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THE IMAGE OF THE “OTHER” AS REVEALED THROUGH VISUAL ARTS: BACKGROUNDS AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The article considers the types of visual culture (visual arts and cinematography) in pedagogical, historical, cultural and philosophical angles as a unique means of transmitting people's attitude to a topic of relevance which is portraying disabled persons (others) in a symbolic way. Another focus is on the way to rebrand the image of people with disabilities to reinforce their position in the society. The analysis conducted reveals the possibilities of implementing the language of visual arts in education to boost not only the tutorial, but also cultural and humanistic potentials, reconsidering the phenomenon of disability in social and philosophical frameworks, updating and forming new social norms and ways the society interacts with the challenged people. The article regards the works of cinematography and fine arts in the context of the topic under study. It offers a number of conclusions about the pedagogical as well as social role of the language of visual arts.

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1. Introduction

The way a disabled person is being represented in the visual space reflects the current state of the moral well-being of society. Visual arts are immersed in cultural and historical heritage and connected with ideology and social representations thus reflecting the reality and existence. The methods of demonstration, portraying techniques as well as plotting with the participation of people with disabilities, people who have differ in appearance (meaning those who represent obvious signs of developmental disorders) correlate with the society see and treat them.

2. Problem Statement

Apart from informational and cognitive-heuristic functions, visual arts perform an axiological function by having a direct impact on the viewer through sensations. They have educational potential, as well, by forming a worldview, defining the standards of attitude towards people with disabilities (the “others”).

3. Research Questions

The concept of implicit or personal knowledge, proposed by Michael Polani and being developed within the framework of philosophy, allows us to consider visual arts as a kind of source enabling to form ideas and a system of worldview. Initially, the understanding of a cognitive act as the integrity of intellect and emotions, mind and soul was introduced by R. Descartes. A number of philosophers such as G.V. Leibniz, I.Kant, A.Bergson, Z. Freud and his followers expressed the ideas about the innate, a priori, potential knowledge. According to the followers of Michael Polani’s theory the criterion for implementing and actualizing the implicit knowledge is language itself (Nilogov, 2017). Humbolt’s (2000) and Wittgenstein’s (1994) findings show that language is the way of objecting implicit and contextual forms of knowledge. Thus, each context defines the meaning of cognitive activity or process. Symbols and metaphors work as the means of implementing and updating implicit knowledge too. The value of metaphor in the context of visual culture works analysis adds to the fact that a metaphor occurs at the junction of a person’s emotional experience and the rational expression of the latter.

4. Purpose of the Study

To study the possibility of visual culture as the language of transmitting attitudes, education as well as the means of forming moral, ethical and social norms society and people with disabilities interrelate.

5. Research Methods

The key methods to study the reflection of the image of the “other” through the means of visual arts are the content analysis of symbolic products of mass culture and the discursive analysis of samples which regard the universal language of visual arts used to display the image of a challenged person. The early experience of depicting a person with mental and physical peculiarities goes back to the iconography of the blessed. The features of foolishness are found in the image of St.Francis of Assisi in the art of the West of

the XIII-XIV centuries. This type of representation of foolishness is determined by the tradition of “carnival culture” of the medieval West with the cult of jesters who ridicule the “immoral” bringing its image to the point of absurdity. There is an ascetic joy of life and laughter of the world in the tradition of the image of the blessed because “only laughter remained outside the official lie, all genres, all forms of language and style, everything was saturated with lies, except laughter” (Koshemchuk, 2015, p. 153). The iconography of Francis of Assisi represents the blessed one speaking to birds and animals. You can see the plot in which Francis of Assisi renounces property in the fresco by Giotto in the Church of San Francesco in Assisi. The parallels can be noticed with the image of Basil the Naked. This plot denotes minimum of clothing as the rejection of worldly goods and external restrictions. In this case, the figure of the blessed one is proportional to other elements of the work and the figures of the people. The images of Basil the Blessed (one of the most revered fools of Russia) which date back to XVI – early XVII century have characteristic features: thinness, nakedness, the beard and hair are disheveled, there are chains and a large cross looking especially large and heavy on the emaciated body. When St. Basil is depicted at full height his figure occupies a significant place on the plane, rising above the horizon. There is the image of the city at his feet. It creates a sense of dominance of the figure over the space. The moral feat of foolishness is unique: the blessed one appears to be in virtue in front of God at the same time he appears to be deprived before the world. The meaning of the phenomenon is clarified by Apostle Paul’s words “The God chose the unwise of the world to shame the wise and chose the weak of the world to shame the strong...” (Novyj zavet Apostola Pavla 1-e poslanie k Korinfyanam, 2019). The blessed one is positioned as a walking conscience, a living image of exposing human vices (Klyuchevskij, 1871). In Russia of XIV-XVII centuries, foolishness as a special rank of worldly sanctity reached its peak and the inviolable right of the blessed one to tell the truth to “the powerful” was reflected in the canons of iconography, which emphasized freedom from social stereotypes and generally accepted rules, bordering on anarchy.

The next image is the ill one. The category of the body as the carrier of the soul is extremely important in creating cultural norms: the soul is intangible and invisible, and the parameters of the body are external manifestations of the soul. People with disabilities or mental problems were regarded as “containers of the devil” and became the victims of the Inquisition. Michael Foucault analyzing the image of the medieval “other” admits that a person with severe incurable disabilities often assumed the image of a social outcast – a leper or lunatic (Chomsky, 2018). Some cases of physical and mental ailments are defined as a temporary condition that must be overcome by available means. That is why one of the popular painting plots up to the XVII century was “The Extraction of the Stone of Madness”. In the middle ages it was believed that stones in the head were the cause of dementia of insanity. Trepanation was performed for the extraction of these stones. This plot is reflected in a number of paintings: “The Extraction of the Stone” attributed to Frans Hals (XVII century), “Cutting the Stone” by Jan Steen (1650-1660) (Atkins, 2003), “The Cure of Folly” by Hieronymus Bosch (1475-1480) (Malizia, 2015; Strickland, 2016). Pieter Bruegel The Elder’s painting “The Blind Leading the Blind” dated back to 1568 depicts the blind with various eye lesions. It proves the inextricable connection of physical illness with mental vices. The plot is based on the biblical parable of the blind, the meaning of which is that if a blind (a false teacher) leads a blind (a neophyte), they will fall into a spiritual pit. The depicted characters are not only the owners of disabilities but also are the personification of spiritual blindness – their “abnormality” is a visible sign of evil.

European paintings of the XVII-XIX centuries contain the image of the “other”. The character from the painting “The Clubfooted boy” by Jusepe de Ribera dating from 1642 has obvious figure disproportions and dwarfism. The Spanish nobility took a special interest in such people who became buffoons, who valued not characters traits or the ability to joke, but the concentration of ugliness. Philip IV’s court artist Diego Velasquez painted a series of eight portraits of court jesters (Los truhanes). There are no grotesque allegories of the body as a reflection of the soul (Pacheco & Palomino, 2018). In the “Portrait of don Sebastian del Mora” who was the representative of an ancient noble family and had in addition to the functions of court jester, a position in the Royal Chancery, you can feel a sense of intelligence, insight and strong character. Don Sebastian had no fingers on his hands, but in the portrait, his hands are arranged as if they are clenched into fists, which he rests on his hips. Velasquez’s paintings reflect the increased interest of the Baroque era in everything that goes beyond the usual and bears the stamp of drama, including the level of a body. Velasquez’s creative method opens up a humanistic tradition in depicting ill people and abnormal body. It emphasizes that disabilities are not the main characteristics of these people.

The painting by the French artist Tony Robert-Fleury “Doctor Philippe Pinel” frees the mentally ill from their shackles in the Salpetriere hospital in 1795. It illustrates humanistic tendencies: Pinel practised a revolutionary method of treatment, allowing his patients to move freely around the hospital grounds. He replaced dark “cells” with light-ventilated rooms and he included moral support and good advice in the treatment protocol. In the footsteps of Pinel’s practice, patients of other hospitals were freed from chains and the principle of humane conditionals became widespread in Europe.

Another image of the “other” is a military invalid. An example of a special attitude to maimed soldiers in European Arts is the modern exhibition of the National Residence of the Invalids that was established in 1670 by Louis XIV and gradually turned into a museum. One of the events that took place in this institution is reflected in the painting by Alexander Paul Joseph Veron “Napoleon Visiting the National Residence of the Invalids” which was shown to the public in 1812 (when Napoleon’s army fled from Russia) to demonstrate the care of the head of the state for his soldiers. Today the painting is perceived as a document reflecting the life of the inhabitants of a unique socio-medical institution, where veterans and disabled people received care, treatment and shelter.

The dichotomy of bodily normality-abnormality as a philosophical issue first took rise in the first third of the XXth century. Husserl’s category of “normality” is based on bodily “ideality” – a healthy, ideal body that goes back to the ancient ideal. Only the ideal content or the “ideal of objectivity” is due to further demonstration. This ideal objectivity can be shown in their identity (Bryanik, 2017, p. 54).

In the context of a post-war reflection, the perception of the “normative” and “non-normative” in relation to the perception and representation of human body, is radically changing. It is associated with the awareness of the causes and consequences of the World War II. The scale of the genocide of racial, bodily, age and ideological “others” had no historical analogues and led humanity to realize its own vulnerability. According to American anthropologist Robert Murphy, the healthy body is a marker of social success while the “abnormal” body is the reverse side, excluding not only economic well-being, but also the implementation of the need for recognition and love as a part of social success. The phobia of “others” is a representation of the fear of becoming one of them (Murphy, 1987). In the Soviet cultural traditions of the mid-twentieth century, masculinity (dominance) was associated with the front, while the disabled, wounded

and children – those who did not have or lost the opportunity to participate in combat – were identified with passive “female” gender. In a series of portraits by Alexander Shilov depicting the veterans of the Great Patriotic War one can notice the following tendencies: early portraits picture men with unfold shoulders, in military uniforms, with a full set of medals. “Passive gender” features two male portraits – “Forgotten” (1985) and “Abandoned” (1998). There are bent figures, unhappy faces that are prone to cause pity. A true phenomenon reflecting the military theme of Russian fine art is a series of graphics by Gennady Dobrov “Autographs of War”, created in the period of 1974-1980. Four of them are portraits of the residents of Nikolsky Skete of Valaam home for invalids. The portraits of veterans are made on sheets of 110x70 cm. Each portrait is structured in such a way that the figure of the person occupies almost all the space, as if the image is way too tight. The artist depicted the injuries with a ruthless, surgical authenticity, the images do not cause pity in the usual sense: “The legless, the armless, the blind, they did not complain about their life. You can see grief and pride in their eyes (Dobrov, 2019).

The use of the image of the “others” within modern artistic framework like cinematography in particular, has also its own genesis, language, and meanings.

Cinematography as a more popular and accessible art form has been reflecting the phenomena of the surrounding reality since its inception and during its active development. The value of this expressive means is that the conventionality and the dynamic nature of the image allows a viewer to see such aspects of life that are impossible to grasp and comprehend in the process of observation or even direct engagement with another way of perception, adaptation and reaction. It is only through game modeling that the specific nature of cognitive patterns of people with schizophrenia, sensory disintegration, etc. can be present to the masses. Medical profession who work with such people claim the “usefulness” of cinematherapy for education and therapy of people with physical mental issues (Smieszek, 2019). It also combats stereotyping (Schwartz et al., 2010) in society and boost thorough understanding in medical profession (Dawn, 2014). Moreover, film is one important resource that contributes to forming public’s beliefs and dispositions about people with disabilities (Schwartz et al., 2010).

The evolution of the image of the “other” in foreign game cinema is reflected in Voroneckaya - Sokolova’s (2016) research. The author regards the evolution of the image from a “negative cliché” of an outsider to a humanistic view on the personality of a “special person” and the place of the certain image in the modern screen culture (Voroneckaya-Sokolova, 2016). The first steps of cinema development as well as reference to the theme of otherness linked the image of a special person with oddities. It formed an ironic and sometimes satirical attitude. The characters with disabilities were used to symbolize fear, threat and danger in fantasy or horror films (“The Crooked Man’s Love”, “The Man Who Laughs”, “Freaks”).

The results of the WW I led to changes in representing the image of a disabled person in the mass culture. The man of war symbolized the honour, that had been ruined by the war and the image was surrounded with a romantic fleur. Moreover, this period saw the search for artistic means to recreate mental disorders on the screen. Still, cinematographers’ focus was more on the aesthetic side of the issue rather than on the content (La Folie du Docteur Tube, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligaru).

The tragedy of the WW II also transformed people’s minds. It found its reflection in cinematography. However, even here the image of the “other” person is presented through the military

losses of the society on the whole and of an individual in particular. The path to recovery and adaptation to a peaceful life lies through characters' individual experience and their personal problems.

The changing of the right-wing and the social landscape, the priority of democratic values led to the flourishing of the auteur conceptual cinema, which addressed the originality and variety of human manifestations in their authenticity. The period of the 1970s and 1980s shifted the cinematographers' attention. It meant that the audience's attention was shifted too. The films depicted the stories of "the other people" in a more realistic and separate from the tragedy of the war way. The entire list of difficulties is shown in these films depending on the types of disabilities but taking into account their "internal subjectivity" (Forrest Gump, The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser and etc.) (Voroneckaya-Sokolova, 2016).

The democratization and humanization of the socio-cultural situation in Europe and the USA, the recognition of human diversity and variability has led to a new interpretation of the image of the "other person". This person may be a bearer of true values, a romantic who can make people beside him/her happy (The Intouchables, Inside I'm Dancing, I am Sam). Cinematograph proclaims and advises the society with the right to distinguish all previously stigmatized people (Voroneckaya-Sokolova, 2016). According to Voroneckaya-Sokolova "the evolution of the image of a special person took place guided by two key factors – the historical change in the socio-cultural context and the evolution of language expressive means" (Voroneckaya-Sokolova, 2016).

Sukovataya (2012) analyzes the features of Soviet cinema and admits to the characteristic use of the "other person's" image to portray negative human qualities (boatswain Silvestr, Basilio (the cat), the crooked man from "The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed") in the period of 1950-1980. It is claimed, the Russian cinema of that time featured a dual interpretation of a disabled person's image. On the one hand, it is the "lofty", and the "tragic" image in revolutionary (military) films and the "low" and the "comic" image of a disabled rascal in others. According to Sukovataya (2012) it is crucial to emphasize the difference in gender aspects: Western cinematography saw characters differentiating in genders; on the contrary, there were almost no images of disabled women in Russian cinematography.

A sociological study of the media representation of individuals with atypical development by Iarskaia-Smirnova and Romanov (2014) reveals the connection between media production and the state idea of forming a welfare society. Disability is also used by filmmakers to express the following metaphorical ideas:

- disability as a manifestation of human qualities (negative – anger, aggression, humility or vice versa motivating - strength of spirit).
- disability as a representation of society (extras, outcasts, victims of unfair state policies).
- disabilities as a test and a contrast (a disabled person who makes a viewer reflect, reconsider and purge).

The authors believe that social transformations of the second half of the 20th century changed the social status of people with disabilities and it affected naturally their metaphorical images in media products. "Breakthrough, activity and love" – this is a new image of the "others" as cinematographic characters. They no longer fight for their survival, they live, love, work, suffer and take care of people.

Qualities of a disabled person are a deformed body, other ways to feel and unusual ways to create a set of alternative vectors for the development of the film language and a set of unprecedented opportunities for understanding oneself and others ... (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2014, p. 93).

The research of foreign scientists emphasizes the need to analyze representations of the image of disability taking into account “state structures”, “linguistic context” while aspiring for the formation of a “universal culture of disability” (Fraser, 2016).

The current trend in cinematography development aims at reflecting a positive and realistic model of disability. Moreover, modern scientists state openly that “Films need to focus more on the potentials rather than the shortcomings of people with disabilities”. Objective and realistic information is broadcasted to viewers in a non-discriminatory language. It makes possible to present a disabled person not only in terms of his/her limitations but also in terms of resources and opportunities to be recognized as a member of the society. For example, Gaby Brimmer (the character of the movie “Gaby: A True Story”) has serious motor disorders (cerebral palsy, tetraplegia). She graduates from university, writes a book and adopts a child. At the same time, she loves, she loses later to find. She comes through the same existential emotions as any other woman. Another example is Khan who is the character of the movie “My name is Khan”. Khan is a person with Asperger’s syndrome who experiences love, demonstrates a sense of justice, empathy, caring, naivety that is worthy of admiration and acceptance. It is important that such media samples contribute to a more adequate social perception of individuals with atypical development. In addition, they are capable of self-perception and self-positioning in the world of the disabled and their social environment.

6. Findings

A brief retrospective analysis of possibilities of visual language in reflecting the public attitude towards one of the most vulnerable societal groups allows us to draw a number of conclusions:

- the use of the language of visual arts to reflect the image of a physically or mentally challenged “other” person has existed since the emergence of ways to depict such a person. It is integral to artistic and socio-cultural traditions;

- the definition of the “norm” in the image of a person is determined by the socio-cultural development of the society where the criteria of “normality” depend on the interrelations of the majority and the minorities, and on the preservation of privileges of the dominant social stratum;

- the language of visual arts can show the current attitude of all social strata to people with disabilities or mental disorders. Furthermore, it can initiate reflection through which it is possible to form new cultural attitudes guided by the system of spiritual and moral values that have established in the process of cultural development and the humanistic principle of equality.

Having emphasized the historical milestones of changing the image of a disabled person in visual arts, we proceed to defining their educational (developmental) potential.

7. Conclusion

First of all, it is necessary to say that in addition to its own artistic value, the language of visual arts, which reflects the image of a “special” person enjoys a number of features that make it an extremely useful tool for learning.

To start with, it is a tool for data mining, even in historical retrospect. In fact, visual arts can be an educational resource for research and dissemination of information about the history and the current problems of people with disabilities. It is important that the society (different categories of it) obtains information about the attitude to various disorders, their individual manifestations at different age stages of human ontogenesis and in different social conditions. Visual art is attractive because it relies on its voluntary nature and unlimited time access. However, the principal value is the possibility to apply it as an effective method of encouraging and modifying social beliefs, attitudes and values associated with the phenomenon of atypical behavior, reducing its stigmatization.

Thus, visual arts as an educational tool prove valuable due to:

- transferring new information;
- stimulating emotional evaluation, reflection, and empathy towards fiction characters; visualizing and actualizing public perceptions of the reality and living conditions of people with disabilities.

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