Cyclops Cameo: Reactions of Four 14- and 15-Year-Olds to Their Encounter with a Contemporary Work of Art

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"The Contemporary Work of Art as an Experiential Model for Pictorial Work in the Higher Grades of the Danish Folkeskole" is the working title for a research project carried out by the author at the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies in Copenhagen. The project covers: The reactions and strategies of 14- and 15-year-old students in direct encounters with works of contemporary art, and how students are able (or unable) to use their experience of the encounter in their own pictorial work back in their school art classes.

My reflections on these issues are based on a body of empirical data, which I have collected using qualitative methods, mainly case studies. In particular, I have followed three art classes (with a total of 27 pupils), each over a period of some months, observing the pupils in school and at exhibition visits, conducting in-depth interviews with the students, their teachers and the educators from the museums, and collecting photographs of both the works of art and of the pupils' own pictorial work. Apart from conducting these long-term studies, I have also observed six other classes, but only during their visit to an exhibition.

In this paper I have chosen to concentrate my discussion on the analysis of four rather brief, but telling statements made by four of the 14 students whom I interviewed as part of the project.

THREE MODELS OF ENCOUNTER

By way of introduction, I would like to suggest three models of three idealized ways of understanding the encounter between a student and a work of art in Western culture.

Following the Swedish researcher Anna Lena Lindberg and her book about the dilemmas of art education in museums
(Lindberg 1991, p. 16), I first distinguish between the charismatic encounter and the educational encounter. The third model, which is the one that I find to be the most interesting in relation to contemporary works of art, is what I will call the relational encounter.

1. THE CHARISMATIC ENCOUNTER

The first figure shows a model of what Lindberg, employing a term taken from Pierre Bourdieu, refers to as the «charismatic attitude» towards the encounter. Ideally, the student experiences the charismatic encounter with the work of art without any guidance from a teacher or other educator. The student is left alone to contemplate the emanation or the charisma of the work and to reflect on his or her personal reactions towards the work — if any.

In modern Western culture, ever since Immanuel Kant formulated the concept of «the disinterested judgment of taste» as the measure of good practice in aesthetics (Beardsley 1966), the charismatic encounter has been viewed as the ideal encounter between the human subject and a work of art. The spectator enters the museum — «the white cube» — the works of art speak to him, and, as an empty — or «disinterested» — container, he receives or contemplates. From this point of view attempts to educate students to appreciate art would be useless. According to Kant, aesthetic judgment is an innate faculty.

It is interesting to see that about half the students in my project actually viewed the charismatic encounter as the «right» one, even though many of them also had to admit that they personally felt more comfortable with an educator at their side.

As an example of this ambivalence, Danny, aged 14, first assured me at one point during the interview that «he wouldn’t have liked to be without the educator» but immediately afterwards stated: «I prefer to walk around by myself to get my own impressions. To me it seems wrong when I have to hear what other people think» (my italics).

2. THE EDUCATIONAL ENCOUNTER

The second figure is a model of the educational encounter. In this kind of encounter the student is openly guided in her experience of the art work by one or more «specialists». It might be a teacher from the school, an educator from the exhibition hall or some other expert. When Lindberg discusses this model in modern history, she refers to «the lecturing attitude» and «a transfer of knowledge from above,»
with no regard to the experience of the students (p.16).

My research suggests that the typical educational method today, far from being a monologue delivered by an expert, is much more akin to what Lindberg describes as «an encounter of experiences» (p. 277). The central aspect of this kind of encounter consists of a conversation between one or more students and the educator in front of the work of art itself. In this conversation, the educator plays the role of mediator between the student and the work of art, asking questions (of the students), providing information (about the work), and attempting to combine everything in a kind of synthesis or «shared text» (p. 279) upon which both the specialist and most of the students can finally agree.

3. THE RELATIONAL ENCOUNTER

The third figure, which I call the relational model, is a model which I have elaborated to be able to illustrate a type of encounter that includes elements of both the previous ones. This model, however, attempts to illustrate a more dynamic kind of encounter, such as those taking place between a contemporary art work and contemporary students.

The relational encounter occurs when a student is invited both to experience an intense relationship with a work of contemporary art of his own choice, but is also provided with an opportunity to deepen this experience through qualified communication with a teacher and fellow students.

This model, inspired by the French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan and the German pedagogue Thomas Ziehe, attempts to understand the encounter not as a mee-
ting between a subject and an object, a person and a thing, but as the encounter between two subjects or two «persons» — the student and «the other» — who both act at the same time as subjects and objects for each other: I look at the work, and the work looks back at me. I see the work and I see myself seeing the work. I may even see myself viewing the work through the «eyes» of the work itself. The encounter becomes an exchange, and it is understood by the student as the experience of a relationship.

In the relational model, the encounter is understood as unique and individual to a greater degree than in the other models. Where the charismatic model views both the work and the spectator as entities without context who leave everything behind when they enter the «white cube» of the museum, the relational model sees them both as deeply situated in time, space, context, style, mood etc. Furthermore, where the educational model favors the critical distance of the student through the dialogue with the educator, the relational model aims to promote a closer, more intimate interaction with the work, involving an alternating process of «melting together» and «drifting apart».

**CYCLOPS CAMEO**

These were the models of the encounter. Now let us have a look at Cyclops Cameo and at what happened in the encounters between this particular art work and four teenagers of today.
Cyclops Cameo was made by the British artist Helen Chadwick in 1995. It consists of a circular canvas, 150 centimeter in diameter, painted in a gray and yellow striped pattern. At the very center of the canvas is a photograph. It is sharp, colored and illuminated from behind. A photograph of a dead infant – a fetus, a deformed fetus, with only one blind eye in the middle of his face – a Cyclops!

It was the work that evoked some of the strongest reactions from the seven students in the art class that visited the Helen Chadwick exhibition. During the interview sessions, when each of the students was alone with me, they actually all chose to talk about their experience of Cyclops Cameo, and, with only one exception, they did not choose to speak of it in positive terms! On the contrary, it seemed to be a work that the students «loved to hate». In their eyes, it was really bad: It was «un-natural» or «un-artistic» or it made them feel «un-comfortable» or «un-safe».

But why was their experience with this particular art work of such great interest to the students? Why was it so terrible?

CONTEXT

Before we look at the four statements, I would like to make a few remarks about the context of the encounters that the students had with Cyclops Cameo:

Firstly it may be of relevance to note that the educator from the exhibition hall did not attempt to establish a particularly educational encounter between the students and Cyclops Cameo. As an introduction, he discussed another work by the same artist with the students, and afterwards they were invited to walk around in the exhibition to make some sketches or just to look. Back in school, some of the students mentioned that they remembered the work as «disgusting», but the discussion in art class never really took off. It was only in the interview situation that the students had an opportunity to reflect more openly about their experience, trying to explain why Helen Chadwick’s work had made such a deep impression on them.

Here are some of their statements:

1. The ethical code

Now,..., I can’t see why you should put a deformed on display, because I think that’s a pity. It’s bad to begin with, and it isn’t necessary to show it over and over again [...]. (Kira 15 years old, 8th grade)

Kira relates to Cyclops Cameo through the ethical code. She thinks that putting something deformed on display is a pity (Danish: «synd»). In relating to Cyclops Cameo, she does not reflect on formal or aesthetic qualities at all, because the ethical code of relation makes aesthetic judgments seem superficial and meaningless.

But how are we to understand the ethical point of view that makes Kira’s relationship to Cyclops Cameo so negative? When Kira says that it is a «pity» to display the weaknesses and defects of a human being in public, glorifying it by showing it «over and over again», I would interpret her statement to mean that what she really cannot accept is the «pitiless» displaying of some personal imperfection in a work of art, and especially not in this case, because of the documentary character of the photograph.

The ethical code, which has its roots
back in Plato’s idealism, is still very active in our culture, and one of the most basic things this code tells us is that we must distinguish between the private and the public sphere – and that a display of personal defects or handicaps is basically a violation of the intimate sphere of the person.

2. The psychological code
Uh, I think they were some really awful pictures. There was, like, a child with only one eye, and cloned eggs and stuff. I didn’t like it. I felt really insecure when I went in there. (Søren 14 years old, 8th grade)

Søren’s way of relating to Cyclops Cameo mainly involves the personal feelings that the experience provoked in him. This response adheres to the psychological code of relation.

When Søren says that the works of Helen Chadwick were «awful» and that they made him feel «insecure» (Danish: «utryg»), what he is also expressing is that he is perfectly aware that he is relating to his own feelings and not any visible qualities inherent in the works of art themselves. Reflecting on his experience he is able to isolate, objectify and put words to the emotional reactions that he feels inside. He has mastered the art of what Thomas Ziehe has defined as «self-interpretation» (Ziehe 1989, p. 38). For Søren, the experience of Cyclops Cameo as «the other» gives rise to a radical experience of his own «insecure» feelings, and he was not at all afraid to display these feelings, neither in front of me nor – while viewing another work in the exhibition hall – in front of the educator and the other students.

3. The code of form
I thought the one with the round things was really interesting, I mean, it went round and round, like someone was just standing there moving the paint brush around in circles in the bucket of paint, or whatever. It made me feel a little dizzy, too.

[...] I think it’s incredible how much imagination and stuff people have. When it just comes out, and you make all kinds of weird shapes and things. I think all of this stuff was well done. (Marianne 15 years old, 9th grade)

When Marianne is asked to describe her experience, what she begins talking about is her way of experiencing the striped pattern, which she likes a lot, because she sees it as an expression of imagination. Her spontaneous reaction is not to relate to the photograph at all, and when I asked her specifically to do so, she made it clear to me, that what she appreciated about contemporary art was not the conceptual content, but «weird shapes and things», the kind of thing that «just comes out».

Marianne, of all the students that I interviewed, was probably the most positive towards Cyclops Cameo. Relating to the works through the formal code, she managed to experience all the works she saw as expressive in some way. She was enthusiastic about colors, forms and patterns, which made her feel kind of «high». In this sense, Marianne related to Cyclops Cameo in quite the opposite way to Kira: whereas Kira related only to the content of the photograph, Marianne sought, above all, formal aesthetic qualities, almost forgetting about the motif or the content of the art work.

Cyclops Cameo, made by the British artist
FOUR 14- AND 15-YEAR-OLDS AND A CONTEMPORARY WORK OF ART
4. The code of high culture

It was ... pretty ... un-artistic. [...] It was more like a show. It wasn't like «well here's someone who's a real artist.» I don't think you can say that about that kind of exhibition. It's the same with, well there's this guy who put some dead pigs on display in containers. «That's not an exhibition either. It's just a show, a freak-show. [...] ... and then there was an eye and, like, a still-born fetus, I think. It was like ... a real show. And ... it didn't make much of an impression on me! (David, 14 years old, 8th grade)

What David does, when he tries to explain his negative attitude towards the exhibition and towards Cyclops Cameo, is, firstly, to try to de-legitimize the status of the whole exhibition as art. He focuses on the claim that the exhibition is a part of a special cultural sphere of society which might simply be called high culture. David relates to Cyclops Cameo using what I would define as the code of high culture.

But why was the exhibition of Helen Chadwick's work not art? Firstly it was «un-artistic» because the works were not an expression of «someone who's a real artist». Secondly, it was not a real art-exhibition because it looked like a «freak show.» Finally, «it didn't make much of an impression,» meaning that it was not even interesting for the public in any other way – it was insignificant.

Using the code of high culture, David attempts to relate to the works of art as a modern art critic. He does not attack the aesthetic features of the art works, but he explains why, according to his personal concept of art, this exhibition is a total failure, and should have been on display in a much less high-cultural context than that of the main exhibition hall in the city.

David tries his best to place the maximum distance between himself and the Cyclops, but like many «art critics» before him, his entire argument collapses when he becomes aware of the fact that he seems to be quite interested in this bad exhibition, and therefore is forced to make the contradictory statement: «it didn't make much of an impression on me!»

CONCLUSION

I will now summarize what might, in my view, be concluded from the analysis of the students' statements. Please note that these conclusions are actually based on a much longer analysis of the four statements than it has been possible to present in this paper (Illeris 1999).

The reasons the students give for having had a significant relation to Cyclops Cameo (whether it was positive or negative) varied qualitatively among the students. Each student focused on a different kind of experience or, as I have called it, they used different «codes» when they had to talk about their experience of the work and why they liked or disliked the piece. I have classified these codes as:

1. The ethical code, focusing on the concept of pity.
2. The psychological code, focusing on the concept of personal security.
3. The code of form, focusing on the concept of imagination.
4. The code of high culture, focusing on the concept of art.

Historically all four codes can be said to
form a part of the cultural discourses of what we have become used to defining as «modernity». Thus, each code has its roots in the cultural history of the past two centuries. What is «different» or «postmodern», if you like, is that these discourses exist side by side, as mutually understood and respected among the students, and that some of the young people themselves are capable of shifting from one code to another, when talking about the different experiences they have had with different works of contemporary art.

- All four students in my presentation experienced Cyclops Cameo as representing «the other». Thus, all four codes served to establish a relationship between the students, their «intuitive conceptions of normality» (Ziehe 1989, p. 36) (ethical normality, psychological normality, formal normality, and high-cultural normality) and «otherness» — with Cyclops Cameo representing a repulsive, but quite interesting, example of «otherness».

REFERENCES

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