

ART AND CULTURE DURING THE PANDEMIC. REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF ART IN POLAND

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Abstract

What is art? What are its functions? What role does it play in the life of an individual, a nation? And finally, how strong is its position in the state? The authors of the text below have attempted to answer these and several other key questions about the essence and position of art in the global Covid 19 pandemic. The area that is explored in the article is Poland. Taking into account the importance of art, its contribution to the cultural heritage of the state, its impact on the cultural identity of nations, emphasising the need for education through art and culture, the authors of the text wrote down a few reflections resulting from both external observations of artistic reality in the time of the pandemic and personal reflections of artists confronted with current challenges and threats to art.

Key words: *low art, high art, cultural identity, multicultural education, pandemic*

*O blessed art, how often in dark hours, when the savage ring of life tightens round me, have you kindled warm love in my heart, have transported me to a better world!*¹

Franz Schubert²

The adduced lyrics of Franz Schubert's lied *An die Musik*³, a composition which, both in terms of music and poetry, is the quintessence of a romantic view of art, perhaps best reflects the emotional approach to it.

History teaches us that the aesthetic and ideological assumptions of art, its functions and role in human life have changed over time. What does not change, however, is the fact that it has always been not only a relief for the soul, emotional rest or entertainment, but also a source of values, knowledge and rules. Therefore, it is not surprising that in order to clearly emphasise the need for the existence and usefulness of art, specific functions have always been assigned to practically all of its fields. Already in medieval times, the importance of art was emphasised, stressing that it was not only to delight with its beauty, but also to teach. This kind of symbiosis of knowledge and art was to guarantee the strength of the development of societies. This type of perception of the function of art is confirmed by the words of Pope Gregory I, who once said: *Pictures are used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books* [Wilk, 2018, Knapieński, 2004, Białostocki, 1978].

Other thinkers, such as Albert Camus, were of the opinion that apart from the obvious educational function, the primary role

1 Oxford Lieder, <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/2693>, (10.08.2020)

2 Franz von Schober: Du holde Kunst, in wie viel grauen Stunden, Wo mich des Lebens wilder Kreis umstrickt, Hast du mein Herz zu warmer Lieb' entzunden, Hast mich in einebeßre Welt entrückt...

3 Franz Schubert An die Musik D 547, Schubert Club, <https://schubert.org/about/andiemusikstep>, (dostęp:13.08.2020)

of art is to inform. The writer believed that art is always caught up in the drama of existence and that it should try to explain all problems, difficulties and dilemmas. He claimed that the indisputable essence and value of art is that it deals not only with those topics that inform about the obvious, good, and safe, but more importantly, it also makes people aware of these negative, unpopular truths so important in human life. He maintained that the task of every creator, artist, is to fulfil his duty to society with the help of created art, that is to light up the darkness of existence. To help, raise spirits or mobilise to act in times of doubt. Art is therefore not only to entertain people, but also to show threats and, above all, make them aware of their greatness, manifested in the ability and efficiency to deal with any difficult situation [Wilk, 2018, Mróz, 1992].

There is plentiful evidence that at the time of various crises, wars, etc. art did not die out, on the contrary, it documented history, explained – interpreted fate and, above all, gave strength to societies which were often scared and tired of fighting for their lives. This can be seen in the works marked by the Polish Messianism of Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, or in operas and songs by Stanisław Moniuszko [Litka, Kowalik, 2018].

A lot could be written about the functions of art, but this is not the keynote of the below text. What is important is the fact that the works of contemporary artists, breaking conventional styles, breaking with the usual solutions, constantly enter new spaces of expression. They use surprise, experiment, hyperbolising reality. The themes, styles and spheres of influence of art have expanded significantly. Often leading to recognising as art something that not so long ago would not deserve this name. Every contemporary recipient of art has to answer himself a series of questions that will concretise his understanding of art. What is art in my life? What role does it play? How does it condition my sensitivity and awareness? Is it essential to my life at all? The answers to these questions are the basis for under-

standing the meaning of art in the 21st century [Zadora, 2014]. A dangerous tendency of the decreasing demand of broadly understood society for high art has been noticeable in Poland for many years. Why is it happening? There are many sources of this phenomenon. On the one hand, the decline of education in the atmosphere of art, the lack of broadly understood mass media education which would generate demand for it. This state of affairs is augmented by commonly known civilisation phenomena such as: consumerism, unification of patterns, cultural globalisation, the pursuit of money, the fast pace of life resulting in the lack of time to enjoy culture. Both the shared, family tasting of culture and *noble snobbery towards art* are atrophied, which results in the formation of a new generation, eager to associate with works that require intellectual and emotional involvement [Dziamski, 2017].

This, in turn, has led to certain social stratification in terms of demand for art. On the one hand, Poland can boast of a very large group of artists representing the highest world level, whose contribution to the development of global and national cultural heritage is undeniable. On the other hand, the aforementioned public demand for high art is quite modest and concerns only a selected limited group of society.

As Marian Golka rightly notices, culture and art, although present in today's social space, are unfortunately not universally present in the life of contemporary society of our country. It is regrettable to say that interest in art, willingness to adapt it to everyday life, concerns only certain groups or environments. It is true that the presence and activity of society (even of only those specific groups) in the proposals of individual cultural institutions confirms the need for their operation and broadly understood activity. It also proves the place and role of art in social life and is a clear signal of society's demand not only for mass culture, offering products that do not require significant intellectual involvement from the viewer, but also for art

that intrigues, disturbs and is *thought-provoking*. [Golka, 2008] However, as emphasised earlier, this applies only to a “limited group – a segment” of society, and not to the majority of our compatriots. [Wilk, 2018]

What problems can this kind of downplaying of art generate? Will it only affect an individual’s reality and quality of life? Can it also determine problems for the national identity in the state?

ART AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Citing Kazimierz Łastawski, it can be said the term *identity* means identifying with somebody or close association with something [Łastawski, 2004]. It defines both a community or similarity, as well as separateness or otherness [Taylor, 1995]. The specificity of identity can be clearly noticed only when it is confronted with “otherness”, which means that it is perceived as the “essence” of the national community, showing its substance in detail, unique, distinct character against the background of other communities [Kowert, 1998/1999]. Created in the long process of historical development of ethnic groups and nations, it consistently shapes the self-esteem, individuality and stability of the members of a given national community. Following this path, it gives them strength to co-create and also to cooperate. National identity is therefore a specific stimulus that guarantees the reaction of society in the case of a crisis, threat, etc.

Moreover, due to the fact that national identity is considered on many planes, as Czesław Maj rightly emphasises, it is often interpreted interchangeably with the notion of “cultural identity” or “civilisation and cultural identity” [Maj, 2001]. However, regardless of which of the nomenclature variants is used in the discourse, each of them places a strong emphasis on the considerable importance of the cultural potential of the state in forging the national identity of its citizens. This potential encompasses works of arts, historical monuments, museum collections, traditions, customs, activities of cultural institutions

(operas, philharmonics, theatres, cinemas, etc.), the level of the education system and education of society as well as the significant influence of the elites, i.e. leading groups, that is writers, artists, ethnographers, historians as well as cultural and scientific institutions and their activities: universities, research units, cultural associations, scientific societies, etc. All these components translate directly or indirectly into the scale, quality and future of the national identity – the cultural identity of a given social group.

Several dozen years ago, Florian Znaniecki uttered the sentence: “Our whole reality is thoroughly saturated with culture”. The interdependence of culture and man, specific entanglement in culture, takes on the dimension not only of perception, consumption or simple utilitarianism, but above all, of a civilisation requirement towards the need to create and develop culture, both locally and globally. Cultural heritage – tradition, values, moral norms, being permanent / present entities, are invariably subject to development and evolution, which is why modern man, consciously or unconsciously, carries out any activity with the participation and through culture [Znaniecki, 1988, Wilk, 2018]. Why do researchers of the problem attribute such an important role to culture and art? What makes them so important?

It is a truism to say that the cultural awareness of the citizens of a given nation is shaped on the basis of its past, present and future. Behind this very general statement there is the influence of the history of a given nation, creating and accumulating a kind of spiritual and material legacy, as well as cultural heritage left by ancestors. It is obvious that it is this type of “cultural deposit” that builds and shapes the cultural identity of the nation, reflecting its character, moods, emotions, etc. Taking care to respect, nurture and remember historical national heritage guarantees the identification of citizens with the state, manifested by social commitment, patriotism, well-understood nationalism,

dedication to the cause or broadly understood willingness to co-create [Suchocka, Królikowska, 2014].

When the aforementioned cultural heritage is trifled with, there is a considerable risk, or even a threat, of the decline of the cultural identity of the nation, manifested by the loss of identification of the citizen with the state (apatriotism) and the negative impact of such attitudes of citizens on their future and that of their country [Jastrzab, 2011]. Therefore, the statement of Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, who perceived national culture quite loftily as the “soul of the nation”, seems justified, defining it as the achievement of many generations, the undisputed property of the entire nation and one of its greatest treasures. He also emphasised that this cultural heritage plays a fundamental role in the history of the nation because it constitutes a kind of code of attitudes and virtues that make up the ethos of the nation, i.e. its moral and spiritual achievements [Wyszyński, 1981].

Despite the fact that Cardinal Wyszyński spoke these words in 1981, shortly before his death, almost five decades later they seem to be as relevant as never before due to today’s European and, unfortunately, also Polish reality, in which one can perceive alternately the unification of patterns, culture, values, and behaviour on the one hand, and intolerance, xenophobia, racism or extreme nationalism on the other.

Of course, it has been significantly influenced by three decades of growing, almost ubiquitous globalisation, which has resulted in not necessarily positive human reactions or attitudes. And although it may sound banal or naive, art can largely contribute to improving the state of affairs. How can it become an antidote to human indifference, insensitivity or even aggression?

There are many ways to achieve it. Education through art and cultural education seem to be one of the simplest and at the same time most effective ways. Education which, in a sense, treats art as a tool for developing the ability to understand socio-cultural reality. By making people more sensitive, it develop

their creativity and the capacity to critically evaluate and analyse phenomena in the field of art, culture and, perhaps above all, in everyday life. This type of civic education, participation – taking part in culture and art, firstly, should be treated as a priority by the elite of our country, as one of the basic elements guaranteeing the maintenance and constant awakening of patriotic, pro-social and pro-civic attitudes, and secondly, it should be addressed to all, but above all, to the young generation and be realised multidimensionally. Multidimensionality should be understood firstly as cultural local education, based on the specificity of one's own nation – homeland, through regional (i.e. European) to multicultural – global education, the aim of which is to make people aware of cultural differences, prepare them for dialogue and interaction with representatives of other cultures, but at the same time a critical reflection aimed at strengthening one's own cultural identity. This kind of perception of the world through the prism of multiculturalism equally supports the processes of rooting in native culture and at the same time facilitates exceeding the optics of perceiving reality only on the basis of own experiences, but also by noticing others with their different history, culture, art, etc., having regard to the common heritage of mankind. Openness to diversity, respect for it is the basis for so-called “culture of peace” that functions beyond divisions and is able to derive patterns from others for own development [Lewicki, Cichowska, 2013]. Recapitulating, one should always remember the important role of art and that it should be one of the unchanging priorities of state activity, regardless of the circumstances and emerging problems.

CULTURE AND ART DURING THE PANDEMIC

Unfortunately, reality negatively verifies noble and lofty assumptions. It turns out that new threats appearing in the country and in the world force us to selectively categorise needs, putting emphasis on mercantile – economic considerations, thus pushing

higher needs – emotional or spiritual ones – to the background. Not only Poland, but also many nations are struggling with this problem right now.

In the first half of 2020, mankind faced a situation that verified the hierarchy of important and less significant things overnight. Here is a mutated animal protein molecule – a coronavirus, a microscopic hero, that has power to change the fate of the world. Humanity has experienced many pandemics in its history. From the *Plague of Athens* that changed the course of the Peloponnesian war⁴ (430=403 BC), through the pandemics of plague, smallpox, cholera, the famous Spanish flu, the flu that decimated Europe, to HIV or Ebola. The number of infectious diseases plaguing the world community is enormous and it seems that we should have got used to it. Meanwhile, a new virus, less than a year old, surprised the inhabitants of the globe and radically transposed reality. What is the difference between the coronavirus and other viruses known so far? How is today's pandemic different from previous ones?

By itself, it is not really that special. In each plague, the spreading disease takes its toll until there is an antidote – a vaccine that will immunise humanity against it. What differentiates the Covid 19 pandemic is its blast radius – disproportionately increased by “shrinking of the earth” due to globalisation. Previous pandemics were more or less local, or at least regional, while this one affected almost the whole world in the blink of an eye. Awakened in China, over the course of several months, it affected countries from almost all continents (Asia, Europe, North America, South America, Africa, Australia), except Antarctica. Although the first cases of the infection were recorded in December 2019, already in March 2020 most countries in the world faced a global threat – a total lock down – an unprec-

4 <https://historia.org.pl/2020/02/27/najwieksze-epidemie-w-historii-swia-ta-ospa-grypa-dzuma-i-cholera-najwieksi-zabojcy-w-historii-ludzkosci/>

edented case in history. This highly stressful situation, having no reference to other events in history, has changed the way we think about the world, about the fragility of being, about the sense of the existence of a human being, about interpersonal relationships, as well as about culture and art [Kuźniar, 2020]. Of course, fear for one's life has accompanied and still accompanies citizens of many countries in the world, as in other pandemics, but the reflection on the problems of the present and the future is largely focused on mercantile priorities and considerations. How to protect and save the economies of individual countries that are weakening day by day? How not to lose your job? How to maintain a family? How to maintain the current *status quo* in terms of an individual, nation, state? These fears and doubts, in a natural – though unnatural (by analysing the past, history) way – pushed the essence, importance and driving force of culture, art, and the artistic expression of the new problem into the background.

Of course, artists, as individuals with increased sensitivity, have felt the Corona-virus pandemic in emotional terms and experienced an increased desire to create. Locked in their homes, they surely transfer their emotions onto paper and canvas, express the impulses of their creative souls through sounds, and forge them into sculptures. Frequently, they are not even stopped by the impossibility to communicate with art recipients. With the help of the technological advances of today's civilisation that the majority of the inhabitants of the global village have, social media, the Internet, the movement of sharing art was born. Recordings have been made in which all musicians are recording remotely their part of the work in order to feel as if they were close to their colleagues musicians and to create a joint work. Performances, directed and broadcast online, are appearing more and more frequently on the web. Undoubtedly, they reflect the nature of the surrounding reality, undeniably also, especially at first, they had a very strong emotional charge, they

brought comfort, gave impetus and brought hope. Unfortunately, over time, the multitude of such activities resulted, firstly, in a decline in interest in them, and secondly, unfortunately, also in the deterioration of their value. It should be remembered that these momentary spurts of artists' hungry souls are just a substitute for what is the basis of the creative act. Of course, in this situation, even such limited creation of art appears to be worth its weight in gold, while in the long run it should be remembered that every artist, both the one creating works and the one who gives life to these works, an actor, musician, singer, dancer, conductor feed on contact with the viewer, listener. The miracle of the creative act is enchanted in the artist's contact with the audience. Every time it gives a different, new, creative character to the same words, sounds and gestures. Every encounter with a live audience prompts artists to a different interpretation. Therefore, how do you compare such emotional contact with on-line performances? It is fully understandable that artists strive for these activities. Everyone wants to maintain a bond with their fans by creating original channels on various platforms. Such activities provide a substitute for artistic fulfilment, and at the same time rekindle the Internet users' memory about the artist. But they will never replace the reaction of a living recipient.

GDP OF THE STATE AND THE PLACE OF ART IN THE PANDEMIC

Another important issue is the existence of artists in today's pandemic. Artistic uncertainty and frustration is exacerbated by the economic uncertainty in which artists have found themselves. In Poland, a vast majority of them have worked in cultural institutions on the basis of a form of self-employment. The suspension of the activity of these entities resulted in the impossibility to serve with their work and, consequently, threatened livelihoods. Unfortunately, the government's actions in

support of artists turned out to be insufficient in this situation. Especially high culture, as a less popular form of communing with art, suffered from this. Much larger financial resources have been and are directed to simple popular art, satisfying the tastes of the mass audience. What does this mean for art? What are the risks of this state of affairs?

First of all, there is a fear that so-called elite art will not have any *raison d'être* in the near future. The economic factor will force many artists to give up creating in favour of taking up a job that guarantees a *livelihood* for themselves and their relatives. Creation that was supposed to be an expression of culture, national identity, an act of patriotism, social mission, etc. will be replaced by mundane needs, distant from emotionality and sensitivity. How will it impoverish historical cultural heritage? Will a gap appear as a result of this kind of pragmatism, and if yes, how big? Today it is difficult to univocally answer these questions.

In the opinion of the authors of these words the time we give to the pandemic is certainly very difficult, but in terms of creativity it will certainly not be fruitless. Mankind has stopped for a moment, but reflective individuals, to whom among others artists most probably belong, have noticed that this is a sign given by fate, a reason for contemplation, reflection on the condition of the human being, humanity and its actions, on the essence of the rhetorical question – to be or to have? The artist's soul cannot live without constant stimulation and will draw conclusions from every situation. History shows that the artist's suffering was usually at the root of the most outstanding creative acts. In accordance with this principle, it should be believed that we will soon have the honour of getting to know new works that have been created during the pandemic. The artworks that will shed new light on what we are currently experiencing. That concert venues and theatres, philharmonics, museums, exhibition halls will be bustling again. That things will go back to normal.

However, today the rest of the text of the great Romantic's song, with which we started our deliberations, might dispel fears and must suffice.

*Often a sigh has escaped from your harp, a sweet, sacred harmony of yours has opened up the heavens to better times for me, O blessed art, I thank you for that!*⁵

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⁵ Oxford Lieder, <https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/2693>, (10.08.2020)

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