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Department of Philosophy
University of Fribourg
Avenue de l'Europe 20
1700 Fribourg
Switzerland

Internet: http://www.eurosa.org
Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Does "Great" Art Exist? A Critique of the Axiological Foundations of the Artistic Canon

Pavel Zahrádka*
Palacký University, Olomouc

Abstract. My paper explores critical objections to the concept of the artistic canon, conceived as a summary of works with an objective aesthetic value that have stood the test of time. To begin with, the objections of feminist and postcolonial criticism are discussed and examined. However, the sociological objection questioning the axiological foundation of the canon, i.e. the possibility of generally applicable aesthetic judgment, has been identified as the most crucial. My paper proceeds to discuss the theory of ideal perception as a solution to the problem of justifying aesthetic judgments. My aim is to prove that from the axiological perspective, the theory of the ideal critic gets tangled in the never-ending regress of a logical circle, or it eventually finds its justification through a particular social practice. This theory is also problematic in the erroneous assumption of logical independence of the descriptive and evaluating components of aesthetic concepts. The inability to separate the evaluating attitude from the conditions of the use of aesthetical concepts refers to the relative applicability of the aesthetic value and artistic canon, depending on the "personal economy" of the evaluating subject.

1. The Artistic Canon, the Test of Time and the Aesthetic Value

Numerous art lovers, along with some art theorists, believe that any given culture will sooner or later recognise quality art works (see Hume 1987, 226–249; Savile 1982; Crowther 2004). They are convinced that truly valuable works dispose of a permanent ability to please attentive audiences in various geographical regions and time periods. These pleasures are guaranteed by the existence of a natural connection between the qualities of the

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work and our aesthetic response. Time distance allows the recognition of works that go beyond the passing trends of the period, providing a valuable aesthetic experience. The existence of the canon of artistic works (i.e. the selected chain of the most important and best art works of their kind) and the top film charts of all time, such as *Rotten Tomatoes* or *ČSFD*, indicate that the test of time is effective. Based on this assumption, some art theorists have come to the conclusion that art works have their intrinsic value, which is objective in the sense that there is a natural connection between certain non-aesthetic qualities of an object and our aesthetic evaluative response. This natural connection then forms the basis of a correct, or generally applicable, aesthetic judgment (see Hume 1987; Hinderer 1969; Levinson 2002). In other words, aesthetic judgments can be attributed a truth value depending on whether they are able to grasp the aesthetic qualities objectively possessed by the object in question. One of the first thinkers to explicitly articulate the theory of the test of time was David Hume, who, in his essay, *Of the Standard of Taste*, says:

> "The same Homer, who pleased at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago, is still admired at Paris and at London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with" (Hume 1987, 233).

And yet, are these axiological assumptions, from which the concept of the artistic canon stems, justified? Is the test of time a truly reliable mechanism for identifying art works of aesthetic quality? What information value does the test of time provide, asides from being given credit by art critics or being popular with audiences even after a long time? And, if the test of time cannot serve to legitimise the aesthetic value of canonical works, are there any other methods for its justification?

The artistic canon is criticised primarily from the position of representatives of gender and postcolonial studies. I will attempt to prove that

even though the objections of the critics of the canon are in a certain respect justified, they do not constitute any principal problem for the concept of the artistic canon. This problem does not appear until sociological criticism touches upon the axiological foundations of the artistic canon, i.e. the faith in the objectiveness of aesthetic values, and thus also in the general applicability of aesthetic judgments.[1] The advocates of the canon face this criticism and contest the theory of ideal conditions of aesthetic perception and evaluation. This theory will be subjected to a detailed examination, followed by conclusions drawn from the discussion between the advocates and critics of the artistic canon in terms of aesthetic axiology.

2. The Test of Time: Feminist and Postcolonial Critique of the Artistic Canon

Let the phenomenon of the test of time be our primary concern. Does the fact that in the course of the past decades, centuries and millennia, certain works actually became a part of the cultural canon prove the exceptional aesthetic values of these works? What if their choice was motivated by other factors than solely aesthetic criteria? Feminist and postcolonial critics of the canon question the impartiality of the selective process, according to which works of art are integrated in the corpus of canonical works. They believe that works do not obtain their canonical status exclusively on the basis of aesthetic criteria, but based on whether they serve to affirm the cultural authority of the dominant social groups, thus retroactively reinforcing their outstanding position:

[1] Given the fact that the pivotal term proposed in the text is the term "aesthetic value", its definition needs to be formulated. "Aesthetic value" therefore, stands for the final evaluation attributed to a certain object based on the perception of its intrinsic properties which a certain community or culture considers worthy of attention. The concept of perception is seen in the broadest sense as encompassing reflection, remembering and imagination relating to the given object. This definition (as opposed to the usage in the following text) does not use the term "intrinsic properties" in its ontological sense, i.e. as "something inherently present in something else", but in the epistemological sense, i.e. as the quality of the object, whose identification requires perception of the relevant object.

> "[S]ince those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically, and politically established classes (or to serve them and identify their own interests with theirs), the texts that survive will tend to be those that appear to reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies" (Smith 1988, 51).

In other words, the aesthetic evaluation of canonical works is subjected to non-aesthetic factors, e.g. the dominant ideology, as in the case of socialist realism or the Great Exhibition of German Art initiated in 1937 by Adolf Hitler. However, social ideologies do not need to reduce themselves to a mere political dimension; they may include unconscious racial, religious or gender prejudices. In the second half of the last century, this criticism of the artistic canon inspired numerous art-history case studies, causing the subversion of the cultural canon (cf. Berger 1972, 45–64), its division into several parallel and different art traditions (cf. Ickstadt 2002) and the revision, i.e. the inclusion of the formerly neglected artists (cf. Chadwick 1990; Pollock 1999; Pachmanová 2004), art genres (e.g. new realisms in Czech visual art of the 1920s and 30s), styles[2] and creative activities (e.g. culinary art, knitting, embroidery and pottery) into the canon.

However, the question suggests itself, whether the statement about the political, or power-related dimension for the criteria of selecting canonical works is not exaggerated. If the selection criteria were only the reflection of power interests of the ruling social classes, then only apolitical, conservative or ideologically conforming works would be recognised. However, a mere glance at the history of the artistic canon questions the identification of aesthetic value with political value, as asserted by the dominant social ideology. Many works of the Western cultural canon (Nabokov's *Lolita*, Goya's provocative *Los Caprichos*, Manet's *Olympia*, songs by the German industrial band *Einstürzende Neubauten*, Havel's *Garden Party*, etc.) are epitomised by their radical social criticism, their breach of social conventions and their violation of the morals of the times.

The theory regarding the political dimension of the criteria for selecting canonical works has recently been subjected to an empirical test per-

[2] For example, jazz music became a part of the canon of artistic forms, only in relation to its symbolic value as a protest against the slavery and discrimination of Afro-Americans, as attributed by European intellectuals and musicians.

formed by Willie van Peer (see Van Peer 1996). Van Peer compared two literary works (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and the novel in verse, *The Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet*, by Arthur Brooke) focusing on a similar topic, and yet taking a different attitude to the prevailing social ideology in England in the 16th century.[3] Peer shows that although Brooke's work is highly moralistic, uncritical and urges citizens to conform to the social order (as opposed to Shakespeare's play, which presents a utopian vision of unconditional love transcending social constraints and norms), it did not have the slightest chance of becoming a part of the canon due to its inferior literary qualities.

The above-provided example disproves the generalised proposition that the ideological dimension of the criteria affects the way in which certain works are granted canonical status. Hence, there is a reason to doubt the assumption that the formation of the canon was motivated by the ideological exclusion of works produced by members of marginalised social groups (women, labour class, national and ethnic minorities) due to their social identity. Although the number of canonical works, whose authors are members of a social minority, is not a representative sample, proportional to the representation of marginalised social groups in society, it does not imply that the criteria for the selection of canonical works takes into account the social identity of their authors.[4] For example, the reason for the poor representation of women in the literary tradition does not lie in the fact that they were gender-discriminated, but in the histor-

[3] Arthur Brooke was an English poet whose epic poem *The Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562) is considered the main source of inspiration for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

[4] The criticism of the problematic assumption of the correlation between the artist's inclusion in a certain social group and the experience he or she renders through the artistic medium is left aside. For example, the term "women's literature" does not automatically assume that the author of the given work is a woman. Women's writing represents a certain cultural skill, which can also be commanded by men. A well-known analogical example is the appraised novel *Bílej kůň, žlutej drak* (*White Horse, Yellow Dragon*) with autobiographical features, dealing with racism and the life of the Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic, which, in fact was not written by a young Vietnamese girl, as initially believed by the public and literary critics, including the publisher, but by Jan Cempírek, a male writer from České Budějovice. For more on the issue of correlation between the author's social identity and the content of the work (see Guillory 1995, 3–12).

ical fact that women – with few exceptions – did not have institutional access to literary education before 1800 and could not publish in established literary genres (cf. Nochlin 1971, 22–39, 67–71). The exclusion of marginalised social groups therefore did not concern their representation in the artistic canon, but their access to the means of cultural production. In other words, although the categories of gender, race and class can explain why forgotten artists are being discovered under a policy of equality and democratic representation, they do not clarify why they had been forgotten in the first place.

The above-mentioned facts prove that aesthetic reasons are the only possible systematic explanation of the artistic failure of the vast majority of forgotten works, including those, whose authors belong to marginalised groups (Guillory 1995, 13–16; Olsen 2001, 261–278). This, however, is not supposed to disprove the fact that some quality works had been neglected for ideological or political reasons, had fallen into oblivion and have now been rehabilitated based on their aesthetic qualities and included in the canon. An example is Běla Kolářová, whose visual works have recently been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. However, the explanation that ideological reasons account for the ignorance of these works is not theoretically relevant, as they cannot be generalised in the context of the vast majority of forgotten works. It has become obvious that the ideological criticism of the cultural canon can only serve to remedy particular errors and omissions in the history of art, yet, it cannot question the concept of the cultural canon as it is. The general obligatory character of the canon is radically questioned only when contemplating the epistemic status of the aesthetic judgment that is the key criterion for granting, or refusing the canonical status.

3. A Critique of the Artistic Canon as the Critique of the Objectiveness of the Aesthetic Value

The most elaborate critique of the artistic canon, questioning its axiological foundation, i.e. the faith in the existence of a generally applicable aesthetic judgment, was presented by Barbara Smith in her publication, *Contingencies of Value* (Smith 1988). In the book's opening, Smith describes

the history of changeable opinions regarding the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's sonnets both as part of literary criticism and on the basis of her own experience with Shakespeare's poetic work. She notes that literary reviews have oscillated between the exalting admiration of Shakespeare's poetic feats (Samuel Johnson, Helen Vendler, Don Paterson) on the one hand and their strict rejection (Henry Hallam, Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, George Gordon Byron, etc.) on the other. Her own opinion on the aesthetic value of Shakespeare's poems has undergone a similarly radical transformation:

> "With only little exaggeration I can say that there is perhaps not a single Shakespeare's sonnet that would not, at a given moment, be a source of the most cultivated and most intense type of literary experience I am capable of; at the same time I have not found a single sonnet that I would not, at a given moment, find clumsy, unnaturally artificial, silly, insipid or bland. Some of those that are now (this week or previous day) among my favourites, would have been (last week or ten years ago) considered obscure, ridiculous or unsophisticated; and some, originally considered kneejerk, superficial or dull, were subsequently found sophisticated and thoughtful" (ibid., 6).

A radical turn in the assessment of Shakespeare's sonnets cannot be explained by the gradual accumulation of facts and corrections of critical conclusions. Smith is convinced that the aforementioned example illustrates the fact that the aesthetic evaluation of a given work always represents a function of our values, interests, expectations, needs, previous experience and knowledge. Smith calls this sum of psychosocial factors the "overall economy of our personality". The transformation of this personal economy also brings about a transformation in our judgment. The evaluation of art works represents a function of our needs and interests, or of what we take interest in at a given moment and what we expect from the reception of the work.

Hence, the changeability of the aesthetic judgment poses the first explanation difficulty for advocates of the artistic canon as a sum of the "best that has ever been thought or expressed" (Arnold 1993, 85). If our aesthetic judgment changes depending on our needs and expectations, how can we be certain that it will not change in the case of art works that have thus far

been appraised? And what tells us which of the different judgments (subject to our current interests, needs and experience) of one and the same work is the correct aesthetic judgment? Which of the above-stated contradictory opinions regarding the aesthetic quality of Shakespeare's sonnets should determine the canonical status of the work? If no such criterion is available, then the idea of a canon as the sum of works with an objectively existing aesthetic value appears to be untenable. At the same time, this shatters the faith in the test of time as a reliable means of selecting works with a generally applicable aesthetic value. The fact that, over decades, certain works have come to be generally recognised only serves as proof that in a given culture, a certain set of works meets the needs and expectations of a certain group of people (e.g. art critics).

Advocates of the artistic canon also have to face the fact that despite the general agreement regarding aesthetic judgments about certain works not only within a certain culture, but also across cultures and historic periods, there are individuals and groups (especially members of socially marginalised groups such as the young, migrants, national minorities and members of protest subcultures) who are in no way impressed by canonical works, or consider them aesthetically inferior or bereft of value. For example, an internet blogger named Phil shares his opinion on *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare in a blog entitled "Shakespeare Is Overrated Tosh in my Opinion":

> "I watched a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* who some say is a tragedy about two star struck lovers, but that is so far from the truth in my opinion. In fact it's more like a stupid story about a serial killer called Romeo and his untimely demise. [...] Oh, the sheer tedium of it all and having to sit with an audience full of overblown stuck up snobs made the event almost too much to bear. If you're planning to watch one of these plays for the first time, FORGET IT. Go visit the movies instead – even *Titanic* was a cut above this rubbish!"[5]

How can we be certain that our positive aesthetic judgment of Shakespeare's piece is more justified than Phil's condemnation? Indeed, what is our belief founded on?

[5] http://www.weeklygripe.co.uk/a319.asp.

The above-specified doubts (radical changeability of the aesthetic judgment, aesthetic disputes over the canonical status of a particular work) overturn the axiological foundations underpinning the belief in the cultural canon, and pose a question regarding the epistemological status of aesthetic judgment or the criteria of correct aesthetic evaluation. In this respect, it is useless for advocates of the canon to invoke the test of time, because this test assumes (and does not prove) the possibility of correct aesthetic judgment. Had they proposed that the test of time justifies the accuracy of aesthetic choice, then their reasoning would have become circular (i.e. the validity of both propositions would be interdependent). The fact that certain works have been recognised over the course of centuries does not have to imply that this recognition is justified and generally applicable. What if canonical works only represent specific interests and needs of art critics and similarly socialised individuals? In that case, a homological process of mutual verification would be established between the art critic and the canonical work. But what if a list compiled by me or you comprising the most aesthetically appealing works was completely different from official film charts or literature curricula? Do we have to accept the theory of pluralist aesthetics postulating the equality of values of a number of different canons that are changeable in individual and cultural terms?

4. The Ideal Observer Theory

In view of the fact that our aesthetic judgments are made based on our experience and not on logical reasoning, advocates of the artistic canon are well aware of the absence of generally applicable rules regarding the induction or deduction rationale of aesthetic judgment;[6] thus, the criterion of a correct aesthetic choice is believed to be dependent on ideal perception conditions.[7] Incongruent or differing judgments regarding the aesthetic

[6] For further explication on logical justification of aesthetic judgments see Sibley 1959; Mothersill 1984.

[7] For each general rule (such as the Golden Ratio principle or Beardsley's general principles of aesthetic value consisting in unity, complexity and intensity of the observed object), there is a number of counterexamples refuting its general applicability, i.e. examples of works that are aesthetically recognised, despite the fact that they do not meet

value of canonical works are accounted for with reference to the incompetent or insufficient aesthetic perception of those who pronounce them:

> "Thus, though the principles of taste be universal, and nearly, if not entirely, the same in all men; yet few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty. The organs of internal sensation are seldom so perfect as to allow the general principles their full play, and produce a feeling correspondent to those principles. They either labour under some defect, or are vitiated by some disorder; and by that means, excite a sentiment, which may be pronounced erroneous" (Hume 1987, 241).

Ideal perception conditions providing the foundation for the formulation of an aesthetic judgment are considered the criteria of a correct judgment. What is then characteristic of these conditions required for ideal perception? How do we identify the ideal recipient, or the ideal art critic?

According to Jerrold Levinson, the ideal critic can be identified based on his or her ability to evaluate works by the "Old Masters," works that have already passed the test of time (Levinson 2002). If the given critic is able to sort out the wheat from the chaff and appreciate aesthetic gems, the contemporary works recommended by this critic will probably provide a reservoir of rich aesthetic experience. Here, the test of time represents an indicator of aesthetic value, which Levinson considers independent of the opinion of the ideal critic. Levinson uses this argument to avoid the circular reasoning objection.[8] Nevertheless, he cannot avoid the logical problem of infinite regress. A specific work only becomes a part of the canon by recommendation of an art critic, but never automatically. If the institutional reproduction and conservation of selected works is motivated by recommendations of recognised critics, the question is what makes the privileged position of these critics in the "art world" legitimate. According to Levinson's formula, it is the fact that these critics were able to recognise paradigmatic art works, whose privileged status is again based on the

the aforementioned rule, or works which, despite conforming to the rule, are not considered fine in aesthetic terms.

[8] In terms of Hume's traditional concept of aesthetic criticism, the theory of the ideal critic encounters the problem that the identification of characteristic features of an ideal critic (at least partially) presupposes the knowledge of works of high aesthetic quality. However, as part of this theory, the ideal critic should serve as an independent arbiter for the identification of works of aesthetic quality.

aesthetic judgment of previous critics. As a result, Levinson's solution becomes ensnared in a chain of propositions that has the form of infinite regress, as it can never provide a satisfactory justification of the validity of aesthetic judgments.

It has become clear that in epistemological terms, the legitimacy of an ideal critic's aesthetic judgment has to be based on factors that are entirely independent of this assessment. This type of solution is also provided by David Hume. In his essay, Hume enumerates five characteristics of a good critic, whose aesthetic judgment is considered reliable (Hume 1987, 234–241). Hume believes that these individuals are endowed with delicate sentiment, strong sense, freedom from prejudice, knowledge of works and practical experience with the evaluation and comparison of various types of art works and aesthetic objects. Supposing that the theory of the ideal observer as a solution to the axiological problem of aesthetics needs to avoid a logical circle, (at least some) abilities of the observer have to be defined independently of the aesthetic value of the given object, i.e. independently of the relationship to canonical works, because the role of the ideal critic is to identify these works in the first place. In other words, the knowledge of the aesthetic value must not be a criterion for the selection of the ideal observer (i.e. it must not be implied as one of his or her identification features), because in that case, these features cannot serve as the source of legitimacy of aesthetic judgments pronounced by this observer. Three of the five listed characteristics of the ideal critic comply with the above-stipulated condition (cf. Kivy 1967). The delicacy of taste can be defined on the strength of above-average perceptive abilities, lack of prejudice thanks to the ability of impartial moral judgment and good judgment based on a sharp mind.

The normative force of an aesthetic judgment pronounced by the ideal critic could be justified by the fact that the validity of some judgments is higher because they have been pronounced on account of a superior, more detailed perception of the qualities of the observed object. In this case, the following rule would apply: if someone perceives the same non-aesthetic qualities of an object as me and is also able to see qualities that I am not aware of, it holds that this individual's ability of perception of the given object is better than mine (Shelley 1998, 34). In other words, the differences on the level of perception constitute a hierarchical difference

on the level of the aesthetic response to the observed object. This explication is apparently also implicitly advocated by Hume in his essay, using an anecdote on the evaluation of the quality of wine kept in a cask with a key on a leather strap on the bottom. Town citizens agreed with the objections of wine connoisseurs only when they found out that the tasters were able to identify qualities (when tasting wine, the first detected the smack of leather, whereas the second was left with an aftertaste of iron) they themselves were unable to detect. Moreover, our perceptive ability is enhanced by additional characteristics of the ideal critic, as suggested by Hume. For example, the freedom from prejudice prevents the critic from projecting feelings of pleasure or displeasure caused by irrelevant external factors (fever, drug intoxication, racist prejudices) onto the properties of the work concerned, thus distorting its real aesthetic value.

However, the attempt to tie the normativity of the aesthetic judgment to the better perception skills of the ideal critic encounters numerous counterexamples. Better perception skills do not necessarily mean better aesthetic perception. Although, for example, the fact that a decorator has a better ability to recognise and name varied colour tones than the author of this article, does not imply that he has a better aesthetic sense for room decoration. Moreover, the ability for detailed perception of sensual properties might not always contribute to more intense aesthetic experience and, in some cases, it even disturbs or impairs this experience. For example, a person who sensitively responds to colour stimuli can see paintings by the abstract expressionist, Barnett Newman, as having disintegrated colours, whereas others will see them as homogenous. Similarly, oversensitivity to sound stimuli can cause an inability to pronounce a judgment on a heavy metal song or a rock concert. In addition, some works (e.g. the huge urban mirrors of Anish Kapoor) require a holistic approach, disregarding individual details and concentrating on their overall impression.

Another problematic situation may be encountered when founding the normativity of the aesthetic response on superior sensory perception capabilities in the situation when two critics with the same well-developed level of sensory abilities, or perceiving the same non-aesthetic properties of the same object (as proven by their verbal description) will differ in their aesthetic evaluation of a given object. This situation is not only a

hypothetical thought experiment; I will illustrate this with a simple example from my own experience. My colleague had one wall of her living room decorated red. Although we both can see the same colour, our aesthetic judgments differ. I find the tone of red tasteless and aggressive (and I do not like red in general), but my colleague loves it. However, should not the perception of the same non-aesthetic qualities lead to an identical aesthetic judgment? After all, Hume and the advocates of the artistic canon draw on the assumption that there is a natural connection between certain (not further specified) non-aesthetic properties and our aesthetic response, which the ideal critic is able to recognise and which guarantees that a work of high aesthetic quality can withstand the test of time.[9]

However, Hume is aware of the deviations in aesthetic judgment, which are not caused by a lack of attention or insufficiently developed perception abilities and which he saw as an inevitable consequence of the operation of different cultural and biographical factors.[10] This might be the reason why the normativity of an aesthetic judgment does not result from the judgment of only one (random) ideal critic, but on the general consensus of critics: "[T]he joint verdict of such [critics], wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty" (ibid., 241). The consensus of critics guarantees that a natural connection between non-aesthetic qualities of the object and our aesthetic judgment has been disclosed, that it is not distorted by any cultural effects or individual propensities, and that it will be arrived at by all those whose perception ability is sufficiently developed and who are able to perceive the given work under appropriate conditions. Consequently, the normativity of the aesthetic judgment is based on an agreement among ideal critics. By the way,

[9] For example, Hume claims:" Though it be certain, that beauty and deformity, more than sweet and bitter, are not qualities in objects, but belong entirely to the sentiment, internal or external; it must be allowed, that there are certain qualities in objects, which are fitted by nature to produce those particular feelings" (Hume 1987, 235).

[10] Hume says: "But notwithstanding all our endeavours to fix a standard of taste, and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men, there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation or blame. The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country" (ibid., 243).

this is the same method used to ensure that our perception of colours of surrounding objects is correct. Agreement with other people, in terms of the colour properties of a specific object, is a guarantee that our judgments regarding colours are pronounced on the basis of a correctly functioning sense organ and under conditions appropriate for perception (sufficient lighting, etc.).

However, the analogy between aesthetic verdicts and recognition of colours falters. While our congenital visual ability is sufficient for the correct identification of spectral colours, correct assessment of aesthetic qualities requires the application of the programme of aesthetic education, as proposed by Hume, composed of the five above-specified criteria for an ideal observer. On the one hand, Hume claims that a critic" must preserve his mind free from all *prejudice,* and allow nothing to enter into his consideration but the very object which is submitted to his examination" (ibid., 239). The requirements demanded of the ideal critic are, on the other hand, in stark contrast with this statement. A critic should be the one who is versed in the practice of appraising and comparing works of art. In addition, in the conclusion to his essay, Hume recognises the role of cultural prejudices in aesthetic judgment when he asks for a critic "of a different age or nation" to place himself in the "same situation as the [original] audience" (ibid., 239). This implies that a critic should abandon the prejudices of his or her times and accept the prejudices of the audience for which the work had once been produced. Moreover, the very ability to ignore one's own cultural prejudices (knowledge, norms, values and habits) is an ability that can be acquired through long-term training, and it presupposes the possibility of taking a step back from one's own life experience:" A man of learning and reflection can make allowance for these peculiarities of manners; but a common audience can never divest themselves so far of their usual ideas and sentiments, as to relish pictures which nowise resemble them" (ibid., 245). The aforementioned requirements represent cultural skills that go beyond the immediate perception of the work and that determine the way in which cultural artefacts should be correctly perceived and judged. Consequentially, Hume's ideal critic is not someone who can free himself or herself from prejudice, but someone who has the "right" prejudices, considered natural and correct in the context of his culture and tradition of aesthetic appraisal (cf. Shusterman 1989, 217).

However, this finding undermines the normative justification of aesthetic judgment on the basis of perception abilities of the ideal critic, which should guarantee that his or her aesthetic response is natural, thus being the correct response to non-aesthetic properties of the object concerned. The consensus in the aesthetic judgment, based on which, certain works are considered of a superior quality in paradigmatic terms, is the result of a certain cultivation of taste and aesthetic education. However, this aesthetic programme can also have a different form.[11] Agreement in aesthetic judgment based on Hume's aesthetic programme thus cannot claim higher relevance than an agreement on other aesthetic qualities of the same objects, which is founded on another aesthetic programme. The original contradictions between different aesthetic responses, which Hume is aware of, have thus become a matter of dispute between different aesthetic educational programmes, which are conditional on a consensus in aesthetic judgments. Hence, the crucial problem with Hume's solution to the axiological problem lies in the fact that the offered criteria of correct aesthetic judgment are arbitrary, and therefore, their exclusive epistemological position in relation to other possible criteria or aesthetic programmes cannot be defended (Ribeiro 2007).

The effort to justify the relevance of a correct aesthetic judgment becomes trapped in a logical circle, a never-ending regress, or eventually finds its justification through a particular social practice. Although the original axiological problem stems from the question of why some aesthetic judgments are more relevant than others, or of how to justify the validity of certain aesthetic judgments, Hume (together with the advocates of the theory of the ideal observer) resolves this issue by stating that some of these judgments (at least based on a consensus of a majority of experts) are practically considered by a given culture and society as decisive. How-

[11] For example, the neo-formalists Lamarque and Olsen (1994) consider the relevant factors of a narrative work in addition to its formal properties also its content to be aesthetically relevant, albeit only in terms of the narrative structure and not its reference function. The members of the African Baule tribe have an entirely different idea of aesthetically relevant properties. In their view, visually valued properties of fine arts include elements representing an cultural ideal promoted by civilised village inhabitants, such as health, cleanliness, fertility, diligence, sense of community and honesty (see Van Damme 1996, 232–233).

ever, these arguments will hardly persuade those who cannot take them on their own merits and who do not find the recommended paradigmatic works of the given cultural canon in any way appealing.

5. Facts and Values

In addition to the epistemological justification of an aesthetic judgment, the theory of the ideal observer encounters another problem. This theory automatically presumes that the use of aesthetic concepts cannot be reduced to a mere emotional response, e.g. "I (dis)like it," as it would otherwise be pointless to justify higher relevance of certain judgments by reference to a perfect observation ability of the ideal critic. All people have the capacity for emotional introspection, which can hardly be further perfected. The perfection of a perception ability assumes that the application of aesthetic concepts stems from non-aesthetic sensory-perceptible properties, i.e. that the application of aesthetic concepts (elegance, plainness, bombast) carries a descriptive component that can be identified independently of the observer's emotional response. In the opposite case, the solution to the aforementioned axiological problem would get bogged down in subjective relativism and the aesthetic response of the ideal observer could hardly be justified. In such a case, the theory of the ideal observer would become pointless.

Another basic premise of the theory of the ideal observer is the assumption that there are two aspects to aesthetic judgments – a factual and evaluative one. As mentioned above, if the theory of the ideal observer as a solution to the axiological problem of aesthetics is to avoid the logical circle, the abilities of the observer have to be defined independently of the aesthetic value of the given object. If delicacy of perception is considered one of the characteristic features of an ideal observer, then, for the aforementioned reason, this perception must be related to sensory-perceptible properties that are free of any evaluative components. In other words, it must be possible to perceive a painting as "plain," or a song as "moving," purely on the basis of the descriptive properties of the observed works, without taking any evaluative approach. The aesthetic value provides a kind of added value, attributed to these non-aesthetic properties based

on the emotional responses they evoke. If it is impossible to distinguish the descriptive element of the aesthetic concept (or a set of non-aesthetic properties, which, in this particular case entitles us to ascribe an aesthetic property to an object) from its evaluative element, then the advocates of the theory of the ideal observer would have to face the objection of the logical circle.

However, the assumption of logical independence of the descriptive component from the evaluative component of aesthetic concepts can hardly be defended. In the majority of aesthetic concepts, the value and the fact form a homogenous unity. This type of concept is known as a "thick concept," in contradiction to a "thin concept," which has either a purely descriptive or evaluative function (Williams 1985, 128–130). For the first time, the theory of "thick concepts" was elaborated on in analytical ethics. Some philosophers who follow the ideas of late Wittgenstein noticed that in the case of ethical evaluative terms, such as "courageous" or "violent," there is no clear line between their descriptive (identification criteria of a certain phenomenon) and evaluative (evaluative approach of the speaker to the specific phenomenon) components. The enumeration of descriptive conditions that are required to describe someone's behaviour as courageous (for example, the person concerned is able to reach a certain goal in spite of personal danger) may not suffice for the use of the term, "courage". There are cases when human behaviour meets the above-specified criteria of courageous behaviour, and yet the one who acts with courage can be called an improvident fool. The agreement regarding the use of the term "courageous" in these cases depends not only on the conditions of its use but also on the congruous evaluative approach of the speakers. If, for example, our approach to the person concerned is negative and we see him or her as ambitious, conceited and power-greedy, then his or her behaviour (e.g. open criticism of a new department manager) can be called "wounded vanity," rather than an expression of courage. The use of the term "courage" is thus conditional on both facts and values that are indivisible; even our way of noticing and interpreting non-aesthetic properties of an object is affected by our evaluative approach.

Roman Bonzon believes that the evaluative and factual components of the majority of aesthetic concepts cannot be separated (Bonzon 1999). The term "elegance" may serve as a good example. Our conclusion that

any garment is elegant is, in fact, not because we identify its non-aesthetic properties, which give rise to its elegance, which, in turn, evoke our liking. Its elegance not only stems from its non-aesthetic properties (which can differ case-by-case), but primarily from our evaluative approach (taste, aesthetic preferences and non-aesthetic values), or from our form of life. What impresses someone as elegant may seem plain to someone else. The inseparability of the fact from the value in the case of aesthetic concepts is also supported by the fact that even recognised critics who meet the condition of the "delicacy of taste" cannot agree on the aesthetic quality of a work. The advocates of the theory of the ideal observer do not know how to resolve this problem, or they, like David Hume, partially acknowledge the agency of idiosyncratic personality or cultural factors. On the other hand, the theory that considers the perception of aesthetic qualities to be inseparable from our individual and socially changeable evaluative approach offers a systematic explanation of this disagreement.

6. Final Summary

The aim of my paper was, first, to prove that the concept of the artistic canon, which derives its legitimacy from the test of time, is not sustainable. In fact, the test of time is not an unbiased mechanism for the identification of permanent and objectively existing aesthetic values of works, but the result of convergent evaluative judgments expressing the prevailing approach to the aesthetic value, which is socially contingent and thus also necessarily selective. The idea of the artistic canon as an objectively applicable aesthetic norm cannot be supported, even by the theory of the ideal critic, because this theory – in addition to stemming from the unsustainable assumption of divisibility of the descriptive and evaluative components of aesthetic concepts – cannot consequently justify why certain criteria of aesthetic value should apply as generally binding and correct. It is, therefore, necessary to refuse the concept of aesthetic value as an intrinsic and objectively existing property of a given object. The functionalist concept of the aesthetic value seems to be much more convincing, since it accepts the changeable character of the value; both dependent on the culturally conditioned idea of properties of objects that are aesthetically relevant, and also on our individually changeable interests, needs, life

experiences and expectations.[12] This radically contingent concept of the aesthetic value also offers an explanation of two fundamental intuitions concerning the artistic canon – its relative stability on the one hand, and its disproval of opinions on the aesthetic quality of canonical works on the other – without having to use questionable means of argumentation, such as the test of time or the theory of the ideal critic.

Different opinions on the aesthetic value of canonical works originate from the different interests and needs of the evaluating subjects, whose different social experiences can produce a different idea regarding the true function of artistic works or the essence of the aesthetic function of an object. In the first place, the permanent nature of the canon can thus be explained by the dominant position of a certain concept of aesthetic value in society. A consensus on the evaluation of canonical works is then viewed as the interaction between the function of the object, cultural institutions, and the needs and expectations of the audience formed through educational and cultural institutions; hence, characterised by certain permanence and stability. Secondly, the stability of the cultural canon is guaranteed by the very fact that an artefact is attributed the status of a canonical work. With some exaggeration, we could say that it is an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Throughout the course of cultural history, cultural artefacts have been venerated by society as shining examples of their kind, and have a much higher chance of "survival", because they are culturally reproduced, i.e. more often displayed, cited, copied, disseminated, referenced, etc. It is therefore likely that these objects, rather than others, will fulfil the expectations and needs of the following – similarly acculturated – generation of recipients, or they may start fulfilling new functions for future generations. Nothing contributes more to the exclusive position of a certain work than its permanent presence, or circulation in a culture. Moreover, canonical works gain further specific cultural functions that ensure that they are required and in demand: they fulfil a historical function, become a part of the national tradition, bear testimony to the consistent continuation of values of a particular community and serve as an exemplary model for further artistic development. Neither explicit (verbal) nor implicit evaluative acts (such as the exposure or referencing of a particular

[12] For more regarding this issue see Smith 1988.

work) serve to disclose the objective value of a work; they merely work to co-create it.

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