

Aesthetic versus sociological value now and then

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Section: Value changes between generations – myth, reality or...

Abstract:

The study deals with two main aspects of cultural experience. In the first place, it explores the value changes between generations using a method of analysis and interpretation of fiction texts written by two generations of writers, and a sociological research among young and middle-aged adults concerning the meaning of the term 'value'. This approach allows us to perceive value from different points of view and while the first part is mainly focused on value in its aesthetic meaning, the second part discusses value from a sociological point of view. In the second place, the study concerns the relationship between fiction narratives and endorsement of multiculturalism, thus connecting literature and real life together. It seems to be highly probable that especially fiction literature has a positive effect on cross-cultural competence in the meaning that reading of fiction explains a lot about the author's background, his or her cultural heritage and the ability to communicate it to a reader. This kind of communication is especially important and it means enrichment for both – the reader and the writer – when the subject matter of the process of the reading is to learn about different cultures and backgrounds, i.e. when we speak about knowledge migration and value exchange. In today's Europe we can observe crossing the geographical borders, and an effort to cross the cultural and mental ones. A successful cross-cultural approach needs a great deal of education and communication. Education (usually understood as factual information) is generally used to eliminate and prevent negative effects of xenophobia, racism and many other types of conflicts between groups of people. Existing work in this field advocates mentioned idea, but they do not stress the emotional side of the problem enough. Education, beyond question, holds a very important role in supporting multiculturalism, and fighting discrimination; on the other hand it very often lacks the emotional aspect which can be found in fiction. Literature combines both informative and aesthetic functions and thus explains the cultural background of its author and his or her values.

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*Values have this "unpleasant" feature
– although they do not exist in material sense,
they are still valid.*
OLIVER BAKOŠ

Recently it has become increasingly important to understand the psychological impact of multiculturalism on human behaviour and on the character of societies. Different cultural identities and cultural diversity are becoming integral part of modern society of European Union (EU). The EU continues to loosen its internal borders and migration of people has become relatively easy and desired, which has resulted into a need to solve problems connected with diversity of cultures, religions, political attitudes and opinions for purpose of protecting human rights and support antidiscrimination. It is especially important to concern this issue as we can discuss numerous war conflicts that originated in dominance of one group over another one. Conflicts are almost always sustained by emotions (anger, hate, fear etc.) and from psychological point of view they almost always result in win-lose situation or lose-lose situation. Psychological approach to conflict usually tries to solve any situation with win-

win result, but this can only be achieved by proper communication and openness to a compromise. Antidiscrimination practice is thus very important aspect of informing people that democratic society can only function when the freedoms and rights of all its members are protected and when the politics is open to maintain these processes. Rational or logic analysis of the problem is, however, usually not sufficient. People create their opinions on emotional basis, with an impact of their surroundings and influence of public opinion (today formed mainly by mass media). Useful instrument of this kind of emotional influence in favour of multiculturalism and thus crossing the borders that stop openness and positive attitude towards 'otherness', could be achieved by increasing emotional understanding – via fiction narrative literature.

The situation after 1989 has brought a completely new range to life in former Czechoslovakia and thus also to Slovak literature and its system of values. The refusal of totalitarianism, free choice and openness have changed its face and we can now speak about plurality in literature – both in themes and forms. It seems that the plurality (commonly connected with post-modern situation) can have both positive and negative outcomes. Positive aspects are found in possibility of writers to chose what they want to do in their text and in Slovak literature we can observe much broader use of topics and methods of writing when comparing the situation after 1989 (Velvet revolution) and period 1948 – 1989 when the only officially accepted method of writing was agreed to be the *socialist realism*. This strictly reduced writers' own originality and caused formation of many texts of poor quality – both in their content, which was usually narrowed to optimistic description of future, importance and great admiration of work and adoration of the Soviet Big Brother, and in the form as well, because it preferred "builder" prose and quite simple poetry with obvious panegyric features.

Paradoxically, there was also something good about the situation. Many authors who did not want to adapt to this "artificial" artistic situation were forced to find ways of pursuing their art. They either emigrated, stopped writing, or wrote in a way that was not really easy to understand or used themes nobody could accused of being "experimental"¹. These authors were a generation of clear literary talent and managed to give Slovak literature some truly unique and high quality books. The theory of opposition and a protest as a means of productivity and creativity was described by a literary theorist Oskár Čepan and it seems that the period 1948 – 1989 in Slovak literature has proved its validity.

On the other hand, plurality of options brings freedom and, of course, responsibility for any particular choice. For some authors it can be a very positive situation allowing them create freely, for others it can be the opposite – difficult situation where decision is a hard struggle. When thinking about negative aspects of plurality, many can also lose their reason for choosing, or are unable to chose or we can feel their unwillingness to take responsibility for a particular choice. Too many choices in terms of poetics and noetics usually cause fragmentation in the rows of both authors and readers of fiction texts. According to Suzi Gablik plurality also means that the borders between what is accepted as art and what is not, simply do not exist, that plurality destroys unanimity of narrative history which made art easy to understand; and plurality negates all norms, and forces artists to choose among many various alternatives. (Gablik, 1995) This understanding of plurality within post-modern era is quite negative. On the other hand it does not give credits to those who are able and willing to cope with pluralism and responsibility and who can actually multiply the positive effects of it. Another way to understand plurality is accepting the opinion that it is an acknowledgement according to which no system of values is set over another one. It means that there are many value and opinion systems which coexist and it is one's freedom to choose from them and his

¹ "Experimental prose" was a discredited term for prose which did not follow the official socrealistic method of writing.

or her obligation to be responsible for the choice. Post-modernism, and the way Slovak writers accept and use it, origins in plural openness and it does not mean loosing or negating value system; it means that value or moral systems are changed and multiplied, but sometimes also fragmented.

Slovak literature after 1989 was expected to bring all the positive aspects of freedom and post-modern plurality, especially in creativity and diversity of literary artefacts, in themes and forms, and it seems it have brought more disappointment. Young generation of writers has faced exactly the same problems as Suzi Gablik had described. Too many options have brought a problem with deciding, and the true aesthetic value has been quite difficult to develop. When comparing older generation of authors who became writing in 1960s and 1970s and still continue to write, and those who only appeared in the time of freedom, we can state that higher tendency to write quality fiction – both aesthetically and in terms of value in its meaning – is to be assign to the older generation. It is, however, necessary to remember that this is just a tendency and when we take into consideration authors who wrote according to official method of writing in socialism, or, on the other hand those from young generation of writers who were able to use plurality and freedom as their asset and thus write quality literature, our thinking is relative, and we can only speak about tendency. The explanation for this tendency can be found also in the tradition or cultural background the older generation came from and the state cultural policy, which was pursued then. More liberal 1960s opened the way for translations of even Western literature² and made space for continuation in literary approaches that were developing in Slovak literature before the Second World War (existentialisms, avant-gardes, nouveau roman, post-modern tendencies etc.).

In the following we will try to briefly outline the themes and forms of writing of both generations of writers, taking into consideration the topic of values as they are worked with in literary artefacts. Before we do that, there is another aspect which influences aesthetical value of literature today and which is connected with post-modern era. It is a consumer society that has also something to do with the way authors have created their art and how readers have perceived it while both groups strongly influence each other. If a reader prefers popular literature, soap operas and kitsch, it is quite probable that writers are going to accommodate to that, and the other way round – the style and content certain author gives to his or her books is to some extent going to influence taste of the readers.

When speaking about aesthetic values it is necessary to state that an aesthetic value of literary artefact should be understood as both formal and thematical perfection. Literary text is an immensely complicated and structured artefact and it is impossible to comprehend it fully. One of the reasons is that a text can have various meanings according to the reader and his or her context (or Eco's *encyclopaedia*). Also when we deal with literary approaches to narrative texts we can find out that a work of art can be seen as open (Eco, Barthes), closed (Lévi-Strauss), sometimes its author is taken into consideration, sometimes he or she is „killed“ (Foucault). Although we do not think primarily sociologically we understand that contemporary literature is determined by the market and mass media mechanisms and thus it can be perceived as a product that can be sold and bought. This consumer focused society influences not only artistic values, but also values in general. The fact that we live in a post-modern era, which according to Frederic Jameson is connected with late capitalism and prefers consuming goods to their production, influences the meaning art has as well.

² As an example there can serve the translations of works by Austrian author Ingeborg Bachmann, who was translated into Slovak language in 1960s and then only in 1980s and depict woman as bearers of traditional order: “Die Frauen sind Trägerinnen der herkömmlichen Ordnung. Sie sind sich nicht bewusst, dass sie nur Produkte der Zeit sind.” (Höhn, 2008). Female literature and themes of emancipation of women started to be dealt with mostly only after 1989 when various feminist organizations were established.

To consume art is something quite natural today, because there is so much of it. In literature, for example, readers have at least that many chances to choose as writers have when they are creating the text. The problem is not in this plurality (applied both when writing and when choosing what to read), but the situation in which the borders between product price and aesthetic price are simply cancelled. Thus successful is the author, who is able to sell effectively and understand the principles of marketing. Aesthetic value is having less and less importance, because society is set to entertainment – and majority of people chooses what is easy to find and consume. When we stop thinking about literature as a unique original artefact that is created by an individual, we will soon have problems to distinguish artistic value from its opposite. Thus art will be a product, only one copy of many and having quite low value in terms of money.

The two generations of Slovak writers we deal with can be simply divided into:

1. *older generation* of writers, who started to publish in 1960s and 1970s (we are not taking into consideration those, who agreed to unnatural and utilitarian method of writing – *socialist realism*),
2. *younger generation* of writers, who started to publish their books after 1989, and only experienced political and cultural freedom with its plurality of possibilities and chaos in value system/systems and identity (clear genre of popular literature is not taken into consideration in this paper).

Both generations have specific features, but of course, when speaking about them we will need to apply generalisation. In reality every writer is a unique personality and their works differ to a great extent. There are, however, tendencies which show that plurality can cause “problems” with aesthetics and in contemporary Slovak literature we detect certain hesitation in finding the „right“ themes and forms within the work of some members of young generation and also clear reflection of changes in society. On the other hand, older generation which had to deal with political oppression, managed to develop their art and have continued to write quality books even after 1989 and also reflect society changes – but differently.

First of all it is necessary to speak separately about themes both generations pursued and then to mention methods or forms they used. Since the space for detailed analysis and comparison of older and younger generations is limited, we are going to set several examples to prove, that thematically and axiologically there are considerable differences between the two groups. However, there are always exceptions to this „rule“.

In contemporary literature written by writers who started to publish firstly after 1989 we can detect higher tendency to open taboo themes, and to shock the reader. Also, it is quite obvious that money, drugs, sex and crime is more often the main target of these younger writers, while they often try to display society in various perspectives with an accelerated tempo of life, shallowness, denial of responsibility for one's deeds, and general chaos within values and the identity of a subject. Taboos that were kept in the past (even though mainly in formal depiction of certain topics), are cancelled and the border between public and private is often crossed, while the method of depicting this varies – it can be a use of parody, irony, pastiche, unique insight, copying etc. The older generation tend to let certain topics untouched and leave it to the reader's imagination, while younger generation often use too few textual gaps to fill. As an example of a member of older generation, we are going to outline certain features of prose by Rudolf Sloboda.

In his works about a character Uršuľa (*Rozum*, *Druhý človek*, *Uršuľa*, *Rubato*), Rudolf Sloboda deals with motif of sex and sexuality, but the way he does that is quite special. Situations in which the characters are to have sex are depicted very briefly and to some extent comically. In novella *Rubato*, e. g. lovers jump to bed in one short sentence and in next sentence the male characters gets up and goes to cook a sausage. The reason for such brief

and comical depiction of sex could have several explanations: firstly, it can be understood as a taboo motif; secondly, author wants the reader to fill in what they want; it is also possible that author does not find the sex necessary to the plot, or believes that authorities dealing with his text would not find it appropriate and thus not allow him to publish it.

On the other hand we have two young generation writers who seem to cross the taboo border much more easily: Uršul'a Kovalyk and Peter Pišťanek.

Uršul'a Kovalyk is a young female writer who deals with various (mainly women) problems. One of them is, of course, sexuality. In the following abstract of a short story called *Šmíračka* (*Voyeur*) we can find how the topic is dealt with much more openly. The girl character secretly watches her parents having sex:

“A tak som v skrini plnej vône naftalínu, medzi opaskami a starými kabátmi, zažívala svoje prvé, nesmelé orgazmy. Najviac sa mi páčilo, keď otec mame lízal vagínu, ako ja vylizujem miskú rozpustenej čokolády. Nos mal zababraný od jej štiav. Ponáral sa do roztiahnutých stehien a prstami dráždil zdurené ružové bradavky. Vzrušovalo ma, ako mama kričí, výpary ich spotených tiel mi vrážali až kamsi od vnútra rozvíjajúcej sa maternice. Bola som opitá feromónmi a v skrini som vysedávala ešte dlho potom.”³
(Kovalyk, 2004, s. 63)

As we can see, the border between the public and private is removed and the author goes even further when she breaks the taboo of sexuality within a family (daughter watching parents) and using the motif of voyeurism, which is perceived as a sexual deviation. Although, the motif is depicted much more openly in comparison with the previous (older generation) writer, it is still done with decency.

On the other hand, the second author from younger generation does not have any scruples and his motifs of sex are harsh, and often naturalistic or vulgar, with certain ironic undertone. In his novel *Mladý Dôňč* (*Young Dôňč*) the main character travels to a “town” to have sex with a prostitute. The whole novel mocks traditional values and use irony to depict simple and brutally naïve Dôňč. It can also be understood as an allegory to Odysseus and his long journey demanding hard work for reaching certain goal, or on the other hand criticising society with its false moral. Sex and money are the aim of majority of the character and thus show is to be considered wrong.

When comparing methods of writing we can state that the older and the younger generations do not differ as much as they differ with the thematisation of their work. Both groups use various methods in their fiction, and often are influenced by post-modern features. Very often we observe destruction of traditional genres and creation of genre hybrids. It seems that from the formal point of view it is more valuable to display knowledge of literary theory and make literature an elite kind of art to some extent. However, when speaking about value change between generations in the meaning of content the gap is considerably bigger. The older generation include explicitly or implicitly values like love, honesty, strong support of family, life itself and health, but what is also very important, they criticize anything that stands against human freedom and what is morally rotten (disloyalty, theft, murder etc.) while they do not connect these moral values with religious beliefs. Often we perceive their support of the idea of individuality of a person and his or her own will and consciousness stating that

³ And so in the wardrobe filled with smell of naphthalene, among belts and old coats, I experienced my first, shy orgasms. I liked the most when my father licked my mother's vagina – the same way as I lick a bowl of melted chocolate. His nose was smuged with her juices. He was crawling to her straddled legs and touching her pink nipples. I was thrilled when she was screaming, and the vapour of their sweaty bodies were hammering somewhere inside my evolving womb. I was drunk with pheromones and I used to stay sitting there long after they finished. (translated by the author)

creativity and intelligence cannot be destructed by the outside pressure (totalitarianism). To some extent, these thoughts show immense optimism, especially when comparing them with younger generation of writers, whose works display lack of positive thoughts (they are often pessimistic and depressive) and whose ambition to make their works interesting and popular usually ends in extremes. This disproportion between the aesthetic value of narrative texts and their internal, human value (reflecting sociological basis in terms of values of the authors), make us believe that majority of younger generation writers do not achieve such aesthetic quality as their ancestors and usually try to break traditional value systems.

The sociological value now and then can be to some extent seen through the narrative texts since literature itself reflects reality of life. Our research among young and middle-aged adults concerning the meaning of the term 'value' shows that there are slight differences between the value systems of young generation and middle-aged adults, and also in the understanding the term itself. We took into consideration only a small sample of research and analysed 10 questionnaires by young generation (18 – 30 years old) and 10 questionnaires by middle-aged adults (31 – 60), while we were not interested in the gender of participants. This mini-research, of course, does not have considerable significance, but it serves us to briefly draft out whether there are any similarities between values of real people and the values that are inserted in narrative works of art, and thus belong to literary characters. Further research is desirable.

The questionnaire contained three questions. The first one was to write four values of own choice in the order of their importance for the participant. The second question asked respondents to write how they understand the term "value". And the last question was whether the respondents think there is any difference between the value system of their generation and some other (either younger or older) generation. Considerable differences could be found especially in the results from the first question. Younger people stated much more often that one of the two most important values for them was love (7), however, middle-aged people stated love as an important value only in 3 cases, and consider health as the most important value in their lives (6). In the following overview there are all the values stated in the first two places:

Young adults:

Love – 7, health – 4, family – 3, education – 2, friendship – 1, freedom – 1, accommodation – 1, food – 1.

Middle-aged adults:

Health – 6, family – 3, love – 3, contentment – 1, loyalty – 1, freedom – 1, responsibility – 1, empathy – 1, work – 1, relations – 1.

The results are interesting to interpret. We can see that the middle-aged adults have broader scale of values and all of their choices are of abstract character, while among young adults there were also material values like accommodation and food. Family and stability connected with it is of higher value for older generation, which seems to be quite natural.

When comparing results from narrative "life" and those from reality in terms of what is value, most middle-aged respondents defined it as something non-material that enriches our lives and what people need to be happy while the answers were almost always written in third person. On the other hand, young adults more often state that it is something that is important for them and they do not want to loose. They wrote it in the first person.

Especially interesting were the results of the third question. All middle-aged adults think that there is a difference between themselves and other generations, some of them writing that younger generation is focused on consumption of goods and that they do not realize the value of health and good relations. The middle-aged adults usually did not reflect older generation and if, they think that their values are approximately the same, i.e. orientated on "traditional"

values. There was one interesting comment on this question stating that in the past the difference between generations and their values used to be bigger, but now the age does not play almost any role. Young adults were much more diverse in the answer on the last question, and only two thirds believe there is a difference in value systems of different generations.

In conclusion, we can say that both literature and reality of life display certain differences between generations and their values, but the fictional/literary world showed much bigger difference than the real life (sociological mini-research). This is to some extent caused by the methodology of our approach, but it also shows that literature reflects life (and within it also values) in much more detailed way. The aesthetics of contemporary Slovak literature displayed certain differences, too, and we found some explanations for this in mass media society of today and in the inability of several authors to cope with plurality of forms and themes. This plurality can be thus divided into internal and external; the internal (plurality of themes) being a platform of outlining diversity of values in today's society, and the external (plurality of aesthetics) perceived as competition of particular artistic artefacts. Wolfgang Iser says: "Only the blind could overlook the fact that works of art wrestle against each other. This struggle is not of a peripheral character, but of a character completely cardinal. (...) However, works of art do not erase each other; they do not destroy each other. In art, there apply coexistence of heterogeneity, and coexistence of radically different." (Iser, 1993) Let us believe that this struggle will always be productive and that both aesthetical and sociological values will reflect human freedom and responsibility. Comprehension of fiction narratives is important. Literature as a potential means of understanding emotional and cultural aspects can be important in increasing mutual tolerance among states and countries. Reading is a process which helps to overcome stereotypes and fears of unknown, and it can be useful in accepting mentality of somebody else. The openness towards multiculturalism and the possibilities of fiction as a means of crossing the borders and barriers are enormous. Further analysis of this problem should be performed to outline positive outcomes of supporting intercultural exchange of literary experience via fiction artefacts.

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