Aisthesis

Public Art in (Local) Communities: Multiple Publics and the Dynamic Between Them

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Abstract. The paper's goal is to investigate the question of the type of public, which serves as a recipient of a particular work of public art. That is, the paper researches the process of how the public is attracted by a given artwork, how this process influences a local community, and what is the actual nature of these publics. As a result, it is argued that some public artworks are intended to have more than one public or, to put it in stronger terms, their task is to bring into play the inner dynamic between numerous publics. Moreover, the possibility of conceptualizing public art not only as a means responsible for facilitating peace but also as revealing the hidden conflicts among the members of the community, to which it is introduced and by whom it is analyzed.

Keywords: Public Art, Local community, Conflict, LGBT+ Rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paper aims at analyzing the role of public art in local communities[1]. We shall investigate the issue of what sort of public serves a recipient of a particular work of public art. In particular, we would like to research the process of how the public is gathered by a given artwork, how this process influences a local community, and what is the actual nature of these publics. We shall suggest the following hypothesis: some public artworks are intended to be seen by more than one public or, to put it in stronger terms, their task is to bring into play the inner dynamic between numerous publics. The second objective of the paper is to investigate the possibility of conceptualizing public art not only as a means responsible for facilitating peace (for example, being a bond for a given community) but also as

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[1] For the sake of this paper, we would like to define "local community" as characterized by a relatively small number of inhabitants, communicating in face-to-face interactions, as well a communities of the sense of being known and recognized by fellow citizens.

revealing the hidden conflicts among the members of the community. That is, we would like to argue the suggested hypothesis is valuable as it helps one to understand the reason why some of those works of public art that have elicited contradictory reactions, still do succeed as works of public art. We suppose that revealing these kinds of conflicts is valuable for fruitful discussions within a given community, as it tells something about that community and might function as a possible trigger for real (not only postulated) social and personal change[2].

The paper has the following structure: in §2 public artworks of Daniel Rycharski are presented and discussed. Next, in §3 and §4, respectively, we describe and discuss crucial features of public art as well as the nature of publics that are reached by different artworks. In particular, this section explores the possibility of existence of diverse publics of a given artwork. Section §5 provides an analysis of the earlier established categories in the light of specific examples of Rycharski's artwork in Kurówko *Strachy*, introduced in §2. The paper ends with the summary of the argument (§6).

2. DANIEL RYCHARSKI STRACHY [FEARS] (2018-2019)

Daniel Rycharski, whose artwork *Strachy* [Fears] we analyze in the paper, represents the young generation of Polish artists. In 2016 he won the Paszport Polityki [Polityka's Passport] award, presented by the *Polityka* journal – one of the most prestigious awards in Poland, given to young creators for outstanding debuts in art and culture. In 2019 he was the first living artist to have a solo exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Two years later, a movie about his personal life and artistic practice titled *Wszystkie nasze strachy* [All Our Fears], directed by Łukasz Ronduda and Łukasz Gutt, won the main prize during the 46th Gdynia Film Festival. In his works, Rycharski addresses the issues of LGBTQ+ rights, homopho-

bia in the Polish Catholic Church, as well as more rarely discussed topics of the forgotten heritage of peasants and the challenges of contemporary life in the countryside in Poland (Maliborski [2019]). His artworks are often created in cooperation with people from outside of the artworld, especially with the community of his home village Kurówko. One of many art pieces, which Rycharski has been creating in Kurówko since 2009 (when he returned to live there) is a public art installation titled *Strachy*.

Strachy consists of several wooden, colorful crosses in various shapes referring to different Christian denominations. Each cross is dressed in few pieces of clothing – T-shirts, sweaters, trousers, or even shoes. The clothes were donated to Rycharski by the LGBTQ+ community members who have experienced discrimination. Another element used in the artwork is barbed wire. It entangles the crosses, alluding to a crown of thorns symbolizing suffering in the Christian tradition. However, Rycharski's installation has more than a purely symbolic meaning. It can also function as a scarecrow. Second-hand clothes still have some smell of human bodies that, together with bright, colorful crosses, discourage animals from feeding on the growing crops. The artist intentionally refers to the heritage of rural communities, where scarecrows also function as a bottom-up creative practice, besides serving their practical purpose. In fact, while *Strachy* was exhibited in Kurówko in 2018-2019 it served to protect crops from wild boars.

Kurówko is a small village one hour drive from Warsaw, populated by around 100 people. There are no public institutions there (not even a church or a shop, which one can often find in Polish hamlets) – just one main road, houses, and fields. At the first glance, one may assume that nothing special happens there and the site is just one of many similar rural villages in Poland. Places, which after the political transformation to a free-market economy in 1989 seem godforsaken. For the last three decades their residents have been losing access to basic public services such as public transport and healthcare, not to mention

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[2] For such a possibility see Simoniti (2018).

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culture (Bukraba-Rylska [2009], Rakowski [2019]). It is, however, precisely with respect to culture that Kurówko stands out. The residents' engagement in Rycharski's work, i.e. their active participation in public culture, makes Kurówko a fitting candidate for a close study of public art "in action". The other reason why we find Rycharski's work especially interesting is that it addresses the problem of homophobia in Poland, while being exhibited in the countryside. Typically, Polish non-urban areas are not associated with political protests. Big cities with their diverse populations and main governmental institutions are rather seen as places of public debate. Nonetheless, Rycharski places *Strachy* in this "apolitical" area, demanding rec-

ognition for the rural community's political voice (Majewska [2019]). Before we start examining what exactly this voice says and what are its repercussions, we would like to get back to the role of public art in political disputes.

3. PUBLIC ART AND ITS PUBLIC(S)

Public art covers plenty of artistic realizations such as sculptures, installations, dance, and theatrical performances, just to name a few. Thus, visually speaking, public art is heterogeneous in nature: what unites this variety is that these pieces are displayed at a public space; however not all of those pieces belong to public art in the proper sense. To resolve this issue, many philosophers and art historians emphasize that public art has a special relation to the *public*, and exactly this relation is responsible for distinguishing this category of art from other kinds. Scholars propose the division between public art and art in public space. "Art in public space" is a term referring to any artwork that happens to be exposed in a public space (Riggle [2010]). "Public art" is a narrower term that refers only to those artworks that can be characterized by a specific kind of influence on their public. Public art «sets out to forge a specific public by means of an aesthetic interaction» (Hein [2006]: 49). What is more, as Baldini writes, it has «[...] the unique potential to encourage a peculiar modality of discourse where individuals share and debate their perspectives on a variety of issues they care about.» (Baldini [2019]: 10).

Recently, Mary Beth Willard has proposed to distinguish two features that are standard for public art: accessibility and site-specificity (Willard [2019]). In her view, these features have to be visually perceptible to the audience (*resp*. public), since exactly these features guide their aesthetic appreciation. Accessibility works in two ways. First, in order for an artwork to be a token of public art it must be physically accessible to the public. This means that the viewers have to easily interact with the artwork, may walk around it and/or be able to closely inspect it (e.g., not from

behind a fence). Being accessible does not automatically mean that the artwork is displayed in a publicly owned place[3]. There might be artworks that are displayed on private property, and yet are accessible to a vast majority of people. Second, accessibility should be understood not only in a physical sense but also in an epistemic one (*Ibid.,* 7). Being epistemologically accessible simply means that potential viewers are able to recognize a given context (in this case – a place) in which an artwork is displayed. Willard uses an example of a violin virtuoso who gave a musical performance near the subway station. According to her, although the performance was physically accessible to pedestrians (everyone could listen to it) it was epistemically inaccessible, since almost no one was expecting a world class musician giving a performance in such a place (not to mention distractions caused by the traffic, being emerged in domestic affairs, commuting to work or school, and the like).

Another feature of public art is their site-specificity. In other words, an artwork has to interact with the surrounding in which it is displayed and has to be created primarily to interact with that specific place. Naturally, being site-specific is a matter of degree: some works of public art are more site-specific, whereas others are less. What is important is that being public art requires fulfilling the condition of site-specificity to a minimal degree. That is, a work of public art has to somehow, and in a non-trivial way, relate to the physical place of its distribution, and this relation needs to impact the artwork's content. Moreover, we would like to see site-specificity as not only limited to geographically defined space, but also as something related to community and social boundaries as well (Kwon [2002]: 100-137).

The existence of the two features of public art immediately raises a question: what is the *proper*

public of public artworks? Is it homogeneous or heterogeneous in nature? Or to put it differently: is there any special public connected with public artworks that is – by definition – site-specific and thus related to a particular community or nation?

In the paper *The Public-Art Publics* (2019) Andrea Baldini presents an argument in favor of *the multiplicity thesis* on public art publics. He shows that a public art public is not universally united and abstract but instead that every artwork creates its own public (Baldini [2019]: 10-11; 20). Thus, we can say that public art in general has many publics, instead of one, of multiple public art realizations. Those publics can be differentiated based on their size or their temporal dimension. For the purpose of the paper, we would like to focus on the first type of the classification.

Baldini distinguishes three different kinds of public art projects and their publics based on scale: local, national, and international. The first one is established by small-scale projects, referring to locally important issues, often political in nature. The national public art public is characterized as a set of individuals occupying a territory of a country where an artwork is installed. The last category, international public art public, refers to a global audience of international projects. Recipients not necessarily appreciate an artwork in person but also find out about it from international mass media coverage. It is important to stress out that, even if the main factor for differentiating these three types of public is their size, they are diverse not only in scale. That becomes clear in comparing local and national public art projects in terms proposed by Baldini. While local ones often expose problems pressing to a local community, national projects underline values common to different social groups. The first one reveals existing conflicts, contrary to the second, and acts to ease them (Baldini [2019]: 14). To develop Baldini's theory and support *the multiplicity thesis*, we would like to pose a further question about the diversity of publics, especially in the case of local public art.

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[3] We concur with Willard that this observation undermines the widespread intuition that public art has to be displayed only in publicly owned places. Rycharski's work *Strachy* is a public artwork that matches all discussed public art's features; yet in Kurówko it was displayed in the field that is privately owned.

4. ANTAGONISTIC VS. AGONISTIC PUBLICS

In our deliberations on public art we want to go a little further than Baldini and formulate the hypothesis that some works of public art address not one (local) public, but multiple (local) publics. We define a public as a group united in sharing a common discourse that enables its members to interpret a work of art in similar terms (even if they disagree with each other's judgments on that work). Naturally, the demarcation line between one group and another is not always sharp or easy to draw. However, we shall claim that if a certain group do share, for example, a similar conception of art, then it is the same public. And this does not automatically presuppose that people inside this group (*resp.* public) have to judge an artwork in a similar way. For example, some might like Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, whereas some might not find it valuable. Notwithstanding, such a fact does not render to separate publics. That would be the case, however, when someone else rejects Duchamp work as a proper art (and, thus, uses a very much different conception of art).

One might immediately object that it is highly counterintuitive to say that a public artwork displayed in a local community has multiple, not one, publics. Indeed, in most scenarios local public artworks might have only one public. However, one can imagine that a given work of art, as it were, creates multiple publics. They are not just two groups of supporters and opponents of a work (then we could say that we have one audience that just judges a given object differently). Rather, they are groups that perceive the world in different categories, have different beliefs and interests[4]. We agree on that with Michael Warn-

er, who writes: «There are as many shades of difference among publics as there are in modes of stress, style and space of circulation» (Warner [2005]: 117). Those differences make it impossible for spectators representing diverse publics to look at an artwork in a similar perspective. They vary in their understanding of an artwork and in their responses to it.

Multiple publics are addressed by artworks which serve as a pretext for a discussion on highly polarizing issues; some of the artworks can help to reveal political opinions previously not explicitly expressed to one another by members of a community. When a potentially controversial artwork is displayed, it forces a community living next to it to respond. Reactions to these works may include a variety of responses, such as parsing an art piece and publicly supporting it or signing a petition for its disassembly (or in the most hard-core scenario simply destroying it). Even ignoring an artwork and avoiding expressing one's opinion becomes ostentatious if the rest of the milieu is commenting on it. By taking these actions, members of a community position themselves not only towards an art piece, but also towards the issues it is covering and – what is most important – towards other members of that community. In this process multiple local publics may emerge that interpret the given artwork in different manners. We are not saying that division between publics is abiding and permanent: it is possible to cross the boundaries between distinct groups. It should be also added that each work, if it creates more than one public, does it in a way that is unique for that work. In other words, it is conceivable that another work will "regulate" the division among members of one community in a different way.

The dynamic between multiple publics often reveals a conflict in a community. As such public art works counter to the dominant neoliberal discourse that hides conflicts in a society and presents them as misunderstandings solvable by means of rational debate. Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (2001) stress that the hegemonic discourse is based on a false assumption that all individuals

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[4] We do not claim that those different discourses are ethically or politically valid the same way – especially when we think about public art that often speaks for rights of the marginalized. However, from the perspective of aesthetics experience, one cannot judge that only one of these publics is "the proper public" (even if at the same time agendas that influence their aesthetic experience can be judged as such from moral or social perspective).

share the same political agendas[5]. Moreover, if one agrees that people in a society have diverse political – as well as aesthetic – values and interests, then conflicts cannot be avoided but only silenced (which always happens at a cost for marginalized groups). The neoliberal paradigm of unified society is also a hidden assumption supporting a conviction about only one local public art public. Thus, the thesis about multiple publics rests on the heterogeneity described by Mouffe and Laclau. Based on the previously mentioned understanding of a public as sharing common discourse, we claim that those heterogeneous groups in a community create multiple public art local publics.

In public art theory, but also in its popular understanding, public artworks are often presented as creating a community by positively reinforcing interactions between its members. Contrary to that, we would like to propose a different perspective on public art. We do not claim that public art always aims to reveal conflicts. However, it sometimes does. Some public artworks function as «[...] a social and political stimulus» (Baldini [2016]: 10) that change the dominant visual discourse and represent erased voices (Rancière [2013]). After Mouffe and Laclau, we accept that conflicts are not something that has to be overcome. Rather, they are the root of "radical democracy", as they make it possible to reshape and renegotiate oppressive power relations: «without conflict and division, a pluralist democratic politics would be impossible» (Laclau, Mouffe [2001]: xvii). Following their ideas, we believe that public art reinforces communities not by facilitating peace but by exposing disagreements.

However, one should not forget that revealing conflicts might incite war. Antagonistic sentiments have the power to create a solid division between allies and enemies – between "us" and "them" – and between different publics. Representatives of those opposing groups often deny others their right to a different perspective and try to silence them (at least metaphorically). Instead,

Mouffe proposes to see members of different groups as equal adversaries: «An adversary is a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy in common» (Mouffe [1999]: 755). She calls this new paradigm «agonistic pluralism» and emphasizes «the importance of distinguishing between two types of political relations: one of *antagonism* between enemies, and one of *agonism* between adversaries. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an "antagonism" into "agonism"» (Mouffe [1999]: 755). Yet different public art publics often position themselves towards each other in an antagonistic manner. Still, we believe that at least some public artworks may play an important role in a democratic society – and in communities – by transforming antagonism into agonism. One of the factors contributing to it seems to be their scale, which is what we analyze on the example of Rycharski's *Strachy*.

5. THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN MULTIPLE PUBLICS

For a better understanding of *Strachy* one has to see it in the broader political context[6]. Two years in a row, in 2020 and 2021, Poland was the most homophobic country in the EU, according to the ILGA-Europe report[7]. On the other hand,

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[5] In their analysis of Rycharski's work Maliborski (2019) and Müller (2019) also refer to Mouffe concepts.

[6] We would like to stress that we do not have the access to empirical research or even first-hand comments on how *Strachy* was received by Kurówko residents. For what we know, the first does not exist and the second is beyond our competences as philosophers. What we have though, are cultural studies and cultural anthropology papers that address how Rycharski's works are received in his hometown (Kurz [2019], Majewska [2019], Maliborski [2019], Müller [2019], Rakowski [2019]), as well as primarily the artist's own statements. Certainly, a better understanding of *Strachy* would need supplementing our findings with a sociological perspective. However, for the goal of our paper, which focuses primarily on multiple public art publics, we do believe that our methodology is sufficient.

[7] In 2020 and 2021 Poland has taken respectively: the last spot and seventh from the end from all European coun-

there are some great Polish organizations and social movements that fight for LGBTQ+ rights. The conflict between these two visions of the society has been increasing in recent years. It is not hard to imagine that it exists also in Kurówko. However, since homophobia is deeply rooted in the Polish society, it is often invisible for those who do not experience it directly. Thus, this conflict may be not noticed by some members of Kurówko (as well as any other) community. The work *Strachy* – which talks about violence against the LGBTQ+ community – challenges this ignorance. It speaks for the right of the LGBTQ+ people not to live *incognito*, in the shadow of dominant homophobic discourse, but to manifest their social experiences. By giving back visibility to erased voices, Rycharski discloses this conflict to the local community. From now on, its members have to take a stand with respect to those voices, whether they want it or not.

Based on what we just mentioned, we assume that *Strachy* probably had multiple publics in Kurówko, interpreting the art piece differently. One can imagine that for some – especially those who are close with Rycharski and have helped him with creating *Strachy* – it spoke about the openness of the Kurówko community. From this perspective the work also contradicted the often repeated stereotype that homophobia in Poland (as well as any other phobia that we are ashamed of) comes from the lower classes of the society. As this stereotype finds no confirmation in sociological findings, it is criticized by Rycharski as well[8]. On the other hand, for others *Strachy* could be associated with the threat to their vision of the local community as homogeneous and conservative. Despite those imaginable differences, the multiple publics probably lived together in this small community and interacted with each other. Perhaps some members of the second group could even change their mind about LGBTQ+ rights

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thanks to *Strachy* when they have seen the amount of violence and suffering, which homophobia brings. And that it hits not only abstract people, but their next door neighbors as well. Even if that did not happen (after all, our perspective on public art is not utopian) people at least had a pretext to talk with each other about LGBTQ+ issues, instead of just hearing about them from homophobic propaganda on public TV, which replaces multiple voices with nationalistic universalism.

Similar issues to those exposed in *Strachy* are addressed with the public art installation *Tęcza* [Rainbow] by Julita Wójcik. The installation is a huge (9 meters high and 26 meters wide) rainbow arch made of sixteen thousand artificial flowers. Initially Wójcik described her artwork as inspired by aesthetic values of a rainbow and denied understanding it as a political symbol. However that has changed due to the later events. Between 2012 and 2015 *Tęcza* was exhibited in Warsaw at Plac Zbawiciela [Savior Square]. During this short period of time the installation was put on fire seven times. Finally, it was dissembled by City Council who wanted to avoid further acts of vandalism, even though most of Varsovians wanted it to stay[9]. For Polish nationalists it was the most hated piece in Warsaw (probably next to the Palace of Culture

tries in the ILGA-Europe report, which measures the level of equality of LGBTQ+ community in different countries.
[8] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JX15rir6vyU&t=43s [20.01.2022].

[9] See: https://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,15912695,ponad-60-proc-warszawiakow-za-tecza-jej-niszczenie-oburza.html [20.01.2022].

and Science) and putting the installation on fire became like a ritual for participants of the March of Independence. One of the organizers of this biggest nationalistic yearly parade in Europe commented on the destruction of *Tęcza* by saying: «a symbol of the plague got burned»[10]. Thus, those attacks were directed not only at art, but primarily at the community associated with it. Homophobes burned the installation because they have interpreted it as a symbol of LGBTQ+ community. It is hard to spot an agonistic community in this case – rather a war between archenemies motivated by hatred (at least on the part of homophobes). It seems doubtful that *Tęcza* has helped to renegotiate the conflict and change it into relation between adversaries respecting each other. On the contrary, it has consolidated counter publics who do not know each other in person but mostly through reports from media or social media. Those publics interpreted the work in completely different terms (as «a symbol of the plaque» or as a sign of hope for an open society, as Wójcik called it)[11] and some denied others the right to their voice. As the fate of *Tęcza* shows, changing antagonism into agonism is not easy and public art often gets burned while playing with fire.

We believe that one of the reasons why some public artworks create agonistic publics, while others lead to antagonistic ones, seems to be their scale, as the comparison between *Strachy* and *Tęcza* illustrates. The variance in scale of a realization (in this case local vs. national) results in a different type of contacts between multiple publics. Artworks placed in local communities, like Rycharski's work, engage their publics in face-to-face interactions that can potentially lead to successful political debates. Contrarily mediated contacts between publics that do not know each other in person often accelerate conflicts, as it happened in the case of Wójcik's piece. Following whistle-

blowers from high-tech social media corporations, algorithms managing those platforms are based on information bubbles and increase of hatred between different groups. In fact, as Frances Haugen – a former Facebook employee – testified before the Senate Commerce Committee, those mechanisms of hate speech ensure users' engagement and result in the corporations enormous profits[12]. It shows that the operating principle of social media is the creation of antagonistic communities – ones that are not only diverse in their opinions, but above all see "others" as enemies, whose right to their voice they question[13]. Thus, multiple public art publics that contact each other mainly through social media become antagonized easily. The most disturbing element is that – as with many other cases of hate speech on the Internet – the results of those virtual antagonisms are acts of violence in the real world, as the destruction of *Tęcza* shows. Clearly, it does not mean that face-to-face interactions between multiple publics never repeat antagonistic schemes. Nevertheless, without the algorithms profiting of hatred, it is more likely for members of multiple publics to see each other as advertisers and not as enemies. Especially in the case of local scale communities where it is harder to avoid personal contacts with others, where existence of a whole community often depends on cooperation between all of its residents[14]. It is worth mentioning that the agonistic dynamic between multiple publics in a local community does not result in a universal consent between those publics. Furthermore, crossing the

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[10] See: https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,14933380,lider-narodowcow-o-teczy-splonal-symbol-zarazy.html [20.01.2022].
[11] See: https://culture.pl/pl/dzielo/julita-wojcik-tecza# [20.01.2022].

[12] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnpVQnv5Cw [20.01.2022].
[13] Similar mechanisms of antagonizing society are used currently in Poland by the governmental media, especially by the public television TVP.
[14] Such cooperation is extremely important especially in the face of lacking public institutions, often pressing – as we mentioned in the previous part – residents of Polish rural areas and hamlets. Neighborly favors and mutual aid can supplement shortage of governmental support. An example of such a practice is car sharing on one's way to work and splitting gasoline costs in areas where there is no public transport.

line between different publics «has more of a quality of a conversation than a rational persuasion» (Mouffe [1999]: 755). It is then not impossible, even if it is probably less common than we often imagine it. However – as we have explained in the previous part, after Mouffe and Laclau – universal consent is neither a goal of the radical democracy. Instead, members of those multiple publics discuss – and probably argue – with each other over an artwork and its meaning, however they still do not stop respecting each other in the process.

Finally, we would like to mention that we do not claim that the described factor is the only reason for different dynamics between multiple publics in the case of *Strachy* and *Tęcza*. Neither is it the most important one. To judge that, one would have to take into account various methodological approaches and many differences between those artworks. Nonetheless, we do believe that a better understanding of agonistic and antagonistic relations between multiple public art publics needs considering the scale of a realization and the type of interactions it results in.

6. CONCLUSION

The aim of this essay was to analyze the role which public art may play in local communities. We have argued that, at least in some cases, public artworks that are displayed locally are able to address not only one local public, but a greater number of them. That is, using Daniel Rycharski's work *Strachy* located in Kurówko we have shown that the existence of more than one local public is not only possible, but it also helps in defining and discovering the hidden conflicts among the members of a local community. What is more, our analysis can serve as a possible way to explain why some works of public art, which have elicited contradictory reactions, still succeed as works of *public* art. Moreover, the inner dynamics between different local publics was explained and researched by employing the theory of antagonisms[15].

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[15] We would like to thank Sabrina Muchová, Nicola Piras, Andrea Borghini, Mateusz Salwa, Monika Favara-

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