

Talking about art and social perspective taking

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In this article, the authors will discuss the relationships between the experience of art and the development of social perspective taking, a psychological construct developed by Selman (1980).

Introduction

In the decade of 1980 two important studies in the aesthetic development area appeared: “The eye of the beholder” by Housen (1983) and “How we understand art” by Parsons (1987). The importance of these studies arises from the impact they had in art education and in the development of the Psychology of Art.

Inspired by these two studies and encouraged by Freeman and Sanger (1995) work studying children’s ideas about art, we aim to explore the relationships between art understanding and social perspective taking (Selman, 1980), the psychological structure that organises interpersonal experiences, arguing that the aesthetic experience is also an interpersonal experience.

Parsons, Housen, Freeman and Sanger... Why not Social perspective taking?

Parsons (1987) and Housen (1983) followed different methodologies, namely different data collection procedures.

Parsons used a semi-structured interview materialised in seven questions: 1) Describe me this painting; 2) What is it about? Do you think it is a good subject for a painting?; 3) What feelings do you see/encounter in this painting?; 4) And the colours? Were they well chosen?; 5) And the form/shapes? And what about the texture?; 6) Was it hard to make this painting? What may have been the difficulties?; 7) Is it a good painting? Why?

Housen (1983) used an open interview. She only makes an introductory question, “What do you see in the painting?” and does not interfere with the viewer’s observations, except by facilitating remarks such as “What are you looking at know?”.

Stages of aesthetic development: Housen (1983)	Stages of development of the aesthetic understanding: Parsons (1987)
STAGE 1 – ACCOUNTIVE: people make concrete observations about the	STAGE 1 – FAVOURITISM/PREFERENCE: paintings are stimuli for a pleasant experience; no awareness of

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painting creating a narrative; preferences, beliefs, personal history are the base for making judgements.	the point of view of others.
STAGE 2 – CONSTRUCTIVE: viewers build a structure for looking using their perceptions, understanding of the natural world; if craft, skill, effort and function are not manifest or if the subject matter seem inappropriate the paintings are judged as having no value; there is a realist spell.	STAGE 2 - BEAUTY AND REALISM: beauty and the realism of the depicted subject and the admiration of the artist's skill are the objective criteria for judging a work of art.
STAGE 3 – CLASSIFYING: active search of indicators such as the formal elements of colour, line, composition which become the criteria used for understanding, decoding and judging the work of art.	STAGE 3 – EXPRESSIVENESS: creativity, originality and feelings are valued; distinction between our feelings and ideas and others' feelings and ideas; recognition of the uniqueness of the subjective experience.
STAGE 4 – INTERPRETATIVE: search of a personal encounter of the work of art; critical abilities are put in the service of feelings and emotions.	STAGE 4 – STYLE AND FORM: attribution of relevance to the medium of expression, the form and style; the stylistic and historical relationships between paintings are brought to light; art has a social dimension; the opinions each one has can be corrected and improved; ability of adopting tradition's perspective as a hole.
STAGE 5 – RE-CREATIVE: the encounter with a work of art requires an equivalent usage of all faculties; based on what we see, we know e we feel, we can reconstruct the work of art giving it a personal meaning.	STAGE 5 – AUTONOMY: judgements about art are not seen as a traditional truth, arising from art critics and art history, but as personal statement of an individual who is aware of art's social dimensions, but who is able to make a personal and complex synthesis.

Table 1 – A comparison between Parson's (1987) and Housen's (1983) theories:

Freeman and Sanger (1995) developed an interview to understand children's theories of art. Analysing the interviews the authors pointed the organization of three major relations during an aesthetic encounter: Painting-World; Painting-Artist; and Painting-Viewer. They named it the net of intentional relationships. These relationships appear in this sequence of growing cognitive complexity.

We believe that when we connect with a work of art, this object is taken as an "other" where many other entities are present: the world, the artist and his intentions, all possible viewers and

their remarks, all possible judgements, etc. Social perspective taking is the competence for coordinate perspectives, i.e., psychological processes through which people cognitively organise their interpersonal experience (Selman, 1980). There are several levels of social perspective taking. Thus, when we appreciate a painting we can adopt an egocentric perspective, i.e., exclusively centred in our own experiences or acknowledge the perspective of others, such as the artist and produce a more complex and integrated reasoning. Before us others start to draw this path. Parsons (1987) depicts several levels of social perspective taking, *i.e.*, each stage also means a crescent ability of different points of view coordination. Rossi (2000) used Freeman and Sanger's (1995) net of intentional relationships for analysing data collected during interviews inspired in Parsons' (1987) interview script. We used Selman's theory not only as an analytical tool but also as the organising principle beyond the development of an interview script.

Developing an Interview Script

We combined the methodologies used by Parsons (1987) and Housen (1983) and expanded it to include questions from Freeman and Sanger (1995) interview script using Piaget's clinical method as a framework.

We have conducted several interviews in Portugal and Brazil. At this moment we have started the analysis of these interviews.

In Brazil we interviewed 40 participants of the 4th, 8th 11th grades and College students from Art and Non-Art Courses. 21 of these participants are familiarised with appreciation of paintings in school context.

In Portugal we interviewed 53 participants of the 2nd, 4th, 6th, 8th, 9th and 12th grades.

Preliminary findings and discussion

Inspired by Rossi (2000), Parsons (1987), Housen (1983) and Freeman and Sanger (1995) we organised the ideas shared by the participants accordingly to their structural similarities: the three major relations the participants established with the work of art: 1) Painting-World; 2) Painting-Artist; and 3) Painting-Viewer; other categories: judgments focused on colour, theme, realism and beauty and expressiveness.

The preliminary findings seem to confirm the existence of a sequence of growing cognitive complexity in the appreciation of works of art. Younger participants seem to privileged the relationship Painting-World (the painting is considered as a copy or representation of reality). Older participants seem to privileged the relationships Painting-Artist (the painting as an expression of the artist feelings) and Painting-Viewer (awareness of the viewer's role in the construction of the painting's meaning).

The participant establishes the relation Painting-World when he believes that the image is literally the representation of the world.

A 12 years old Portuguese boy says about “Abaporu”, a painting from Brazilian painter Tarsila do Amaral:

He is in the desert. It’s cool. The boy is very well painted. It seems really a boy in the desert.

Rossi (2000; 2003) establishes several types of the relation between Painting-World: the relation Painting-World type 1 (art submits to reality, the artist depicts reality directly); the relation Painting-World type 2 (the artist chooses what to depict); the relation Painting-World type 3 (the artist transfer his feelings directly to the work of art)

The participant establishes the relation Painting-Artist when he abandons the direct relationship between painting and the world or the inner world of the artist. The main challenge is to explore the artist intention and, by doing so, discover the meaning of the work of art.

A 17 years old Portuguese girl says about what she think is the work of an artist.

What is important in a work of art is to understand the intention of the artist. I know that many painters try to express their feelings through art, but they may also have other intentions.

A 28 years old Brazilian College student says about “Abopuru”:

I think the intention of Tarsila do Amaral was to represent the difficulties of the Brazilian people... the extreme heat, the lack of water.

The participant establishes the relation Painting-Viewer when he or she is aware of his role as a meaning maker.

A 26 years old Brazilian College student says about “Abopuru”:

The head of the women is small because she has no time to think... the hands and feet are enormous because she depends on her ability to work, physically work, to assure her survival. It is my meaning for the painting.

Comparing the answers from Brazilian and Portuguese participants, in general Brazilian participants seem, for instance, to be aware of the complexity of the artist feelings earlier than Portuguese students (Rocha & Coimbra, 2006).

We could say that Brazilian students are in general more sophisticated viewers than Portuguese students. This difference seems to be related to the role of art in each educational system, more integrated in the Brazilian reality, and to the familiarity with art: Brazilian participants seem to be more familiarised with paintings and with their appreciation and discussion in formal contexts, such as school.

The aesthetic development is influenced by the cognitive development. The aesthetic development seems to have relationships with the moral development (Parsons, 1987) and, according with our own research, with the interpersonal development, more specifically with social perspective taking.

Many authors say that being involved with art can be crucial to the development of all human beings. Nevertheless many of these arguments seem to be based on common sense and not on empirical data. Our preliminary findings suggest that being involved with the appreciation and discussion of art may promote the interpersonal development and, thus, the cognitive development. In other words, talking about art may be a way of stimulate social perspective taking and cognitive development as a whole.

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