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ARTS JOURNALISM 2.0: MEDIA AND ARTS-LITERACY

Abstract:

If media reflect and create the reality we believe to be living, visual arts no longer seem to be part of this reality. Role, form and content of texts interpreting, evaluating and describing arts are unclear and vaguely defined. So are the values, audiences, platforms and authors that have changed significantly over the last couple decades. The contemporary art is quite difficult, no longer visually "pleasant" (often not visual at all), missing most of the attributes we tend to connect it with: it is un-aesthetic, un-decorative, un-plastic, un-material, un-pictorial, un-displayed, un-documented, no longer using the visual means or media... Given the evolution of visual arts, how has arts-writing reflected the changes its subject has been going through? Is reading about art helping us read art? Are media enabling audiences to notice visual arts or are "pictures" no longer in the picture? Should we re-define the arts journalism / arts criticism or does it still function the way it is supposed to? And if not, who is to be blamed? How do we keep our arts sensitivity and arts literacy if arts reflection is no longer part of the media content and even if it is, its quality is limiting its impact?

The Czech arts and arts writing have been seemingly undergoing particular changes as part of the country's politics and society transformation after the 1989. Comparing the situation of arts journalism in Czech Republic and other countries, surprisingly they all match quite similar pattern. Is this just a phase or is this the arts journalism 2.0?

Keywords:

arts journalism, arts literacy, media, arts reflection, visual arts, arts writing, contemporary art

Introduction

Role, form and content of texts interpreting, evaluating and describing arts are getting unclear and vague as well as the values, audiences, platforms and authors of arts reflection. The contemporary visual art is un-aesthetic, un-decorative, un-plastic, un-material, un-pictorial, un-displayed, un-documented and if often avoids the visual means or media. This “de-aestheticization, dematerialization and ephemeralization” (Villard, 2011, p.37), “withdrawal of visual pleasure” (Kwon, 1997, p.91), and shift towards “aesthetics of meaning” (Danto, 1997) is part of conceptual approach to visual art (Bourriaud, 2004; Havránek & Mančuška, 2004; Potts, 2008; Vásquez Rocca, 2013) but is no dramatic turning point considering the stages visual arts have gone through in just the second half of 20th century (land-art, actionism, body art etc.). Still in the crucial 1960s f.e. the arts writing quality has not changed fundamentally, so why has it changed so much recently?¹ Is arts-writing transformation really representative of the changes its subject has been going through? Or is it actually rather representative of the media development? Does the contemporary arts journalism still provide contemporary arts understanding?

I will try to answer the question whether or not the arts journalism needs to be re-defined and whether or not is the current state of arts writing putting at stake our visual arts literacy. I will describe the changes the Czech arts writing has gone through in last two decades and compare the findings with the situation of arts journalism in other countries as described by local critics and theoreticians.

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis have been suggested at the beginning of the research of Czech 1990s arts journalism:

Asynchronicity

As arts are society-conditioned and always reflecting particular socio-political context, their development is by certain level always distinctive and therefore can be considered characteristic of particular situation of particular place and time. Yet the arts have proved to often foreshadow the changes the society is about to experience. Would this asynchronicity therefore also be symptomatic for arts reflection of 1990s?

Distinctiveness

However asynchronous arts are also characteristic of particular circumstances that condition the style and content of every piece. Contemporary arts' intention is not to reflect the society but to comment and potentially also co-form it (Adorno, 2009; Bourriaud, 1998 and 2004; Groys, 2008; Struken & Cartwright, 2009).² The Czech society has gone through major transformation, transitioning from communist party driven to trade driven system. Both arts and arts writing have been reflecting the transition, therefore the topics and development of both arts and arts journalism in the

¹ „Contextuality is one of the main values of contemporary art and art criticism as well as orientation towards culture, interdisciplinary take, focus on ‘otherness’, and self-awareness combined with critique of the approach’s authority which are characteristic for art production and criticism especially since the 1990s.” (Foster, Krauss, et al., 2011, p.669).

² “Traditional art worked on the level of form. Contemporary art works on the level of context, framework, background, or of a new theoretical interpretation.” (Groys, 2008, p.40).

last two decades may differ from topics and development of arts and arts writing in other parts of world.

Authorship

It is not merely arts that the arts-reflection texts are symptomatic of. Language, form, topics and authors selection and transformation characterize rather the media strategies and functioning (comprised of financial matters, target audience or editorial policy regarding the culture section). The topics selection, or - in case of visual arts specialized magazines - the linkage to particular artists, approaches or galleries, is relates mainly to art scene development. Based on that, several periods can be characterized for the after-1989 decades regarding the mentioned topics and contributors selection, as well as inclinations toward certain forms of arts processing but also particular phenomena such as tendency toward entertainment, celebrityization of artists, trade focused thematization of arts and others. In case of daily press, these tendencies can correlate or differ in connection to the editorial board and newsroom. Arts reflection in press, its quality, orientation and language standards change with the authors of arts critical/journalistic texts - besides the personal interests and connections to particular artists or approaches, it is mainly the media run (and the selection of editors and contributors in particular), that determines the arts reflection in contemporary media.

These and other assumptions put together, the general hypothesis of the research has been stated following: In Czech Republic *arts criticism has turned into arts journalism* in 1990s.

Media in charge: general conclusions about arts journalism

Even though research-focused and educational institutions and fields may be made responsible for arts literacy, these are all highly selective, creating their own inclusion and interpretation systems, co-forming and confirming the social and political stereotypes (Holly & Smith, 2009) while lacking wider context (Guilbaut, 2009). For that reason, less self-involved and specialized platforms are needed and arts also need to be subject of media coverage – and not just the specialized platforms, as the arts magazines do not provide the frame of the socio-political context that is both source and subject of the contemporary arts. The art piece can be mostly interpreted only based on knowledge of this context that the specialized periodicals leave out given their specialization. Also as is the broad public, not experts, these are supposed to address and educate.

The venues available for criticism today are extremely limited and impose restrictions on what may be discussed. Art magazines, operating as trade journals and dependent on gallery advertising for income, tend to focus on reviews of artists or exhibitions that are in the public eye, while art coverage in general interest publications has a strong bias toward celebrity and entertainment. Academic journals, read by few, often unreadable, and operating largely as tenure generators, are more like private clubs than forums for genuine debate and discussion. (Heartney, 2006, p.104).

Contextualize a work – to place it in its historical context, both artistically and more broadly – exactly so that the audience can see how the artist under discussion was addressing a problem or question the issue from within his own circumstances, which might not otherwise be obvious to contemporary readers, listeners and/or viewers. Assisting audiences in apprehending and

understanding what is valuable in the works at hand is the primary function of the critic and (her) critical work. (Carroll, 2009, p.45).

For the same reason, the responsibility cannot be transferred on the on-line media. Content of on-line media very much copies the content of printed press. The on-line sources (databases, typically existing for purposes of grants, research and academic activities;³ self-presentation webs of artists and galleries or art museums and other art institutions webs; and self-realization, blog-like contents driven by personal interest and motivation of groups or individuals) are mostly initiated and run by the “enthusiasm” of the volunteering authors or as their “student activity”.⁴ Also major content quality gaps, big fragmentation, difficult selection, and limited ability to reach audiences or draw attention to what is happening limit the value and potential benefits of the on-line arts writing (McQuail, 2014, int.).

The blogosphere resembles nothing so much as the Wild West, full of unregulated and unregulatable voices. Thus far, its sheer magnitude and chaos works against its status as a place for meaningful public debate. (...) Separating the valuable from the useless can be a fulltime task. (Heartney, 2006, p.105).

Taking all said above into consideration, what is the arts journalism quality in and outside the Czech Republic? The general statements are supported by quotes of Czech theoreticians and journalists (who have mostly changed sides a couple of times throughout their career, working both as outsider experts on arts history/theory and as editorial board members and journalists), who have been interviewed as part of the research.⁵

The *distinctiveness hypothesis* has been seriously challenged by comparing the Czech arts journalism research to findings of studies analyzing the cultural/arts press in Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Norway, Denmark, Finland and United Kingdom. The conclusions of these studies are all quite similar despite the variations in context and research interests of their authors.⁶ Most of them keep using the term “crisis” and following conclusions may be generalized:

Interviews and previews have replaced reviews. The arts journalism term is therefore more appropriate than “arts criticism”. Also stories, profiles and obituaries make up the majority of the arts coverage and half of the arts content is made of listings. Arts texts are mostly written by freelancers and major portion of the content is pulled off the wire service with no further editing. These all fit the Czech arts journalism, in fact often, the Czech theoreticians and journalists consider them to be the Czech specifics:

³ Artlist.cz, Abart.cz, Vvp.avu.cz, www.proculture.cz (official website of Czech Ministry of Culture), Artalk.cz, Czechdesign.com, <http://jlbjlt.net/> vs. <http://rhizome.org/>, <http://www.eai.org/index.htm>.

⁴ Based on the replies of Czech arts related webs, on-line magazines and databases (Sládková, 2013).

⁵ Thirty experts from across the field have been addressed, two thirds of them have been interviewed (Marek Pokorný, Tomáš Pospiszl, Karel Císař, Lenka Lindaurová, Milena Slavická, Jiří Ptáček, Josef Chuchma, Jan Vitvar, Jan Skřivánek, Magdalena Čechlovská, Lenka Dolanová, Ivan Mečl, Palo Fabuš, David Kořínek, Petr Vaňous, Jan Rous, Jiří Šetlík, Vít Havránek). The selection was to be representative of different generations, fields of expertise (aesthetics, arts history, pedagogy, media studies, philosophy etc.), approaches (editors, publishers, journalists, free-lance contributors, curators, theoreticians), practice and relationship to visual arts.

⁶ Hovden & Knapskog (2008), Knapskog & Larsen (2008), Lund (2005), Hellman & Jaakkola (2011), Jaakkola (2012) (2014), Kristensen & From (2010), Kristensen (2009), Szantó, Lévy & Tyndall (2004), Janeway & Szántó (2003), Szántó (2002), Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen (2007), Reus, Schneider & Schonbach (1995), Canclini (2003), Golin & Cardoso (2009), Marques de Mello & Moreira (2009), Wasserman (2004).

The arts are covered by people with no experience because they are more affordable than the experienced ones. This situation is not exclusively Czech, even though there are exceptions and in few countries such as Great Britain, where visual arts make part of public discourse (Císař, 2009, int.).

The western standard of a visual arts expert is no standard in Czech press (Vitvar, 2009, int.).

The western dailies don't lack arts section and it is an honor to write for it. In Czech Republic, everyone feels comfortable to review an exhibition and write on visual arts even without the proper education or experience. (Lindaurová, 2009, int.).

The editorial work in dailies is unfortunately limited to few journalists covering everything in very quick, folksy, accessible way which causes the leveling, simplification and popularization of all contents. (...) Arts are evaluated by people who do not and simply cannot know the context and continuity. (Vaňous, 2009, int.).

The arts reflection inclines to combining the wire service texts with sort of impression-ism. The range of formats has been reduced to comments, review-like notes and interviews. All the formats however lack any concept (Chuchma, 2009, int.).

Still, interviews are seen as the most beneficial format (Lindaurová, Vitvar), unless very short and survey-like (Vaňous). The interviewed journalists/theoreticians also agree that mere abstracts of wire service (Císař, 2009, int.; Lindaurová, 2009, int.) or wire service texts accompanied by "percentage evaluation" of the exhibition (Vitvar, 2009, int.) are presented as reviews. The genres of the Czech arts journalism are report, interview and profile (Císař, 2009, int.).

Arts coverage makes up the smallest portion in case of general interest or cultural magazines, weekly periodicals or dailies.⁷ Marketing departments rationalize the elimination of certain categories of content by citing a lack of demand from readers. The hierarchy of visual art, literature, drama, dance, music and film varies but film and literature typically occupy the highest positions based on which they are also considered the most interesting – unlike the elite or specialized-audience genres like dance, visual arts and drama.⁸ In the Czech Republic, this is viewed as a traditional setting:

Visual arts have had a weaker position in Czech society since the 19th century (when literature and drama established their prominent position), the position of arts has never been very strong and the media co-create and preserve this state. Also the visual arts experts are not interested in the public debate (Pokorný, 2013, int.).⁹

Obviously this conclusion is valid also in the Czech Republic, despite the fact that here, as well as other places, it does not quite correspond with actual society interests: the number of art galleries is growing significantly, so are the numbers of gallery visits,¹⁰

⁷ Exceptions are Denmark and Mexico (Kristensen, 2009; Canclini, 2003, p.45).

⁸ Janeway & Szántó (2003, p.285). They slightly differ country to country.

⁹ The limited reach and involvement in public debate is far more general problem and has its historical context of course, which, still, is used as an excuse for no development or improvement in this matter.

¹⁰ There are 9 million Czechs over 15. There are 60-90 visual-art focused websites, almost 100 visual-art focused institutions and organizations, over 30 visual-art focused publishing houses, and about 50 periodicals, general and specialized, regional and nation-wide (Culture.net, 2013).

visual-art focused institutions, private, state or city-run.¹¹ The decline of media coverage does however correspond with the government investments in arts and culture.¹²

Arts out of the picture: other conclusions based on Czech arts journalism after 1989

The *authorship hypothesis* has proved valid. The character of the text is in absolute majority dependent on its author no matter the platform it's been published in. Not just the structure, comprehensiveness, argumentation or interpretation quality, but also the language, style, topic selection and form of the text. Therefore the arts reflection evaluation can be categorized based on arts critics, arts journalists and contributing theoreticians and historians. Also the different magazines arts writing can be described and judged based on the editorial cooperation and contributors' selection.

Of course the media responsibility is not made merely of choosing the contributing authors. The other significant factor determining the quality of arts reflection is "filtering of audience interest topics", as the arts criticism in dailies and other general interest media can be made simply through the topics selection (Pokorný, 2009, int.).

If judged based on topics selection, most of press including the specialized periodicals (Artist Magazine, Flash Art Magazine, some scholarly periodicals and couple blogs excluded), also the *hypothesis on arts criticism turning into arts journalism* can be considered valid. Unlike expected, the transformation has not happened as much in the level of content, language and style of the articles, as it has happened in the coverage orientation. The hypothesis is to be specified though: Rather than arts criticism turning into arts journalism, *the arts journalistic contents have been replacing the arts critical contents in the press arts coverage*.

In weekly and monthly periodicals – culture and society magazines, the character of arts texts has not changed significantly. Also the frequency of the visual arts topics in press has not varied much. The range of arts magazines and specialized periodicals and anthologies has changed and the variety of 1990s selection has decreased significantly with the new millennium. Generally, major changes are noticeable particularly in dailies, where quality of both content and form of arts reflection has declined distinctively.

The *asynchronicity hypothesis* has been supported by both research and opinions of interviewed experts. The art criticism has not changed with arts transformation. The two

¹¹ In 1996 The Art Newspaper made the comparison for the first time. In 2011 400 institutions from all over the world and approx. 1500 exhibitions data was taken in comparison. (Lomová, 2012).

The Rembrandt exhibition had 34 thousand visitors total, 372/day, high numbers had also Slavic Epic of Alfons Mucha in the National Gallery – 320 visitors/day (Lomová, 2013) and contemporary Czech artist Kristof Kintera in Prague City Gallery and contemporary British painting (Beyond Reality) in Rudolfinum Gallery. Also the presentations of the applied arts and design tend to have numbers higher than average.

¹² „Of the hundred percent designated to culture by the city of Prague, visual arts got 6 per cent, today, after some strong pressure, it has increased to 13-16%, which actually corresponds perfectly with the space the visual arts cover in daily press and magazines.“ (Císař, 2009, int.).

The culture and art expenses of the Ministry of Culture have been getting smaller since 2007, in 2012 it has been approx. 335 mil. CZK which is approx. 13,4 mil. EUR but only 40% of the expected grants and investments have been fulfilled (Zpráva o státní podpoře umění, 2011). Arts investments have been approx. 10.6% and exhibition activities 3,8%. (ARIS database).

are understood as two independent changes. Understanding the arts aspiration to be a transforming component of society does of course put also the arts reflection into a far more important position, than the one press has been mediating in last decades. All the interviewed of course agree that media must form and educate the readers, mass media and dailies included. Given that, they cannot leave the arts out of the picture.

The most important level of arts inclusion and education is therefore the selection of visual arts topics that the press presents, no matter how good or bad the very writing is. The visual arts need to be part of the reality the media are reflecting and co-creating and it needs to be a range of the visual arts approaches as wide as possible. The criticism can be achieved simply by orientating the readers in the arts field (Pokorný, 2009, int.). In the contemporary over-production, selection is evaluation.

Art criticism is never objective or un-biased. It always is a matter of choice, opinion or program as well as consistent context analysis. (...) If we translate Popper's falsification concept into criticism practice coarsely, the critic's job is not to be unerring. Critic's job is to state a strong argumentation based opinion on a particular matter. His or her willingness to error must be huge. This willingness is the foundation of any criticism whatsoever. Without openness to error there is no chance of truth. Injustice is part of criticism, of any value assertion or examination. Only time shows which opinions were truth and which false. We all make mistakes. The fear of being mistaken or injustice is symptomatic of our time. Of course it is way easier to just describe anything in an entertaining way without expressing an opinion. (Pokorný, 2009, int.).

Few other opinions describe the quality of the contemporary Czech arts journalism. The criticism of the Czech press is not limited exclusively to the arts field. Actually the criticism of arts journalism goes as far as making it responsible for quality of exhibitions run and art market, as well as language simplification (Lindaurová, Vaňous, Chuchma, Vitvar and others):

The daily press needs wider variety of formats, which helps to enrich the spoken language and updates the critical apparatus. Where else than in daily press, different forms of expressions should be used, such as polemic, column, essay etc. Not just when covering the visual arts, but art in general. (...) Arts writing must get interdisciplinary since visual art is interdisciplinary, the genres and forms mix and evolve, and most of the formats are heterogeneous today. (Vaňous, 2009, int.)

Particular visual arts language cannot and should not be eliminated. Articles on music or science use terminology all the time and no-one seems to mind that. People don't know what a "happening" is because they never come across the term and it is the media that can be blamed for that. Editors do not bother to get the terminology right and they also underestimate the readers, suspecting that they would not know or understand the more specialized language. It should actually bother the very readers that this is how uninformed and illiterate the media expect them to be. If the readers are educated, they should not only mind such media approach but also provide feedback, which may or may not actually change the media content (Ptáček, 2009, int.).

The major problem of the Czech press is the constant underestimating of readers' intelligence. If we compare the Czech arts articles with articles published in Germany, France, UK or Italy, where the general public is in fact way less arts-learned by the compulsory education system, it is a striking difference. The articles published in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* would by no chance be published by even highly specialized arts magazine in the Czech Republic (Pokorný, 2009, int.).

Sports of economics surprisingly do not suffer of terminology simplification the way arts do. Culture is often reduced to entertainment by the media which is why terms and particular language are seen as an obstacle to its entertaining potential (Chuchma, 2009, int.).

If media informed more about visual arts, the exhibitions would have higher attendance, which would lead to better financing and turnout potential, which could also lead to bigger media coverage and higher demands of the arts journalism (Císař, 2009, int.).

Conclusion

With media, given how major part they play in contemporary information buried society, it is unfortunately common to come to vicious circle of financing, informing, consumption, production and ratings, arts notwithstanding. As trivial and exaggerated at the same time as it may seem, the message of the contemporary Czech arts criticism remains quite simple: including the specialized topics is the major task media have to undertake. No matter if visual arts are considered general interest or difficult and specialized, they must be part of the picture the media provide, even if we consider this picture inaccurate, manipulated, or whatever other adjective is on your list. The lack of reflection does not deform the arts or arts literacy as much as it deforms the literacy itself.

Still the tendency towards entertainment and popularization of all contents has had some divergence periods and for the last decade mostly magazines and occasionally also weekend dailies' supplements have paid more attention to visual arts and there have been some interesting arts texts published. Unfortunately the contents of all dailies are getting quite uniformed and so is the way in which arts get covered. Based on comparison with foreign press, there seems to be one matter that could break the offer-demand circle of mass media. If merely one daily newspaper was to consider itself too exclusive to exclude the (highly specialized/sole interest) arts topics, it would not necessarily influence the quality of arts writing in other dailies, but at least set the example – basically if we just had one local newspaper to be mentioned together with Guardian, New York Times or Neue Zürcher Zeitung when speaking of quality arts journalism... To make it obvious, that arts are worth covering. Not financially, obviously, but as the public service that journalism is meant to keep fulfilling. Even if it is not the standard, we must know, that it should be.

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