

Are there Bad Artworks? Some Views on the Negative Evaluations of Art

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Abstract

The general purpose of this paper is to investigate the character of negative evaluations of art through two basic questions, which are to be answered by a historic and a cognitive/structuralistic approach, retrospectively: Do negative evaluations of art have an absolute and permanent character and can negative evaluations block the cognitive process of the creation of aesthetic experience? The definitions of artworks both as value-carriers and as the means of renewing creative and philosophic thinking are used as the basis of an argumentation that reaches the conclusion that negative evaluations of artworks are only temporary as they may change with the passage of time. Moreover, cultivated perceivers of bad artworks may gain deep aesthetic experience because of their effort to justify their negative evaluations, in which they are reminded of the principles of genuine art, due to our structuralistic thinking process based on binary opposites.

Keywords: Art Evaluation, Structuralism, Binary Oppositions, Clement Greenberg

Introduction

By the term 'bad artworks' are meant the works that have not been capable of fulfilling their purpose, which has not, however, always been a stable one: according to traditional definitions from the Renaissance up to the 19th century it was mainly connected to the platonic triptych of the imitation of nature, flawless technique and the expression of beauty. This has, however, been changed in the 20th century with the cognitive turn in the perception of art: artworks are not anymore to be evaluated by the above criteria that ontologically combined the artwork with the artist, but by their potential to change individual and collective ways of thinking (Gemtou, 2008-9, 3). In all cases however, artworks are to be understood as carriers of values that traditionally were restricted to aesthetical terms but during the modernistic era have been changed by giving to art a more cognitive-philosophical purpose.

The proposed theory is that negative evaluations of artworks can only have a temporary and weak character, which is to be analyzed through both a historic and a cognitive approach. The historic approach is based on the traditional definition of art as a value carrier, which is the subject of the first part of the paper. In the second part, it will be shown that often artworks gained contradictory evaluations whether by different social and ideological groups or by different cultural eras. Due to the unstable and culture-dependent character of values, history has shown that negative evaluations may easily turn out to be positive ones according to their percipients' cultural framework.

In the third part, the proposed theory is to be strengthened through a structuralistic examination of the way we perceive and evaluate artworks. Based both on the modern definition of art as a means that creates philosophic thinking and on the 'binary oppositions' cognitive theory, it is to be argued that even the negative evaluated artworks are capable of fulfilling their aim. Beyond the fact that they lead us to creative thinking processes, they automatically remind us of genuine art and its superior values. The precondition for that is the existence of a cultivated perceiver willing to gain by his/her contact with art. This conclusion results from a structuralistic examination of Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde Art and Kitsch" (1939), as a representative text for the thinking process of a cultivated person trying to explain negative evaluations by making references to positive artistic values.

Artworks as value-carriers

Artworks consist of two parts, a material and an immaterial. To the material part belong both tactile means, such as the canvases and the colors in painting and the raw materials in sculpture, and the optic ones that are form and subject. Both the material and immaterial part of an artwork are immediately connected to its creator: he/she is the one who chooses a certain subject to depict, by using certain means and forms. This choice is however not independent from his/her era that largely defines it in accordance with the prevailing historical and cultural circumstances. Furthermore though the artist is absolutely influenced by the value status of his/her era, as he/she does not choose a subject matter in order to inform his/her audience about that, but in order to project values connected to it. Values have an eternal and universal character, but each era adjusts and perceives them according to its ideological components. Beauty e.g. will always be an absolute aesthetic value, but history has shown that it has taken different forms in different eras, expressed through two main trends in the arts (Rader, 1941, 324-332). Thus, classical eras (Greece 5th cen. B.C., Italian High Renaissance, French Classicism 18th cen.) created a kind of an archetypical beauty model that in painting was expressed through the basic principles of symmetry, harmony and balance. The visual result relied on linear painting and closed, static compositions, in which the places of the axes had a symmetrically organized and absolutely balanced character. On the contrary, eras immediately following the classical ones (Greece-Hellenism, Italian Mannerism, Baroque, Romanticism 19th) understood beauty not as an absolute value that could be perceived only through intuition, but as a part of the world that was to be realized mostly through our senses. Thus, painters created compositions with the purpose of stimulating the senses in order to perceive beauty. Practically this led to the creation of composition with intense movements, strong emotions and color contrasts. This kind of emotional and subjective beauty was expressed through the type of visual painting that gives a priority to color and light as the dominant components of the composition.

The immaterial part of an artwork is always a value-laden one, while its material part represents the entrance leading from everyday life to the world of values. Values also exist in our real world, but we often tend to overtake or even to forget them. At that point art takes over in order to remind us of the true and important meaning of life, as at least it has been formed in the framework of western civilization. Except for the aesthetic values that refer mainly to our senses, artworks are also carriers of moral values. There has been an extended conversation about the

role of aesthetic and moral values as ontological characteristics of art that led to two main philosophical theories, Moralism and Autonomism (Beardsley, 1981). According to the supporters of Moralism an artifact becomes an artwork because of its moral values that are also the main factor for their evaluation. On the other side the supporters of Autonomism claim that art is created just for its own sake that means that only aesthetical values define an artwork and allow its evaluation. There have been, though, milder arguments belonging to the field of a moderate Moralism on the one hand and of a moderate Autonomism on the other: the first ones (Caroll 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) argue that some representational artworks should also be evaluated both by ethical and aesthetical criteria, and the second ones (Anderson και Dean 1998) accept that there are cases that aesthetic experience can be the result even of the moral values included in the subject matter of the artwork.

Regardless of the weight given to their role as ontological and evaluative tools of artworks in comparison to aesthetical values, moral values play an important role in narrative paintings with subject matters connected to life, civilization and human history. Let us examine the example of Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* (1814, Museo del Prado, Madrid) (fig.1). It refers to an incident during the Peninsular War commemorating Spanish resistance to Napoleon's armies. In particular it is the depiction of an execution of Spanish rebels by Napoleon's French army. Although, however, the subject reflects a real incident, its moral values dominate over its informative character: when reality becomes art, facts express values. We are confronted with values such as patriotism and self-sacrifice for the common good and the protection of your compatriots. The hero of the composition is to be compared with Christ due to his open arms and the stigma on his right hand. And although he is nothing more than a simple worker, both his attitude and his expression have incredible grandeur that is even more strengthened by the light and the chiaroscuro.

The informative character prevails, though, in artworks connected with political and religious authorities aiming to transmit certain messages to their publics. The *Narmer's palette* (fig.2) e.g. was not created for aesthetical or moral aims but rather in order to propagandize to the ancient Egyptian people the great achievement of their king, who had united Upper and Lower Egypt into one kingdom. Its artist/s unconsciously included, though, dominant moral values of their culture, such as the absolute respect to the Pharaoh, who is depicted on a far larger scale than all other people in the relief, and the religious belief that the center of life is located in the place of the heart that was always frontally depicted, while the lower part of the human body as well the head were shown in profile as having no value at all. Those are cultural values that are unconsciously embedded in all artworks and can be used as informative sources by future interpreters.

Values referring more to cognition than to aesthetics dominated in the 20th century's art, in the framework of the conceptual movement. In this case though the purpose of the artist was not an informative one, but rather he/she used art as a means to motivate a kind of philosophical thinking mostly about the ontology and the aims of art. Modern artists largely turned the artistic praxis to philosophical matters and sought for artistic means to provide the new problematic that was strongly connected with the matter of art's self-identification. Thus, Duchamp exhibited in 1917 his famous *Fountain* (fig.3) not whether to stimulate aesthetic pleasure or to inform people about the form and the use of the urinal in the first half of the 20th century, but in order to

question the traditional definition of art as a carrier of aesthetic and moral values (Iversen, 2004, 47-48). Conceptual art has not aimed to increase our informative potential but to motivate us to reevaluate our traditional concepts.

When do we evaluate artworks as bad ones?

Up to this point it has been shown that values are the basic ontological characteristic of an artwork, with the cultural values to appear as stable and unchangeable (because of their direct connection to deeper cultural structures), and the aesthetical, moral and philosophical values as transformable according to the value-system of each interpretative community: the artist may intentionally include certain values in his/her creation that, however, will be probably perceived in a different manner by interpretative groups with different perceptions and ideologies.

In this part, some of the reasons that have led to negative evaluations of individual artworks, artistic movements or even whole cultural eras are to be examined in the framework of a historic approach: the purpose is to show that people evaluate the subject matter and the form of an artwork according to their aesthetic and moral value system. Aesthetic and moral values often appear as having an eternal and universal character, however their absolute meaning is to be re-identified according to the ideological background of their perceivers. Thus for example in the above analyzed subject of Goya's painting *The Third of May 1808* (fig.1) that has been glorified both by the Spanish people and their government, it is self-evident that it would have been discredited by Napoleon's followers.

There exist thousands of examples of artworks that have been rejected by their contemporary eras or societies and later gained important recognition. When Caravaggio, for example, handed over the commissioned painting of *St. Matthew and the Angel* (fig.4) to the church of St. Louis of the French in Rome, a scandal broke because of the saint's direct realistic appearance. In an era that praised absolute beauty, there was no place in any church for pictures showing sacred people as having baldness, wrinkles and worn clothes. The painting was returned to Caravaggio who had to paint a new one, according to the prevailing standards. The most representative example of a rejected artistic group have irrefutably been the Impressionists. Living in an era when the Academie des Beaux-Arts still pulled the strings in the French cultural scene, people were unready to accept the impressionistic short, thick strokes of the often applied impasto paint, nor their trivial subject matters. Knowing that a good painting must both look like an open window onto reality and depict historical subjects, religious themes and portraits, they rejected this innovative movement which, though, was mostly recognized in later eras. In the same manner Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (fig.3) (which today is to be evaluated as a landmark in the development of modern art) was rejected even by the progressive jury of the Salon des Independants, who couldn't tolerate that the *Fountain* was a trivial object with a hydraulic character that had not even been created by the artist (Short, 1980, 25).

In the same manner, entire cultural eras have been downgraded by other eras and their spiritual representatives. Classical eras evaluated former eras that had produced unbalanced, crowded and intense compositions as periods of cultural crisis: J.J.Winckelmann understood the Baroque era and its art in a negative manner, while Reynolds castigated Bernini for creating his

David biting his lips, as art –according to the classicistic-platonic theory – should express the ideal beauty that couldn't include grimaces or other details in the facial expression or even in the clothing of the depicted figures. According to the Classicists, art develops to the peak of the ideal beauty. As soon as a period has reached it, which means that artworks have been able to express in a perfect way all elements that create balanced and harmonious compositions, artists begin to exaggerate and thus to slip away from the main eternal and universal aim of art. This classicistic theory on the development of art has its origins in Petrarch's cyclical model for the development of culture: culture reached its peak in antiquity, then fell into a thousand-year crisis and was reborn in the mid fourteenth century (Ferne, 1995, 10 & Gemtou, 2013)

Despite the fact that classic art has always been connected with ontological beauty and thus glorified, there are cases that it has gained a negative character in the collective consciousness due to the ideological framework in which it belonged. The most eminent example is the art produced by the German Nazi regime. According to Goebbels, the Nazi minister of Propaganda since 1933, art criticism was not an aesthetic but much more a political matter (Dunlop, 1972, 236). In an interview in March 1937, he claimed that good artworks were those that included national socialist ideas. Thus modern art was declared to be not artistic and a great number of modern paintings were destroyed. The totalitarian regime could not accept the turn of the definition of modern art as a field of free and subjective expressions. Instead it claimed that artworks must be carriers of moral values that were identified with the main ethical principles of Nazi politics, such as the German family, the toil of labor and the military discipline. The ideal German soldier should have been handsome, healthy, strong, brave and heroic, and this was the way he should be depicted in art. Also architecture was created according to the Nazis' high standards as their buildings were characterized by durability, severity and absolute symmetry. Public buildings of this era are to be found in many places throughout Germany: they follow the classical style with an emphasis on the effect of greatness and grandeur. According to objective criteria, artworks and buildings are to be evaluated through the relation of their form and their subject/purpose, but collective consciousness tends to more subjective and spontaneous evaluations influenced by certain negative political circumstances. It is self-evident that people would evaluate in a negative manner artworks created in totalitarian regimes, because of the value system of their creators.

Finally, there have also been intellectuals, who evaluated certain developmental stages and their artworks as intrinsically bad according to their subject matter: Hegel (1835-8, 1975), the philosopher who first turned the traditional narrative on the development of art to a theoretical-metaphysical system, understood the dominance of non-religious or secular subjects in the Dutch painting of the 17th century as a crisis and furthermore as the end of art. Despite the fact that Hegel did not mean by that the end of the production of art but much more the end of its teleological development towards the self-identification of the Absolute Idea (Danto, 1986, 81-115 / Carroll, 1998, 17-29), he still believed that artworks that had been created after the period of Renaissance could just be carriers of low aesthetic and moral values.

A structuralistic approach on art evaluation

The above historical approach has shown that values in artworks gain a different reception according to the cultural era/community and its ideological and historical framework. Thus any negative evaluation of art has a relative, unstable and changeable character. Subsequently, the evaluation of artworks is to be examined in relation to the function of our perception through opposite concepts. The purpose is to show both that even if we reject an artwork as a bad one, at the same time we justify its role in creating thinking processes, and moreover that our negative evaluation is immediately connected in our minds with the positive values of superior genuine art.

The above claim is to be explained by the theory of binary oppositions originated as an important theory of meaning, showing how people understand concepts, properties and values. The one who put it together was the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure claiming that binary opposites were the means by which the units of language gained value or meaning (Saussure, 1959). Language was understood as a structural system with terms defined by a reciprocal determination to each other. We cannot conceive of 'good' if we do not understand 'evil', and we understand the condition of 'illness' through the condition of 'health', just to mention some examples. Moreover we always tend to give greater weight to the positive situations or properties, as 'good' and 'health', while there exist deeper levels of binaries helping to reinforce meaning (Fourie, 2001). So e.g. the concepts hero and villain are to be analyzed in secondary binaries as good/bad, handsome/ugly, liked/disliked, and so on.

The same process is valid when we try to understand the immaterial part of an artwork, which means when we evaluate it (as its immaterial side consists of values). Evaluation is the critical examination of the artistic values projected on the form and the subject of the artwork: if the form is the appropriate one to express the subject, there may emerge the suitable condition for the creation both of superior values and deep aesthetic experience.

The way that we understand values depends on our historical/cultural framework: every era has its own positive and negative artistic values by pointing out the first ones and by rejecting the second ones. Subsequently, it is to be shown that the rejection of the artworks is the final part of a mental process structured by the motive of binary opposites: bad artworks are to be understood as such by their comparison to the good ones. Precondition is though the existence of a cultivated recipient willing to gain by his/her contact to art.

This theory is to be supported through a structural analysis of Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant Garde and Kitsch", which was published in *Partisan Review* (1939). Although Greenberg revised later many of his recorded thoughts and arguments, the essay remains very appropriate for a structural examination in the framework of the binary oppositions' theory, as it shows the thinking process of an educated man in order to justify his negative evaluations. In particular, Greenberg argues for his contemporary avant-garde art in order to make it clear that his also contemporary kitsch art is a massive popular product of low value.

The first binary pair analyzed in this essay consists of the traditional type of society and Greenberg's contemporary society according to their developmental pattern, especially their final stages. A traditional society "becomes less and less able to justify the inevitability of its particular

forms, breaks up the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend in large part for communication with their audiences. It becomes difficult to assume anything. All the verities involved in religion, authority, tradition, style, are thrown into question, and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works". On the other side Greenberg's contemporary society has managed to overcome this last phase by creating the avant-garde culture. In order to make the concept of avant-garde clear, Greenberg contrasts it with the concept of the "motionless Alexandrianism", as he calls the academicism emerging at the last phase of a culture, characterized both by the absence of important issues in art and by the replacement of creativity by a showy virtuosity. During this phase art becomes the product of the mechanical reproduction and nothing new and inspired comes up. On the contrary, Greenberg's contemporary age - though being the last phase of the developmental pattern - follows different paths due to a new kind of political thinking produced by the bourgeois of the 1850s-1860s: they seemed to have realized that their social status was not "an eternal, natural condition of life, but simply the latest term in a succession of social orders". This way of thinking created the base for revolutionary tendencies in all intellectual fields determining the displacement of the intellectuals from the bourgeoisie to the bohémie.

The dipole bourgeoisie/bohémie is another important binary opposition of this essay. We understand and tend to evaluate positively the term "bohémie", as a new intellectual order of people with creative and innovative ideas, by contrasting it with the traditional bourgeoisie, where all larger issues had been decided by the old masters. Even the emigrants themselves "isolated the concept 'bourgeois' in order to define what they were not". The binary contrast between bourgeoisie/bohémie is further strengthened by sub-comparisons focusing on the revolutionary attitude of the bohemians in contrast to the organized structures both of the bourgeois' lives and the capitalistic markets.

Greenberg defines modern art as the effort to find a path, "along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence". Thus artists were driven to the expression of the absolute, which was a common language for all social orders and structures. Their aim was not to imitate reality but the artistic process itself through its archetypal structures: the artists focused on the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes and colors, which turned out to be their main source for inspiration.

After defining the avant-garde scene and the bohémie by contrasting them to Alexandrianism/academism and the bourgeois respectively, Greenberg turns to the second major subject of his essay: the Kitsch. He uses this German term to define the popular and commercial art and literature, as it was expressed through the cover pages of the magazines, the comics, the Hollywood movies etc. Kitsch is to be understood and evaluated as the opposite pole of the avant-garde art. Thus Greenberg creates a comparative process based on the axiomatic acceptance that the avant-garde art represents the positive laden pole of the certain binary opposition system and the kitsch the negative one. He explains kitsch art as the result of the urbanization, due to which peasants settled in the cities and changed their lifestyle. Their need for a culture fitting to their own consumption led to the creation of an ersatz culture. This kind of culture is once more to be understood through a comparison with the avant-garde culture: the second one is characterized as a genuine culture, while the first one produces a superficial art offering quick and easy satisfaction.

While Greenberg evaluates kitsch art in a negative manner using adjectives such as fake, deceptive and dangerous, he recognizes that it has been expanded worldwide at a very fast pace thereby creating a universal culture. In order to explain this phenomenon, Greenberg mentions an essay of Dwight Macdonald about Soviet Cinema, published in the *Partisan Review* (1938). The main issue of the article was the dominant role of kitsch art in the Soviet Union, which was studied through the clear preference of a Russian peasant for Repin (a leading exponent of Russian academic kitsch in painting)(fig.5) instead of Picasso (fig.6), even though his abstract style looks similar with Russian traditional styles. Greenberg creates binary opposite pairs in order to make clear the differences between the abstract avant-garde painting and the realistic kitsch one, showing the opposition between an illiterate (and without time for cultural cultivation due to hard working) peasant who tends over to Repin and an cultivated intellectual (as himself) who definitely prefers Picasso.

The peasant's contact with the realistic painting confronts him with unfamiliar artistic values, such as "the vividly recognizable, the miraculous and the sympathetic". The main privilege of realism is the identification of depiction and reality, which offers direct satisfaction without the need of the acceptance of conventions. Moreover, in Repin's work there is a dramatic tone throughout, by both intensifying the emotional experience of the observer and making Picasso's work look austere and barren. Thus the illiterate peasant feels absolutely satisfied by the realistic painting and rejects the abstract one, which demands more sensitivity and at least a second deeper look in order to offer aesthetic experience. This facility with which realistic kitsch art emotionally touches the masses has been exploited by all kind of dictators, while avant-garde art never has been used as a means for propaganda.

The following table represents the opposite binaries that define avant-garde art and kitsch according Greenberg's essay:

Avant-Garde Art	Kitsch Art
Product of a genuine culture	Product of an ersatz culture
Handicrafts	Mechanical producible works
Abstract/absolute style	Realistic style
Carrier of values strictly connected to art and artistic problems	Carrier of more and diverse values
Dominance of the Form	"Tells a story"
Austere, barren impression	A vividly recognizable, miraculous and sympathetic impression
Aesthetic experience as a result of the reflection upon the immediate impression left by the plastic values	Immediate aesthetic experience by the realistic subject matter
Aesthetic experience as an arduous process	Aesthetic experience without any effort
Paints cause, imitates the artistic process	Paints effect, imitates reality
Cannot be used as a means for propaganda	Pliable, keeps a dictator closer with the soul of the people

The first column (on avant-garde art) includes principles that presuppose a cultivated public, while these in the second column (on kitsch art) concern more illiterate people. The fact

though that the above table is the result of the thinking process of an educated observer, shows that the cultivated public has much more to gain by its contact with art than just an immediate aesthetic experience. While our peasant simply showed a preference for the realistic artwork, Greenberg tried to understand and to explain his tendency towards the abstract work, by creating binary opposition. He didn't just reject kitsch as a bad kind of expression, but argued against it by making systematic references to its opposite, namely avant-garde art.

Conclusion: Negative evaluations have a temporary and weak character

A good artwork has to efficiently serve its aims that are both to provide values and to create philosophic and cognitive thinking. The aesthetic experience resulting just by a spontaneous eye contact with the subject and the form of the work cannot but be a very superficial one (Gemtou, 2010). As it has been shown in the third part of the paper, the intensity of the gained experience depends on the observer and her/his need to deeply understand artistic values: Greenberg didn't just reject kitsch but tried to understand why he was doing so. His essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" reflects his thinking process that is based on binary oppositions defining both artistic styles. This process is at the same time the proof for the temporary and weak character of negative evaluations of artworks, due to their capacity of creating thinking that immediately leads to their opposite good artworks and its values. Bad art is strictly connected to good art and vice versa: the one cannot exist without the other, with the good one, though, dominating the bad one. Thus, we can only speak about bad perceivers, who are not willing (due to diverse reasons) to understand their spontaneous choices. History has, moreover, shown that evaluations of art are not stable, as the rejected artwork of one era has gained superior appreciation in other epochs. Therefore, every time we reject an artwork as a bad, we should appreciate both its existence and negative values, as they immediately refer to its absence and the positive values of superior art. It depends on us to find them through philosophical and creative thinking.

List of Plates



Figure: 1. The Third of May 1808, Francisco Goya, 1814, Oil on Canvas, 268 cm × 347 cm (106 in × 137 in), Museo del Prado, Madrid. Image Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Third_of_May_1808



Figure:2. Narmer Palette, c.3200-3000 B.C., Siltstone, c. 64 cm x 42 cm, Egyptian Museum, Cairo
Image Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narmer_Palette



Figure: 3. Fountain, Marcel Duchamp, 1917. Image Source: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fountain-by-Duchamp>



Figure: 4. St. Matthew and the Angel, Caravaggio, 1602, Oil on Canvas, 295 cm × 195 cm (116 in × 77 in), destroyed. Image Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Matthew_and_the_Angel



Figure: 5. Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks to Sultan Mehmed IV of the Ottoman Empire, Ilya Repin, 1880-1891, Oil on Canvas, 203 cm × 358 cm (80 in × 141 in), State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg. Image Source: <file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/Greenberg%20%20Avant-Garde%20and%20Kitsch.htm>



Figure: 6. Woman with a Fan, Pablo Picasso, 1907, Oil on Canvas, 152 x 101 cm, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia. Image Source: <file:///C:/Users/user/Desktop/Greenberg%20%20Avant-Garde%20and%20Kitsch.htm>

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