984, pp. 126–127).

In the research presented in this article, all students who took part in the experiment study in the field of art, so they are treated as "experts" prepared to receive a work of art, including contemporary art. It should also be emphasized that the research was carried out in natural conditions, in the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin that presents contemporary art, so the viewers interacted with real works, not only with their reproductions, which often do not render the work objectively (e.g. colours are changed, light is used differently, the format of the work is not given).

It was interesting to ask the question whether students of artistic faculties have sufficient skills to decipher codes proposed by currently active artists without any interpretative guidelines, or whether they need support in the form of curatorial description, especially that the analysed works depict the ugliness that is difficult to perceive. From the literature on the subject, as well as from previous research (Szubielska et al., 2016, pp. 21–34; Niestorowicz et al., 2013), it can be concluded that getting familiar with the information about the work and its author has an impact on the perception and aesthetic evaluation of contemporary art, especially if a given work is assessed by laymen. Will such knowledge also influence the assessment of works made by experts in the field of art? Empirical research in this article will attempt to answer the aforementioned question.

EXPERIMENT – OPINION SURVEY.
AESTHETIC PERCEPTION OF UGLINESS
IN SELECTED WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Aim of the research

As it has already been mentioned, the aim of the research is to get to know the reception of contemporary art assessed by students of the Faculty of Arts of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, and to compare these assessments between groups of students who either have or have not got acquainted with the information about the works.

The researchers were looking for empirical verification of the hypothesis that attempted to show that getting familiar with the information in the form of a text description and curatorial description concerning the studied works of art and their authors affects the scope of understanding and the evaluation of the analysed works. In other words, it was decided to empirically find out whether the information about the work or lack of such information influences the perception and aesthetic evaluation of the work.

Hypotheses and research questions

This hypothesis that derives from the literature on the subject, as well as from previous research on the reception of art (Niestorowicz, Szubielska, 2017, pp. 228–242; Szubielska et al., 2016; Niestorowicz et al., 2013), allows for formulating the following theses:

Knowledge (in the form of a text description and curatorial description) has an impact on the assessment of beauty and understanding of contemporary art, which is presumed to be ugly. Receiving the description and the curatorial guideline enables recipients to rate the works as more beautiful (H1), as well as more understandable (H2) than in the situation when the interpretative instructions are not given.

Correlation between different dimensions of aesthetic evaluation. The higher the beauty of modern works (taken as ugly) is rated, the more they are assessed in terms of: fascination (H3), sense of understanding (H4), and mastery (H5).

In addition, the following research questions were formulated: Does the text description and a curator's guideline result in an increase of fascination with the work (P1) and recognition of the artistry of the work (P2)? Does the assessment of particular contemporary exhibited works, whose aesthetic ugliness is taken for granted, differ in the dimension of beauty (P3)?

Research tool

The questionnaire that regularized the assessment of the analysed works became the research tool for the objective evaluation. The examined persons, after

viewing the entire exhibition, assessed selected works in four dimensions of aesthetic experience: beauty, fascination, sense of understanding, and artistry. The instructions for the respondents were as follows: "With every work viewed (or cycle of works), under its title, mark if it is: ugly – beautiful, repulsive – fascinating, incomprehensible – understandable, and whether you rate it as trash or rather a masterpiece". The assessments were made on a 7-point Likert scale. In their studies of painting assessment Niestorowicz and Szubielska (2017) used similar scales of aesthetic evaluation of the works depicting ugliness. In the presented study, only the last scale was modified so that it could refer not only to paintings (where it was described as "trash" – "a masterpiece"), but also to works created in other techniques. Each of the respondents assessed the aesthetics of 9 works (where "work" is understood as both a single work and a series of works on exhibition).

The test group

22 people took part in the study (16 women and 6 men) aged 19–24 (M = 21.32, SD = 0.95). All participants were students of the Institute of Fine Arts of the Artistic Faculty of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin.

Students were assigned to two groups: experimental group (N = 12), who assessed the work after reading the descriptor in the form of a text description and listening to curatorial information, and control group (N = 10), who assessed the work without any information.

Research procedure

The research was of a group nature and the answers were marked on a paper sheet. The respondents rated selected works at the group exhibition "Pernicious Predilection" at the Labirynt Gallery in Lublin. The participants from the experimental group had a description of each of the analysed works at their disposal, as well as a curator's tour, which lasted about 40 minutes. Students from this group received detailed information about the authors, the researched works, as well as the context in which a given work was created. The whole procedure that included reading the descriptions, listening to the curator's information and evaluating the researched items took students from the experimental group about 1.5 hours.

The second group of students, the control group, which assessed the works without any curatorial information, spent approximately 50 minutes on the exhibition.

Each time the participants were to mark on a seven-point, bipolar scale, to what extent they find a given work ugly – beautiful, repulsive – fascinating, incomprehensible – understandable. They also assessed the artistry of the artist who created the work, on the scale of trash – a masterpiece.

Research material

The research material consisted of selected works presented at the group exhibition "Pernicious Predilection" in the Labirynt Gallery, in Lublin (on 21 April 2017 – 4 June 2017), along with their curatorial descriptions. The curators of the exhibition were Paulina Kempisty and Aleksander Skrabek. The works selected for the study were not to be too time-consuming in terms of getting familiar with them (hence, the longer video works and the work combining art and science by Karolina Żyniewicz were excluded from the assessment). Moreover, the evaluation did not include works containing erotic content (these may have been read not in terms of their beauty or ugliness, but through their particularly emotional nature). The research material therefore included 9 following works: (1) *Birth of Capitalism* by Aleksandra Ska; (2) *This is not Wonderland* by Monika Zadurska-Bielak and Tomasz Bielak; (3) *Selfie (#17, #14, #11, #1, #7)* by Aneta Grzeszykowska; (4) *Karol Darwin porośnięty Aspergillus versicolo* (*Charles Darwin covered with Aspergillus Versicolo*) by Diana Lelonek; (5) *Liberum Animum* by Robert Kuśmirowski; (6) *Powielacz* (*Duplicator*) by Olaf Brzeski; (7) *Beautiful Deformations* by Barbara Formella; (8) *Cykl Urazy (Anatol, Robert, Zosia)* (*The Injuries Cycle (Anatol, Robert, Zosia)*) by Zuza Krajewska; (9) *Dyktator/ Plama/Próba* (*Dictator/Stain/Test*) by Jacek Malinowski.[1]

The "Pernicious Predilection" exhibition, as the curators note, was inspired by the notion of *delectatio morosa* taken from medieval scholasticism and bearing reference to the temptation of sin (Thomas Aquinas, 2017, pp. 71–89), meaning "stopping one's thought on a forbidden pleasure". "The presented works" – as Kempisty and Skrabek continue – "are materialisations of compulsive visions, fascinations, fears and fantasies and they sometimes reach the limits of aesthetic endurance. Many works in the exhibition address the body, (...) conscious work with defects, revealing the natural process of ageing or attempts at disturbing it by means of interventions in cells. (...) ugliness is revealed by some of the works – framed, showcased, securely separated from the viewer, sometimes fetishised, ugliness does not disgust, but fascinates, demonstrating that an ugly object may become an object of desire. The eponymous pernicious predilection also means the inability to reject compulsive thoughts and desires, the incessant pursuit of what exceeds the borders of the state usually defined as normality. The exhibition attempts to reveal such penchants and predilections. (...) such desires may sometimes adopt a disturbing shape, unveiling the dark side of the human mind and the potential of evil inherent therein. At other times, they become related to an unbridled need of hoarding objects or obsessive repetition of activities" (Kempisty, Skrabek, 2017, pp. 17–22)[2].

---

[1] https://labirynt.com/en/uporczywe-upodobanie/
[2] See also: https://labirynt.com/en/uporczywe-upodobanie/ (a part of the introduction).

Results

The results obtained in the study were entered to the SPSS spreadsheet, with the use of which all statistical analyses described below were carried out.

The normality of distribution was checked and then four t-tests were calculated for independent samples for the independent variable to read the curator's information in the form of descriptions and guided tours (yes, no) and subsequent dependent variables: evaluation of the beauty of the work, fascination with the work, intelligibility of the work, evaluation of the artistry of the work. All analyses were conducted for averaged results of individual dimensions of aesthetic evaluation (including all assessed works). Descriptive statistics of the results obtained in the study, divided into the results of the experimental and control group, are presented in Table 1. The recipient group, who got acquainted with the curator's information (in the form of a description and guided tour), assessed the works displayed at the exhibition as significantly more: beautiful, $t(20) = -2.29$, $p = 0.017$, $d = -0.98$; fascinating, $t(16.21) = -3.69$, $p = 0.002$, $d = -1.58$; understandable, $t(14, 91) = -3.12$, $p = 0.004$, $d = -1.34$, than the group of viewers who did not receive curatorial information (see: Table 1). The evaluation of works on the artistry scale did not differ significantly in the experimental and control group, $t(20) = -1.87$, $p = 0.077$.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of averaged assessments of ugliness, fascination, understanding, and artistry of works displayed at the "Pernicious Predilection" exhibition

Condition		Average	Standard deviation
ugly _ beautiful	control	3.65	0.56
	experimental	4.38	0.87
repulsive _ fascinating	control	3.45	0.45
	experimental	4.59	0.95
incomprehensible _ understandable	control	3.11	0.51
	experimental	4.37	1.28
trash _masterpiece	control	3.9	0.44
	experimental	4.47	0.87

Source: Authors' own study.

After calculating Pearson's r correlation (on the results averaged for all assessed works), it was concluded that the assessment of works on the ugly – beautiful scale significantly and positively correlates with the assessment on scales: repulsive – fascinating ($r = 0.87$, $p < 0.001$), incomprehensible – understandable ($r = 0.88$, $p < 0.001$), trash – a masterpiece ($r = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$).

The differences in the assessment of the beauty of individual works were studied with the use of the analysis of variance with the inter-object being familiar

with the curatorial information factor (yes, no) and with the intra-object assessed work factor (*Birth of Capitalism*, *This is not Wonderland*, *Selfie*, *Charles Darwin covered with Aspergillus Versicolo*, *Liberum Animum*, *Duplicator*, *Beautiful Deformations*, *The Injuries Cycle*, *Dictator/Stain/Test*). A significant main effect of getting acquainted with the curator's information was observed, $F(1, 19) = 4.5$, $p = 0.047$, $\eta^2 = 0.19$. In the case of the evaluation preceded by curatorial guiding and reading the descriptor, the works were marked as more beautiful in comparison to the evaluation without previous getting acquainted with curatorial information (see: Table 1).

Because the sphericity condition was not met, F tests for the intra-object factor were calculated with the Greenhouse-Geisser correction. Statistically significant main effect of the assessed work factor was observed, $F(2.834, 53.846) = 11.33$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.37$. The results of the post-hoc tests with Bonferroni's Multiple Comparison showed that the work entitled *Birth of Capitalism* was assessed as significantly less beautiful than the following works: *This is not Wonderland* ($p = 0.017$), *Charles Darwin covered with Aspergillus Versicolo* ($p < 0.001$), *Liberum Animum* ($p = 0.001$), *Duplicator* ($p = 0.002$), *Beautiful Deformations* ($p < 0.001$), *The Injuries Cycle* ($p < 0.001$). The work *Dictator/Stain/Test* was rated as significantly less beautiful than the following works: *This is not Wonderland* ($p = 0.002$), *Beautiful Deformations* ($p < 0.001$), *The Injuries Cycle* ($p = 0.035$). In addition, the work *Beautiful Deformations* was considered to be significantly more beautiful than the following works: *Selfie* ($p = 0.012$), *Charles Darwin covered with Aspergillus Versicolo* ($p = 0.005$), *Duplicator* ($p < 0.001$).

The interaction between the analysed factors was not statistically significant, $F(2.834, 53.846) = 2.34$, $p = 0.087$.

Table 2. Evaluation of individual works exhibited at the "Pernicious Predilection" exhibition – descriptive statistics

Assessed work	Average	Standard deviation
1. Birth of Capitalism	2.72	0.88
2. This is not Wonderland	4.31	1.43
3. Selfie	3.51	1.62
4. Charles Darwin covered with Aspergillus Versicolo	4.06	1
5. Liberum Animum	4.56	1.76
6. Duplicator	3.76	1.32
7. Beautiful Deformations	5.36	1.18
8. The Injuries Cycle	4.86	1.42
9. Dictator/Stain/Test	3.07	1.51

Source: Authors' own study.

DISCUSSION

The aforementioned results indicate that the hypotheses raised at the beginning of the article have been confirmed. After getting acquainted with the description of works and curatorial tours, students rated the works as more beautiful (H1), as well as more understandable (H2) than in the cases when the recipients were not provided with curatorial information. Thus, one can observed the influence of knowledge on the assessment of beauty and comprehensibility of contemporary works, which are perceived as not beautiful. The obtained results are consistent with previous reports from literature on the subject. It is also confirmed by previous studies regarding the influence of contextual information on the reception of contemporary art (Niestorowicz et al., 2013), where the introduction of the description made the examined recipients rate higher the originality of abstract and difficult images. Other studies (Szubielska et al., 2016) on the impact of the familiarity with catalogue information on the aesthetic perception of contemporary painting by experts and laymen also allowed for the conclusion that – according to Pietras (2014, pp. 24–37) – curatorial descriptions may contribute to understanding contemporary art (in this case, the studies concerned the works from the category of abstract painting, which usually gives the recipients, especially untrained in the field of art[3], difficulties in interpreting).

The research presented in this article also indicated that curatorial descriptions cause an increase in fascination with the work (P1). The recipients who read the descriptions and participated in the tours were much more fascinated by the observed works than those who did not take part in them. However, there were no differences in the evaluation of the work artistry when it comes to the recipients who either were or were not acquainted with the curatorial information. Presumably when evaluating the artistic skills of the artists, the interpreters referred to all their knowledge of art history, comparing the rated works to other works in the field of contemporary art, so the curatorial guided tour did not influence their grades.

Interesting results were obtained with respect to the correlation of ratings. It turned out that the higher the beauty of the modern (assumingly not beautiful) works is rated, the higher the assessment concerning the following dimensions: fascination (H3), sense of understanding (H4), artistry (H5). The correlations assumed in the third, fourth and fifth hypotheses have therefore been empirically confirmed in these studies. The occurrence of correlation is also consistent with earlier studies (Niestorowicz, Szubielska, 2017), where the problem of aesthetic

---

[3] Laymen, on the other hand, have no difficulties in perceiving figurative paintings, classical painting, which, however, was not the subject of this research, see: A. Furnham, J. Walker (2001a; 2001b); G.C. Cupchik, R.J. Gebotys (1988).

perception of ugliness in art was explored in the assessment of two groups of students: "laymen", i.e. people unprepared to receive art, and "experts", i.e. students trained in the reception of works of art. In these studies, there was also a high positive correlation between the assessment of beauty and fascination and understanding, both in the group of experts and laymen, who assessing the works as more beautiful, simultaneously declared greater comprehensibility of the studied works and fascination with them.

It is extremely interesting that the answer to the question (P3): Is the assessment of individual, assumingly not beautiful, contemporary works seen at the exhibition, different in the dimension of beauty? turned out to be positive. The evaluation of individual works as beautiful or ugly were significantly different. The work *Beautiful Deformations* was considered the most beautiful. Although the work showed distortions of body parts, it was aesthetically pleasing, even over-pleasing – so the viewers most probably to a greater extent focused on the form (glossy material) rather than the content (degenerate body parts). The fact of showing "anesthetised" and "beautified" (Adorno, 1994) ugliness in a work of art, significantly differing from the real world realities, is not uncommon in contemporary art. In their works, artists put all their craft, using artistic means in such a way and dressing the work in such an aesthetic form that the viewer accepts ugliness, which appears as one of the strategies of art (*ibid*.).

The following works were considered significantly less beautiful than most other works: *Birth of Capitalism* and *Dictator/Stain/Test*. *Birth of Capitalism* is visually very economical, and really difficult to interpret. The picture is blurred and ambiguous, so it is possible that the reception of the work was difficult for the interpreters. *Dictator/Stain/Test*, on the other hand, is a depiction of evil, as this work presents a Nazi criminal as a metaphorical vampire. In earlier studies on the aesthetics of ugliness (Niestorowicz, Szubielska, 2017), the participants rated the images of evil as significantly more beautiful. However, it should be emphasized that these studies focused on evil depicted in the images of classical painting, such as in the neoclassical picture *Hell* by Joseph Anton Koch, or in the moving, symbolic image of *Lucifer* by Franz von Stuck. In these pictures aesthetically pleasing images of evil can be observed, and they refer to literary fiction, folk or cultural beliefs. These images often depict evil in ambiguity, the figure of the devil that appears to be misunderstood, suffering and struggling with loneliness. In addition, these images refer to the unreal world, the world of fantasy, where the sense of endangerment is tamed, subject to control. However the evil evoked in these studies in the work *Dictator/Stain/Test*, showing the vampire as the Nazi criminal, refers to the tangible evil, which, combined with the national, social and historical aspects, or even references of the recipients' personal matters, brings to mind a real sense of threat.

The carried out research is a continuation[4] of empirical studies on the aesthetic perception of ugliness. It turned out that the evaluation of contemporary works depicting ugliness, in the opinion of "experts", i.e. students trained in the field of art, depends on the provided information about the analysed work and its author. We do hope that the results of this research will be valuable information for the gallery's curators. We also believe that the catalogue descriptions and curatorial descriptions are invaluably helpful and can contribute to the growth of interest and the sense of understanding of contemporary art among viewers, even those who are professional recipients.

REFERENCES

Adorno T.W., 1994, *Teoria estetyczna*, PWN, Warszawa.
Cupchik G.C., Gebotys R.J., 1988, *The search for meaning in art: Interpretative styles and judgements of quality*, "Visual Art Research", 14: 38–50.
Eco U., 2005, *Historia piękna*, Rebis, Poznań.
Eco U., 2009, *Historia brzydoty*, Rebis, Poznań.
Furnham A., Walker J., 2001a, *Personality and judgement of abstract, pop art, and representational paintings*, "European Journal of Personality", 15: 57–72.
Furnham A., Walker J., 2001b, *The influence of personality traits, previous experience of art, and demographic variables on artistic preference*, "Personality and Individual Differences", 31: 997–1017.
Gołaszewska M., 1973, *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa.
Gołaszewska M., 1984,. *Estetyka i antyestetyka*, PWN, Warszawa.
Hohensee-Ciszewska H., 1976, *Podstawy wiedzy o sztukach plastycznych*, WSiP, Warszawa.
Ingarden R., 1958, *Studia z estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa.
Kempisty P., Skrabek A., 2017, *Nie wytrzymam tego...*, [in:] *Pernicious Predilection* (exhibition catalogue), the Labirynt Gallery, Lublin, 17–22.
Niestorowicz E., 2007, *Świat w umyśle i rzeźbie osób głuchoniewidomych*, UMCS, Lublin.
Niestorowicz E., Szubielska M., Błaszak D., 2013, *Badanie recepcji malarstwa współczesnego. Przeżycia estetyczne wobec obrazów figuratywnych i niefiguratywnych*, [in:] *Sztuka jako re(medium)*, red. M. Stępnik, Petit S.K., Lublin.
Niestorowicz E., Szubielska M., 2017, *Maszkary i szkarady. Ocena estetyczna klasycznych dzieł malarskich przedstawiających brzydotę*, „Historia i Kultura", 32: 228–242.
Pietras K., 2014, *Osobowość i wiedza ekspercka jako wyznaczniki percepcji współczesnej sztuki wizualnej*, „Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Psychologica", 7: 24–37.
Szubielska M., Niestorowicz E., Bałaj B., 2016, *Wpływ figuratywności obrazu i zapoznania się z informacją katalogową na percepcję estetyczną malarstwa współczesnego przez ekspertów i laików*, „Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Psychologia", 9: 21–34.
Thomas Aquinas, 2017, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 12, Veritas, London, 71–89.
https://labirynt.com/en/uporczywe-upodobanie/

---

[4] The first stage of the research, presented in the article by E. Niestorowicz and M. Szubielska (2017), referred to works of classical art, taking into account the categories of ugliness that U. Eco considered in *On Ugliness*.