

“Art and Defects” in the Eye of a Beholder

Conference Report by Bob Muilwijk

The conference „[Kunst und Gebrechen](#)“ („Art and Defects“), which was scheduled from March 19th to March 21st and then postponed due to Covid-19, finally took place from November 5th through to November 7th. The second lockdown of the year in Austria demanded an altogether different setting than originally intended by the organizers [Hildegard Frauneder \(Universität Mozarteum\)](#), [Nora Grundtner](#) and [Manfred Kern \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#). Luckily, the online environment they provided for the conference proved an excellent alternative framework, save for the occasional turned off microphone giving the fitting illusion of mute speakers or deaf audiences.

The conference had a clear biographical focus: Most of the fourteen presentations sought to disentangle the influence any clear “defects” artists might have had on their work or their reception. Of course, this already poses a problem that many of the speakers addressed: the idea of “defects” presupposes a teleological norm, be it physical, mental or concerning age or gender, from which it is possible to deviate. A defect is a defect first and foremost in the eye of the beholder and, as Manfred Kern mentioned in his introduction, it can be seen not just as an impediment, but as a catalyst for artistic expression, too. As Dutch footballer Johan Crujff once succinctly put it: [“Every disadvantage has its advantage.”](#)

Regarding deviation from a physical norm [Nelly Janotka \(Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte München\)](#) started out by discussing performances and works by Lisa Bufano, Mari Takayama and Stelarc in her opening presentation. By integrating prosthetics into her performances, which purposefully do not conform to the normative “whole” body, Bufano questions the necessity of such a norm, while Takayama creates self-portraits without any prosthetics and thus seems to ask a similar question: Must the “incomplete” body complete itself? Australian-Cypriot Stelarc, finally, with his attempt to permanently attach a prosthetic third arm to his body, seems to go above and beyond any possible norm for the human body.

Janotka’s presentation laid out three main variables that would define the following presentations: 1. What genre of art are we discussing? 2. What kind of “defect” is in play? 3. Is the “defect” positively or negatively connotated?

Occasionally, presentations neatly clustered themselves with regard to these variables. This was, for example, the case with the literary and filmic depictions of blind female composer Maria Theresia Paradis and the sculptural and graphic depictions of deaf male composer Ludwig van Beethoven discussed by [Julia Hinterberger \(Universität Mozarteum\)](#) and [Max Pommer \(Friedrich-Schiller-Universität Jena\)](#) respectively. While Paradis’ rise to musical fame was facilitated by her blindness, which made her eligible for financial support by empress Maria Theresia and an ensuing musical education, being both a blind *and* a female composer also rendered her something of a curiosity. (Such links between gender and reception were

also the subject of [Romana Sammern's \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#) presentation on the biographies of female artists from the Renaissance up to now.) Klinger's 1902 Beethoven sculpture, in a similar vein, bears testimony of his interpretation of the composer's deafness as a final step in an artistic apotheosis, which is meant quite literally. In this, the sculptor draws on a long 19th century tradition including Schopenhauer, Wagner and Nietzsche, who all see Beethoven's deafness as enabling rather than disabling: losing his hearing allowed him to "turn his eyes inwards". As such, his "defect" places Beethoven not below, but above the normative "whole" man – the artist and his art start to transcend humanity, as portrayed by Joseph Adolf Lang in his 1905 aquatint "Beethoven in den Wolken thronend" ("Beethoven enthroned in the clouds").

At this point, it should be pointed out that positively connoted "defects" seem more common in the discussed artists than negatively connoted ones, which probably has to do with a survivorship bias with regard to artistic reception. We simply do not notice those artists who failed to make it to the big league *because* of their "defects".

This was made clear, too, by [Peter Deutschmann \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#), who, starting out from Nikolaj Gogol's short story *Šinel'* (*The Overcoat*), discussed the three stuttering Russians Jurij Lotman, Michail Gasparov and Vladimir Sorokin. Lotman's adage that "the best speaker is a bad speaker" because a bad speaker has to constantly think about what he is saying, surely makes sense *in his particular case*, but does not, for example, hold true for the classical philologist and verse theoretician Gasparov, whose lectures Deutschmann had attended in Moscow with no little amount of astonishment that the university let this man teach at all. In reciting verse, however, Gasparov's stutter disappeared all but completely, which supports a hypothesis that his "defect" led him to grow to such great heights as a scholar of literature.

One is tempted to say that if someone achieves something while suffering from a "defect", we (both the artists or, in this case, the scholars themselves as well as their audience) reflexively fall back into the assumption that every part of a story should have a narrative function – indeed, we fall back unto Nietzsche's problematic quote, that "[t]hat which does not kill us makes us stronger."

That such a reflex has a long tradition was illustrated by [Georg Danek's \(Universität Wien\)](#) presentation on poets as seers in the epics of Greek antiquity. In the *Odyssey*, the blind singer Demidocus is portrayed as having received his talent for singing from the gods, who *also* (but not in turn!) robbed him of his eyesight. A similar binary opposition is present in the lame god Hephaestus, who nevertheless is the most fabled artist of all gods. This link between good and bad "gifts from the gods" becomes explicit in the Homeric figure of Tiresias, whose blindness is not just juxtaposed with his ability as a seer, but paradoxically connected to it in some sort of an exchange deal. Regarding Homer himself, who is traditionally portrayed as blind, too, a similar mechanic seems to be in play: the poet becomes a *vātes* – through his blindness.

[Dorothea Weber \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#) consequently picked up the thread with Lucretius, while highlighting for example Democritus' self-blinding in order not to impede his mind's eye with his physical ones, as well as the link between poetry and philosophy on the one hand and insanity on the other made by Saint Jerome in his comments on Lucretius. This "knowledge" of Lucretius' insanity, although first purported nearly five centuries after his

death, influenced his reception: the poet-pilosopher was both admired *and* dismissed for being insane.

With their presentations both [Gregor Schuhen \(Universität Koblenz-Landau\)](#) and [Jana Graul \(Universität Hamburg\)](#) stayed in the realm of reciprocity between artistic genius and “defects”. Schuhen bridges the apparently wide chasm between *Don Quixote* and Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*: Both in Cervantes’ early 17th century novel as in Mann’s adaptation of the Faustian story, Schuhen highlights a process which he calls “genius through insanity” – Mann has his protagonist Adrian Leverkühn purposefully infect himself with syphilis, which is referred to in the novel as the “genius-bestowing disease” [1]-. (This matches Mann’s view that physical discomfort is a boon for artists, which he expressed in several theoretical writings.) Here the *intentional* seeking out of a “defect” in the hopes for artistic productivity sets these works apart from others, whilst clearly placing them in a tradition that is already familiar with the positively connoted “defective artist”. Offering a third glance at this tradition after Danek and Weber, [Ronny F. Schulz \(Christian-Albrechts-Universität zu Kiel\)](#), while not *causally* linking artistic skill and “defect” to one another, pointed out the prevalence of physical disability as a *sign* of poetic potency in 13th century German language poetry – even when, similar to Mann’s Leverkühn, such “defects” are achieved by automutilation, as is the case in Ulrich von Lichtensteins *Frauendienst (Service of Ladies)*.

Graul on the other hand reflects on both negative and positive consequences of the constant exposure to the risk of wavering health for artists in the early modern period, like Michelangelo. One can compare this mechanism to Thomas Bernhard’s excessive productivity, which he himself attributed to his ever impending death caused by his chronic lung disease.

[Céline Roussel \(Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München\)](#) finds a similar positive twist to the “defect” of blindness in the works of blind authors Jacques Lusseyran, John Martin Hull and Georgina Kleege. Their “defect” is no totally inhibiting hindrance, but adds new dimensions to their literary work – they not only normalize blindness, but draw artistic force from it.

Subsequently, [Daniel Ehrmann’s \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#) presentation, which focused mainly on Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Friedrich Schiller and Adalbert Stifter, was something of an anomaly, because none of these three suffered from any “defects” that normally would have hindered them in their mode of artistic expression. That Lichtenberg suffered from quite serious physical deformities and that Schiller got severely ill, but survived, did not impede their possibility to write, but nevertheless limited their choice of genre (Lichtenberg’s decision for the aphorism, for example, in the eyes of Goethe) or influenced their productivity (Schiller’s increased output after his disease). Stifter’s case is particularly unusual, because in keeping a meticulous diary on his perfectly fine health, which he mostly describes as “good” or “very good”, he begins to perceive himself through this own writing as generally unhealthy: the non plus ultra of his self-diagnoses is not “healthy”, but “as if I were healthy”. That Stifter eventually commits suicide leaves Ehrmann and us in an interesting reversal to wonder not whether a “defect” influenced his writing, but if his writing himself created a “defect”.

An opposite view with regard to a reciprocity of artistic genius and “defects” was also offered. In his presentation on Spanish painter Francisco Goya, Andreas Emmelheinz (Goethe-

Universität Frankfurt am Main) resists such assumptions – in Goya’s case, of a correlation between his concept of artistic melancholy and his sickness and conditions of old age. These do not heighten his productivity or raise the quality of his work – he simply “keeps growing older, but continues to learn”. The frequently made link between Ingeborg Bachmann’s “defects” and her work, too, was problematized by [Marlen Mairhofer \(Paris-Lodron-Universität Salzburg\)](#). The reflex-like reading of Bachmann’s works as “pathotexts”, Mairhofer professes, deprives the author herself of her voice (which becomes replaced by the voices of any possible “defects”) and the reader of an adequate reading of her work. Emmelheinz and especially Mairhofer thus offered a refreshing counterpoint to seeing artists’ “defects” as a primarily positive influence on artistic expression on the one hand and at least as an indispensable tool to understanding their work on the other.

The conference thus spanned multiple artistic genres and offered plenty of different approaches to the subject. While broadening its scope even more might not have been beneficial, there were several i’s that remained undotted: I am thinking here, for example, of the categories *ethnicity*, *class* and perhaps *religion*. Concerning the first category one could discuss Polish poet Julian Tuwim, whose mastery of the Polish language is occasionally connected causally to his Jewish heritage: that he was no “real Pole” allowed him to write in ways “real Poles” could not. Such a trope is problematic, because it is generally agreed upon nowadays that ethnicity cannot be “defective”, but these mechanisms nonetheless are reminiscent of those discussed over the course of the conference and have been at play in the reception of artists for centuries. One could make a similar case about late Danish poet Yahya Hassan, who, being of Palastinian descent and raised in one of Denmark’s poorer neighborhoods in a Muslim family, deviates the literary establishment’s “norm” in more than one. Here, as, for example, with Maria Theresia Paradis, intersectionality enters the picture. In any case: while focusing on the artist’s “defects” can be productive (especially in regard to an artist’s reception), this also carries in itself the risk of clouding a perhaps clearer view of the artist’s work, which, in the end, is autonomous, *too*.

Being organized in the framework of the cooperation between the Universität Salzburg and the Universität Mozarteum entitled “[Wissenschaft und Kunst](#)” (“Knowledge and the Arts”), such autonomous art was also originally intended to be an equally important part of the conference as the presentations. In this case, too, Covid-19, threw a spanner in the works. Although this “defect” could not be remedied, the conference, which took place under difficult circumstances, definitely met the high expectations it had raised.

Reference:

[1] Thomas Mann: *Doctor Faustus*. Translated from the German by John E. Woods. New York, Vintage 1999, p. 248.

Empfohlene Zitierweise: Bob Muilwijk: [Tagungsbericht] “Art and Defects” in the Eye of a Beholder. Bericht zur Tagung „Kunst und Gebrechen“ [Veranstaltung des Programmbereichs “Figurationen des Übergangs”, interuniversitäre Kooperation “Wissenschaft und Kunst” zwischen Universität Salzburg / Universität Mozarteum, 5.-7.11.2020, Salzburg], in: Figurationen des Übergangs, 13.1.2021. <<https://transition.hypotheses.org/440>>

