

Vygotsky's Stage Theory¹: The Psychology of Art and the Actor under the Direction of *Perezhivanie*

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This article reviews Vygotsky's writings on arts (particularly logocentric art including the theater) and emotions, drawing on his initial exploration in *The Psychology of Art* and his final considerations set forth in a set of essays, treatises, and lectures produced in the last years of his life. The review of *The Psychology of Art* includes attention to the limits of his analysis, the mixed Marxist legacy that is evident in the book, the cultural blinders that affect his vision of the relative value of different artistic productions, the content of what he elsewhere refers to his "tedious investigations" into extant views, and the gist of what he considers to be the essence of art. Attention to his late work falls into two areas: Emotion in formal drama and emotion in everyday drama, each of which involves *perezhivanie*, roughly but incompletely characterized as emotional experience. The article concludes with an effort to situate Vygotsky's writing on art and emotion both within his broader effort to articulate a comprehensive developmental psychology of socially, culturally, and historically grounded individuals and social groups, and within scholarship that has extended and questioned his work as his influence has expanded beyond the clinics of Soviet Moscow.

In this article I attempt to bridge work undertaken by L. S. Vygotsky at the beginning and end of his brief career. His first work of scholarship, *The Psychology of Art*, based on his doctoral research and the insights he developed in his early days of teaching, served as a prolegomenon to his subsequent and more elaborated effort to outline a comprehensive psychology based on cultural-historical principles. Vygotsky's treatment of art was largely logocentric, focusing for the most part on literature and the theater, and thus helped set the stage for his consideration of the fundamental role of speech in human development. This emphasis produced what Van der Veer (1997) called Vygotsky's "linguistic psychology" founded on the three themes of "Words, words, words" (p. 7).

Then, in the last years of his life, he returned briefly to questions of the emotions, including the paradox of the actor's verisimilitudinous affectation of emotions on the stage and the

¹"For Vygotsky unlike Piaget, there is no 'stage' but only a progressive unfolding of the meaning inherent in language through the interaction of speech and thought. And as always with Vygotsky, it is a progression from outside in, with dialogue being an important part of the process" (Bruner, 1987, p. 11).

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drama of everyday life and its role in the development of personality. This strand of his work has received limited scholarly attention yet has potential for illuminating aspects of his larger project in ways that suggest the fundamentally emotional quality of culturally mediated personality development.

My reconsideration of Vygotsky's attention to art, emotion, and the growth of consciousness begins with an outline of the views he expressed in *The Psychology of Art*,² which he completed in 1925. I also include attention to Vygotsky's (1997b) views from 1921 to 1923 as expressed in the chapters on "Education of Emotional Behavior" and "Esthetic Education," included in the volume published as *Educational Psychology* based on lectures delivered at Gomel's teachers college and believed to be written in anticipation of a textbook for a new generation of revolutionary Soviet teachers.³

To examine Vygotsky's mature views on art and emotion, I consider a set of essays, treatises, and lectures from the last three years of his life. From Volume 6 of *The Collected Works* (Vygotsky, 1999a, 1999b), I review "The Teaching about Emotions: Historical-Psychological Studies" and "On the Problem of the Psychology of the Actor's Creative Work." I further consult three lectures: A talk, included in Van der Veer and Valsiner's (1994) compilation *The Vygotsky Reader*, which the editors have titled "The Problem of the Environment," in which Vygotsky discusses *perzhivanie*, a complex construct that roughly translates to "emotional experience," which he uses to help explain aspects of human development; and Lectures 4 and 5, "Emotions and their Development" (1987a) and "Imagination and its Development in Childhood" (1987b), from Volume 1 of *The Collected Works*. My purpose in reviewing Vygotsky's views on art, emotion, and consciousness is to take this relatively minor aspect of his career project and examine it as a way to provide depth to his contributions to the field's understanding of cultural mediation, personality, and concept development.

²For this article I rely on the 1971 MIT translation of *The Psychology of Art*, the only version available to readers of English, which was conducted by Scripta Technica, Inc., an apparently defunct company about which little seems known today. Even those who have considerable knowledge about the translation of scholarship and Vygotskian studies are at a loss to explain this company's operations; neither Michael Cole nor René van der Veer could tell me anything about Scripta Technica, Inc. Internet searches reveal that many books in various fields have been translated by this company, but there is no information about how they hired or trained their translators, who did specific translations, whether the translations were conducted by individuals or teams, or other information that would help to gauge the authenticity of their work. Given the remarkable variation in the translation of *Thought and Language/Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1934/1962, 1934/1986, 1934/1987c) and the dissatisfaction of knowledgeable scholars regarding the quality of many translations of Vygotsky into English (e.g., Van der Veer, 1987, 1992, 1997), it is disconcerting that this early effort by Vygotsky to outline a theory of the psychology of art comes with no specific attribution to an identifiable translator and no other version against which to compare it. According to Van der Veer (personal communication, January 20, 2009), the MIT translation is half the length of various Russian editions that themselves are not consistent in terms of content or the accompanying commentary. And so for those not fluent in Russian, scholarship that uses *The Psychology of Art* as a starting point is undertaken with a certain degree of caution.

³I had intended to reference this information to the editor(s) of *Educational Psychology*, but the book provides no clue to the identity of such, even as this information appears in the "Editor's Note" on pages xiii to xv. In spite of the singular indexing of the "Editor's Note," the note itself uses plural pronouns (e.g., "In translating the book we wished . . ."), making the editor's/editors' identity yet more ambiguous.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ART

The Psychology of Art both contains the seed of the ideas that Vygotsky developed during the remaining phase of his life and suggests that even with reserves of genius working in his favor, he was in the formative stages of developing the blueprint for a comprehensive psychology of human development in its cultural-historical context. It thus stands as a fascinating and impressive yet problematic account of the qualities that distinguish what is art from what is not and the ways in which art may engender responses in those who engage with it. My review includes attention to the limits of his analysis; the mixed Marxist legacy that is evident in the book; the cultural blinders that affect his vision of the relative value of different artistic productions; the content of what he elsewhere refers to his “tedious investigations” into extant views; and the gist of what he considers to be the essence of art, including his focus on the form of artistic works, his beliefs in the superiority of canonical works, his views on artistic meaning, his grounding of art in a genre theory, and his outline of *catharsis*, which refers to the “intelligent emotions” available from a properly conceived engagement with true works of art.

Limits of Vygotsky's Analysis

Vygotsky worked on *The Psychology of Art* from 1915 to 1922, beginning at the age of 19 and concluding at age 26. Yaroshevsky (1989) reported that Vygotsky wrote this meditation during a protracted illness, one of the many life-threatening bouts with tuberculosis that interrupted his career and often led him to believe that his current work would be his last. Following a trip to study defectological institutes in Western Europe, he became so sick that he was ordered by doctors to take respite in a sanatorium. Bedridden and with no access to empirical research methods, Vygotsky (1925/1971) nonetheless devoted his energies to scholarship. Drawing on his background as a teacher, he took the approach of a literary critic: To conduct an astute reading of texts that produces a deep and careful reading, the elucidation of criteria to guide the production and reading of literature, and the application of those criteria to texts. His analysis moves through three genres of literature—the fable, the short story, and the tragedy—finding that the fable contains the basic elements of all literary works of art. To take this position, he rejects at length the assumptions that guide the work of leading critics of his time by juxtaposing their ideas against texts that, in Vygotsky's analysis, defy the conception of his antagonists, and then outlining an alternative view that resolves the problems his analysis identified.

Vygotsky thus relies primarily on philosophical ruminations to develop his theory of the psychology of art, rather than the empirical methods he later developed in the clinics of Moscow. (As I review later, he did attempt to measure breathing rates of readers of literature as evidence of emotional response during this period, although this approach comprised a minor aspect of his early work.) Indeed, Leontiev (1997) noted that “the attempt to objectively analyze the emotions caused by [art's inherent contradictions] were not successful (and could not be successful in view of the level of development of the psychological science at the time)” (p. 13), a problem that contributed to Vygotsky's shift from the theoretical and abstract practice of literary criticism to more empirical studies of human development.

Consistent with Vygotsky's wishes, *The Psychology of Art* was never published during his lifetime. In his introduction to the MIT translation, Leontiev (1971) argued that even in his mid-20s,

Vygotsky foresaw a great revolution in psychology and believed that his research toward this broader purpose of resolving the crisis of fragmentation in the psychology of his day would lead him to greater insights than those he laid out in *The Psychology of Art*. He never returned to revise them comprehensively in terms of the cultural, social, and historical framework and emphasis on tool-mediated concept development that he developed in the remaining years of his life.

The Psychology of Art thus stands as what Leontiev (1971) called a “germinal” exploration of a more robust undertaking that Vygotsky never completed: To arrive at “the understanding of the function of art in the life of society and in the life of man⁴ as a sociohistorical being” (p. x). Vygotsky never completed the project initiated with his doctoral research and early teaching experiences, even as he frequently infused his subsequent writing with examples from Tolstoy, Pushkin, and other literary writers. The issues that he raised, however, continue to daunt those interested in psychological studies, the emotional dimension of human existence, and the role of art in culture. To Vygotsky, these conundrums found resolution in the formulation that human development is greater than the sum of emotional and cognitive parts. He sought instead a unified conception of mind as a phenomenon that engages people with the settings of their actions. The main theme of this endeavor, Yaroshevsky (1989) asserted, “was an attempt to understand man in the conflicts of his being in this world full of tragedy” (p. 215).

Vygotsky’s Mixed Marxist Legacy

In the formative period during which he wrote *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky operated from a Marxist perspective, the de rigueur epistemology of the nascent Soviet Union in which he came of age. The Marxist cultural-historical emphasis in *The Psychology of Art* is evident in many ways. Art, says Vygotsky, “is determined and conditioned by the psyche of the social man” (p. 12) and “systemizes a very special sphere in the psyche of social man—his emotions” (p. 13). Vygotsky rejects the notion that an artistic response consists solely of a transaction between text and reader, arguing instead that “between man and the outside world there stands the social environment, which in its own way refracts and directs the stimuli acting upon the individual and guides all the reactions that emanate from the individual” (p. 252). Individuals never act alone but instead are always working within cultural and historical channels of practice that mediate their perception of reality, their beliefs about the overall direction of human activity, their appropriation of cultural tools with which to engage and act on the world, their reading of the signs that structure their everyday practice, and the worldview that develops through one’s interrelated activity in each of these practices.

Another indication of Vygotsky’s Marxist orientation is his anticipation of the construct of intertextuality, the idea that each text takes on meaning in juxtaposition with other texts, situating each in a cultural-historical context. This notion is compatible with ideas articulated by Bakhtin (1973), a contemporary of Vygotsky’s whose philosophical writing is often paired with Vygotsky’s cultural psychology of human development (e.g., Wertsch, 1991). Vygotsky (1925/1971) argues that “an author who puts down in writing the product of his creativity is by no means the sole creator of his work. . . . [Pushkin] passes on the immense heritage of literary

⁴Throughout this article I cite anthropocentric terms when used by the sources. Quoting their language does not imply endorsement of the terms or the perspective they embody.

tradition," which depended on the cultural dimensions of the genres in which he wrote (p. 16). "Everything within us is social," he continues, "but this [premise] does not imply that all the properties of the psyche of an individual are inherent in all the other members of this group as well" (p. 17).

Here Vygotsky simultaneously aligns himself with Marx's materialist philosophy and makes space for the individual's role within a socially mediated world. This accommodation of individual construals of reality would reach fruition in such works as *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1934/1987d) and would later provide Stalin with the grounds to have Vygotsky's work suppressed posthumously for its ultimate attention to the individual, even one so heavily immersed in sociocultural context.

Vygotsky's Cultural Blindness

Vygotsky could not always see outside his own cultural limits—the very sociocultural, teleological, and proleptic channels that he recognized in taking a Marxist perspective. He argues for a cultural-historical approach to psychology without always recognizing the ways in which his own society mediated and constrained his thinking. For example, Vygotsky (1925/1971) makes the cultural argument that "art is an expanded 'social feeling' or *technique of feelings*" (p. 244). In doing so he approvingly quotes Taine, who wrote,

For seventeenth-century man there was nothing uglier than a mountain. It aroused in him many unpleasant ideas, because he was as weary of barbarianism as we are weary of civilization. Mountains give us a chance to rest, away from our sidewalks, offices, and shops; we like landscape only for this reason. (p. 244)

Vygotsky's sense of universal, however, appears to come in relation to changes in taste and standards over the course of a single culture rather than different tastes that develop from culture to culture, an idea contested by those who took up Vygotsky's work in service of understanding comparative human cognition (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981). Taine's 17th-century beholder was not a universal figure but rather an urban European. Not every person of the period, however, found mountains to be so repellent. South African anthropologist, musician, and social activist Johnny Clegg (1986) introduces his song "Kilimanjaro" by explaining the mountain's mystical significance as the origin of all African people, suggesting that 17th century sub-Saharan Africans likely viewed it outside the context of the "barbarian" Ottoman invasions into Europe and found it to have majestic beauty and deep cultural significance. On the North American continent, meanwhile, mountain ranges such as the Grand Tetons have been regarded by indigenous people as sacred for many centuries, including the 17th.

Vygotsky's world was decidedly Eurocentric, even as he elsewhere distinguished between "the West" and "the USSR" (1997a, p. 47) and referred to scholarships from global sources. Along with French minuets, Shakespearean and Chekhovian drama, Pushkin's poetry, Gothic architecture, and other European creative works, in *The Psychology of Art* Vygotsky includes brief attention to ancient Egyptian art. This Mediterranean culture comprised the broader civilization of which Vygotsky was a part and so became included within the heritage that provided the framework for his thinking. African culture from beyond the Mediterranean world, along with Native American cultures and those from other locations exotic to this region, lay outside this

framework and so were not included in his conception of “17th-century man” as an arbiter of taste and standards.

Vygotsky’s more extended cultural-historical project, then, was in its infancy when he wrote *The Psychology of Art* and was never fully realized in his later writing; see, for example, Luria’s assumptions about the “backwards” people of remote villages and mountain pasturelands of Uzbekistan and Kirghizia in the 1930s, a study in which Vygotsky played a role late in his brief life (Smagorinsky, 1995). Others have written about the ways his Jewish heritage shaped his worldview (Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008), his simultaneous immersion in both the Enlightenment and Romantic traditions and how they created unresolved conflicts in *Thinking and Speech* (Wertsch, 2000), and other factors that channeled Vygotsky’s own development and normalized his cultural experiences to the point where he seemed not able to recognize them as local and situated. Vygotsky, then, although able to account for cultural-historical elements in human development, was also limited by those factors in his generalizations about humanity based on his cultural perspective.

Vygotsky’s “Tedious Investigations”

Vygotsky’s writing is characterized by what he wryly refers to as his “tedious investigations” into extant views (1999b, p. 119). To create space for his own revolutionary ideas, he first needed to unpack and refute, in excruciating detail, the ideas of those he sought to displace. This tendency can test the patience of even the most devoted readers of Vygotsky as they endure his meticulous repudiation of scholars whose work dominated the field prior to the 1930s.

In a lengthy section of *The Psychology of Art* titled “Critique,” Vygotsky (1925/1971) dedicates three chapters to his dissatisfaction with contemporary scholarship in the areas of art as perception, art as technique, and art as psychoanalysis. Fundamentally, Vygotsky critiques the “unilateral intellectualism” of art psychology in his day, in which “art requires brain work; all the rest is incidental in the psychology of art” (p. 32), particularly the emotional substance that to Vygotsky is central. He rejects the idea that an art form “can be reduced to processes of perception, or to pure brainwork” (p. 33).

Vygotsky’s refutations of his antecedent and contemporary thinkers permeate his review of the fable, the short story, and the tragedy, which he undertakes in order to establish what distinguishes a text as a work of art. One must again wade through his exhaustive analyses of those whose views he considers to be based on inappropriate premises. Although on occasions critics such as G. E. Lessing (1864) are “quite right” and “quite correctly” make certain points (p. 98), Vygotsky inevitably points out “the weakness of the positions which Lessing tries so desperately to defend” (p. 108). Lessing is but one of many critics whose ideas Vygotsky outlines in detail and then rejects as hopelessly misguided. The modern reader must approach these investigations with a certain patience as the young Vygotsky dismisses what he views as both significant and flawed literary criticism of his day in order to outline a psychology of art that will inform current thinking about the psychology of both art and mediated thinking in general.

The Essence of Art

Vygotsky (1925/1971) expends considerable effort to distinguish what constitutes a work of art as opposed to a production of lower creative and aesthetic standards. In his concurrent writing

on this topic (Vygotsky, 1997b), he dismisses most children's literature as "a vivid example of bad taste, of the coarse violation of all notion of esthetic style, and of the most dismal misunderstanding of the mind of the child," due to its didactic emphasis characterized by "a hortatory tone, tedious copybook maxims, and unctuous preachiness" (p. 242). Art, instead, requires a careful formulation of appropriate materials, embeddedness in a suitable artistic genre, and topic of appropriate emotional timbre. I next review his early attention to the nature of art and its formal requirements.

Focus on form. Among Vygotsky's (1925/1971) primary tasks is to understand those qualities that allow for a human creation to be considered a work of art. He says of his task,

The central idea of the psychology of art, I believe, is the recognition of the dominance of material over artistic form, or, what amounts to the same thing, the acknowledgement in art of the social techniques of emotions. . . . I do not interpret [aesthetic] symbols as manifestations of the spiritual organization of the author or his readers. I do not attempt to infer the psychology of an author or his readers from a work of art, since I know this cannot be done on the basis of an interpretation of symbols.

I shall attempt to study the pure and impersonal psychology of art without reference to either the author or the reader, looking only at the form and material of the work of art. (p. 5)

Vygotsky's (1925/1971) focus on form leads him to reject the view that meaning arises from "the psyche of social man" who "completes with his imagination the picture or image created by the artist" (p. 39). Rather, he maintains, "the artist must never allow our fancy or imagination to perform an *arbitrary* [emphasis added] addition or completion" (p. 46). These capricious elaborations, he says, are "the work of ignoramuses and laymen" (p. 46). In Vygotsky's conception, the psychology of art, unlike the changing psyches of people, "remains immutable and eternal. What changes and evolves from generation to generation is the way it is used and applied" (p. 40). Rorschach's inkblots, he continues, "show quite unmistakably that we give meaning, structure, and expression to the most absurd, random, and senseless accumulation of forms. In other words, a work of art by itself cannot be responsible for the thoughts and ideas it inspires" (p. 40).

Vygotsky is instead concerned with the constitution of human creations and their properties, distinguishing between types of human works that can be considered art and those that should not, and between human creations that meet artistic standards of canonicity and those that do not. He focuses on the form that a semiotic configuration of signs takes to achieve a meaning potential in a cultural context whose intertextual codification practices provide meaning for particular forms. Vygotsky worked against the crisis of objectivism of his day, seeking instead to formulate a unity of genre, subject, and material in considering the meaning potential of artworks.

Vygotsky (1997b) disputes Tolstoy's view that children are capable of producing art, asserting that their lack of technical skill prevents their creations, no matter how meaningful to their personality development, from reaching artistic status. (Presumably such prodigies as Mozart, who at age 5 was writing musical compositions and performing public recitals, stand outside this judgment.) In contrast to Tolstoy's (1862) belief that it would be "odd and insulting" for him to critique the productions of 11-year-old children because such interference would violate "the natural properties the child's soul is endowed with from the very start" (p. 258), Vygotsky believes

that “no matter how sublime and how exquisite are those works [the children featured by Tolstoy] produced, their creative impulses were always of a different order than Goethe’s or Tolstoy’s in their very essence” (p. 259). To be treated as art beyond the personal meaning afforded the artist, Vygotsky feels, technical mastery is required.

At the same time, Vygotsky believes in the developmental value of experiencing “the poetry ‘of every moment,’” that is, “the creative reworking of reality, a processing of things and the movement of things which will illuminate and elevate everyday experience to the level of the creative.” Vygotsky (1997b) considers the cultivation of this process to be among “the most important of all the tasks of esthetic education” (p. 261). Lindqvist (2003) noted that Vygotsky asserts in his 1930 book *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, “Emotion and imagination are closely related. . . . Emotions result in an imaginary process, and vice versa. Emotions are always real and true. In this way, Vygotsky claimed, emotions are linked to reality.” This value on “play as imagination in action” (p. 249), however, does not guarantee that youthful engagement in this critical esthetic process might produce artifacts that could be considered art.

Vygotsky (1925/1971) rejects strictly formalist and strictly affective definitions of what elevates a human work to the status of art. He looks instead to those structural aspects of a creation from which arise a sense of profundity and new planes of emotional experience in those who transact with its substance. He sees form as a central property organically related to its meaning potential. The materials selected and the form into which it is fashioned conjointly produce an emotional state or experience capable of evincing a consistent type of elevated emotional experience for its respondents. This state supersedes the mundane semantic quality of the materials or language through which the art is constructed; the whole is not only greater than the sum of its parts, paradoxes between its central elements amplify an artwork’s effects.

Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, for instance, is capable of evoking powerful emotions in large part because the poignant image of the crucified Jesus in his mother’s lap emerges from a cold block of marble.⁵ Tuscan artist Giorgio Vasari, a younger contemporary of Michelangelo’s, said of this sculpture that “it is certainly a miracle that a formless block of stone could ever have been reduced to a perfection that nature is scarcely able to create in the flesh” (Vasari, 1965). Vygotsky contends that an emotive sculpture cannot, in contrast, be produced from wax. According to Leontiev (1971), Vygotsky believes that art’s true validity

appears only when we consider it in relation to the material which it informs or “incarnates,” as Vygotsky puts it, by giving it new life in the context of the work of art. . . . Sensations, emotions, and passions are part of the content of a work of art, but they are *transformed* in it. Just as the artistic creation produces a transfiguration of the material of which the work of art is composed, it also causes a metamorphosis of feelings. The significance of this metamorphosis is, in Vygotsky’s view, its transcendence of individual feelings and their generalization to the social plane. (p. vii)

Just as a magnificently emotive sculpture may be carved from cold, hard stone, an emotive text may be produced from a homely collection of words when they are orchestrated into configurations with a meaning potential. This paradoxical combination of form and material, argues Vygotsky, contributes to the artfulness of a human creation.

⁵The *Pietà* is my example, not Vygotsky’s.

Canonicity.⁶ Undoubtedly there would be disagreement on the point at which a material and its subject matter unite to produce this transcendence of feeling in beholders. Vygotsky's examples tend to run to extremes, such as his contrast between Beethoven's sonatas and peasant folk music, to illustrate the elevated response he sees available from canonical works but not those mundane works, the effect of which he considers merely emotive. For the heuristic purposes of *The Psychology of Art*, he considers such distinctions to be adequate. Surely greater contention would await anyone looking into examples closer to the balance of this binary, such as sonatas by composers of marginal status or folksongs such as the Irish anthem "Danny Boy" that have reached canonical stature to the point where they have become a staple of live performances of Irish classical flautist James Galway. Vygotsky's gravitation to masterworks as the sine qua non of artistic achievement suggests much about his own upbringing as an educated Jew and ascendance into the pantheon of Soviet academic life through his brilliant intellect. Yet his cultural experiences could also be viewed as limiting factors in his perspective.

Vygotsky believes that a work of art must not only express feelings but transform those feelings into a more generalizable experience that elevates those whose readings or viewings provide a corresponding set of experiences that are amenable to illumination. In Vygotsky's vision, only high-quality art can produce this elevation of feelings, this metamorphosis. His treatment of art is limited to transcendent canonical works, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, that had moved Europeans' sensibilities over time. Vygotsky appears to conceive of art as a product of *Kultur*, the German tradition that values the repository of the greatest products of human creativity and intellect over time⁷ (M. Cole, personal communication, February 11, 2009). He disdains, for instance, the manner in which many literary works have "fallen prey to commonplace and vulgar interpretation, the prejudices of which have to be dealt with every time one studies a familiar text, such as Krylov's fables or Shakespeare's tragedies" (p. 150).

Vygotsky finds little to admire in peasant folk music and other cultural expressions of common people, even as he asserts the developmental importance of playful and creative action among children that nonetheless does not meet artistic standards. In his critique of Tolstoy's view that works that produce good feelings may be considered artful, he quotes V. G. Valter's contention that

if Tolstoy had said that the gaiety of the peasant women put him in a good mood, one could not object to that. It would mean that the language of emotions that expressed itself in their singing (it could well have expressed itself simply in yelling, and most likely did) infected Tolstoy with their gaiety. But what has this to do with art? Tolstoy does not say whether the women sang well; had they not sung but simply yelled, beating their scythes, their fun and gaiety would have been no less catching, especially on his daughter's wedding day. (pp. 241–242)

⁶An external reviewer for this article wrote, "Let me defend Vygotsky's views on the canon for a moment. Vygotsky resists the idea that canonicity is reducible to class prejudice and for two good reasons. First of all, he is developing a psychological theory which depends very much on a distinction between higher and lower psychological processes. It really follows from this that there is no form which is so elevated that we cannot discover its biomechanical substratum in its material nor any biological function so base that it cannot be reworked into a higher, specifically human cultural form. Secondly, as a revolutionary Marxist, Vygotsky's attitude toward bourgeois culture is not that it should be abolished, but on the contrary that it should be conquered and assimilated by the working class (and in particular by the children who were his charges)."

⁷This meaning is distinguished from that which pertains to the values of German imperialism during the Hohenzollern and Nazi regimes.

Although I am reading a translation of a quote of a quote, I do read a certain dismissive and patronizing sarcasm in Valter's comments, selected by Vygotsky because he feels they make a convincing point. Simply speaking with condescension of an example does not, however, effectively dismiss it. Given that neither Vygotsky, nor Valter, nor I actually witnessed the performance that moved Tolstoy so, it is hard to say whether the peasant song was artistic by any standard. What I gather, however, is that Vygotsky believes that this example reveals that *expression of this type* is too common to provide the elevated emotional state that he believes is the province of true works of art, even as he acknowledges elsewhere (e.g., p. 16) that the creative processes of folk and classical artists are similar.

Vygotsky (1925/1971) further derides art that falls outside the canon that he admires. He speaks disparagingly of "trash literature" that appeals to "mass tastes" and satisfies "hidden and forbidden desires rather than aesthetic emotions and requirements" (p. 79). He describes a "fairly stupid but very civilized lady" whom Tolstoy once humored as she read a "trite and vulgar" novel she had written about a romanticized meeting between a heroine and hero (p. 63). Vygotsky thus rejects a *democratic* view of art (see Moody, 1990) and *populist* conception of literature (Faust & Dressman, 2009) in which the common person's artistic expression and appreciation stand on equal ground with those of the professional artist or critic.

Art and meaning. At this point in his career, Vygotsky appears to believe that works of art have stable meanings inscribed in them by their authors. Even though Vygotsky is considered the father of contemporary semiotics by V. V. Ivanov (1971), in his closing commentary in *The Psychology of Art*—apparently written for the English translation and so contemporary circa 1971—the situated tenor of more recent semiotic theories (e.g., Witte, 1992) suggests that Vygotsky's early work had yet to achieve the cross-cultural dimensions that his interpreters (e.g., Cole, 1996) extrapolated from his formulation. In these more recent conceptions, the codification of meaning in a text relies on shared knowledge of cultural signs and what they mean to those conversant with what they inscribe (see Smagorinsky, 2001).

The history of the arts provides abundant occasions when the absence of a shared understanding of textual codification has produced different perspectives on the value of a work. One well-known example concerns the "Piss Christ" photograph by Andres Serrano, which depicts a small plastic crucifix submerged in a glass of the artist's urine. This photograph won the U.S. Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art's "Awards in the Visual Arts" competition sponsored in part by the federally funded National Endowment for the Arts. The photograph inspired much controversy over the degree to which it was or was not art, the extent to which it violated the principle of the separation of church and state given that taxpayer money supported Serrano's work on the project, the question of what the image meant, and much else. Without question those who considered it art and those who found it to be obscene and blasphemous were not operating within a shared notion of textual codes.

Given Vygotsky's focus on the interpretation of canonical works within the educated class of the Soviet Union, perhaps his belief that authors of texts and their audiences share assumptions about codification makes sense. Yet that assumption cannot be at work in more pluralistic societies in which artistic texts may emerge from more than one set of conventions. "Piss Christ" provides one type of example, one in which a profane subject is interpreted differently by people of different sorts of religious experiences and affiliations, different conceptions of what counts as (fundable) art, and different readings of incendiary texts.

Rabinowitz (1987) gave a different sort of example in arguing for greater recognition for literature written by women, using Margaret Ayer Barnes's 1935 novel *Edna His Wife* as an example. Rabinowitz asserted the premise that "canonization is, at least in part, a process by which certain texts are privileged because they work with a normalized strategy or set of strategies" (p. 212)—the sort of shared assumptions about codification that can enable authors and audiences to operate within the a shared understanding of textual codes. He maintains that "[*The Great*] *Gatsby* has been canonized and *Edna [His Wife]* tossed in the can at least partly because of a political bias in the way we have been taught to read" (p. 213), referring to the fact that Barnes's novel has not reached the status of canonization attained by Fitzgerald's novel because of its reliance on conventions that fall outside those established by mainstream literary critics, who were preponderantly male.

Grounding his analysis in what he calls *the politics of interpretation*, Rabinowitz (1987) argued that *The Great Gatsby* and other "classic" texts have achieved their status because the rules of interpretation, and thus canonicity, have been set by male critics who base their judgment on the works of male authors writing about male issues. Rabinowitz's argument is long and provocative but could be summarized as follows:

There is a certain kind of repetition in the canon as well, at least in its focus. As Judith Fetterley provocatively puts it, "If a white male middle-class literary establishment consistently chooses to identify as great and thus worth reading those texts that present as central the lives of white male middle-class characters, then obviously recognition and reiteration, not difference and expansion, provide the motivation for reading." To put it in other terms, we may readily canonize books that raise problems—but we seem to prefer it if those problems are the problems of a certain dominant group, for then at least the centrality of that group remains an implicit assumption. (p. 229)

Vygotsky's (1925/1971) premises about art, then, assume a common, canonical cultural framework for interpretation. Cultural frameworks are inherently ideological, enabling dominant groups to assert their authority over others by establishing the standards by which all public works are evaluated. To Rabinowitz (1987), this reliance on canonical standards is exclusionary and limiting, elevating some works above others not because of inherent qualities but because they conform to dominant standards. Such a limitation in Vygotsky's thinking needs to be acknowledged as 21st-century scholars take up his work in undertaking their own.

Art and genre. Vygotsky's (1925/1971) account of the distinguishing qualities of an artistic text appear to be well aligned with what is now called *genre theory*, or more specifically *North American genre theory*, in which the production of works within a genre is viewed as a form of social action (Miller, 1984). In *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky is concerned with the form that a text must take in order to be considered a work of art. The specific features of a genre cue particular and appropriate types of responses in readers, listeners, or viewers of the artistic text. Vygotsky's dissatisfaction with many interpretations of *Hamlet*, for instance, leads him to assert that many critics misread the text because they pay attention to the wrong features. "If *Hamlet* is what the critics claim it to be," he asks, "why is it shrouded in so much mystery and obscurity? Frequently the mystery is greatly exaggerated, and even more frequently it is based on utter misunderstanding," such as Merezhikovskii's error in reading the play according to the standards of an operatic libretto rather than "the actual *Hamlet*" (p. 169). He further argues that most critical views of *Hamlet* are characterized by a "shallow approach," leading him to conclude that "those

who want to study *Hamlet* as a psychological problem must abandon criticism” and “discard the 11,000 volumes of commentary that have crushed the hero under their weight” (p. 177). “It is more correct,” he continues, to attempt to grasp the play “from its teleological trend (the psychological function it performs)” (p. 181).

In considering the fable, Vygotsky distinguishes between the prosaic (didactic fables such as those of Aesop and Tolstoy) and the lyrical or poetical (those by La Fontaine and Krylov). Critics such as Lessing who applied the same criteria to both were sadly mistaken, Vygotsky argues, because the structure of each should more appropriately cue a particular kind of reading. Vygotsky asserts that “the segregation of fables into prosaic and poetic ones becomes a necessity obvious to everybody, and the rules applicable to the prosaic fable turn out to be completely different from, if not opposite to, those applies to the poetic fable” (p. 138).

Referencing Zhukovskii’s conclusion that “the reader’s mind must be directly involved in the action described by the poet,” Vygotsky (1925/1971) declares that

if the two levels, or parallel themes, in the fable are supported and described with all the skill of poetic technique, that is, if they exist not only as a logical contradiction, but especially as an affective contradiction, the reader of the fable will experience contradictory feelings and emotions which evolve simultaneously with equal strength. (p. 139)

The presence of these contradictions, he asserts, will “guarantee the emotion generated by the very organization of the poetic material” (p. 139).

Because of this capacity to produce emotion in response to the arrangement of formal elements,

it is a cardinal mistake to assume that a fable must be a mockery, satire, or a joke. It has an infinite variety of psychological genres, and it is perfectly true that it contains the seed of all other forms of poetry [and] of lyric, epic, and drama. (p. 140)

What makes a fable poetic, argues Vygotsky, is the manner in which its form produces not just an emotional response in a reader but an emotional response marked by paradox: “The affective contradiction and its solution, by means of short-circuiting contrasting sensations and emotions, represent the true nature of our psychological reaction to fables” (p. 143). The arrangement of the linguistic material of the fable so that it “develops its action on two contrasting, and frequently opposing, emotional levels” (p. 135) provides fables with their poetic quality, the “subtle poison” that Krylov attributes to the dual meaning available in a poetic or lyrical fable. It produces the “second meaning” that elevates a story to the level of art (p. 137) because “it forces us, by the strength and inspiration of its poetry, to react emotionally to its story” (p. 143).

Vygotsky’s genre theory is further elaborated in his consideration of the short story, centered on his exegesis of I. Bunin’s “Gentle Breath.” Vygotsky opens with a distinction between the material of a story and its form, asserting that

the material is what is readily available to the poet for his story, namely the events and characters of everyday life, or the relationships between human beings—in brief, all that has existed prior to the story can exist outside of it or is independent of it. The form of this work of art is the arrangement of this material in accordance with the laws of artistic construction. (p. 145)

What distinguishes an account of events as a work of art is the form in which the poet renders it:

Disposition and arrangement of events in a story, the combination of phrases and sentences, of concepts, ideas, images, and actions is governed by the same rules of artistic association as are the juxtapositions of sounds in a melody, or those of words in a poem. (p. 149)

This arrangement, he maintains, relies on poetic technique that “is purposeful; it is introduced with some goal of other, and it governs some specific function of the story” (p. 149).

Vygotsky advocates the undertaking of a “structural analysis” involved in the “composition” of events into a narrative sequence, such as the nonlinear sequence used by Bunin in “Gentle Breath” (p. 154). By reorganizing a linear sequence into a newly ordered narrative composition, events “lose their turbidity” as they are liberated from “the conventional bonds in which they are presented to us in actuality,” enabling the author to

undo life’s turbidity and transform it into a crystal transparency. [Bunin] did this to make life’s events unreal, to transform water into wine, as always happens in any real work of art. The words of a story or verse carry its meaning (the water), whereas the composition creates another meaning for the words, transposes everything into a completely different level, and transforms the whole into wine. Thus, the banal tale of a frivolous provincial schoolgirl is transformed into the gentle breath of Bunin’s short story. (pp. 154–155)

This composition of events into art creates the emotional effect that Vygotsky argues follows inevitably from a knowledgeable response to the artistic arrangement of form, one that moves above vulgar and commonplace responses that are incognizant of textual coding or the skill required to turn the water of material into the wine of a formally constructed work of art. Vygotsky, using Blonskii’s claim that breathing rates indicate emotional response to a stimulus, employed a pneumographic recorder to measure breathing rates of people reading “Gentle Breath” to develop the insight that an “affective contradiction . . . between two contrasting emotions . . . makes up the astonishing psychological rules of the aesthetics of the story.” Traditionally, he argues, critics had sought to explain “the harmony of form and content” in artistic works. In contrast, he posits that “form may be in conflict with the content, struggle with it, overcome it” to produce a “dialectic contradiction between content and form.” This inherent paradox, the “inner incongruity between the material and the form,” is central to the effect of a work of art in that it produces conflicting emotions in the reader (p. 160).

This paradox is especially evident in a tragedy such as *Hamlet*, he asserts, given that “the task of art, like that of tragedy, is to force us to experience the incredible and absurd in order to perform some kind of extraordinary operation with our emotions” (Vygotsky, 1925/1971, p. 190). He elaborates on this point, saying that

the physiognomic incongruity among the various details of the facial expression in a portrait is the basis for our emotional reaction; and the psychological noncoincidence of the various factors expressing the character in a tragedy is the basis for our tragic sympathy. By forcing our feelings to alternate continuously to the opposite extremes of the emotional range, by deceiving them, splitting them and piling obstacles in their way, the tragedy can obtain powerful emotional effect [so that] *at any moment, [the protagonist] unifies both contradictory planes and is the supreme and ever-present embodiment of the contradiction inherent in the tragedy.* (pp. 194–195)

The paradox of incongruent combinations of form and material is thus extended in the conflictual emotions that an artistic work raises in those who engage with it. These ironies, Vygotsky

(1925/1971) argues, are central features of works of art that are worthy of elevation to canonical status.

Catharsis. The feeling evinced in the respondent represents what Vygotsky (1925/1971) calls a *catharsis*. Vygotsky borrows this term from Aristotle, who, according to Yaroshevsky (1989), uses it “to denote the essence of aesthetic experience as cleansing the soul from affects and giving ‘harmless’ delight”; the term was then appropriated by Freud and his followers, who employed it to characterize the ways in which art serves as a vehicle for “living out forbidden desires” (p. 155). Vygotsky views the Freudian conception to be overly biological and individualistic, according to Yaroshevsky. What produces a catharsis, argues Vygotsky, is the social subconscious element of art’s effect on the individual. Art serves as a medium through which one may anticipate a social future, one channeled by cultural mediation.

Vygotsky’s (1925/1971) definition of catharsis is specific and departs from conventional meanings from dictionaries and other theoretical orientations. To Vygotsky, a catharsis involves the generalization from personal emotions to higher human truths that becomes available through a transaction with a work of art. Both emotion and imagination are central to this process, with a key aspect of each being its indefiniteness and thus its capacity to promote a raised awareness in a respondent. An aesthetic response to art, he argues, is not strictly visceral. Rather, it involves a delay in which the imagination elevates the response: “The emotions caused by art,” he says, “are intelligent emotions” (p. 212).

Catharsis involves “an affective contradiction, causes conflicting feelings, and leads to the short-circuiting and destruction of these emotions” (Vygotsky, 1925/1971, p. 213). This process leads to “a complex transformation of feelings” (p. 214) and results in an “explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions” (p. 215). Because emotion and imagination are implicated in instances of profound engagement with art, Vygotsky asserts that “art complements life by expanding its possibilities” (p. 247) as one overcomes, resolves, and regulates feelings through a process of generalization of those feelings to a higher plane of experience.

Nor does art serve as a template for action, even if action may follow from engagement with it. Consider what occurred following the release of Walter Hill’s (1979) film *The Warriors*, based on the novel by Sol Yurick (1965). Yurick’s story followed Xenophon’s telling of *Anabasis*, which is based on a tale of a band of soldiers’ retreat from Persia in 401 B.C.E. and their battle home across enemy territory. In Hill’s cinematic version, seven survivors of a street gang must fight their way across New York City. Their odyssey is depicted as so visually and emotionally primal that riots followed its release in a number of U.S. and U.K. cities. Even though the film includes themes such as loyalty and teamwork and thus potentially could be considered artistic if heightened reflection on those capacities follows from a viewing, the film’s more elemental use of violence triggered actions that mimicked the behaviors of its protagonists and their many antagonists.

Perhaps what the rioters lacked was what Vygotsky (1925/1971) discusses as the capability of experiencing the German concept of *empatie*, or empathy. Vygotsky says that

emotions are not produced in us by a work of art, as are sounds by the keys of a piano. An artistic element does not introduce its emotional tone into us. It is we who introduce emotions into a work of art, emotions arising from the greatest depths of our being and generated not at the shallow level of the receptors but in the most complex activities of our organisms. (p. 207)

He refers to the manner in which the emotion suggested by a work of art is realized in a respondent as *co-affect*. One can, for instance, experience Othello’s jealousy or Macbeth’s terror

along with the actors performing the play. One might also experience the fear and the responses engendered by a viewing of *The Warriors* and in turn seek physical and emotional release through violence upon emerging from the theater. What appears to be lacking in such actions is empathy for the victims of such behavior and the elevated emotional experience that follows from an imaginative delay through which this higher plane of consciousness may be realized.

A distinguishing feature of art, then, is its capacity to incite a heightened emotional response that produces an elevated plane of experience by means of an imaginative extrapolation from initial feelings, particularly as they involve conflict and transformation. The art does not act as a sole stimulus, however; it works in conjunction with a respondent's capacity to experience appropriate emotions. Many viewers of *The Warriors* did not riot following the film; some may have experienced the catharsis that Vygotsky viewed as a critical dimension of a work of art's effect on its beholders. And so a young child might not yet have had the experiences necessary to respond with pathos upon viewing Michelangelo's *Pietà*, nor might a person with autism that is sufficiently severe to limit empathic capabilities, nor might a person whose cultural conditioning suggests the appropriateness of other sorts of responses. Given Vygotsky's focus on canonical works, it again becomes difficult to know precisely where to draw the line between that which is art and that which falls short; given the lack of common experiences among humans and differences in biological and emotional development and normative psychic makeup, it is hard to say at which point on the continuum of possibilities a person becomes available for a cathartic response, and in relation to which specific human creations.

A response of catharsis, argues Yaroshevsky (1989), is transformational to beholders who experience it knowledgeably, as suggested by Vygotsky's belief that each reader of *Hamlet* becomes its new author. This highly spiritual aspect of humanity is realized through engagement with art. The explicitly atheistic policy of the Soviet Union suppressed religious orientations to understanding the soul and suggests one reason for the references by many Soviet psychologists to the arts as an expressive medium for understanding psychic, worldly, and cosmic mysteries (Smagorinsky, 2009). Vygotsky (1987a), in critiquing contemporary conceptions of the emotions, asserts that emotions "remain so close to the nucleus of the personality" in spite of evolutionary development away from pure animal instincts (p. 327). Such explorations rely on the mediation of cultural tools, with art serving as a, and perhaps *the*, critical mediator for spiritual understanding.

VYGOTSKY'S LATE CONSIDERATIONS OF DRAMA AND EMOTION

In the last years of his life, Vygotsky prepared a set of essays, treatises, and lectures dedicated to questions of emotional life on and off the stage. None draws directly on *The Psychology of Art* or his other early writing, and none employs key constructs such as catharsis. Rather, Vygotsky considers more specifically the degree to which genuine emotions contribute to the artifice of stage work and the role of emotions in the development of personality.

The Emotion of Formal Drama

To consider how actors produce convincing emotional performances that move audiences, even as they follow someone else's script repeatedly on the stage, Vygotsky (1999a) rejects the reigning approach of his day, which was to develop a "professionogram" of the actor's work to identify

“how certain general qualities and traits of human giftedness should be developed to ensure the person who has them success in the area of theatrical creative work” (p. 237). To Vygotsky, the development of such typologies could only superficially address the central problem that Diderot called the “Paradox of the Actor”: How to produce emotional performances on the basis of a theatrical script and perform them convincingly so as to produce an emotional response in viewers who are aware of the artifice of acting on the stage. Technique alone is insufficient for the convincing replication of deep emotional states that stimulate the sort of catharsis Vygotsky (1925/1971) discusses in *The Psychology of Art*. Vygotsky states Diderot’s paradox as follows:

Must the actor experience what he portrays, or is his acting a higher form of “aping,” an imitation of an ideal prototype? The question of the internal states of the actor during a stage play is the central node of the whole problem. Must the actor experience the role or not? (p. 239)

How, asks Diderot, can actors who despise one another personally perform tender love scenes that move an audience to rapturous applause?

Rejecting approaches that rely on the identification of technique, Vygotsky (1999a) attends instead “to the actor and all the uniqueness of his psychology” to address the “psychophysiological conditions” of performance (p. 238). These conditions, he argues, are situated culturally and historically, with actors’ creative work changing “from epoch to epoch and from theater to theater” (p. 239). This historical emphasis, he continues, helps resolve questions of the degree to which emotional performances rely on genuine emotions on the part of the actor. Drawing on the dramatic theory of Russian director Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky, Vygotsky maintains that “the psychology of the actor expresses the social ideology of his epoch and . . . it also changes in the process of the historical development of man just as external forms of the theater and its style and content change” (p. 240). Different time periods thus produce different psychologies for the actors and directors who occupy them, rendering the psychology of the actor “a historical and class category, not a biological category” (p. 240). An actor’s ability to portray an emotion does not follow solely from the ability to produce tears or to construct an expression, but is dialogically related to genres and conventions of expression through which the culture of that expression realizes its ideology, social future, sources of emotions, and other situated aspects of appropriate emotional gesture.

And so a culture’s view of an experience such as death—as a passage to a better place, as the loss of a cherished life, as a celebration of one’s existence, and other views—channels an actor’s biological ability to perform a physiological effect as a culturally valued form of expression:

The actor creates on the stage infinite sensations, feeling, or emotions that become the emotions of the whole theatrical audience. Before they become the subject of the actor’s embodiment, they were given a literary formulation, they were borne in the air, in social consciousness. (Vygotsky, 1999a, p. 241)

An audience’s resonance with the emotions of a performance are thus based not on a raw or innate correlation but on shared social understandings of what counts as tragic, triumphant, poignant, and so on, and how one appropriately expresses such emotions within particular, situated sets of conventions.

Vygotsky (1999a) identifies a critical irony in Diderot’s paradox and finds a cultural-historical explanation for it, yet never resolves how acting achieves the verisimilitude on which it depends for its effect. This essay seems to take up Vygotsky’s (1925/1971) early interest in catharsis,

focusing here on what an actor must do to rouse feelings of emotion in audiences that potentially might become the sort of “intelligent emotion” that the highest art forms are capable of producing in viewers, without employing the term catharsis itself. As he does in *The Psychology of Art*, he focuses on the relation between material and form, locating artistic creation in the paradox between the patent simulation of reality in theatrical performances and the genuine emotions that performers draw on and ultimately inspire in their viewers. Although viewers’ responses are implicated in his discussion—for actors without audiences are working in the absence of relational performances—his attention falls primarily on the creation of the artistic work and its paradoxical emotional motivation.

The Emotion of Everyday Drama

Yaroshevsky (1989) related that in 1929, Vygotsky jotted the following notes: “Dynamics of the individual=drama. . . . The individual as a participant in a drama. . . . Psychology is humanised” (p. 217), suggesting that the principle focus of psychology should be on personality, “a character of the drama of life on the social stage” (p. 219). Vygotsky’s sense of drama concerns people in relation to both others and themselves, with drama emerging relationally through transactions with other people in social settings. Dramatic tensions are also present within the individual, indicating that the development of personality is a consequence of the internal and external dramatic conflicts a person experiences in everyday life.

Yaroshevsky (1989) argued that Vygotsky saw a strong relation between such real human dramas and the dramatic work of the theater. He viewed art as a vehicle through which to understand and regulate human emotions, thus making art a central mediator of human development. Yaroshevsky asserted that Vygotsky

was inspired by the idea of an inner link between spiritual assimilation of the world and its practical transformation. Revealing the mechanism of art’s impact on the real behavior of a concrete individual, without restricting oneself to determining its sociological roots and aesthetic specificity—that was Vygotsky’s purpose. He endeavored to prove that art is a means of transforming the individual, an instrument which calls to life the individual’s “vast potential, so far suppressed and constrained.” The view of art as ornamentation of life “fundamentally contradicts the laws of art discovered by psychological research. It shows that art is the highest concentration of all the biological and social processes in which the individual is involved in society, that it is a mode of finding a balance between man and the world in the most critical and responsible moments of life.” . . . Vygotsky set out to build a new objective psychology capable of explaining the way in which a product of art regulates behavior in a way different from physical signals. For this purpose he worked out a special concept of aesthetic reaction as an integral systemically organized living human action integrating sociocultural, personality-based and neurophysiological elements. (pp. 148–149)

Vygotsky sees personality, with its psychological foundation, and art, with its dramatic origins, as interrelated: The development of personality is fundamentally dramatic and the phenomenon of art is at its heart psychological, suggesting the necessity of both in the development of consciousness.

Vygotsky analyzes this emotional dimension of culturally mediated human development in several essays and lectures, asserting that “the emotions are one of the features which constitute the character of an individual’s general view of life. The structure of the individual’s character

is reflected in his emotional life and his character is defined by these emotional experiences” (1987a, p. 333). “The Teaching about Emotions” consists in great part of Vygotsky’s (1999b) “tedious investigations” into the ideas of Lange (1885/1912) and James (1884, 1890). Although they were not collaborators, James’s and Lange’s views were similar enough to be coupled as the James–Lange theory of emotion and have been influential enough to remain a touchstone for psychologists to this day (e.g., Prinz, 2006).

Vygotsky’s (1999b) rejects the James–Lange theory because of its Cartesian view that emotions are innate and driven by reflex, “pre-established and prepared in advance by the whole course of zoological and embryonal development. They are inherent in man due to the organization of his organism, and, strictly speaking, they exclude any possibility of development” (p. 203). This static view of the emotions runs counter to Vygotsky’s genetic approach; “a theory of emotions that excludes the possibility of development,” he maintains, “inevitably leads us to admitting emotions to be eternal, inviolable, changeless essences” (p. 203). Vygotsky, in contrast, believes that “all emotion is a function of personality” (p. 207), and thus considers emotion and human development to be reciprocally related to one another. He argues that “our affects make it clear to us that we, together with our body, are one being. It is specifically passions that form the basic phenomenon of human nature” (p. 164).

For Vygotsky (1999b), any psychology of the emotions that follows from Descartes “not only bypasses the problem of development, but factually resolves the problem in the sense of a full and complete denial of any possibility of emotional development in man” (p. 205). This view is part of the mechanistic conception of psychology that Vygotsky challenged throughout his career, one in which “the body acts as a soulless robot wholly subject to laws of mechanics” (p. 163) and one that is fundamentally dualistic and intellectualistic and in which feelings are reduced “to a purely cognitive process” (p. 176). In contrast, argues Vygotsky, “consciousness must not be separated from its physical conditions: They comprise one natural whole that must be studied as such” (p. 228).

Significantly, these emotions are further related to the setting in which emotional behavior is learned. Vygotsky (1999b) asserts that human development is a function of individuals’ volitional, goal-directed, sign-and-tool mediated action in social and cultural context and that human development is the proper focus of a psychology that seeks a unified understanding of what might be termed a distributed psychology: One in which “mind” is unbounded by the skull and is related through social mediation to historical genres of practical activity and cultural purpose and the immediate instantiations of those practices in everyday action (see Wertsch, 1991, for an elaboration of this interpretation of Vygotsky).

Shortly before his death, Vygotsky (1935/1994) adapted the Russian term *perezhivanie*, possibly from Stanislavsky (2007), to account for the central role of affect in framing and interpreting human experience. Benedetti (2007), Stanislavsky’s translator, saw this term as denoting “the process by which an actor engages actively with the situation in each and every performance” (p. xviii). It has been associated with efforts to overcome trauma; its meaning appears to suggest that it is grounded in the process of emotional response to experience, particularly in its regulatory function. Vygotsky employs the term for the dramatic process of the development of personality in everyday life rather than on the stage. He argues that environmental factors are “refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience” (p. 339) to help shape a developmental path.

People frame and interpret their experiences through interdependent emotional and cognitive means, which in turn are related to the setting of new experiences. The phenomenon of *meta-experience*—that is, how one experiences one's experiences—provides the means through which people render their socially and culturally situated activity into meaningful texts of events (Smagorinsky & Daigle, in press). Vygotsky (1994) argues that

an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]⁸ is always related to something which is found outside the person—and on the other hand, what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in an emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]. (p. 342)

Consequently, in “*an emotional experience [perezhivanie] we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the emotional experience [perezhivanie]*” (p. 342).

Vygotsky's (1935/1994) effort to situate the development of the child within the protean context of the environment leads him to assert that “one should give up absolute indicators reflecting the environment in favour of relative ones, i.e., the very same ones, but viewed in relation to the child” (p. 338). This relational view of the setting of development has a number of implications for thinking about emotion as a fundamental aspect of human growth in social context. The environment takes on different meanings and plays different roles for the individual at different ages and stages of development, and the child's relationship to any environmental factor thus changes over time. It is “always represented in a given emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]. This is why we are justified in considering the emotional experience [*perezhivanie*] to be a unity of environmental and personal features” (p. 343).

In art, *perezhivanie* could serve to promote the intelligent emotional process that Vygotsky sees in catharsis. A resonance between a viewer and an emotional theatrical performance, grounded in some sort of shared set of cultural and personal experiences, could produce deep reflection on prior experiences and heightened awareness of how they affect one's personality in a genetic sense, that is, in the role of cultural mediation on one's personality development. The kinds of emotions that are appropriate to express are learned rather than innate; they follow from a sense of cultural propriety that one appropriates through engagement with others whose own responses have been conditioned through their social experiences.

Art, however, is only one form of cultural mediation. Vygotsky ultimately extends his understanding of catharsis to “the stage of life”: The everyday drama that people experience as part of their engagement with society. Whether stimulated by the verisimilitude of art or by spontaneous social transactions with others, one's actions have an emotional content from which cognition cannot be disassociated. Emotion, cognition, and personality are thus intertwined with sociocultural-historical context. Stanislavsky's reliance on *perezhivanie* as a theatrical resource, then, is also a central part of human development in offstage life as well, serving as the foundation

⁸The insertion of [*perezhivanie*] in the text is a translation device provided by editors Van der Veer and Valsiner (1994), who explained that “the Russian term serves to express the idea that one and the same objective situation may be interpreted, perceived, experienced or lived through by different children in different ways. Neither ‘emotional experience’ (which is used here and which only covers the affective aspect of the meaning of *perezhivanie*), nor ‘interpretation’ (which is too exclusively rational) are fully adequate translations of the noun. Its meaning is closely linked to that of the German verb ‘erleben’ (cf. ‘Erlebnis,’ ‘erlebte Wirklichkeit’)” (p. 354).

for cathartic response to dramatic mediation, through which intelligent emotions may produce a more refined sense of personality.

Vygotsky (1987b) draws connections between emotions and imagination by asserting that “the movement of our feelings is closely connected with the activity of imagination. A certain construction may turn out to lack reality from a rational perspective. Nonetheless, this construction is real in the emotional sense” (p. 347). To Vygotsky, the goal of psychology is to arrive at a unified conception of the human psyche; “only by approaching these forms of activity as systems,” he argues, can human development be understood (p. 348). To contest dualistic thinking in considerations of mind, he concludes that “both imagination and realistic thinking are often characterized by high levels of affect or emotion. There is no opposition between the two in this connection” (p. 348), leading to the insight that “imagination is a necessary, integral aspect of realistic thinking” (p. 349), thus linking his conception of art and emotion to the drama of spontaneous everyday life and its role in socially situated personality development.

CONCLUSION

Lest I unnecessarily test my readers’ kindness with further tedious investigations of my own, I would like to briefly attempt to make sense of Vygotsky’s disparate points in these early and late expositions on art, psychology, emotion, and development. *The Psychology of Art*, although problematic to Vygotsky, nonetheless lays a foundation for his subsequent work, including what I find to be limitations. His logocentric emphasis, for instance, anticipates his ultimate view of speech as the “tool of tools,” a view that underappreciates both the abundance of nonverbal art available for consideration and the potential for signs produced through other systems to serve as part of one’s cultural tool kit (Smagorinsky, 2001; Wertsch, 1991; Witte, 1992). His focus on canonicity involves an elitist perspective that does not consider the phenomenon of mediation in all its forms with people from diverse cultures and social classes, one that is out of step with many 21st-century interpreters of his work.

His ideas, however, do emphasize the interrelation between cognition and emotion, an issue that remains underappreciated in societies where Enlightenment norms prevail, often leading to hyperrationalism, the irrational belief and unquestioning faith in the efficacy of reason (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979). As Kochman (1981) has shown, rationalist perspectives have cultural grounding that can lead to conflicts between groups whose social practices foreground emotion and rationalism to different degrees. Emotional responses are culturally mediated and appropriated, with art among those sign systems that are codified in ways that suggest appropriate means of response for those who have learned to read them. These codes work on different scales, from the individual wandering the gallery to groups responding to a swastika, often producing heightened states of emotion that may or may not have a strongly rational basis.

Vygotsky’s attention to everyday drama and the culturally conditioned development of personality provides an extension of his views on the psychology of art. Shifting his focus from the form and material of art to spontaneous engagement with humans and their cultural artifacts, Vygotsky sees emotion as a fundamental aspect of thinking and acting in the world. These views remain, however, in their formative stages, leaving much for 21st-century Vygotskian scholars to develop. Everyday drama, for instance, runs a gamut from spontaneous to affected, and the performative aspect of human transactions remains a problem to be investigated. People read texts of events in

everyday life, but these texts lack the formal planning and execution of works of art. Yet everyday drama is codified based on cultural-historical practices of signification and so readings ensue, if through a degree of participation that generally is absent in the theater.

Vygotsky's brief consideration of imagination has great implications for the trajectories of social groups and their individuals. His relation of imagination, emotion, and cognition suggests that people's capacity to project a trajectory for themselves is culturally mediated. It is important to understand, then, the kinds of mediation that provide both the emotional foundation and cultural sense of propriety for their trajectories, and the sorts of mediation that potentially limit conceptions of trajectory.

Finally, at least for the purposes of this article, Vygotsky's introduction of the construct of *perezhivanie* has garnered considerable interest in such forums as the XMCA online discussion group (e.g., http://lchc.ucsd.edu/MCA/Mail/xmcamail.2009_02.dir/msg00126.html). Yet *perezhivanie* thus far remains more a tantalizing notion than a concept with clear meaning and import to those who hope to draw on it. How this feature of human development is constructed and employed in future work will affect how Vygotsky's legacy in the development of a comprehensive, unified cultural psychology is extended and realized by those working in his considerable wake.

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