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Reading ABC. An experiment

Abstract

The article discusses an experiment with the participation of a group of foreign students, who visited Cracow in 2015. It is **not** a research study in a proper sense, although it was based on methods used in questionnaire and focus group research. The purpose of the experiment was simple: to determine how young people with little or no knowledge about Polish history and culture are able to understand a film focused on „being Polish”. A short documentary by Wojciech Wiszniewski was shown to two groups of students: the ones who had just arrived in Cracow, and the ones who had participated in several courses on Polish culture.

Key words: documentary, cultural competence, Polish cinema, Wojciech Wiszniewski

Study or experiment?

The inspiration for this short paper came from my teaching experience as a professor of film and media studies. For almost twenty years I have been working with foreign students, most of them from Europe (Erasmus and Erasmus Plus exchange students), but also from the United States, Canada, the Far East, and Australia. My first English-language experiences were occasional lectures and seminars on Polish cinema; a few years later I started my own regular course called “Contemporary Polish Film” (split into two parts, 45 teaching hours each). The course discussed Polish cinema after 1989, with an introduction to the most important post-war movements. Last year, another course was introduced: “Masters of Polish Cinema”.

The article is **by no means** a research study in a proper sense, although it is based on methods (mentioned later in references) used in questionnaire and focus group research. Instead, I present and discuss the outcome of an interesting experiment conducted with the participation of my foreign students. This experiment could encourage further research; however, in this form it only helps to formulate questions and possible research directions. The purpose of my experiment was simple. Working

with foreign students in a natural way makes an academic teacher question the possible influence of their teachings. Does the cultural competence of foreigners substantially change in just a few months? Simple observation obviously suggests answers. Informal conversation with student also helps, but I wanted a more systematic approach in order to see what the outcome of my efforts really is.

Surprisingly, my experiment, which was designed as a kind of “test” for a possible long-term study, concluded with unexpected observations of a more general nature.

Participants of the experiment

I am fully aware that the group of people who took part in my experiment is not representative on a large scale¹. Yet, I was only interested in examining a particular group of people representing foreign students **willing to actively learn about Polish culture and participate in it** for a period of time. To observe the change, I decided to choose a “micro-readings approach” and so-called **time-series design** with **single intervention in multiple groups** (in this case, two)².

The majority of participants have no previous experience in film studies. Most of them study humanities or social sciences, with some rare exceptions. In recent years, only a maximum of 15% of students declared any kind of Polish background, and even less were able to speak Polish (B1 level or above). Occasionally, some Polish students interested in cinema (but not enrolled in film studies) join the group. The study was carried out with two groups of students. One of them consisted of 20 people **who spent a semester** in Poland and participated in several courses on Polish culture, including ‘Polish Contemporary Film’ (June 2015). The other was comprised of 23 students **who had just arrived** in Poland and signed up for a ‘Masters of Polish Cinema’ course (October 2015). Two different groups were chosen to comply with the research strategy mentioned above.

Background and previous experiences

The aim of the aforementioned courses is to introduce participants to Polish film in the broader context of national culture. During the classes, several movies are shown; all with an introduction and some with live commentaries. Moderated discussion always follows the screenings. We focus on topics, characters, political and social context, and

¹The problem is discussed among others by: Frank Biocca, Prabu David and Mark West, *Continuous Response Measurements (CRM). A Computerized Tool for Research on the Cognitive Processing of Communication Messages* [in:] Annie Lang (ed.) *Measuring Psychological Responses to Media Messages*, New York and London: Routledge 2014, pp. 15-64.

² See: Glass, Gene V. Willson, Victor L., Gottman, John Mordechai, *Design and Analysis of Time-series Experiments*, Charlotte: Information Age Publishing 2008.

only occasionally comment on style, film form, and genre. Students from different cultural backgrounds offer their opinions and interpretations of Polish movies. Some of them are truly original and exciting, as they are based on fresh and unencumbered approaches. For example, most of the political metaphors are not easy to apprehend, as students know very little or nothing about the recent history of Poland. Yet, most of the students do try to understand the movies they watch. Instead of trying to discover the intended meaning, they look for more universal aspects of the stories.

Juliusz Machulski's *Sexmission* (*Seksmisja*, 1984) is a very good example of this creative 'misunderstanding'. When the movie premiered in Poland, it was considered a metaphor for a totalitarian society, and as such was drastically censored. A state without men, in fact ruled by a disguised male dictator, stood for eighties' Poland. For today's foreign students, Machulski's comedy has a different meaning. Most of the students agree that it is an antifeminist satire, and some of them see the movie as a critique of political correctness.

Subject of the experiment. Criteria for selection

The experiment had to be conducted in class (2 hours and 15 minutes). Thus, a **short film** had to be chosen for discussion and analysis. Its **focus on a Polish-oriented subject** was essential. I also opted for a film that communicates with **images rather than words**. Although alternatives certainly exist, after few discussions with my academic colleagues I decided to choose a film in which Polish identity is thoroughly discussed. The film is also very "dense": with only 9 minutes of running time it encapsulates many references to Polish history, culture, and language (although there is almost no spoken dialogue, and very little off-screen commentary, which makes it even more challenging).

Both groups watched the same film: a short experimental documentary, *ABC* (*Elementarz*, 1976) by Wojciech Wiszniewski. The film is recognized³ as one of the most outstanding achievements of Polish documentary and a major influence on a generation of younger filmmakers⁴. More information on Wiszniewski and his short can be found in the booklet with commentaries written by Mirosław Przyłipiak⁵ that accompanies the DVD edition of the work.

³ See for example: Kamila Kuc, Michael O'Prey, *The Struggle for Form: Perspectives on Polish Avant-Garde Film 1916-1989*, Columbia University Press 2014, p. 78.

⁴ See for example: Urszula Tes, *Declaration of Immortality – Inspirations Derived from Creative Documentaries by Wojciech Wiszniewski*, "Images" 2014, vol. XV/no. 24 Poznań 2014, pp. 145-154.

⁵ *Wojciech Wiszniewski* in a series *Polska Szkoła Dokumentu*, Warszawa: Polskie Wydawnictwo Audiowizualne, 2007.

Method

Students received questionnaires (more detailed description follows), and afterwards participated in a focus group. For this part of the experiment, a so-called “creative approach”⁶ was applied. During the discussion and while working with questionnaires, the participants are fully aware of the purpose of the experiment. This approach is based on a “brainstorming” effect, in which a group of people who are all interested in the subjects of the study tries to “solve” the problem together. The discussion in the focus group was obviously moderated.

The film was shown three times. After the first screening students received questionnaires, and all questions were explained. Then they watched the film again and answered questions from section A of the questionnaire. Section B referred to the third screening, during which the film was freeze-framed nine times, and students were asked to comment on what they saw on the screen.

Shown below is section A of the questionnaire with some comments in italics (not included in the original questionnaire) which refer to my instructions or tips given to the students during the experiment.

Your nationality:

Do you have any Polish ancestry (parents, grandparents)?

Do you speak Polish (at least B level)?

Describe briefly the main topic of Wojciech Wiszniewski’s „ABCs”

(no more than two sentences)

Students were asked to go beyond the story, and identify “deeper” and more general meanings of ‘ABC’.

Who are the people depicted in the portraits on the walls (beginning of the documentary)?

There are pictures of Polish kings hanging on a wall in a dark corridor.

How would you describe the people in the first part of the documentary (letters A - D)?

Who are they?

First letters of the alphabet are spoken by four different individuals in four different rooms.

What is the first sentence that Polish children learn?

The sentence “Ala ma kota” (Alice has a cat) can be seen briefly in a book.

What is the first sentence children learn in your country? Write it in your own language and translate it into English.

⁶ Merton, Robert K. , Fiske, Marjorie, Kendall, Patricia L., *The Focused Interview. A Manual of Problems and Procedures.* The Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois 1956.

Katechizm polskiego dziecka by Władysław Bełza (1900)

— Kto ty jesteś?	(Who are you?)
— Polak mały	(A little Pole)
— Jaki znak twój?	(What is your emblem?)
— Orzeł biały	(The white eagle)
— Gdzie ty mieszkasz?	(Where do you live?)
— Między swemi	(Among my people)
— W jakim kraju?	(In what land?)
— W polskiej ziemi.	(The Polish land)
— Czem ta ziemia?	(What is this country?)
— Mą ojczyzną.	(My homeland)
— Czem zdobyta?	(How did they fight for it?)
— Krwią i blizną.	(With their blood and scars)
— Czy ją kochasz?	(Do you love it?)
— Kocham szczerze.	(I love it dearly)
— A w co wierzysz?	(What do you believe in?)
— W Polskę wierzę!	(I believe in Poland)
— Coś ty dla niej?	(Who are you for your country?)
— Wdzięczne dziecię	(A grateful child)
— Coś jej winien?	(What would you do for it?)
— Oddać życie.	(I would give my life)

Some parts of the poem (in bold above) were omitted in the documentary.

Could you explain why?

Fragments of the famous poem were used in "ABC". They are recited line by line by a group of children.

Name characters and situations that you identify as typically Polish.

Section B refers to nine tableaux (titles come from the author, tableaux briefly explained in italics)

Picture

A picture by Artur Grottger from the series "Polonia" can be seen briefly. A scene from 1863 January Uprising is depicted.

Group of men

Group of Polish soldiers in uniforms in an informal situation.

Group of men, women, and children

Large, multi-generational family.

Two men in a room

A Christmas priest's visit.

Women in a passageway

Countryside women selling food in a city.

Four men

Coal merchants.

Couple

Newlyweds. This tableau resembles traditional posed marriage photographs.

Three young people in white shirts

Members of the Youth Organisation in white shirts and red ties. A white eagle without a crown can be seen on the wall.

Two boys in the countryside

Two adolescent boys in a typically Polish countryside landscape with willow trees.

The outcome

After the questions had been answered, the students participated in a moderated discussion. Some of the problematic questions were explained, others were clarified by a lecturer. Students willingly participated in conversation.

Although there were a few persons with Polish background in the October group, only two were able to speak Polish. All students identified Wiszniewski's documentary as strange, hermetic, and difficult. Almost all tried to indicate the main topic of *ABC*; only a few left this question with no answer. Ten people claimed that the documentary refers to the Polish system of education, with some noticing that the director criticises stereotypes. Eleven participants of the experiment discovered a more general meaning, saying that the main topic of the film was "Polish identity" or the "Polish way of life".

Only one person (a student from Poland) was able to recognise the pictures in the opening sequence. Others answered, "I do not know" or tried to guess (key figures from Polish history, Józef Piłsudski⁷, etc.). All foreigners had problems with questions requiring actual cultural competence; for example, nobody was able to indicate the famous 'Ala ma kota' phrase as one of the first sentences learned by children in Poland. On the other hand, most of the participants described characters from the first part of the film (persons declaiming letters A-D) as typically Polish. In an open question about typical Polish elements present in *ABC*, most of the students gave no relevant answer. Some of them referred to stereotypes that in most cases were not related to the film, while obvious elements (Polish symbols, colours, references to Polish history) were generally left unnoticed, with the exception of students with a Polish background and/or the ability to speak Polish. Most of the students tried to answer the question about Belza's poem. While some gave no relevant answer, others referred to the nationalistic tone of the omitted fragments.

Members of the October 2015 group had serious problems with section B of the questionnaire. Only four people (including a Polish student) tried to give answers that are more detailed, while others described characters in the tableau in a very casual way.

⁷Józef Piłsudski (05.12.1867 – 12.05.1935) was a Polish politician; first Marshal of Poland (since 1920), and actual leader (1926–35) of the Second Polish Republic.

In both cases, very rarely was the true context of the scene identified.

Wiszniewski's *ABC* is an example of experimental documentary. Its meaning is inherently open and somehow blurred, even for those with proper cultural competence. Yet in discussion, students did not complain about its complex form. They enjoyed its episodic and associative structure, but in most cases were not able to identify the basic components that are usually quite self-evident for Polish audiences. I was not surprised with the answers, as many participants of the class had no previous contact with Polish culture. Some of them decided to come to Krakow because of a pre-existing interest in Polish issues; however, the majority had different reasons such as curiosity or low accommodation costs, while some considered Krakow an attractive hub to visit Central Europe.

The structure of the June 2015 group was similar: it contained one Polish student, three with Polish ancestry (but limited language skills), and one who spoke Polish fluently but had no Polish family whatsoever. Obviously, it was very interesting to see if just one semester in Poland was enough to overcome the barriers of cultural competence. The expectations were high and somewhat justified as students were active participants in academic life. Most of them had learned the basics of Polish and had contact with students from Jagiellonian University. They obviously attended other courses related to Polish history, politics, contemporary issues, culture, and participated in excursions and other educational events. After the course, all students had basic knowledge about post-war cinema in Poland. They also researched the subject individually to prepare a final project: an essay on a Polish film of their choice.

The outcome of the experiment with the June 2015 group was quite surprising. Again, students identified the overall meaning of the documentary as related either to the system of education, or 'Polish identity'. Yet, this time only four persons claimed that the meaning is more general, while 15 tried to discuss the subject of education and its manipulative influence on the younger generation. Additionally, two of the persons who saw *ABC* as a metaphor of national identity gave very casual answers consisting of isolated words or very short phrases rather than sentences or entire paragraphs. In one case, the reason was poor command of English. In another, an unexplained lack of involvement from an English native speaker who usually gave only single words answers or very short sentences.

The interpretations provided by other students were in many cases quite complex, while answers to other questions were not significantly 'better' than the ones given by the members of the October 2015 group. Some of the students were able to identify more images properly, but their general competence was no different.

Where then do the differences in the general understanding of the film come from? It seems that they were biased by what students had learned during their stay in Poland. Many movies discussed in class were made before 1989, others often related to the communist regime. Obviously, they were often discussed in a political context. Students also learned that many institutions, which they considered as politically neutral, were in fact tools of oppression in communist Poland. This new knowledge was 'used' to interpret the film, which otherwise seemed hermetic. The process is called

‘confirmation bias’:

Creating and testing hypotheses represents a crucial feature not only of progress in science, but also in our daily lives in which we set up assumptions about reality and try to test them. However, the lay scientist stands accused of processing his or her hypotheses in such a way that he or she is biased to confirm them. “Confirmation bias” means that information is searched for, interpreted, and remembered in such a way that it systematically impedes the possibility that the hypothesis could be rejected—that is, it fosters the immunity of the hypothesis. Here, the issue is not the use of deceptive strategies to fake data, but forms of information processing that take place more or less unintentionally⁸.

My discussions with Polish students show that for Poles, Wojciech Wiszniewski’s *ABC* does not really deal with education. Although I had no chance to conduct a similar experiment (no questionnaires were used, only moderated conversation), none of the Polish viewers saw the documentary as a metaphor of education, and especially manipulation. They all tended to interpret the film as an experimental essay about Polish icons, symbols, and stereotypes.

Falski’s “Elementarz” as a matrix of understanding

A famous learning aid by Marian Falski (*Elementarz*) that inspired the filmmaker was originally published in 1910 and is still available and sometimes used in education. Although it may be criticised for its conservative approach to family, social roles, etc., its author was able to introduce innovative⁹ and highly effective methods of education. Falski did not focus on the structure of the language, but instead tried to employ natural cognitive preferences of children. He used images and simple words to teach them how to read and write. He also replaced printed letters with handwriting. Many of his innovations were revolutionary, at not only the beginning of the 20th century, but also many years later.

In a way, Wiszniewski employs Marian Falski’s ideas. He intended his documentary to be ‘read’ in an analytical manner, just like the words and simple sentences in ‘*Elementarz*’. The director also seems to go beyond words: the only linguistic components of the film are the letters of the alphabet and Belza’s poem. Instead, he proposes a complex kaleidoscope of images: a visual aid supposed to teach us to ‘read’ Poland.

Foreign students who were still not able to identify all components tried to

⁸ Margit E. Oswald, Stefan Grosjean, *Confirmation Bias*, [in:] Rudiger F. Pohl (ed.), *Cognitive Illusions. A Handbook on Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement and Memory*, Hove and New York: Psychology Press 2004, p. 79.

⁹ See, for example: Ryszard Wroczyński, *Marian Falski i reformy szkolne w Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa: PWN 1988.

comprehend the text as such with their limited and fragmented knowledge of Poland and its institutions. The result was an ‘improper’ reading of the film, probably dissonant with the intention of the filmmaker. Although the ability to identify typically Polish characters, situations, and symbols was similar, there was one other important difference between both groups: members of the June 2015 group answered the questions in section B of the questionnaire in more complex and elaborate ways. The reason seems simple: for most of them (students who were not English native speakers), studying in Krakow was their first chance to use English in academic discussions. Not only did their linguistic skills improve, but they also became more confident and self-assured. I assume they also **had more willingness** to understand a text that seemed so demanding not only because they wanted to really apprehend the text itself, but to **legitimise themselves** as individuals participating in Polish culture. Their biased understanding of the text resulted from the limited ‘tools’ they could use in the process of interpretation:

A true confirmation bias seems to occur primarily when the hypotheses tested are already established, or are motivationally supported. In general, we may say that the confirmation bias consists in favouring expectancy congruent information over incongruent information. This may happen in different ways: (a) memories congruent with the hypothesis are more likely to be accessed than memories that are incongruent with it; (b) undue weight is given to the importance of congruent information, possibly because of the concentration on the hypothesis, and the neglect of alternative explanations; (c) those sources with information that could reject the hypothesis are avoided, provided that the person knows a priori the opinion of the source.¹⁰

Conclusion

Let us try to ask some questions. Did the students really learn anything about Poland? Were their opinions and judgements about our country manipulated or falsified? Is it truly possible to understand the Other (in this case Poland and Poles)? Although the cultural competence of the June group was almost no different than that of the October group, I profoundly believe that those few months the young people from all over the world spent in Krakow make deep sense. My simple experiment proves the obvious: it is not possible to fully **understand the Other** after just a few months. Nevertheless, it also suggests that **meeting the Other** is equally valuable:

there is a zone of mutuality pre-predicatively given to ‘us’: we confront each other in a situation which then permits the exchange of ideas. My fellow man is encountered as ‘within hailing range’ or within ‘speaking distance’, as available for an intimate chat, as open to a face-to-face encounter. In all

¹⁰ Oswald and Grosjan, op.cit., p. 93.

of these possibilities, the Other is taken as ‘confront-able’, as ‘hail-able’, as essentially capable of approaching me in closer and closer relationships. He is already in the world moving toward me. Horizons of proximity and distance undergird the possibility of our meeting. The Other who is friendly toward me is said to be easily ‘approachable’; the Other who is rather cold, difficult to relate to, is spoken of as being ‘distant’. The communicative zone involves avenues of withdrawal outward as well as engagement inward. To communicate is to be already involved in a world whose situations are built out of such eidetic possibilities¹¹.

When I presented my paper based on the experiment discussed in this article at a conference, I suddenly realised that it was more of a political statement than a proper academic address. I have recently returned from Neukölln, a borough of Berlin where people of 147 nations live. Were they Others, or was I the Other? I left for Berlin in early October 2015, and returned in late November 2015. Poland had changed dramatically¹².

I revised this article in Berlin again (November 2016). Berlin had also changed: struggling with a shift in public opinion, the refugee crisis, and more (than ever) support for radical political forces.

Will Poles and Europeans still be able to meet the Other, ‘misunderstand’ them, ‘misinterpret’ them in a world with no eidetic possibilities?

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¹¹ Erwin W. Straus, Maurice Natanson, Henri Ey, *Psychology and Philosophy*, New York: Springer Verlag 1969, p. 101.

¹² In October 2015, right wing populist party called “Prawo i Sprawiedliwość” won the elections. Since then the liberal course of Polish economy and politics has been systematically negated.

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