The rhetorics of bad quality

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Abstract

This article aims to investigate the rhetorics of bad quality in arts and culture. Its focus is how bad quality is described, what kind of argument is used and to what extent descriptions of bad quality have something general in common. The article uses as empirical data reviews of different kinds of cultural expressions in different public media. To compare this kind of public cultural valuation with a quality evaluation that is a part of cultural policy, the analysis makes use of funding decisions from the Norwegian Art Council in the applicants’ disfavour. It deals with instances when the elusive property of quality is not present and has as a vantage point contexts where there is room for and a need to argue for the badness of certain cultural expressions. What kind of vocabulary is at hand for such negative discourses? In what ways can a piece of art or culture be conceived as bad.

Keywords: quality, art, rhetorics, bad, culture
Introduction

The Museum of Bad Art in Massachusetts is a museum with collections, exhibitions and publications of bad art. It is probably one of its kind, but none the less interesting as an example (although tongue-in-cheek) of how bad quality is the essential prerequisite to be included in a certain context. To be included in the museum’s collection, the art must be “created by someone who was seriously attempting to make an artistic statement”, according to the director of MOBA.

The following two paintings are examples from the MOBA collection.

Unknown, Lucy in the Fields with Flowers.
The written introduction to the collection reads like this:

*The pieces in the MOBA collection range from the work of talented artists that have gone awry to works of exuberant, although crude, execution by artists barely in control of the brush. What they all have in common is a special quality that sets them apart in one way or another from the merely incompetent.*

MOBAs collection and the humorous introduction to it represent an introductory example to the topic of this article: In the realm of arts and culture, how, and with what kind of concepts do you explain that something is bad? We can continue with three more attempts to do just this:

When Madonna featured in her first movie in 1986, *Shanghai Surprise*, a British critic summarized his views on it in this manner: “Makes you long for something lighter and wittier, such as a documentary on the Khmer Rouge” (quoted in Ward 2002:19).

An R’n’B record was some years ago described like this by a Norwegian music critic: “outdated beat sketches with constant, horrible, totally misplaced outbursts of sweaty funk metal and nagging white indie rapping” (Bjørnersen 2006).

When Odd Nerdrum’s (Norwegian painter and writer) book was excluded from a certain scheme of the Norwegian Art Council (the purchasing programme for dramatic text), it was dismissed on the following grounds (in my translation): “despite some interesting parts of semi-biography and cultural criticism, and a certain flow in often humorous dialogue, the conceptual and dramaturgical elements are not thorough and engaging enough as a literary or dramatic text”.

These three quotes represent different attempts to explain why something is bad, or in the last instance, why something is not good enough. The contexts and framework within which the statements operate are quite different. What the examples have in common is that they are rooted
in professions that work on a daily basis with separating good from bad. This point to an interesting divide: On the one hand you have more or less academic discussions on the possibility, or rather, impossibility of defining the quality of art. On the other hand, you have the continuous practice of critics, bureaucrats, prize committees and consultants that defines quality and the lack of it every day. This article aims to shed light on both the theoretical and the practical side of this divide. In the following, the topic and the empirical data is presented in more detail, being followed by a review on selected attempts to theorize explicitly on bad art. The next and main part of the article is a presentation and analysis of examples from two different kinds of quality assessment – that of art councils and that of mass media critics. This is followed by a discussion on how different ways of describingbadness are rooted in artists, art or affect, and furthermore by some final remarks on how these evaluative practices represent a continuous aesthetic discourse.

The topic and the data

This article deals with negative evaluations of art and culture. The main focus is how bad quality is described, what kind of argument is used and to what extent descriptions of bad quality have something general in common. What kind of vocabulary is at hand for such negative discourses? As an analytical tool, I will make use of the traditional triad in aesthetics, that of artist, art and audience. This triad is on the one hand a way of distinguishing between the foci of different kinds of aesthetic theory (cf. e.g. Bale 2008). Conversely, this triad can on the other hand also function as a basic distinction between different ways of defining the very concept of art itself.

Why should such a topic be relevant to cultural policy research? I can think of a number of reasons. First of all, the very concept of quality and the process of evaluating it, constitutes a basic principle for cultural policy. An important legitimation of this part of government politics is that this is necessary because market forces and public demand is not sufficient to create the quality one wants. The last Norwegian white paper on cultural policy, states for instance that quality is “a decisive criteria for a cultural project to be supported in the governments cultural policy” (Kultur- og kirkedepartementet 2003:7). Furthermore, most art councils and most schemes and projects of cultural policy have as a primary mandate to ensure the production and availability of high quality art and culture. To be able to do just that, art councils and cultural bureaucrats are very much dependant on a never ending effort to separate good from bad.

Secondly, quality judgment constitutes a very important arena for the exertion of power in the cultural sector. To use the Norwegian context, quality judgements, more often that not behind closed doors, decides the distribution of more than 500 million kroner. At the same time, reviews and critiques can decide quite brutally whether or not a cultural product has a commercial right to live. In both these cases, to be in the position to describe badness (or lack of goodness), is a position of considerable power. As such, these positions and the way they function deserves a closer study.

Thirdly, quality should be studied to promote a sort of disenchantment (Weber: entzauberung) of the quality concept. To study how quality works in actual practice; to analyze how the concept influences the actual cultural policy at work, is also to contribute to demystify the elusive. Such demystification can sometimes be appropriate and necessary.

In addition to these reasons, it is not a very far-fetched prophecy that the importance (as well as the controversy) on professional quality assessment will increase proportionally with the digital cultural
democracy. When everyone can produce and distribute art to the world, professional distinction will most likely change its role. The general conditions for cultural critique are evidently changing, albeit to what degree and in what direction are questions not being beyond the scope of this article.

The main empirical sources for this article consist of previous attempts to describe and define the bad in a theoretical manner, as well as newspaper reviews of different kinds of cultural expressions, especially musical recordings and films. I have gathered reviews from two Norwegian daily newspapers; *Dagbladet* and *Aftenposten* from their respective digitized archives. The publishing period for these reviews has been between 2000 and 2011, and the criteria for being included in the material have been that the record or film has been given the number or grade 1, on a scale where 6 is the highest.\(^7\) To compare this last kind of public cultural valuation with a quality evaluation that is a part of cultural policy, I also include selected funding decisions from the Norwegian Art Council in the applicants’ disfavour – although limited to the extent that these contains an explanation for the negative outcome. The decisions in question stem from literature purchasing schemes, and are quoted from the minutes of the relevant meetings of Arts Council Norway.

On attempts to define badness

Aesthetics is traditionally defined as either the philosophy of or a particular conception of beauty and/or art.\(^8\) In this context, the primary interest is on how a negative aesthetics is textualized and conceptualized. Principally, aesthetic quality can be seen as an essential aspect in an object itself, something entirely in the eyes (or ears) of the beholder, or something that is constructed socially or institutionally. A similar tripartite distinction can be used for definitions of art itself: In this way, the artness of art lies either in the art object, in the way it is experienced and interpreted, or – again – in the institutional context of art. The first stance is the traditional aesthetic view that art is an object or form, and that artness hence can be defined by aesthetical properties of the art objects (cf. Davies 2001:171). The second view has been put forward by John Dewey, among others, claiming that it is the experience of art that made art what it is or can be (Dewey 1934). The third view is easily recognized in institutional theories of art, as outlined by George Dickie (Dickie 1974, 2003) and Arthur Danto (1973). This last theoretical strand has been very influential in trying to establish some sort of common understanding of how art becomes art. Dickies explanation is that an artwork is an artefact created to be presented to an artworld public (cf. Dickie 1974, Davies 1991:84). This three-part-distinction of viewing quality (or art) is of course a much too simple one, but it can serve as a vantage point. An interesting question is to what extent these 1) objective/essentialist, 2) subjective and 3) social/institutional views also describes the cases where the quality is considered bad or lacking. I shall return to this question.

The American philosopher James Feibleman wrote in 1971, that “[b]ad art has seldom been studied. You might go through many a history of art without seeing the topic mentioned” (Feibleman 1971:59). He seems to be right. At the same time, if it is possible to describe what makes a work of art good, it should also be possible to describe what makes it bad. These are also properties that tend to define one another – the good is the opposite of bad, and bad is the lack of good. The art historian Quentin Bell states that “the goodness of good art is determined by some opposite quality with which we compare it” (Bell 1969:20). This doesn’t necessarily bring us much further, but underlines one of the reasons to why also badness should be discussed and studied.

Is the concept of bad art at all possible? In an essentialist perspective, it is not (cf. Vilks 2001:33f). Something is either art or it is not. If it is art, it has transcended the potential judgment of negative
qualities. If it is not art, it is dismissed and excluded from the relevant discourse: Bad art is non-art. In Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, he states both that “The very idea of a bad work of art is an oxymoron”, i.e. a contradiction in terms, and also that “As long as the boundary between art and reality is not completely fudged, tolerance for bad art is a transgression against the very idea of art” (Adorno 1984:236).

There is also the option that evaluation of art has become gradually more important, as the question of what art actually *is* has ceased to give meaning. The Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen, who has written a book on the concept of art, claims that:

> When the concept of art is emptied, and everything, literally, can be art, it is no longer possible to separate between art and non-art. Then the question of quality and value becomes far more important: “Is this good?” or “Does this have any value?” Such a question is more relevant because it actually distinguishes objects. It is a critical question, as opposed to the rhetorical question on whether something is art or not. This question has only the power to ascribe yet another object to an empty concept. (Svendsen 2000:111, my translation)

There are of course some attempts to both define and systemize the specific attributes of bad art. One of the few is from the mentioned James Feibleman. He wrote an article in 1971 with the title *Bad Art*. He proposes that art can be bad for eight different reasons. It is highly relevant in this context to look closer at his distinctions of the bad. The usefulness and quality of his model is questionable, but it deals with lack of quality from an interesting perspective. Feibleman claims that art is bad:

1. When the parts are more important than the whole in a work of art
2. When morality supercedes beauty
3. When technique exceeds content
4. When previous standards of the beautiful are employed in repetition
5. When conventional evaluations are allowed to govern new work
6. When pity replaces emotion
7. When there is no organization or direction
8. When art is directed to ends other than the aesthetic

(Feibleman 1971:63).

Feibleman moves on to expand on each of these ways to be bad. Let’s look more closely at some of Feibleman’s eight points. His first one deals with the lack of holism, that is, when the parts are more important than the whole (op.cit.:63). Feibleman calls this “the archetypal example of bad art” (ibid.). His concrete examples of this are both Gothic cathedrals, with too many decorative elements, and also some paintings by Jackson Pollock, where the parts speak louder than the whole. Feibleman’s definitive statement on this kind of badness is this: “Art in which the parts themselves behave like wholes goes dead against the very meaning of art and therefore is singularly bad.” (op.cit.: 64).
The second and third point of Feibleman regards two different examples of the unimportant overshadowing the important – morality over beauty and technique over content. Both moral and technique is in Feibleman's sense elements that cannot be at the centre of proper art. If art has a moral agenda, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or propagandic novels published under the Stalin regime, it becomes bad. This stems from the fact that the morality issues influences the aesthetic effects of the artwork. When technique becomes more important than content, it is the same thing that happens – technique and virtuosity is shallow, while content is or should be profound.

In Feibleman's model, it is a traditional aesthetic (or essentialist) perspective that prevails. If these distinctions of bad quality is turned around 180 degrees, what emerges is the classical view of what *good* art is, or what art actually is and necessarily must be: an 1) aesthetically pleasing and 2) original 3) whole that evokes 4) emotion and sense of beauty, and that has 5) aesthetic form and emotional content as its 6) one and only end. If one or more of these criteria is not met, the art in question is, by definition and necessity, bad.

There are other attempts to summarize types of bad art, in other parts of the cultural industry. In an anthology on *Bad Music* (Washburne and Derno 2004), Simon Frith deals among other topics with anthologies on bad music. One of his examples is the radio show *Worst Records Ever Made*.[9] He claims that such compilations includes three types of (bad) music: music that is technically incompetent, music that expresses a sort of misplaced emotion[10] and, finally, genre confused music, where opera singers sing rock or rock singers sing opera etc. Frith goes on to say that the type of badness represented in these categories essentially means ridiculous music. Later in his article, Frith systemizes the most common arguments on music lacking quality. What makes bad music bad, or how is its low quality explained in a discourse on music (Frith 2004:20ff)?

First of all, a common negative critique of “bad” music regards its production, or mass production background. Music is bad if it is standardized, if it is formulaic or in some way imitative. This is both bad in the Marxist culture-critical tradition from Adorno and others, and bad in the more romantic aesthetic sense. The implicit contrast of this kind of bad is of course the autonomous, the original and the unique (op.cit.).

Secondly, music becomes bad because of the sheer incompetence of the artist or musician. This point can regard actual bad playing, the fact that the musician is unprofessional or uneducated at a technical level. It can also be an argument pointing to the artist being *self-indulgent*, that is, being too much in love with him- or herself to see when enough is enough, either of technique, emotional pathos or personal ego.

An interesting third point is that music is described as bad when it leads to bad things. Bad music has been claimed to responsible for arousal, violence and crime. Hence it is the immoral effects of the music that makes it bad. This moral stance was first a common critique against 50s rock ‘n’ roll, but has also been clearly visible as responses to e.g. rap music in the 90s and also after 2000. Such arguments on badness has also been institutionally influential, with the best examples of this being campaigns, lobbyism, public hearings and committees in the US dealing with bad music’s bad influence on young people[11].

Frith’s points on bad music show that there is more to artistic badness than just aesthetic unfulfilment. The bad in bad art or culture can also have an ethical element – the idea that we
should avoid bad art because it is bad in a strictly moral sense. In their analysis of the historical development of ideas on social impacts of the arts, Belfiore and Bennett have shown that ideas of negative influences of the arts have a long intellectual history. Making “The Negative Tradition” one of three main ideological strands, they show that a negation of the value of arts goes as far back as to Platon’s *Poetics* (Belfiore and Bennett 2007:143, see also Belfiore and Bennett 2008). Interestingly enough, this is in a way the complete opposite of the second version of badness from James Feibleman. He states that art is bad when it is primarily occupied with being morally good. In the bad-moral-effect-criticism, art is bad when it leads to the morally bad.

**On the practice of assessing quality: art councils and mass media**

Quality is no doubt an important concept for cultural policy. Quality is a sort of philosophers’ stone for culture – it is considered absolutely essential, indeed sought-after, and is at the same time extremely elusive, both as a concept and as an essential aspect. It is the stuff that transforms ordinary culture to gold through some alchemistic process that gives the cultural expression in question a lasting value. In a Norwegian cultural policy context, several voices have asked for a closer focus on the quality of culture, after several years of steadily expanding budgets from the Ministry of Culture. In this article, most examples are from instances where this elusive property is not present.

There are at least two places where we find a more or less professional and institutional quality assessment of the arts. One is the in the role of the professional critic or reviewer, working in some form of media – newspapers, magazines, television, radio and of course, the internet. The second is the quality assessment that is performed by a cultural bureaucracy in order to distinguish between what deserves financial support and what doesn’t. The typical example here is the publicly funded art council working to promote quality and professionalism in the arts. The first of these two is a publicly oriented role. The reviewer writes – of course – to and for a reader, a reader that wants to be enlightened, guided, amused and entertained, preferably at the same time. The role of cultural bureaucracy is much more non-public and non-accessible. At the same time, both roles need to conclude an assessment quite schematically. The reviewer needs more and more often to give the cultural product a number, a grade, while the cultural bureaucracy needs to end with a simple decision of “yes” or “no”.

This last institutionalized kind of quality assessment – that of art councils and similar public organs – are interesting because they occur where two sets of logic, or two societal institutions – bureaucracy and art – meet. To guide them in their attempts to separate good from bad, these organs have often formalized what constitutes the good, but much more seldom what constitutes the bad. The Swedish Art Council uses for example the following criteria as a guidance to assess the quality of literary fiction:

- intensity
- complexity
- renewal or independence regarding literary technique
- shaping of ideas and experiences
- ability to transgress expectations of genre
- originality
It should follow logically that literary work that is intense, complex, independent, transgressing and original is good, while the unoriginal, un-intense (whatever that is), genre conforming and dependant is bad literature. The same holds for the criteria on performing arts, where the most important ones are high artistic quality, renewal and development, as well as the more political criteria of equality, accessibility and cooperation. The Arts Council England describes their artistic assessment as focusing upon three dimensions:

Idea - the concept or artistic impetus behind the work

Practice - the effectiveness of how the work is put into practice and the impact it has on those experiencing it

Development - the contribution the work makes to the development of the artist, the artform and the arts more widely.¹⁴

In other words, the emphasis lies on a combination of artistic intention and the both short term and long term effect of the artwork. The exact same criteria, probably inspired by Arts Council England, are also used by other funding organizations, such as the Canadian British Columbia Arts Council and New York State Council of the Arts.¹⁵ The Danish 'divining rod-model' of evaluating performative arts (Ønskekvistmodellen) has a comparable triad as functional criteria of artistic quality, holding that this quality is a function of intention, skill and relevance (villen, kunnen, skullen) (cf. Langsted et. al. 2005).

The Arts Council Norway has a funding and an assessment practice that can be compared with other European art councils. The council administers e.g. several purchasing programmes, where the need for quality assessment is very much present. At the moment, there are six such programmes: one for literary fiction, one for children’s fiction, one for non-fiction, one for translated fiction, one for dramatic text, one for cultural magazines and one for recorded music. All programmes buy a certain number of copies (between 200 and 1550) of the relevant cultural products and distribute them to public libraries around the country (cf. Vestheim 2001 and Freihow 2001). The largest and most costly programme is the purchasing programme for literary fiction for adults, which buys books for around 40 million kroner every year. This programme is also unique in the sense that the publishers send all books they consider relevant to the programme, and that all books are included in the scheme, unless they lack a minimum of literary quality. This means in effect that the burden of quality proofing is reversed, in the sense that it is the absence of quality that needs to be proven, and not the presence. Of the between 250 and 300 books of fiction that the publishers want to have included in the programme every year, between 75 and 90 percent are. This also makes the scheme especially relevant in this context, because having reversed the burden of quality proofing means that there is a bureaucratic need to argue negatively, to explicate the lack of quality in artistic expression. These explications have regularly been disputed and debated.

In 1996 a writer complained to the Norwegian Parliamentary Ombudsman (Sivilombudsmannen), stating that the justification for not including her book in the purchasing programme was not good enough, and a potential violation of the Public Administration Act (Forvaltningsloven). The ombudsman ruled in favor of the Art Council, but the council decided that it should formulate a set of criteria to be used both for the assessment and dismissal of books in the programme. The criteria agreed upon were these¹⁶:
• elements specific of genre
• stylistic elements
• structure and composition
• thematic construction and development
• language treatment
• knowledge base

These criteria are used in different combinations to explain why literature is not good enough to be included in the purchasing programmes. The following quotes are examples of how they are put to use to explain literary badness:

a) A crime novel is described as having “weaknesses of structure and language treatment”.

b) After an appeal and a renewed assessment, a poetry book was dismissed on the following grounds: “The book seems unfinished. It has weaknesses in its poetic imagery and has programmatic passages”.

c) Another collection of poetry is not included in the programme, because it has “weaknesses of language treatment and weak thematic development”.

d) A novel about internet dating has weaknesses in “character development”. The same dismissal grounds are used for a chick-lit novel that has both “weak language treatment” and “weak character development”.

e) When it comes to dramatic texts, the rejections seem less standardized, but they are equally short. A selection of plays from a playwright was dismissed in this manner:

“The appeal committee has put a special emphasis on weaknesses in the interplay between the shaping of characters and choices of language and genre”.

f) The aforementioned dismissal of a Norwegian painter’s stage play regarded Odd Nerdrum. The rejection of his dialogues Hvordan vi lurer hverandre (“How we deceive each other”) was, as previously quoted, explained like this:


despite some interesting parts of semi-biography and cultural criticism, and a certain flow in often humorous dialogue, the conceptual and dramaturgical elements are not thorough and engaging enough as a literary or dramatic text.

It is interesting to note some slight differences regarding genre. Poetry is often dismissed because its imagery is weak or not “developed”. Fictional prose seems to have more problems with language, themes and characters. Dramatic text dismissals are not systemized to the same degree, but a common topic seems to be that the text does not stand the test of the genre they belong in. What these short rejection statements have in common, is that they are attempts to describe and explain the lack of literary quality, in a context and a system where this lack needs to be explicitly described. The statements can be described as meticulously non-aesthetic. The dismissals seem to try to avoid any explicit aesthetic assessment. Aesthetic concepts like beauty, sentiment, artistic intention etc.
does not seem to have any place in these kinds of assessments, and neither has any kind of description of the effect the art has on its reader.

What these descriptions of bad quality does give room for, is the technical failure of the literature in question. The assessments are very much about what can be labeled literary technique, and more specifically the different technical weaknesses. They emphasize literature as labour, as an endeavour that requires a certain level of skill. If the relevant literature is considered not to have this minimum of skilfulness, it is bad literature in the sense that it is not good enough to be bought. The negative descriptions deals with instances where either the author does not have the literary skill that the occupation requires, or where he/she hasn’t worked thoroughly enough with the product. The technical focus gives the assessments a form of quasi-objective flair. The most negative assessment (according to the art council’s staff) is also the most neutral one: “The dismissal is given after a totality assessment” (Norwegian: ”helhetsvurdering”).

A comparison with the eight versions of bad art that James Feibleman described shows that the descriptions of bad art from the art council interestingly enough does not seem to fit into any of his categories. A potential exception is the poet whose work was described as “programmatic”. This seems to conflict with the points that the aesthetic ends should be the only ones in a work of art.

Quality assessment in public media

Within the same cultural discourse, but seemingly with another set of criteria and different tricks of the trade, there is the act of reviewing the arts. Public media of different kinds are filled every day with reviews and assessments of cultural products. A substantial portion of these are bad reviews. Bad reviews are – naturally - all about explaining why and in what way a certain piece of culture is, for lack of a better word, bad. To write a bad review is also something that is to be learned. There are instruction books on how to write reviews, including bad ones. In one of these, the author gives some hints on how to write negatively on arts and culture. She says for example that, “if you want to write bad reviews, you’ll need to draw on your reserves of two qualities: wit and wisdom” (Brayfield 2008:94).

Let us turn to a set of reviews from Norwegian newspapers and to the eventual combination of wisdom and wit. The examples are gathered from Dagbladet and Aftenposten (cf. note 7). The movies and records in question have been rewarded the grade one, usually on a pair of dice, a very common practice in Norwegian public media. A one on the dice is a very plain and quantitative way to state that something has poor quality. In other words, what we are dealing with here arguably represents the worst.

An initial clue to how poor quality is described by critics is to take a closer look at the adjectives that are being used in their valuation. The following is a list of selected key adjectives from the film reviews in Dagbladet and Aftenposten between 2000 and 2011:
In other words, the movies in question are lacking in intelligence, wit, charm or credibility, failing to trigger the intended response (laughter, suspense, excitement), or actually triggering the wrong response (repulsion, embarrassment, boredom), or documenting wrong or failing intentions (pretentious, speculative, sadistic). Only a few of these key adjectives, like incoherent, deal with the craftsmanship and production of the actual artwork.

The following are selected textual examples from different ways of explicating the rationale behind awarding the lowest grade possible to a cultural product:

1) On an album by Massive Attack:

Don’t buy this album, which is failing in all aspects, destroying the reputation of the group and which will bore you solid. (…) Incredibly enough, you get quite a bit of vocal from the constantly annoying and chronically cosmic Sinead O’Connor. And her lyrics is an embarrassing concoction of equally cosmic (and comical) nonsense.19

2) On a song and album by Michael Bolton:

The song strikes the chord on the new, soulless collection of soft songs from Bolton. He doesn’t have enough butter in his voice to be a Julio Iglesias, and not enough hormones to match Tom Jones. Hence he remains lying and splashing in a musical soup of clichés, backing vocals and keyboard programming, while he, lovesick and tear-choked, tries to enjoy the sound of his own voice.20

3) On a film and Jennifer Aniston’s part in it:

And why choose to act with Gerard Butler, which you have absolutely no chemistry with on the screen? Was it just to rub yourself against him like a rag on a washing board in front of
the photographers on the Golden Globe Awards earlier this year, dressed in the highest split of the evening, knowing that your ex and his hot, Oscar-winning girlfriend already had arrived? Are you sure you are OK?^{21}

4) On the animated movie *Winx Club*:

The faces of the girls have almost no life and resemble the plastic dolls the Italian producers hope to sell millions of. And the falsetto lines the poor Norwegian actors (...) are forced to produce, is the language equivalent of nails on a blackboard. *Winx Club* is the white trash second cousin of *Harry Potter*, dating Lady Lovely Locks at the mall. And it doesn’t belong at the cinema.^{22}

5) On the novel *The Golden Buddha*, showing that bad reviews also often are short reviews. The entire review reads as follows:

A whole bunch of people experience a series of action-filled episodes around a giant golden Buddha and the liberation of Tibet. Incoherent, boring and embarrassingly flat.^{23}

These quotes are examples of a quite distinctive way of describing quality. In comparison with the assessments quoted from the Art Council dismissals, these are very non-technical, personal and in some sense, emotional aesthetical judgments. Together this constitutes an exact opposition to the quoted assessments from cultural bureaucracy, more technical, non-personal and non-aesthetic.^{24}

To describe cultural badness in a daily newspaper, as the recently quoted assessments does, constitutes often good examples of extreme subjectivism, at least at the immediate level. (As such, *gonzo* journalism has become a norm rather than an exception.) As a genre, the texts are a kind of meta-genre, consisting of expressions about expressions, texts on texts, personal statements on personal statements. In this manner, they constitute a kind of interpretative, hermeneutic practice. The genre is also a personal one. The texts in reviews, and especially in bad reviews, tend to be more about the reviewer than what actually is reviewed. This is the “wit and wisdom” (cf. Brayfield 2008) of the reviewer. An important part of a bad review is to find creative ways to describe the reviewers’ boredom, resentment, unpleasantness or any other type of aesthetic discomfort. The creativity is both regarding how this discomfort is felt and to explain the roots of it. To explain why something is bad, the reviewers resort sometimes to different contextual explanations. As the quoted reviews should have given examples of, this goes far beyond the actual cultural expression. The artist’s mental state, personal economy, appearance, conduct, personal relations etc. are all elements that can contribute to the explanation of why something is bad. The tan of an artist, his hair (or lack thereof), amount of cosmetic surgery, number of affairs and so on is in this sense all relevant pieces of information. This also goes for e.g. Fergie’s silicone implants, Jennifer Aniston’s dress, Gene Simmons’ playboy status, Miley Cyrus/Hannah Montana’s merchandise etc.

At the same time, underneath this relatively shallow criticism, it is a rather traditional view of art’s goodness and badness that appears. Just as the case is with the quoted art councils’ criteria for what constitutes good art, what is considered positive, is originality, creativity, honesty, development of the genre etc. By contrast, the negative aspects of bad culture are mass production, the unoriginal, the superficial, the dishonest, lack of personality, lack of artistic development and so on. Even if, e.g. a review emphasizes the point that the artist Fergie has undergone surgery, under the title “Evil has silicone breasts”^{25}, this is merely to hint at the biggest problem – the lack of honesty and originality.

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In other words, the basic points of a lot of bad reviews correspond quite closely to Feibleman's distinctions between eight types of bad art. Reviews of the quoted kind have often as the pivotal point that the artist has made bad art in one of the eight ways. A common problem is of course the fourth point – “where previous standards of the beautiful are employed in repetition”. This accounts for the unoriginal. Another common criticism is either “when the parts are more important than the whole” or “when technique exceeds content” or both, as seems to be Michael Bolton’s problem when he according to the critic basks in a soup of backing vocals and keyboard programming. An additional point is that bad reviews also often deal with the last of Feibleman's distinctions: “when art is directed to ends rather than the aesthetic”. This is exactly the case when music, film or literature is labelled bad because it is a cynical attempt to make money, the single most important “end other than the aesthetic”.

The ways and roots of badness: artist, art or affect?

In the different ways to explain how and why different forms of art are bad – what then, is considered to be the roots of badness? What is explained by the artist, what lies in the art itself and can badness be read from affect and effect? The British art historian Quentin Bell wrote two essays on the topic of bad art in the 1960s (Bell 1989 [1962] and 1969). His main conception of bad art is that art is bad for two reasons: Firstly, because the sentiment, that is the mental feelings of the artist, affects his work, and if this is not a personal or original one, or lacking altogether, the art becomes bad. Secondly, art is often bad because of awareness in the artist of what he calls social beauty, that is, what society considers to be beautiful. If the artist tries too hard to please, is too aware of standards of beauty, puts too much effort into being good, the result becomes inevitably bad. In his view, this goes for paintings like the following, which he calls appallingly bad.

The Monarch of the Glen, by Edwin Landseer. (Also used by the whisky brand Glenfiddich). Source: Wikimedia Commons.
According to Bell, these are examples of paintings that are bad for the last reason. Their badness connected to a far too strong attachment to the period they were made in; a dating that is too strong. The badness of the paintings is in other words defined. They are bad because they are too much influenced by their contemporary expectations to how art should appear. In that way, this becomes an example of defining badness based on external factors, as opposed to badness based on elements in the actual piece of art. The reasons for art becoming bad can also lie entirely in the artist, as in Bells emphasis on the sentiment of the artist. This is the same point that is made by reviewers of popular music especially, because the artist is lacking in sincerity, honesty and originality.

At times, there is evidently no need to question neither the artistic sentiment nor the artworks firm rooting in a contemporary context. At times the roots of bad are plain to see, evident in the artwork itself. The assessment of literature for the mentioned purchasing programmes fits into this category. The books are dismissed on rather technical grounds, because they don’t meet the minimum standards required to belong to the literary guild.

A basic distinction between different ways of being bad would have to distinguish on the one hand between artist, art and audience, and on the other hand between what we can refer to as an internal or an external context. The internal context regards the actual artwork or cultural product, the artist as a producer of art and the individual experience of the relevant art. The external context refers to factors outside this immediate realm of the production and communication of the artwork. These distinctions give us the following principal ways of viewing art as bad, showed here as a table:
Figure 1

This way of distinguishing between different kinds of negative valuations echoes several of the analytical triads mentioned previously. It represents an ideal-typical distinction between forms of valuation. In actual practice, as e.g. exemplified in this article, these kinds of distinctions naturally blend and intermingle. At the same time, the tendency to mix such principle criteria has been subject to academic criticism. The post-war American school of literary theory that came to be labeled as New Criticism is an example of an influential attempt to make clear the kinds of criteria applicable for aesthetic valuation. This school voiced for a kind of positivist aesthetic, focusing solely on the properties within the artwork itself. Two concepts used to denote the problems of using wrong criteria, are the intentional fallacy and the affective fallacy, coined by the core figures W. K. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley in two separate essays. The intentional fallacy is described as “confusion between the poem and its origins”, while the affective fallacy "is confusion between the poem and its results (what it is and what it does)” (in Wimsatt 1982:21). The kinds of valuation quoted in this article relate quite differently to the ideals of this “pure” critique. The examples from the negative valuations on literature from Arts Council Norway seem to be quite conscious attempts to avoid both the intentional and the affective fallacy. The actual text is the pivotal point for the judgments. On the other hand, the examples from mass media reviews, deliberately commit both fallacies in every single review, and obviously, do not see these as fallacies at all. A continuous aesthetic discourse – final remarks

It is tempting to dismiss a discussion on the topic of good and bad art as a discussion with nothing but dead ends. Questions on the quality of art tends to evolve into the eternal question of what art actually is, which in turn has a contextualist or an essentialist answer, or, perhaps more commonly, a mix of the two. And hence the discussion ends. All three potential paths have been thoroughly trod, and all three has been considered uninteresting and irrelevant. There is, however, as I have tried to give examples of here, an evaluation practice that continues on a daily basis, whether or not definitions of art and its quality is an interesting or productive question. This practice is found both in public media and in cultural bureaucracy. In these two areas, two different roles are filled and two different rhetorics are used by people who are trusted to have a high sensitivity for the presence of quality.

Both the mass media reviews and the cultural political circle of applications, processing, evaluation, decision etc. constitutes an ongoing practical discourse on art and aesthetics. It could (and should) also be investigated as such. In effect, the established system of art councils with professional, arms-length judgments of the quality or potential quality of cultural expressions, is a system that in a sense
involves a constant struggle with and a constant rewriting of aesthetic philosophy. For every artist, every application and every potential project, informed experts ponders upon inherent qualities of an expression, its relationship to the artists production, its context for presentation, its references to art history or lack thereof and so on. In a sense, this should represent an interesting challenge to reception theory, because this practice evidently is a part of the *wirkungsgeschichte* of the works of art.

This article has dealt with bad quality, and has attempted to systematically analyze both theoretical and practical approaches to the bad. In other words – both theories on the aspects that make works of art poor, and actual evaluative practice that concludes negatively. There is evidently a gap between these two kinds of aesthetical discourse. I have aimed to shed light on both discourses. At the same time as the discourses differs quite considerably, the practical discourse use certain elements and criteria from the theoretical discourse. An illustrative example is the conservative and rather traditionalist and romantic view on art that can be found to be at the core of mass media critique.

In his postscript “Towards a ‘Vulgar’ Critique of ‘Pure’ Critiques” in *Distinction*, Bourdieu states that it is necessary to see pure and vulgar taste as related to one another or at least, that the pure is based on a rejection of the not so pure:

‘Pure’ taste and the aesthetics which provides its theory are founded on the refusal of ‘impure’ taste and of aisthesis (sensation), the simple, primitive form of pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses (...) (Bourdieu 1984: 486)

What Bourdieu deals with here, is certainly one form of “bad” art – art considered bad because it provides immediate gratification. This is art that is too easily enjoyed or understood – art that triggers what Bourdieu refers to as a “disgust at the facile” from those who represent the legitimate and dominant, ‘pure’, taste. To fully understand the categories of bad culture, it is nevertheless necessary to treat the notion of bad art and culture as something more than the negation of a hegemonic taste.

References


1 The article is based on a paper held at the 5th International Conference of Cultural Policy Research, Jyväskylä, August 24.-27, 2010.

2 I thank MOBA for the permission to use these images.


4 Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Norwegian and Swedish are mine.

5 Quoted from the minutes of the Arts Council’s meeting on June 6th, 2008. Cf. http://www.kulturrad.no/sitefiles/1/omoss/Raadsreferat/RadsreferatforwebR3.08.pdf [read 12.04.12]

6 Corresponding, of course, to the basic communication model of sender/message/receiver and the basic economical model of producer/product/consumer.

7 The total number of reviews collected was as follows From Dagbladet: 50 film reviews between 2000 and 2011; 34 record reviews between 2003 and 2011. From Aftenposten: 16 record reviews and 35 movie reviews between between 2006 and 2011.

8 Cf. e.g. the definition in the Merriam-Websters dictionary: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aesthetics [12.04.10]

9 This was the title of a radio show in Britain in the early 1970s (Frith 2004:17).

10 Frith mentions e.g. the 1961 song with the title My Pullover (actually “This Pullover”), in which easy listening singer Jess Conrad praises his pullover. (cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGEl55qHg7E ) [12.10.12]

11 The most widely known example of such institutionalized moral valuation is the infamous Parental Advisory stickers, introduced by RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) in 1990.

12 The challenge to professional quality valuation by the explosion of available viewpoints online is an interesting topic, deserving a separate study.


16 My translation from Norwegian, quoted from internal document from the Arts Council Norway.

17 The quotes are selected from minutes of Arts Council meetings and/or appeal committee meetings between 2007 and 2011. Some of the minutes are accessible on http://www.kulturrad.no/om_oss/om_kulturradet/radsmoter/ [12.04.10].

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Cf. van Venrooji and Schmutz 2010 and van Venrooji 2009, analyzing popular culture aesthetics through a study of newspaper reviews.


*Dagbladet*, 12.03.2002.

*Dagbladet*, 24.03.2010.


From *Aftenposten*, 03.04.2006.

An aspect that needs to be commented on is that the quoted assessments seemingly deal with different forms of art, belonging in separate forms of cultural circulation and discourse. This is a relevant point, but only to a certain degree. Although the forms of culture vary to a large extent, it is my aim to show that they belong in the same roomy category of contemporary aesthetic discourse.

*Dagbladet*, 19.09.2006: "Ondskapen har silikonpupper".

To what degree should such discourse be a public one? It is a quite common stance (e.g. Lund, Mangset, Aamodt (red.) 2001:10) that qualitative evaluation by experts is a defendable part of cultural policy, as long as the evaluations are publicly accessible and debatable. This means that one acknowledges the experts’ legitimate role in quality assessment, but only to the extent that their considerations can be debated both by the non-experts and other experts. This is not always the case, and should perhaps more often be so. Relevant stakeholders and bureaucrats tend to explain the relation between openness and quality assessment in two completely opposite manners. On the one hand, you have the argument that professional quality discussions need to be non-public and non-accessible, in order to be neutral, and in order not to be affected by other considerations than the artistic ones. On the other hand, you have the reverse argument – that openness about the quality of art and open discussion about assessments and decisions will ensure that a fair process is taking place.

See Everist 1999 for a suggestion on how reception theory should be included in studies on musikal value.