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Seeking the Pattern of Aesthetic Value in a Work of Art

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Abstract: The method and criteria that are used for detecting the aesthetic value in works of art are among the key themes of aesthetic epistemology. The object of this study is to attempt a rational reconstruction of the background of art criticism. In tradition Western thought, aesthetic value lies in achieving unity in complexity, *unitas multiplex*. In the 20th century, this duality was enriched by a third category, intensity. In 1989, Tomáš Kulka suggested that these three categorical features could be detected within works of art by applying a falsification proving method to the aesthetic value. Kulka described an intuitive process of assessing the aesthetic value of works of art by finding possible alternations that would contribute to improving and/or damaging the work of art. The number of possibilities thus found may lead us to recognize the aesthetic value of the work of art. This paper addresses Kulka's concept, emphasizing some of its potential problematic aspects and concluding with a suggested percentage modification of Kulka's concept that might better correspond with an practical background in assessing the aesthetic value of works of art.

Abstrakt: Způsob a kritéria, kterými je odhalována estetická hodnota uvnitř uměleckých děl jsou jedním z klíčových témat epistemologie estetiky. Předmětem této studie je pokus o racionální rekonstrukci procesu, který stojí v pozadí umělecké kritiky. V tradici západního myšlení převládá názor, že estetická hodnota spočívá v dosažení jednoty v mnohosti (*unitas multiplex*). Ve 20. stol. byla tato dualita pojmů rozšířena o třetí kategorii, intenzitu. Způsob, jakým jsou tyto tři kategorické vlastnosti odhalovány uvnitř uměleckých děl, navrhl v roce 1989 Tomáš Kulka, který na tuto trojici pojmů aplikoval popperianský falzifikační způsob ověřování hodnoty uměleckých děl. Kulka se pokusil popsat pozadí intuitivního procesu, kterým bývají hodnocena umělecká díla tím, že jsou nalézány možnosti (*alterace*), kterými je možné dílo znehodnotit a/nebo zdokonalit. Počet takto nalezených možností nám pak umožňuje rozpoznat estetickou hodnotu uměleckého díla. Naše práce se kriticky zabývá Kulkovým konceptem, zdůrazňuje některé jeho případné problematické aspekty a v závěru se pokouší o jeho procentuální modifikaci, která by mohla lépe odpovídat pozadí praktického způsobu hodnocení estetické hodnoty uměleckých děl.

Keywords: Aesthetic value, aesthetic assessment, alteration, art criticism, complexity, epistemology, falsification, Gestalt, intensity, unitas multiplex, unity, work of art.

Klíčová slova: Estetická hodnota, estetické hodnocení, alterace, umělecká kritika, komplexita, epistemologie, falzifikace, Gestalt, intenzita, unitas multiplex, jednota, umělecké dílo.

The quality of works of art is a sign of human maturity. This does not mean that the quality of all works is equally good. Some are irreplaceable; others are not. The reason for shared interest in the assessment of works of art is an effort to distinguish the imperfect objects from the ones we consider – often subconsciously – to be perfect.¹ Thus individual works of art are subjected to the judgments of art criticism. The task of aesthetic evaluation is to discover the criteria by which art critics estimate the value of works of art and to describe a procedure for applying these criteria. It is possible to say that aesthetics is therefore a form of metacriticism of works of art.²

It is not correct to say that each value judgment focuses on solely the aesthetic value of a work of art. Some judgments historically relate a work of art to a relevant category of existing works of art. Assessing the value of a work of art is a decisive parameter of the measure of innovative potential of a particular work in the context of the contemporary state of the “Artworld”.³ It has therefore been suggested that aesthetic value should not be confused with artistic value.⁴ The aesthetic value is the inherent property of artistic artifacts, meaning that its assessment is implied by the constitutive elements of the work of art and their mutual relations.

The objective of this study is to develop the relatively recent concept that trying to define a certain pattern for the aesthetic value of a work of art follows a long tradition of aesthetic epistemology. This concept by Tomáš Kulka was published in 1989 as *Art and Science: An Outline of Popperian Aesthetics*.⁵ In it, the author applied certain principles from philosophy

¹ In our study we address objective value, i.e. the value independent from the subjective experience. The issue of duality between the subjective and objective evaluation of beauty contained within works of art was discussed in the 18th century in the frequently cited paper by British empirist David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste* (1857). HUME, David. *Of the Standard of Taste*. In. LENZ, John W (ed.). *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965. In contemporary discussion see, for instance WINTERBOURNE, A. T. Objectivity in Science and Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 21, No. 3, 1981, pp. 253-260.; ROVE, M. W. The Objectivity of Aesthetics Judgements. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 1999, pp. 40-52.; HANRAHAN, Siún. An Exploration of How Objectivity Is Practiced in Art. In. *Leonardo*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2000, pp. 267-274.

² NIEDERLE, Rostislav. *Pojmy estetiky: analytický přístup*. Brno: Muni Press, 2010, p. 19.

³ The term “Artworld” is used in the original sense as coined by Arthur Danto in DANTO, Arthur. The Artworld. In. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting. (Oct. 15, 1964), pp. 571-584. Danto's concept was developed by George Dickie in his institutional theory of art in DICKIE, George. *The Institutional Conception of Art*. In. TILGHMAN, Benjamin (ed.). *Language and Aesthetics*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1973.

⁴ See, for instance OSSOWSKI, Stanislaw. O przeciwności przyrody i sztuki w estetyce. In. OSSOWSKI, Stanislaw. *Dziela*. 4 vol. Warsaw: 1966-1970.; DZIEMIDOK, Bohdan. O estetycznych a umeleckých hodnotách umenia. In. *Filozofia*, sv. 52, 1997, pp. 253-259.; KULKA, Tomáš. The Artistic and the Aesthetics Value of Art. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1981, p. 336-350.

⁵ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1989, s. 197-212. The text was published in several other languages, including as KULKA, Tomáš. The Logical Structure of Aesthetic Value Judgments: An Outline of Popperian Aesthetics. In. *Yeshiva World*

of science to the field of aesthetics and developed them into a quantitative model of aesthetic assessment.

Although the first edition is already more than twenty years old, it does not seem to be a subject of broader discourse in aesthetics;⁶ if the text is referred to, it is only as a marginal mention in specific psychological and didactic studies, where it serves as an example of the general thesis that there is a certain logical structure behind the verdicts of art criticism.⁷ Tomáš Kulka himself returned later to his concept in connection with the distinction between the aesthetic value of art and the aesthetic worthlessness of kitsch in two editions of the book *Kitsch and Art*.⁸

The question arises of why Kulka's concept is not more widely reflected in professional studies. The answer could not be general disinterest in this popular subject, because it is contradicted by a broad historical discussion. We assume that the most likely explanation is that the concept may have some inconsistencies with the actual background of the current practice of art criticism. Even with this assumption, the epistemic concept has a plausible potential for explaining the general process behind the intuitive aesthetic evaluation of works of art.

The following text is divided in four main parts. In the first part we focus on the relevance of the initial premises of Kulka's concept. In the second part we describe in detail Kulka's algebraic formula. The third part conveys a critical view of the model of aesthetic assessment, emphasizing its potential problematic aspects; in this part we are going to ask the critical question whether the concept reflects the actual background of critical judgments. In the fourth part we conclude our paper with the proposal of a new algebraic formula to determine the aesthetic value of a work of art which should refine this potential imperfections in Kulka's original model.

I.

The basis of both Kulka's concept and our modification of this concept consists of three initial premises. The first is that the subject of criticism is the perceptible Gestalt of the work of art. The second is the assertion that the criterion for assessing the aesthetic value of a work of art is a combination of terms unity, complexity, and intensity. The third premise is the need to

News, Vol. 38, No. 2, 1989, pp. 87-102.; KULKA, Tomáš. Umění a věda: Nárys popperianské estetiky. In. *Estetika: časopis pro estetiku a teorii umění*, 1992, č.2, pp. 29-40.

⁶ An interpretation of Kulka's concept can be found in the chapter on art criticism in NIEDERLE, Rostislav. *Pojmy estetiky: analytický přístup*. Brno: Muni Press, 2010, pp. 35-38.; The incorrect interpretation of some aspects of Kulka's concept (especially the notion on alterations that are identified as "improvements") in TOKÁR, Michal. *Kapitoly z teórie knižnej ilustrácie*. Prešov: Prešovská univerzita v Prešove, Pedagogická fakulta, 2000, p. 168.

⁷ See MARTINDALE, Colin. Art and Artists. In. PRITZKER, Steven R. *Encyclopedia of creativity*. Vol 1, Ae-h. London, New York: Academic Press, 1999, p. 118.; VARTANIAN, Oshin, MARTINDALE, Colin, PODSIADLO, Jacob, OVERBAY, Shane, BORKUM, Jonathan. The link between composition and balance in masterworks vs. paintings of lower artistic quality. In. *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 96, Issue 4, 2005, pp. 493-503.; SWAMI, Viren, GRANT, Nina, FURNHAM, Adrian, McMANUS, Christopher I. Perfectly Formed? The Effect of Manipulating the Waist-To-Hip Ratios of Famous Paintings and Sculptures. In. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2007-2008, pp. 47-62.; SLAVÍK, Jan. Problém chyby v tvořivě výrazové výchově. In. *Pedagogika*, Vol. 44, No. 2, 1994.; SLAVÍK, Jan. LUKAVSKÝ, Jindřich. Didaktická analýza nefigurativního výtvarného vyjádření pojmů emocí u jedenáctiletých dětí. In. *Současné metodologické přístupy a strategie pedagogického výzkumu. Sborník anotací 14. konference ČAPV*. Plzeň: PdF ZČU v Plzni, 2006.

⁸ KULKA, Tomas. *Kitsch and Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996; second printing 2002. Czech edition: KULKA, Tomáš. *Umění a klíč*. Praha: Torst, 1994.; second printing 2000.

establish the aesthetic value of a work of art – in a hierarchical scale in terms of “bad work of art – good work of art”.

The first premise relates to the assessment of a work of art based on its overall appearance. The origin of this key proposition is from Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle's use of the term *ευσύνοπτον* characterizes a perceptual condition which is *sine qua non* for any possibility of our assessing the aesthetic quality of a work of art. Aristotle writes that the beautiful object depends on a magnitude and order of its parts. He illustrated it by this example:

“Hence a very small animal organism cannot be beautiful; for the view of it is confused, the object being seen in an almost imperceptible moment of time. Nor, again, can one of vast size be beautiful; for as the eye cannot take it all in at once, the unity and sense of the whole is lost for spectator; as for instance if there were one a thousand miles long. As, therefore, in the case of animate bodies and organisms a certain magnitude is necessary, and a magnitude which may be easily embraced in one view; so in the plot, a certain length is necessary, and a length which can be easily embraced by the memory.”⁹

For a relevant aesthetic evaluation of a work of art, there is a determinacy for assessing the perceptible whole of the work rather than evaluating separately its individual parts. In the 20th century, this idea was developed by specialists of Gestalt psychology, who defined the perception of art – as opposed to psychological elementarism – based on natural components. A whole is not simply perceived separately as a sum of the individual parts; for example, a triangle is not perceived as three angles but as a unit shape. So we can accept the proposition that the goal of aesthetic assessment of works of art is *Gestalt* rather than isolated individual parts.¹⁰

The second premise relates to a certain revision of Aristotle's *unitas multiplex* that was made in modern aesthetics. In the 1950s, Monroe C. Beardsley suggested enriching the duality of unity and complexity with intensity as a third quality.¹¹

Beardsley noted that the combination of unity and complexity could not be sufficient criterion for the assessment of the overall aesthetic quality of a work of art because the existing duality does not cover the important expressive property. The aesthetic quality of a work of art cannot be viewed as a mere formalistic collection of various elements arranged in a balanced and compact unit; there must also be a minimum intensifying feature in a work of art that affects the recipient.¹² Thus the three characteristic features of works of art, i.e. unity, complexity, and intensity, are frequently cited in the professional discourse from the half of 20th century to the present connection with the aesthetic value of a work of art.¹³

⁹ ARISTOTLE. *Poetics*. New York: Cossimo, Inc., 2008, pp. 14-15.

¹⁰ ARNHEIM, Rudolf. *The Power of the center: a study of composition in the visual arts*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982.; VERSTEGEN, Ian. *Arnheim, Gestalt And Art: A Psychological Theory*. New York, Wien: Springer, 2005.

¹¹ BEARDSLEY, Monroe C. *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 461.

¹³ See, for instance MOTHERSILL, Mary. Critical Reason. In *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 42, 1961, pp. 74-79.; LANDKORF, Louis E. A Phenomenological Methodology for Art Criticism. In *Studies in Art*

The third premise relates to the possibility of assessment of aesthetic value of work of art in a hierarchical scale in terms of “bad work of art – good work of art”. For this possibility Kulka applied the principles of falsification from Karl Popper's philosophy of science¹⁴ to the field of aesthetic assessment.

Popper's falsification is a method of proving the truth of a hypothesis or scientific theory that consists of an attempt to disprove the scientific assertion based on finding a contradicting example. The method of falsification stands in opposition to verification process which conversely verifies the truth of hypotheses based on finding confirming examples. The qualitative measure of scientific hypotheses and theories does not lie in the possibility of disproving them but in the fact that they must be formulated in a controvertible way.

As Popper further states, the proving examples in the falsification process are limited:

*“Every test of theory [...] must stop at some basic statement or other which we decide to accept. If we do not come to any decision, and do not accept some basic statement or other, then the test will have led nowhere. But considered from a logical point of view, the situation is never such that it compels us to stop at this particular basic statement rather than that, or else give up the test altogether. For any basic can again in its turn be subjected to tests, using as a touchstone any of the basic statements which can be deduced from it with the help of some theory, either the one under test, or another. This procedure has no natural end. Thus if the test is no lead us anywhere, nothing remains but to stop at some point or other and say that we are satisfied for the time being.”*¹⁵

Kulka showed that the same principle can be also applied to aesthetic assessment. Aesthetic falsification may serve a dual role: first, it is the line of demarcation between statements of aesthetic and non-aesthetic character, and second, it is possible to use falsification as the measure of the aesthetic value of a work of art. It was suggested that aesthetic assessment should be testable in such a way that the value of each work of art may be denied by finding better or worse alternatives within the *Gestalt* frame of the work of art. For each such found alternative, Kulka introduced the term “alteration” which are only imaginary and hypothetical, not actual (there is no need to repaint Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) in order to find its aesthetic value). The assumption that a good work of art is one that which is highly falsifiable may be applied in aesthetics just as in science:

*“Good works of art are more ‘falsifiable’ than bad ones in the sense that the former are easier to spoil and more difficult to improve than the latter.”*¹⁶

Education. Vol. 25, No. 3, 1984, pp. 151-158.; ISEMINGER, Gary. The Beardsley-Dickie Debate. In. George. LEVINSON, Jerrold (ed.). *The Oxford handbook of aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 99-118.; GAUT, Berys. *Art, Emotion and Ethics*. Oxford University Press, 2007. etc.

¹⁴ POPPER, Karl. *Conjectures and Refutations*. London: Routledge, 1963.; POPPER, Karl. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. London: Hutchinson, 1959.

¹⁵ POPPER, Karl. *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. 2nd Ed. (1st Ed., 1959). London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 104-105.

¹⁶ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 29, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 197.

In Kulka's paradigm, the subjects of assessment are not any aesthetic features of a work of art in relation to the features of other work of art; the subject of assessment is still and only the actual appearance of the work in contrast to its own possible alternatives. In practice, for instance, a critic of art reveals that in Vermeer's painting *The Milkmaid* (c. 1658), a certain shift of the female figure to the left side of the picture composition damages the Gestalt of this masterpiece, or a film critic says that selected scenes in Bresson's film *Une Femme Douce* (1969) would benefit from a more dramatic course. Plentiful similar examples from all artistic disciplines can be easily found.¹⁷

A key requirement for every alteration is that it not exceed the characteristic features of Gestalt of a certain work of art. Thus if a critic claims that the dominant female figure in Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* would benefit from repainting her characteristic soft blue skirt in a warm and striking color, it would be naturally possible to have doubts about whether such a new "version" is still an alteration of the same masterpiece. In this case we would rather say that this art critic's view is related to an entirely different work of art that is only very similar, but not identical, to Vermeer's original masterpiece.

On the other hand this „fuzzy“ property of borders of Gestalt grown up in the changes accomplished inside the structure of work of art that are almost irrelevant, e.g. tiny little scratches into sculpture or deleting the insignificant tone sounding in the background of orchestral tutti. Pertinence of such a changes may be of course a subject of debate, but because the recognition of the borders of the Gestalt of a work of art is a matter of a psychological process, these disputes do not play an important role in the epistemology of art criticism.

If we are able to find any alteration of a work of art, then every alteration has (or at least can have) a relationship with the evaluated work of art. The number of found alterations and their potential value sets the level of the aesthetic quality of a work of art. For instance, if we were unable to find any (or almost no) improving alternative to Vermeer's painting, then we can assume that it is a genuine manifestation of a perfect state of a work of art. Conversely, if we find a greater number of improving alternatives at the expense of the number of damaging alterations, then we could responsibly claim the aesthetic value of Vermeer's picture is low.

It is probably unsurprising that this method of assessing the aesthetic value of a work of art is a quite common practice of art criticism. Value rankings illustrate the way to assess works of art. They are often mentioned in the critiques and reviews of artistic works published in newspapers and magazines. For instance, a film critic gives six out of ten stars to a film; a music publicist gives two out of ten stars to a new album, etc. The reader has the opportunity to imagine the total assessed value of the work of art. There is a good reason that this assessment method is understood in agreement with the sequence of internal mental processes that go on during the assessment of artistic works.

¹⁷ In general there are two ways we can assess the aesthetic value of a work of art. The first way is to compare the *Gestalt* of a work of art with its possible version. Thus we are able to identify the aesthetic value of the work of art itself. The second way is a general comparison of a work of art with other works of art. In this case we must admit that not all works of art are comparable. It would be unproductive to argue whether, for instance, Chaplin's *The Kid* (1921) is better than Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), because these are two works with completely different aesthetic functions. On the other hand, the comparison of the painting *Guernica* with other works of art of the same artistic genre (e.g., cubism, representation of war scenes) could be informative. In the second case, the assessment of the aesthetic value of a work of art is reflected in the a priori categories (e.g., painting, sculpture, film, music) and standards (or artistic genres such as portrait, landscape, oratorio, sonata). Kulka's concept does not concern the general structure of aesthetic value judgments; it deals only with the work of art itself in relation to the inherent properties, i.e. to the three of terms: unity, complexity, and intensity. See NIEDERLE, Rostislav, DUŽÍ, Marie. Explikace pojmu krásy. In. SOUSEDÍK, Prokop. *Jazyk - logika - věda*. 1. vyd. Praha : Filosofia, 2005. Logika. pp. 205-221.

II.

In this part we present Kulka's algebraic formula and its important key words.

The first key word is alteration. Kulka defines alteration as one of the unrealized possibilities of a work of art. Alterations may be understood as changes, or variants (alternatives), which we are able to find in the current state of the work of art (W).

The second key word is *Gestalt*. If the alterations should be limited, then it is important not to understand those variants as alterations, which change the main perception *Gestalt* of the work of art. The reason for this is clear. By crossing the frontiers of *Gestalt* we would encounter not a new variant of the work of art but a new work of art as a whole. On the other hand it is necessary to emphasize the blurred property of alteration in the *Gestalt* of work of art, meaning that the task of alteration inside the frontiers of *Gestalt* is a certain problem of *paradox sorties*.

In Kulka's concept the alterations may be divided into three types. The first type are alterations which change relations between constitutive elements of the work of art, whereas these constitutive elements remain unchanged themselves (re-touching a photographic print, editing a poem, etc.). The second type are on the other hand such alterations which change the constitutive elements while the relations between them remain the same (scaling photographs, the translation of a poem). The third type of alterations does not aesthetically change work of art. The alteration either

A: *causes some aesthetic damage to W* , meaning that it contributes to the recognition of the accuracy of W or

B: *aesthetically improves W* , meaning that it points at inaccuracy or

C: *does not aesthetically affect W* .

The letters a , b and c in the formula below signify the number of alterations under the category A, B and C.

Alterations are composed together with the characteristic features of works of art - unity, complexity and intensity - into a formula describing the aesthetic value of works of art.

The first one is *unity* of a work of art. Unity is understood synonymously to the whole aesthetic value of a work of art $V(W)$.¹⁸ The higher the number of alterations that aesthetically damage the work (a) and the lower the number of aesthetically improving alterations (b), the higher is the unity of the work of art: $V(W)=(a-b)$.

For the complete formula the terms complexity and intensity have to be defined as well:

*“What we admire in art is not simply unification per se, but harmonization or unification of highly complex and intensive forms. Complexity and intensity should thus be represented as amplifying factors of the unity component of our formula.”*¹⁹

¹⁸ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 29, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 207.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

In his book *Kitsch and Art*, Kulka proposed *complexity* as the form of the sum of all alterations (a+b+c). Kulka wrote that the more complex a work of art is, the higher the plurality and diversity in its constituent features. This intuition may be (at least partially) depicted, as we can express the rate of complexity as the total number of alterations, meaning the total number of options for changing the work of art without changing the main perceptive *Gestalt*. It means that the more complex a work of art is, the more options there are for changing it.²⁰

The term *intensity* is characterized by Kulka as follows:

“One could say that intensive works leave a strong aesthetic impact; they are highly expressive. As a rule, works of art which strike us as highly intensive are very tightly and economically organized. All the constitutive elements function aesthetically, there are very few redundancies.”²¹

The general example which demonstrates the intensity of a work of art may be a poem, which is a highly economically structured medium, in which each word has a unique, irretrievable role, meaning that it is situated in such a position where it should be. On the other hand, a work of art with high complexity is usually only slightly economical. The artistic genre of the historical novel may serve as a good example of a highly complex work of art, due to the presence of numerous components, unlike in the genre of a short sonnet: Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo* (1845) is certainly more complex than any of Petrarch's sonnets. However, such examples is necessary to understand only as illustrative because in generally does not true that higher the complexity causes automatically low measure of intensity.

The degree of intensity is proposed as a ratio of the number of aesthetically significant (a+b) and aesthetically neutral (c) alterations. The number of C type alterations is then increased by 1, for the case there were no such alterations of type C [0] to be found and to avoid zero value in the result of the formula which would lead to its failure.

The mathematical expression of intensity should be represented by $1/[(c+1)/(a+b)]$, which is the inverse relation of the originally proposed $(a+b)/(c+1)$. This simple inversion is a measure to avoid the two following cases. Firstly, the inversion ensures that when the bad and good qualities are balanced (a=b) in case of an average work of art, the resulting value would also be 0. Secondly, when neither type A [0] nor type B [0] alteration is found, which is typical for objects missing any degree of beauty. It is thus convenient, that the resulting value does not equal zero in this case but that it is *indefinable*.

The final form of the algebraic formula for the calculation of value (V) of a work of art (W) is expressed bellow:

$$V(W) = (a - b) \cdot (a + b + c) \cdot \underline{1}$$

²⁰ KULKA, Tomáš. *Kitsch and Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, second printing 2002. Part Why Is Kitsch Worthless?

²¹ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 29, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 208.

$$\frac{1 + c}{a + b}$$

III.

In the third part, the text will attempt to clarify speculative features of the above mentioned concept of aesthetic value, which could contribute to unclear interpretability of the final value of the formula. Kulka's concept is supposed to be speculative in the three following points:

1. relevance (irrelevance) of neutral type C alterations in the value concept,
2. ambiguities related to the assessment of a work of art within a diffuse value scale,
3. trichotomic approach to relations between unity, complexity and intensity.

The first point deals with neutral alterations type C. In general, the value model may be characterized as follows

*“How could we, for example, justify a claim such as: feature F of work W is (is not) in the right place, exactly where it should (should not) be? [...] If we find an alternative W which strikes us as aesthetically superior to W, we could infer that F is not quite in its place. [...] We could thus say that aesthetic value judgements could be tested or justified by juxtaposing the work of art under consideration with its own alternatives.”*²²

Note that the term alteration itself is described as:

*“The notion of alteration clearly implies change, but evidently not every change will count as an alteration. A change in a work of art which would make it difficult to recognize its basic dominant features would not be normally considered an alteration.”*²³

Considering these quotations allows us to assume that alterations have a value sense and are not “value-neutral”. The reason for the formula is to convey the knowledge of how high the rate of accuracy or inaccuracy of a work of art is, which cannot be recognized until having tested alterations on the current state of the work of art. To be able to discuss the sense of alterations (such as the change in comparison with the current state of the work of art) such alterations have to have some potential to improve or damage the work of art.

So far it seems that the alterations have a clear part to play in the epistemic process. Nevertheless, introducing a new thing to the value concept which evidently does not imply value change may be understood as *contradictio in adiecto*:

“It is evident that works of art could (in principle) be improved or damaged by alterations. However, it is also possible that some alterations are aesthetically inconsequential, i.e.,

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 200-201.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

that some changes or transformations would neither improve nor spoil the aesthetic quality of the work."²⁴

In other words, C type alterations constitute a change, however, such a change is irrelevant for the assessment of the accuracy or inaccuracy of the work of art. Thus, we agree to the notion, that if a type C alteration does not imply a value change, it cannot be considered an alteration contributing to the recognition of the quality of the work of art.²⁵

The formula free from "neutral alterations" (and also without technical value +1 in intensity) is:

$$V(W) = (a - b) \cdot (a + b) \cdot \frac{1}{a + b}$$

It is important to admit that this formula even after the simplification does not comply with the two extreme cases, due to which the ratio in intensity was inversed.²⁶ It is also necessary to ask whether the ratio $1/(a+b)$ really describes the level of intensity, which had been earlier defined as a ratio between the number of aesthetically significant and neutral alterations $1/[(c+1)/(a+b)]$.

In the second point of our polemic we question the options to assess a work of art without a limited assessment scale on both sides, within which the assessment should be carried out. Kulka himself defines the assessment scale as limited, since "each work of art (*W*) has some definite number (*K*) of alternatives, that it can be altered in *K* different ways."²⁷ It means that the assessment of works of art cannot be performed in an infinite spectrum, but always in relation to the number of found alterations. It is the same as if an art critic assessed the quality of a certain work of art by giving it "two out of ten stars". Such a piece of information is comprehensive because we know both the assessment scale, in this case represented by the number 10, and the qualitative rank in this scale, represented by the number 2.

The author's definition of the term unity which seem to be in conflict may present a bigger problem:

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁵ In order not to neglect something which can be important, we offer a certain semantic solution, which may help to clarify so called neutral alterations. If the term "neutral alteration" stood for a case, when a work of art can be changed by various techniques without being able to recognize the value shift, the sum of such techniques should be considered as type B alterations or should not be considered as alterations at all. We still insist, however, on whatever the decision is, there is no neutrality within value alterations. This may be demonstrated on Kulka's example, where he describes a situation characterizing neutral alterations: "For example: transposing the tune of Frere Jacque from C-major to, say, F-major would be unlikely to affect its aesthetic qualities (whatever these may be)." If we cannot see a difference between two versions of the same work of art, then the change between them is irrelevant from the value point of view. See *ibid.*, p. 200.

²⁶ The first one of them is described as a case in which no type A alteration was found neither type B alteration (whereas we do not count the C type alterations), meaning the case of aesthetic malfunction ($(a+b)=0$). In such a case, the result should be undefinable, which is in agreement with Kulka's objective. In the other case, when there is an average work of art and the number of alterations type A is well balanced with the number of alterations type B ($a=b$), is the result zero, which also well corresponds to original Kulka's version. See *ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

*“The greater the number of the aesthetically damaging alterations (a), and the smaller the number of the beneficial alterations (b), the greater the aesthetic value (V) of a work of art (W). The aesthetic value of a work of art could thus be tentatively seen as being directly proportional to the number of its A-type alternatives minus the number of its B-type alternatives.”*²⁸

In order to show the ambiguity within the definition, the statement is divided into two parts. It seems that the first and second part of the statement describe two different aspects.

Based on the first part of the statement *“the greater the number of the aesthetically damaging alterations (a), and the smaller the number of the beneficial alterations (b), the greater the aesthetic value (V) of a work of art (W)”*, which well corresponds to the foregoing quotation about alterations, the assessment procedure may be resumed as follows:

1. a current state of a work of art exists, its value $V(W)$ is unknown,
2. alterations of type A and/or B are found in the current state of the work of art,
3. according to the number of type A and B alterations the quality of the work of art $V(W)$ can be determined.

The first part of Kulka's explanation of unity in relation to a work of art is correct. Based on the number and type of found alterations, the quality of the examined work of art may be assessed (for instance “two out of ten stars” or “ $V(W)=187$ out of 200” or “ $V(W)=2$ out of 47” etc.). Due to the fact that alterations of type A and B, or of just one single type are being found, the assessment scale is revealed, which gives us some necessary boundries enclosing the space within which it is possible to judge particular alterations among each other (*Fig. 1*).

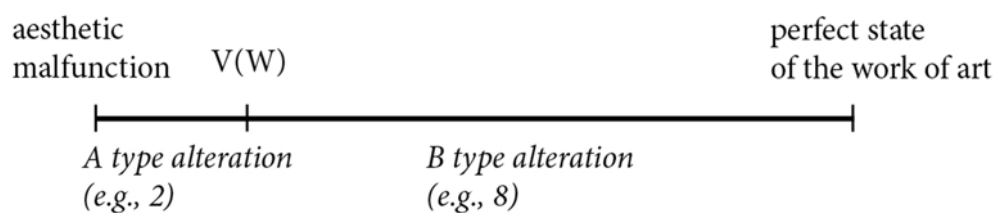


Fig. 1

The second part of the statement *“the aesthetic value of a work of art could thus be tentatively seen as being directly proportional to the number of its A-type alternatives minus the number of its B-type alternatives”* and which is subsequently transferred to the mathematical expression $V(W) = (a-b)$, however it reflects something else. The assessment procedure should then appear as follows:

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

1. a current state of a work of art exists, its value $V(W)$ is unknown,
2. alterations of type A and/or B are found in the current state of the work of art,
3. by subtracting the number of B alterations from the number of A alterations, provided that $(B > A)$, the quality of the work of art $V(W)$ can be determined.

The first two points of this assessment procedure are consistent. The problem lies in the third point. It is not that a general model giving negative results of aesthetic assessment could not represent the value of a work of art $V(W)$. The complication comes when we realize that the finite number of found alterations that encloses the assessment scale may be exceeded in the case that B is greater than A. How, then, does a work of art that is represented numerically below the aesthetic malfunction appear?²⁹ Therefore it seems that the resulting verdict (well portrayed through “2 stars out of ?” or “ $V(W)=187$ out of ?” or “ $V(W)=48$ out of ?” etc.) misses the informative statement, since we deny the necessary boundaries within which it is possible to assess particular alterations among each other.

The third point of our disputation is focused on the trichotomous expression of Kulka's formula, which puts its components – unity, complexity, and intensity into equal position. The equivalence of components demonstrates itself on the fact that the unity, complexity, and intensity are mutually multiplied.³⁰ It is, however, possible that the relation of the three components can be rather structured in a triadic manner. But let us imagine the common situation in which a judgment is made about the aesthetic value of any work of art, for instance with the claim that “in order to balance the picture, the portrayed woman should be shifted to the center of the composition” or that “in order to ensure the integrity of the movie, there should be greater emphasis on the main character”. We may say that the main requirement of art criticism is the integration and intensification of individual elements. The main question is how to achieve unity in a work of art. It is possible that the relationship between unity, complexity, and intensity could be better expressed in a formula in which unity becomes a variable dependent on complexity and intensity. In other words, we believe that the epistemic model of art criticism should be represented by a triadic structure rather than by a structure in which all components are equivalent.

In the article *Art and Science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics* itself, there is no reasoning of the trichotomous relationships. There is only a brief mention of them in relation to the definition of the term unity:

²⁹ It may be possible that our interpretation of Kulka's thesis is incorrect. But consider how Colin Martindale interprets the role of zero in Kulka's model: “[...] *Thomas Kulka has made the argument that the relationship is multiplied by complexity or variety by intensity. If any of these factors is zero, an object will does not be beautiful.*” MARTINDALE, Colin. *Art and Artists*. In: PRITZKER, Steven R. *Encyclopedia of creativity*. Vol 1, Ae-h. London, New York: Academic Press, 1999, p. 118.

³⁰ In Kulka's mathematical expression, the three terms are multiplied by each other, not squared, as mentioned in the text. Despite this fact, it may be seen as a minor terminological mistake. The bigger mistake lies in the fact that the terms are really multiplied by each other. Multiplication is an arithmetic operation, during which natural numbers are repeatedly summed and where the factors are interchangeable independently on their order. It is therefore really possible to interchange the terms freely in case of multiplication. For example, $(\text{unity} \times \text{complexity} \times \text{intensity}) = (\text{intensity} \times \text{unity} \times \text{complexity}) = (\text{complexity} \times \text{intensity} \times \text{unity})$, just like it is possible to interchange the factors when multiplying numbers $(3 \times 2 \times 10) = (10 \times 2 \times 3)$ etc.

*“What we admire in art is not simply unification per se, but harmonization or unification of highly complex and intensive forms. Complexity and intensity should thus be represented as amplifying factors of the unity component of our formula.”*³¹

Kulka himself reacted to this problem several years later in a short footnote in his book *Kitsch and Art*:

*“Both Beardsley and Dickie treat unity, complexity, and intensity as if these were independent good-making properties or values of equal standing and equal importance. I believe this is a mistake. Unity, in my opinion, should be seen as the dominant component of aesthetic value. If the work is seriously disunified, high degrees of complexity and intensity may further accentuate rather than attenuate its badness. Complexity and intensity by themselves should be regarded as aesthetically neutral components that only amplify the positive or negative value of the unity component. This contention could be supported not only by the observation that highly complex and intensive works can be bad, but also by the fact that we may estimate degrees of complexity and intensity without necessarily aesthetic value judgments.”*³²

We assume that despite the presented quotation, the dominant position of unity over the other two components remained unfulfilled in Kulka's formula. Nevertheless, the structure of the terms is not to be neglected. While the apprehension of both Beardsley and Dickie conceives unity as only one of the components, the triadic position makes it a variable dependent on complexity and intensity. By changing the features of complexity or intensity, we always change the unity of the work of art as well. The question is: what we would have to change in a work of art in order to say that we are changing its unity without changing its complexity and intensity? Therefore, we propose the triadic form of the formula rather than trichotomous.

IV.

The fourth part of the text provides a new model, which should solve the controversial aspects that we touched upon in the previous polemic. We attempt to find a model, which would correspond to the conclusions from the previous part of this text. Unlike Kulka's original model, the new model works with the following premises:

1. to work with type A and B alterations only and avoid neutral type C alterations;
2. to maintain two border limits on the assessment scale, which is defined by the type and number of found alteration;
3. to replace Kulka's trichotomic model of unity, complexity, and intensity by a triadic model, in which unity would represent a variable dependent on complexity and intensity;

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³² KULKA, Tomáš. *Kitsch and Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, p. 71.

4. to separate the term *unity*, which is understood as the value of each particular alteration of a work of art (uW), from the term *aesthetic unity* of the work of art V(W), which is understood as the value of the current state of a work of art in relation to the finite number of found alterations and therefore towards the limits of its assessment scale itself.

In the introduction of this part the categorization of alteration types should be repeated. Tomáš Kulka distinguishes two types of alterations that concern the structure of works of art. The first type are those alterations, that change the relations between elements, whereas the constitutive elements remain unchanged. The second type are such alterations, that do not change the relations between elements but do change the constitutive elements of the *Gestalt* of a work of art.³³ It is possible to structure any such type of alteration depending on whether an alteration contributes to improving or damaging the work of art. But simultaneously we believe that it is possible to say about any alterations whether their value affects the complexity or intensity of work of art. This echoes Beardsley's idea that the greater the quality of a work of art, the more collective the degree of unity, complexity, and intensity:

“[...] *the greater the degree of some or all of these features [unity, complexity, intensity], the greater magnitude of the aesthetic experience that the object is then capable of evoking. [...] On the other hand, if the critic says that a particular aesthetic object is a poor one, we will [...] expect him to produce evidence that it is very deficient in features that would promote a high degree of unity, complexity, or intensity.*”³⁴

Therefore in agreement with Kulka's terminology, we may keep labels type A, which contributes to the recognition of the accuracy of a work of art, and type B alterations which warn about the inaccuracy. As a product of these two dichotomies, we may categorize the alterations into the four following groups:

1. type A alterations in complexity (c), Ac,
2. type A alterations in intensity (i), Ai,
3. type B alterations in complexity (c), Bc,
4. type B alterations in intensity (i), Bi.

Let us pay attention to the general requirements, which are imposed on the demanded model. In comparison with Kulka's formula, we will attempt to involve the trichotomous position of unity, complexity, and intensity. The unity will be considered as a dependent variable based on two independent variables – complexity and intensity. We will attempt to interconnect complexity and intensity in order to make the model take into account their balance,

³³ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 29, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 201.

³⁴ BEARDSLEY, Monroe C. *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1981, p. 534.

which should be in good agreement with the proposition that “*high intensity (just like high complexity) is not in itself a guarantee of rightness.*”³⁵ The consonance, harmonization, balance or “unification” between complexity and intensity determines the unity of a work of art under the following conditions:

1. a work of art is the more unified, the more balanced is the relation between complex and intensive features of the work of art,
2. a work of art is the more unified, the greater is the number of type A alterations and the lower is the number of type B alterations.

Here it is necessary to emphasise important note that the term unity of a work of art will not carry the same meaning as the final result value $V(W)$. In previous part of this study we have mentioned that the informative value receives its meaning first within the limit barriers where the assessment proceeds. We will try to maintain these limit barriers, so that the assessment scale does not vanish in the infinity. We will then attempt to find a model, which will be able to take into account the actual state of a work of art W_a and which is in agreement with the presumption that “*each work of art (W) has some definite number (K) of alternatives, that it can be altered in K different ways.*”³⁶ The object of the assessment is then the state of a work of art *hit et nunc* in comparison with its possible variants ($W_1, W_2, W_3, \dots, W_n$), which may be found within its *Gestalt*. The final result of the formula is then the comparison of the actual state of a work of art W_a with, with the perfect state of the work of art W_p , which reflects its position as a percentage within the limits from 1 to 100 percent. While the unity concerns only the balance and degree of each particular variant or a work of art, the value of a work of art $V(W)$ signifies the percent expression of the actual state of a work of art W_a within the limit barriers between aesthetic malfunction (we suppose 0) and its perfect variant.³⁷

Let us turn to the formula itself. The main premise of each assessment is an existing assessment scale. Such a scale is a basic axis with a gradual depiction of certain states or variants,³⁸ from lower to higher quality (W_1, W_a, W_2, W_p) (*Fig. 2*).

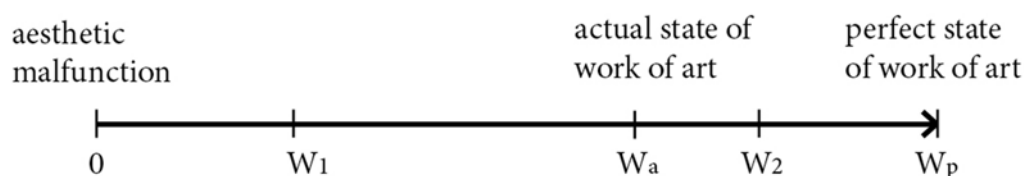


Fig. 2

³⁵ KULKA, Tomáš. Art and science: An Outline of a Popperian Aesthetics. In. *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol 29, No. 3, Summer 1989, p. 208.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

³⁷ It is naturally possible to compare the percentage value of other states of the work of art with its perfect state, not only the proposed current state of the work. However, we usually question the aesthetic value of a particular work of art in the state which we “face at the very moment”.

³⁸ We will consider the terms alterations, state of the work of art and variant as synonyms.

Since the complexity and intensity are determined empirically based on which types and how many alterations are found, there is no need to structuralize each of these terms mathematically as is the case of Kulka's original concept (complexity = $(a+b+c)$; intensity = $1/[(c+1)/(a+b)]$). A simple axis is thus generally useful separately for each of the discussed terms - unity, complexity and intensity. Let us demonstrate this using an example with the unity of a work of art W , where the unity axis shows the actual state of the work W_a and its

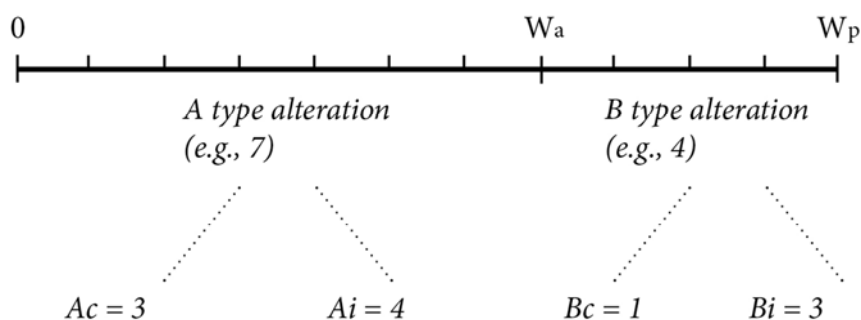


Fig. 3

perfect state W_p on the basis of all types of found alterations (Fig. 3).

As mentioned earlier, the unity should be the result of balance between the number of found type A and type B alterations. This means that if we wished to show the situation graphically, we need to include the coordinates of unity (u) in dependence on the coordinates of two independent variables – complexity (c) and intensity (i). At the same time, we must follow the premise that if each work of art has a finite number of alternatives, then the assessment scale cannot be infinite but must be limited by the worst of the possible states on one end and by the perfect state W_p on the other. It is impossible that the increasing coordinate (u) is predetermined in a certain fixed position for all cases. We must not forget that the particular states of a work of art and their interplay are assessed. The states of a work of art cannot be related to some universal and canonically perfect work of art. It is therefore necessary, that the increasing coordinate of unity (u) is sufficiently flexible in dependence on the concrete number and type of all found alterations. If we set the dependent variable of unity (u) to a particular value for all works of art, we would deny the principle of alterations.³⁹

If we would like to express the situation graphically, we need to use a three-dimensional chart including both independent variables (c) and (i) and dependent variable (u). We assume that the number of type A and B alterations found as well as the balance between coordinates (c) and (i) may be well portrayed on a three-dimensional chart with an inclined plane (u). For the three-dimensional graph, we will use the same parameters as in the previous figure: $(c) \in \mathbb{N}$; $(i) \in \mathbb{N}$; where c and i are natural numbers (Fig. 4).

³⁹ Here we remind that there is nothing else than alterations, which determines the current state of a work of art including its perfect state. It is impossible to think of an obligatory or universally applicable perfect state to which we could relate all works of art.

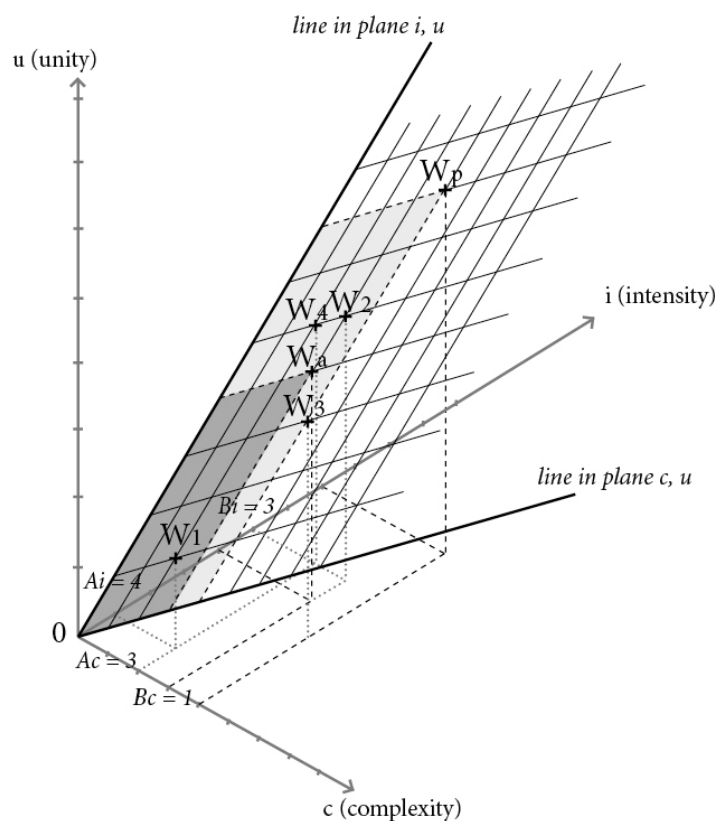


Fig. 4

Let us prove if the three-dimensional chart really takes into account all the above mentioned conditions, in order to be able to reveal the possible imperfections of this depiction. Firstly, we need to compare the situation of the three states of the work of art (W_a , W_3 , W_4), which have the same unity. However, each of these states reaches unity in a different constellation of various types of alterations W_a 7 (A_i , A_c [4;3]), W_3 7 (A_i , A_c [3;4]), W_4 7 (A_i , A_c [5;2]). Of course it is still true that both variants W_3 and W_4 are found within the *Gestalt* of the work of art limited by the perfect state of the work W_p 11 (A_i , A_c [4;7]).

Based on the value of coordinates (i) and (c), it can be stated that the state of the work of art W_3 is perfectly complex, nevertheless, it fails for lack of intensive features. The state of the work W_a consists of better intensity features at the cost of complex features. The most intense state in this triplet is represented by W_4 , which is but at the same time the poorest in terms of complex features. This comparison makes it clear that even though the states of the work of art W_a , W_3 and W_4 are defined by different alterations, they do not necessarily have to have a distinct unity value.

This, however, does not deny the possibility of comparing the particular states of works of art between the aesthetically worst and best variants in the inclined plane. If we compare states W_a , W_3 or W_4 with states W_1 and W_2 it is clear that state W_2 is the best in the hierarchical scale, while the equally standing states W_a , W_3 or W_4 are somehow poorer, the worst being variant W_1 . It is also evident that in any case of the state of a work of art, the decisive parameter is the distance from the perfect state W_p . It seems that the three-dimensional chart respects the condition of concerning the balance between complex and intensive features of

the work as well as the condition of greater number of type A alterations found. This condition is understood in the sense that the greater the W_a the closer to W_p , and the higher the unity.

However, there is a problem, which is not satisfactorily resolved by the proposed chart and namely that the chart also comprises a case when there is no alteration for intensity and/or complexity. We can imagine an example where the work of art is described by the following values W_x (A_c, A_i [2;0]), which means the object, in which almost every alteration would leave us aesthetically indifferent, i.e., there is no alteration which would improve or damage its aesthetic appeal.⁴⁰ This situation should not be taken into account in any epistemic model of aesthetic assessment according to Beardsley or Kulka either, who wrote that a minimal measure of intensity is a sine qua non for to be identified as a work of art.⁴¹

Therefore we attempt to improve the chart as follows. The initial value point is shifted from the original point 0 to the point [1,1,1], by which we exclude the situation in which the chart would include the aesthetically malfunctioning objects. *Figure 5* shows the corrected version of the previous chart, which shifts the assessment scale of the states of works of art in interval from 1 to c_p for complexity $\langle 1; c_p \rangle$ and from 1 to i_p for intensity $\langle 1; i_p \rangle$.

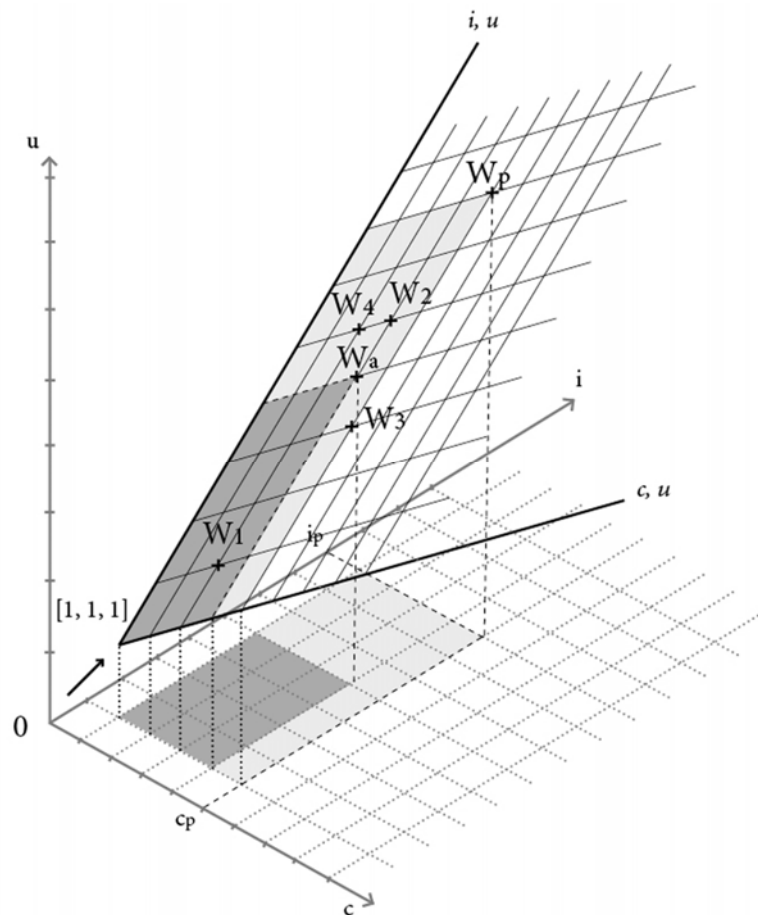


Fig.5

In the end, it is necessary to provide an algorithm corresponding to the unity of each possible state of a work of art uW_x , which would be represented by the chart. In the field

40 *Ibid.*, p. 210.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 209.

$(c) \in \mathbb{N}; (i) \in \mathbb{N}$, where the perfect state of the work is given by $W_p (c_p; i_p)$, then for every point $[c, i]$, where $c \in \langle 1; c_p \rangle \cap i \in \langle 1; i_p \rangle$ applies:

$$uW_x = k + i - 1$$

Here we leave the issue of seeking for a formula expressing the unity of a work of art. The last paragraph will be focused on the last step in the assessment procedure and that is the percentage expression of the whole value $V(W)$. We suggest that the calculation of the aesthetic value of a work of art is carried out on the basis of comparison of its current state $W_a (x\%)$, which is the objective of our assessment, and its perfect version $uW_p (100\%)$. To demonstrate this in an example we take $uW_p=4$ which corresponds to 100%. The question is what percent reaches the value of the work in the actual state W_a , if its unity is $uW_a=3$? The aesthetic value is calculated by direct proportion very simply: $V(W)=3 \cdot (100/4)$, $V(W)=75\%$. For the calculation of the total aesthetic value of a work of art the following formula applies:

$$V(W_a) = uW_a \cdot (100 / uW_p)$$

A final note to address the status of the value model. Neither Kulka's model nor our own should be used in artistic practice. The main objective of this paper is to contribute to the rational reconstruction of the background of the common practice of art criticism on the basis of a percentage modification of Kulka's model. Our study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the epistemology of art criticism.

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