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### A Re-examination of Defining Moments in Vygotsky's Work and Their Implications for His Continuing Legacy

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# A Re-examination of Defining Moments in Vygotsky's Work and Their Implications for His Continuing Legacy

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This article argues for the idea of different moments in Vygotsky's work while highlighting combinations of ideas and concepts that were particularly emphasized in distinct moments of his work. After Vygotsky's death, these moments were not considered a theoretical system in development, either in former Soviet psychology or in Western interpretations of his work. Vygotsky's legacy seems to have been mostly reduced to one concrete focus of his work, mistakenly identified as cultural-historical theory. The overemphasis of selected aspects of Vygotsky's work resulted in an overshadowing of other ideas that have remained relatively "unknown" until fairly recently. In this article, previously underemphasized elements in Vygotsky's psychology, such as emotions, fantasy, imagination, personality, and the generative character of human psyche, are emphasized. A consideration of these elements offers new and refreshing alternatives to Vygotsky's legacy. These previously underemphasized elements are markedly represented in Vygotsky's first and third moments. Furthermore, in the third and final moment of his work, the category of sense opened up a completely new perspective for a systemic and complex approach to understanding the human mind.

## INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky's work is characterized by his great creativity and productivity within a short period of time. Because Vygotsky's work is rich and even somewhat incomplete, it cannot be analyzed linearly or monolithically. In my reading of Vygotsky's texts, I perceive an author who continuously entertained new ideas, ideas that could appear contradictory to one another, even within the same text. An analysis of Vygotsky's intellectual trajectory in psychology is difficult due to the rapidity with which he developed ideas and incongruence between dates of his handwritten texts and dates of publication.

It is difficult to temporally segment the diverse qualitative moments of Vygotsky's ideas because his ideas overlap in works written in similar periods. In this article, I intend to offer a reexamination of the different theoretical emphases in his work from 1915 to 1934. These emphases surface in his theoretical and epistemological approaches to various topics. Tracing the emergence of these diverse trends, I have identified three "moments" in his works, which are

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markedly different from other attempts to distinguish moments in Vygotsky's theoretical trajectory. Still, my analysis has important points of contact with A. A. Leontiev's interpretation of the last period of Vygotsky's work.

The moments of Vygotsky's work enumerated in this article comprise blends of ideas that could be located in a concrete temporal period. The problem is that he simultaneously wrote works that were strongly dissimilar to one another in their main ideas, as can be demonstrated if we compare *Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 1965) with *Pedagogical Psychology* (Vygotsky, 2003).

My analysis of these different moments in Vygotsky's work does not produce an ordered and well-established sequence oriented toward a clear end. Instead, his work represents a tumultuous process full of contradictions and unfinished ideas. Ultimately, it is my contention that these ideas produced many collateral effects from which it is possible to find new alternatives in the interpretation of his legacy. The moments in Vygotsky's work discussed here are markedly different from other attempts to delineate temporal moments in Vygotsky's theoretical work (Minick, 1987; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

Differing emphases that characterize moments in Vygotsky's work did not come about purely as a result of clear intentions. Those moments were also influenced by the effects of the turbulent epoch during which his writings were brought to life, during which the world saw the succession of the Russian Revolution, the First World War, and the rise of Stalin to the top of Soviet political leadership.

Another justification for parsing Vygotsky's career into three moments is the emergence of concepts on higher psychological functions that arose during the period in which he wrote, which emphasized the cognitive functions of sign mediation, tools, and internalization, and influenced his work. This blending of ideas has been identified by many authors as Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. Amazingly, critics of Vygotsky from former Soviet psychology also centered their work on these concepts for a time that overemphasized the later Vygotsky's cultural-historical activity theory; this led to a disavowal of the richness of Vygotsky's system of thought both in the Soviet psychology and in Western approaches to his work.

#### THE FIRST MOMENT OF VYGOTSKY'S WORK: HIS EMPHASIS ON THE GENERATIVE CHARACTER OF THE PSYCHE, THE EMOTIONS AND FANTASY

This first moment was characterized by several publications, among which *Psychology of Art*, *Pedagogical Psychology*, "Consciousness as a Problem in the Psychology of Behavior" (Vygotsky, 1982a), and his first works concerning defectology are especially relevant. This moment roughly coincides with the years between 1915 and 1927, during which "The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" (Vygotsky, 1982b) was published—in which he defined his program for the radical change of the theoretical apparatus of modern psychology. This program guided him throughout his work. Unlike other authors, I consider *Psychology of Art* to be the most significant work of this moment (Vygotsky, 1965). This book includes his very first works, which were written between 1915 and 1922. Written before the onset of any kind of political or institutional pressure, these represent his more spontaneous works. Few authors have analyzed the relevance of *Psychology of Art* and its importance in articulating an understanding between Vygotsky's life and his work (del Rio & Alvarez, 2007; Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).

In *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky constructs a new conceptualization and model for understanding psychology as a science. He presents many of his central concepts, which lead to the development of new categories and ideas related to psychological questions of art, for example. The book offers new insights on various topics in psychology that call for a reconstruction of the field.

The central subject of the book suggests a psychology oriented to essential human questions, irreducible to behavior or to an objectivistic view of human beings. (Of interest, in one of his chapters, Vygotsky identified Marxist psychology as being part of objective psychology, which also included other theoretical approaches such as behaviorism.) Regardless of labels and categories, in *Psychology of Art*, the basis was created for a psychology capable of studying the human person in all her complexity, as an individual whose psychical processes have a cultural-historical genesis. This cultural-historical genesis was also a complex topic, which Vygotsky approached in different ways over the course of his writings.

It was a consideration of precisely these points that led some Soviet psychologists to consider *Psychology of Art* to be the product of an immature period in Vygotsky's life; however, the principal novelties of his work had long been hidden from Soviet psychology. In the words of Puzyrei (2007),

Indeed, while his [long essay on] Hamlet is permeated by an intensive exploration of the phenomenon of a person within the boundary situations of existence, and while the problematic of the spiritual dimension of personality is touched upon in many chapters of "The Psychology of Art" and occupies a significant portion of the last chapter of Pedagogical Psychology, in *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* the discussion of that problem-set [which is extremely terse, to say the least] is postponed until the very last page, and in later works of Vygotsky—the works that present the canonical version of cultural-historical theory—the problems of the philosophy of man are hardly discussed at all in so many words, are "sidelined", and can be only indirectly extracted from an analysis of Vygotsky's discussion of other problems in explicitly psychological subject areas. (pp. 28–29)

In my view, it was the departure from his agenda in *Psychology of Art* that characterized the transitional point between the first and second moment of Vygotsky's work. The progressive decline in Vygotsky's works between 1927 and 1931 on the seminal topics introduced in *Psychology of Art*, such as imagination, fantasy, emotions, and personality—traditional topics in psychology that he began to treat in an entirely different manner—defined a new qualitative moment of his work. This new moment, which I analyze next, is closer to the idea of reflection as a general principle than to the emphasis on the generative character of the psyche that was so relevant in *Psychology of Art*.<sup>1</sup>

Vygotsky's objectivistic turning point received its maximal expression in his definition of the instrumental and operational character of higher psychological functions. These functions were completely separate from the individual psychical system as a whole. This moment was reified as the emergence of "cultural-historical theory" and identified with the "mature Vygotsky." Puzyrei's (2007) misinterpretation of *Psychology of Art* is clear in the following assumption: "As we know, in his *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky deals exclusively with fiction" (p. 34). It was not

<sup>1</sup>The relation between the pioneers of activity theory and Vygotsky's theory was controversial; in the beginning of the Kharkov period, they firmly criticized Vygotsky for his overemphasis on language and meaning. After that period, they took Vygotsky as their main theoretical source.

fiction; rather, it was another way of presenting the topic of subjectivity, which was distorted in a metaphysical sense by some modern approaches in philosophy and psychology. The term *subjectivity* practically disappeared from the vocabulary of Soviet psychologists only some years after the publication of *Psychology of Art*. The omission of the question of subjectivity from Soviet psychology was accompanied by a narrow view of culture and by the development of a narrow and instrumental understanding of psychological processes.

Vygotsky's emphasis on emotions and fantasy in art represents an attempt to focus on topics that, for their own psychological characteristics, opened a new chapter for psychology. In an open discussion with psychoanalysis, Vygotsky tried to develop these topics within a completely different theoretical framework, oriented by a cultural-historical view of the psyche. Vygotsky focused on those functions not as isolating psychological processes but in an attempt to determine how they were linked to each another within the psychological system. Vygotsky was firmly interested in a new ontological definition of the human mind, a fact that has been omitted by most of his Western interpreters. Vygotsky's orientation to the study of complex psychological systems was clear from *Psychology of Art*:

We realize that none of the existing theories of aesthetic emotion can explain the intimate connection between our feeling and the objects we perceive. To arrive at this explanation, we must resort to psychological systems based on the association between fantasy and feeling. (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 209)

Vygotsky was very concerned with integrating emotional and cognitive processes as part of a systemic representation of mind. As was underscored in a previous Puzyerei quotation, Vygotsky progressively abandoned this topic after his reorientation to the study of sign mediation in the development of higher psychological functions.

It is difficult to question his spontaneous and creative orientation to Marxism in *Psychology of Art*. Marxism is very relevant in his sensitivity to the social origins of the human psyche. His clear insight about the social genesis of the individual psyche became evident in this book.

We see that non-Marxist social psychology has a primitive empirical approach to the social entity, regarding it as a crowd, a collective, entity, a relation between individuals or persons. Society is taken to be an association of people and is regarded as an accessory activity of one individual. These psychologists do not admit that somewhere, in a remote and intimate corner of his thought, his feelings, etc., the psych of the individual is social and socially conditioned. It is easy to show that the subject of social psychology is precisely the psyche of the single individual. . . . Indeed, how can we distinguish social psychology from individual psychology if we deny the existence of a popular soul, a popular spirit, and so forth. (Vygotsky, 1971, pp. 14–15)

Vygotsky made several noteworthy statements in this quotation, including that social reality does not mean "an aggregate of persons" and does not have a crude empirical definition. Social psychology only took theoretical notice of these statements many years later, with Tajfel's (1969) and Moscovici's (1961) works. Vygotsky did not understand psychological processes as being simultaneously social and individual, ideas impossible to develop in that time, but he remarked that we could study social reality through the study of individuals because they are configured through their social existence. It was a novel idea for a cultural-historical approach to the psyche, but it was never taken up by Soviet psychology.

In an effort to comprehend the social character of the human psyche, Vygotsky tried to avoid the reduction of psychological phenomenon to an ideological aspect:

“No one as clear as Plekhanov has explained the theoretical and methodological need of psychological research for the Marxist theory of art. According to him, “All ideologies have one common root: the psychology of a given era” (p. 76; Vygotsky, 1971, p. 12).

The recognition of the psychological aspects of ideology, as well as his effort to avoid an ideological reductionism of art, was an expression of his nondogmatic orientation and of his determination to avoid any kind of reductionism in the explanation of psychological phenomena. Similar orientations would have been completely unfeasible in the Soviet context shortly after he sustained these positions. Vygotsky's defense of the ontological differentiation of psychological processes in relation to other kinds of phenomena involving their complex cultural-historical genesis also appeared in *Psychology of Art*:

This sociological system, the philosophy of historical materialism, is of course not likely to explain anything on the basis of human psyche as the ultimate cause. But it is also not likely to reject or ignore the psyche and the significance of its study as an auxiliary mechanism, which, together with economic relationships and the sociopolitical regime, generates ideologies. When investigating complex art forms, this theory insists on the need of studying the psyche, because the distance between economic relations and ideological form grows constantly greater; hence art can no longer be explained as a direct consequence of economic relations. (Vygotsky, 1971, pp. 12–13)

I have decided to keep this quotation complete due to its importance for the development of a new approach in psychology. Vygotsky rejected any linear and immediate determinism between external facts and the psyche. For the first time in the history of psychology, someone clearly defended the idea that social facts do not immediately become psychological processes. Social reality expressed itself in art only through psychological mediation! This represented a fantastic step forward in the representation of subjectivity, overcoming the metaphysical approach that characterized psychoanalysis. However, the importance of this assumption has been ignored by psychologists until now.

In the aforementioned quotation, it is interesting to note Vygotsky's assumption about the importance of psyche as a mediating mechanism for the comprehension of how economical relations and socio-political structure become ideology. I argue that in *Psychology of Art*, more so than in any other intellectual work, Vygotsky was looking for ways through which complex social, economic, and cultural facts become psychological processes, and this interest was the actual beginning of the cultural-historical approach in psychology. In *Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky began an interdisciplinary dialogue with sociology, though he did not follow through on this discussion in his subsequent works.

Still, the theoretical approach to the study of the psyche discussed by Vygotsky in *Psychology of Art* led him to a representation of the mind as an integrative and dynamic system in development. It allowed Vygotsky to establish a dialogue with psychoanalysis that, at the time, was the most prevalent theoretical approach oriented to the explanation of complex emotional and symbolic processes concerning human fantasy and imagination. In that moment, Vygotsky defended an integrative representation of the human mind from which he created some distance in the second moment of his work.

Fascinated by the creative and imaginative richness responsible for art as human expression, Vygotsky was sensitive to the creative and audacious constructions carried out by psychoanalysis in this matter. This interest was evident in his clear goal of understanding the complex functioning and organization of the human mind. In targeting this interest he could not be indifferent to the topic of unconsciousness, which was banished a short time later by the Soviet psychological literature.

Therefore, the unconscious is not separated from the conscious by any impassable wall. Processes that begin as unconscious frequently have their continuation in consciousness and on the contrary, many conscious processes are expelled by us to the subconscious sphere. There is a permanent living dynamic relationship, which does not stop for a minute, between conscious and unconscious spheres. (Vygotsky, 1965, p. 94)<sup>2</sup>

In this quotation, it is possible to appreciate his dialectical approach to this relation—a departure from the Freudian metaphysical approach based on the substantialization of the unconsciousness, treated in psychoanalysis as an entity. Vygotsky's emphasis on the procedural character of the relation between these two spheres allowed him to overcome the mechanical determinism supported by a one-sided representation of the unconsciousness as the universal origin of any behavior. Besides this, Vygotsky was opposed to the naturalistic representation of sexuality as the universal drive that organizes unconsciousness.

Finally, I want to return to my discussion of the generative character of the psyche that can be seen in *Psychology of Art*. This book represents one of the few moments in which the author overcame his subordination to the principle of reflection. He recognized the generative character of the psyche again in the last period of his work. One of his clearer expressions concerning the generative character of the human psyche was stated in *Psychology of Art*:

This means that, in essence, all our fantastic experiences take place on a completely real emotional basis. We see, therefore, that emotion and imagination are not two separate processes; on the contrary, they are the same process. We can regard a fantasy as the central expression of an emotional reaction. (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 210)

His recognition of emotionally produced phenomena as reality is clear. These phenomena are subjective by their nature, but they are objective as a particular human characteristic, as real as any other characteristic in the definition about what constitutes “being human.” These emotionally based processes could not possibly be identified by linear relations between reality and the psyche. The recognition of the generative character of the psyche as a real characteristic of subjectivity—as a real quality of human processes that shapes a reality as real as the concrete world—was a crucial assumption that led to advances toward a new representation of subjectivity based on a cultural-historical perspective.

Vygotsky's position in terms of the understanding of the subjective side of psychical processes is clearly revealed in the following statement:

This new approach can be described approximately as follows: The psychologists proceed from the irrefutable association that exists between emotion and imagination. We know that every emotion has a psychic expression in addition to a physical one. In other words, a feeling “is embodied, fixed in an idea, as is evidenced in cases of persecution mania, according to Ribot. Consequently, an emotion

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<sup>2</sup>This is my translation, which seems more accurate than that of the English version of *Psychology of Art* (1971, p. 72).

is expressed by the mimic, pantomimic, secretary, and somatic responses of our organism. It also requires some expression of our imagination. We find the best evidence for this view among the so-called objectless emotions. Pathological phobias, persistent fears, and so forth, are always associated with specific ideas, most of which are absolutely false and distort reality, but in so doing find their "psychic" expression. A patient who suffers from obsessive fear is emotionally sick, his fear is irrational; and so in order to rationalize it, he imagines that everyone is pursuing and persecuting him. (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 209)

The topics of emotions, personality, fantasy, motivation, unconsciousness, and imagination remained completely ignored in the second moment of his theoretical work, which concentrated on the study of the higher psychological functions.

This first moment under analysis also extends to include his works related to defectology. In "Defects and Compensation," written by Vygotsky in 1924 and corrected by him in 1925, he still emphasized the importance of subjective facts in problems concerning defects.

In the last analysis, the fate of personality is decided not by the existence of a defect in itself but by its social consequences, by its socio-psychological realization. In connection with this, it becomes necessary for the psychologists to understand each psychological act not only with respect to the past, but also in conjunction with the future direction of personality. (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 55)

Two pages later, he more incisively continued on the same idea:

They didn't understand [referring to psychologists at the time] that a handicap is not just an impoverished psychological state, but also a source of wealth, not just a weakness but a strength. They thought that the development of blind child centers on his blindness. The psychology of blindness is essentially the psychology of victory over blindness. (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 57)

In this text, he once again highlights the importance of subjectivity when analyzing psychological impacts of defect on a person. Taken as an objective fact, the defect does not imply any kind of universal psychical consequence. Vygotsky also introduced the idea "social consequences," which he unfortunately did not develop as an intentional theoretical frame to be used in other moments of his work. Not based on the principle of reflection, the development of this idea could have led to a new way of analyzing the interaction between the social world and the psyche.

The prior quotation ended with a beautiful and transcendent statement: "The psychology of blindness is essentially the psychology of victory over blindness!" In this sentence, Vygotsky briefly touches upon one of the main principles in the new theoretical perspective on the topic of subjectivity within the cultural-historical framework: Subjectivity represents a production guided to overcome the barriers resulting from objective conditions; it is not an external reproduction of a given objective order. Rather, the subjective is a particular human way of guaranteeing human development in the face of adverse objective conditions. Instead of being based on reflection, subjective expressions represent a truly new production defined by the actual organization of subjectivity as a system.

This was another indicator of the importance Vygotsky attributed to the generative character of the psyche in this first period of Vygotsky's work: The psychical system is responsible for psychical production. No psychological function could be directly analyzed by its direct relationship with any "external" influence. His analysis of blindness and its psychological impact resembled Maturana's (1970) and Maturana and Varela's (1980) theoretical formulation, many



years later, of “structural coupling,” which they used to refer to noninstructive conduct between an operationally closed system and its environment or between two or more operationally closed systems.

Briefly summarizing this first period of Vygotsky’s work, the following matters are central: The understanding of the psyche as a system under development; the definition of the generative character of the psyche, whose productions cannot be reduced to a reflection or an internalization of external operations; the relevance of affective processes; his attempt to represent psychical organization through the unity of cognitive and affective processes; and his clear orientation to a new ontological definition of the psyche as such.

In this moment of his work, Vygotsky seemed to defend the idea that psychical effects of living experiences do not result from the linear and direct impact of any objective influence taken from a person’s psychical organization. He emphasized the generative character of psyche instead of its reflective condition. The contradiction between these two views of the psyche will continue throughout his work.

Vygotsky also developed new methodological procedures in order to provide concrete evidence for the new theoretical principles postulated in psychological research, but this issue is not expanded upon in this article.

Another important idea concretized in *Psychology of Art* was Vygotsky’s definition of the person as the subject of social psychology. He never pursued this very promising idea further, but one cannot fail to see the value of this work for a cultural-historical approach to subjectivity. On the basis of this idea, it would have been possible at the time to overcome the dichotomy between social and individual psychical phenomena: Knowledge of society appears through its consequences on human beings.

However, Vygotsky could not successfully develop that idea in the subsequent periods of his work. Furthermore, it is difficult to know to what extent he was conscious of the theoretical relevance of that assumption. In the second moment of his work, he did not elaborate on the topic. He developed a different theoretical option addressed to a cultural-historical comprehension of higher psychological functions, taking into account their cognitive character. In his approach to the study of those functions, their cultural-historical characteristics were understood in a narrow instrumental version based only on sign mediation.

## THE SECOND MOMENT OF VYGOTSKY’S WORK: THE OBJECTIVISTIC AND INSTRUMENTAL TURN OF HIS WORK

As mentioned before, this second moment of Vygotsky’s work was defined by a new theoretical emphasis, centered on signs, semiotic mediation, cognition, and internalization. This period can be chronologically situated between 1928 and 1931. During that period, his new ideas coexisted with those ideas he developed in the first moment in many ways, but the new focus on which he centered his attention began to become evident. In some works of this period, particularly in “The Problem of the Cultural Development of the Child” (Vygotsky, 1994); “The Tool and the Sign in Child Development” (Vygotsky, 1984); and “The Genesis of Higher Psychological Functions,” included as a chapter of *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions* (Vygotsky, 1983), the main ideas of his new orientation were made clear as his objectivistic turning point.

The book *Tool and the Sign in Child Development* was written in 1930, judging by comments about its first publication in Volume 6 of the Selected Works of Vygotsky). As we all know, the selected works were organized by the year in which each chapter was written, not by the year of publication. But if one reads this book carefully, one will constantly have the feeling that it does not express Vygotsky's ideas in 1930, but those of an earlier moment, of the cultural-historical period. (Leontiev, 2001, p. 81)

Leontiev was aware of the difficulties of defining any kind of temporal sequence in Vygotsky's work. In any case, Leontiev located the cultural-historical moment of Vygotsky's work in the late 1920s. Because *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions*, in which the aforementioned chapter appeared, made the main foundational principles of this period explicit, I consider this moment to last until 1931. Vygotsky's position during that moment was congruent with the particular historical events that were taking place at that time.

When analyzing Vygotsky's work, one must consider the many events of repression, in which the impact of Stalinism was fully experienced, that occurred during the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, if we take into consideration that Vygotsky maintained the enthusiasm, creativity, and personal involvement that characterized his work throughout his life, it would be impossible to say that the changes in his thought were exclusively a result of external pressures exerted during this period. Although external conditions did affect his work, it is also important to take into account his own oscillation between maintaining an objective and subjective orientation to his work, an inconsistency that was common in Soviet psychology. On this regard, for example, Radziovsky aimed to reveal

all the richness of the ideas expressed by Marxist classical authors concerning subjective experience were not adequately interpreted by Soviet philosophers; we did not create a Marxist philosophical anthropology. (Consequently) the concept of subjective experience found no place in the language system of our philosophy. Precisely for this reason, the transition from Marxist philosophy to psychological theory was very complex. (Radziovsky, 1988, p. 126)

The dialectical model permitted a new option for comprehending the complexity of subjectivity. It allowed for a divergent view from that of the dichotomous procedural and organized moments of the psyche (dominant in psychology), to viewing subjectivity's complex character as being interwoven between its procedural and shaping moments. However, the materialistic dogma imposed by an erroneous interpretation of Marxism in Soviet psychology did not allow an appropriate use of the dialectical side of this approach for the development of the topic of subjectivity.

The second moment of his work, identified as cultural-historical theory, was more likely representative of his path leading to the definition of a general psychology rather than a conclusion of his work. Some of the main characteristics of this second moment, mistakenly considered cultural-historical theory, were overemphasized by some Soviet followers of activity theory as a way to legitimize the basic principles of Activity Theory, at the expense of advancing a serious in depth study of Vygotsky's legacy. The following statement illustrates this component of the second moment:

The very core of Vygotsky's cultural historical theory is the doctrine of the particular, specific, semiotic organization of all actual human mental forms (which Vygotsky himself called "the higher psychological functions"), including the human memory. (Puzyrei, 2007, p. 58)

The attempt to identify this as the cultural-historical period leads to an oversimplification of Vygotsky's theory that disallows interpretations of its complex and dynamic course, the real core

of which was not semiotic mediation but the development of a dialectical and complex theory of mind from a cultural-historical standpoint. This oversimplification has been criticized in recent times by some of the more prominent proponents of activity theory, such as Zinchenko (1997). In fact, Vygotsky's orientation to the study of higher psychological functions does not explore their emotional character or their organic place in the individual psychical system. Those topics were mentioned by Vygotsky in different moments of his work, yet almost exclusively in his early and later works.

Some of Vygotsky's statements typical of this second moment clearly reveal his objectivistic reductionism. The psyche appears in his representation of that time as an internalization of external operations. The complex question of the relation of the psychical processes to indirect identifiable external sources that participate in their development was completely evaded by Vygotsky at the time. He was then focusing on a very instrumental model of semiotic mediation.

Initially the sign is always a means of social connection, a means of affecting others, and only later does it become a means of influencing oneself. . . . Piaget said that reflection may be considered as internal argument. For the applicability of this law to the history of the cultural development of the child to be absolutely clear, we need only recall that speech is initially a means of socializing with those around the child, and only later, in the form of internal speech, it becomes a means of thinking, (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 103)

During this period his agenda was closer to that of Piaget than ever before. Vygotsky's main ideas at the time emphasized the immediate relationship between the word and the action in social life; he centered on the ways in which words and action-functions become psychological processes.

If it is true that the sign, in the beginning, is a means of communication and only later becomes a means of personal behavior, it is completely evident that cultural development, based on the use of signs and the sign's inclusion in the general system of behavior initially takes place in a social, external way. . . . I interact with myself as others interact with me. As verbal thinking is equivalent to the transference of language to the internal individual side, so reflection is the internalization of discussion. . . . The primary psychology of the function of the word is a social psychology and if we want to know how the word functions in individual behavior, we should analyze, first and foremost, its prior function in the social behavior of the person. (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 147).<sup>3</sup>

Matiuschkin also noted the following in his epilogue to *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions* published in Russian,

The fundamental change produced in the behavioral structure means the transit from the inferior to the superior form, consisting in the fact that men introduce into the complex situation of stimulus a new system of neutral stimulus capable of acting as stimulus-means. . . . In this moment, not even Vygotsky, in spite of rejecting the S-R model as inadequate, could completely overcome it. (Matiushkin, 1995, p. 355)

Vygotsky's quotation is clear evidence of his behavioral understanding of the nature of psychological functions and even of personality at that moment. His approach to semiotic mediation represents a behavioral approach to semiotics that is simpler and more concrete than that assumed

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<sup>3</sup>This is my translation, which seems more accurate than that of the English version of *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions* (1971, p. 103).

by classical Russian semioticians. At that time, Vygotsky was closer to Piaget and Mead than to his contemporary Russian semioticians, such as Shpet and Bakhtin.

Neither Shpet nor Bakhtin replaced complex subjective processes with semiotic operations as Vygotsky did in some of his relevant works of the second moment. This becomes evident when making a comparison between Vygotsky's previously mentioned statements and some quotations of Shpet and Bakhtin. "A unique material sign, word embodies and condenses the unit of cultural sense and subjective contents" (Shpet, 1996, p. 245). In Shpet, as in Bakhtin, the organic relationship between signs and the world was always taken into account. For both of them, the human psyche is not reduced to a semiotic system. Words, signs, and language were never floating in contextual flux without being articulated within the more complex organizations in which human beings interact with each other in the social world. "The world, where the act takes place is a unique and integral world, concretely felt (experienced): visible, audible, palpable, perceptible and thinkable, all of them penetrated by a volitional-emotional tone" (pp. 124–125; Bakhtin, as cited in Leontiev, 2001, p. 66).

In the Russian semiotic tradition, signs are closely intertwined with human practices, human subjectivity, and the complexity of the world within which human actions take place. Semiotics provides an ontological support that cannot be reduced to symbolical games characterized only by their practical and contextual sides. Semiotic systems and phenomena are inseparable from subjective processes. Bakhtin also recognized the subjective configuration of human action, not only in its sensorial–cognitive aspects, but also in its emotional-volitional expression, that is, in its subjective side. In "Marxism and the Philosophy of Language," Bakhtin said, "Any ideological sign is not only a reflection, a shadow of the real word, but a material part of the very real word" (as cited in Leontiev, 2001, p. 67). A sign is not only a reflection but a truly productive, generative element. This generative capacity is the basis of human subjectivity, without which it would be impossible to talk about culture.

Sense is potentially endless, but it could be updated only in contact with other (foreign) senses. . . . Actual sense does not belong to one [identical] sense, but only to the relation between two senses which meet each other, coming into contact. . . . It could be neither the first, nor the last sense; it always exists between senses, as the link of a sense chain. . . . In historical life, this chain endlessly develops. (Bakhtin, 1997, p. 350)

The way in which sense is developed in linguistics could bring a new method for the construction of its categories in psychology, considering the psyche in its double condition of process and configuration. These two sides of psychical phenomena could be observed in their endless and interwoven movement. Vygotsky appears to have attempted to include the consideration of this qualia of psychical phenomena in his definition of sense in the last period of his work. However, he never explicitly referred to Bakhtin in his work. He started to discuss his approach to the matter of sense by citing the French psychologist Paulhan.

Concepts about sense could bring to light a new method of theoretical construction in psychology, but the way in which it was conceptualized in linguistics could not be mechanically imported to the study of psychical processes. Sense should be reexamined for use as a psychological category. It was something that Vygotsky seems to have attempted in the last period of his work, but that, in my opinion, he could never actually have undertaken appropriately. In this second moment, Vygotsky did not give any attention to the comprehension of sense as a possible new avenue for the development of cultural-historical psychology. Why Vygotsky never quoted Shpet

or Bakhtin in his works is a real historical enigma, particularly when noting that A. N. Leontiev's (2001) greatly appreciated Shpet's work.<sup>4</sup>

In one more expression of the linear dependency between external and internal processes within Vygotsky's understanding about social determination of the psyche, he said,

It is possible to say that we become ourselves through others; this rule is not only applicable to personality as a whole, but to the history of each particular psychological function. This postulate expresses the essence of the process of cultural development understood in a purely logical form. Personality is in itself what it really is, through what it means for the others. This is the process of personality formation. For the first time the question of the correlation between psychical external and internal functions is being posed in psychology in all its importance. (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 149).<sup>5</sup>

In this quote, personality appears as a direct expression of what we are for others. Therefore, personality appears to be organized based on others' evaluation of us, merely as storage of external opinions. In this period, Vygotsky was close to Mead's position, in which every individual act was defined on the basis of a direct external symbolic behavior. This approach to the topic of personality completely accords with the dominant principle of reflection; the productive, generative character of personality is completely omitted.

In summary, this second moment of Vygotsky's work was a period in which his references to emotions, fantasy, and imagination—which were extensive in the first moment of his work—disappeared. Statements such as “the reality of emotions” never appeared during this cultural-historical period.

Personality was understood as resulting from others' perceptions of us. Vygotsky no longer considered personality and its active role in dealing with physical defects in this second period. His understanding of higher psychological functions was focused on the cognitive character of these functions and on their semiotic mediation (understanding the latter in a very instrumental and objective way). Any relationship between psychological functions and individual psychological systems was completely ignored.

Social processes were essentially understood as operational functions through a direct relation with social behavior. Macrosocial processes were completely omitted, as were institutional ones. One could say that his comprehension of social phenomena during the second moment was centered on microsocial processes concerning social behaviors. Aside from all the limitations of this concrete period previously mentioned, it is worthwhile to recognize its importance as a “zone of sense” for the development of psychology (González Rey, 1997). For the first time in the history of psychology, an attempt was made to explain the cultural and social character of higher psychological functions, marking the basis for a qualitative distinction between the animal and human psyche.

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<sup>4</sup>Shpet was arrested in 1929 and was removed from his teaching activities at the university. In 1937, after being arrested again, he was shot.

<sup>5</sup>My translation from Spanish version of *The History of the Development of Higher Psychological Functions*. In English this Vygotsky's work appeared in *The Collected Works of L.S.Vygotsky: The History of the Development of the Higher Psychological Functions* (Vol. 4).

### THE THIRD AND FINAL PERIOD OF VYGOTSKY'S WORK: HIS RETURN TO HUMAN SPIRITUAL COMPLEXITY

It's paradoxical that there is still no complete, well argued, scientific biography of L. S. Vygotsky. It's really quite astonishing that literature on him in Russian and other languages tends to focus exclusively on the ideas of only one period of his life, ideas that he himself later went beyond. These were the ideas of the "cultural historical theory". But the Vygotskys of 1925, 1930 and 1933–34 are not all the same. (Leontiev, 1992, p. 41)

It is incredible how little known the broader theoretical works by Vygotsky have remained. Leontiev (1992), in the prior quotation, also made reference to three moments in Vygotsky's work but never explained them in detail. In the previously quoted publication, he expanded on the third moment. Main differences between my position and that of Leontiev's include the role he gives to activity in Vygotsky's work and the importance I attribute to the first period of Vygotsky's work.

The Russian philosopher F. T. Mikhailov has also discussed the lack of familiarity with the character of Vygotsky's work inside Soviet psychology, and later in Russian psychology. He was particularly interested in the Vygotsky–Leontiev approaches and critically shared many of the positions of these two approaches.

Here we have a logic of self development of life not a reaction to external stimuli. It is not for nothing that today no one so thoroughly and so thoughtfully knows all (I emphasize – all!) the works of Vygotsky. And I could demonstrate to my few readers the strikingly profound philosophical literacy of the author. But this no longer has any bearing upon the myth of cultural-historical psychology. (Mikhailov, 2006, p. 41)

The reification of cultural-historical theory and the dearth of knowledge about Vygotsky's own system of thinking were two central concerns for this author. The attempt to rescue, through an analysis of his work, Vygotsky's unified theoretical view, with its complex articulations and unfoldings, has become a concern only in very recent times and for very few authors (i.e., A. A. Leontiev, Zinchenko, and Mikhailov, among others). This trend has not appeared in the more widespread and traditional dominant interpretations of Vygotsky's work up to now.

In my opinion, Vygotsky's works from his first and last moments have been equally ignored. In this last period, from 1932 and 1934, Vygotsky reconsidered many of his ideas from his first moment, in particular his interest in the cognitive–emotional unity of the psyche and the functioning of the psyche as a whole. It is curious that it was precisely in a work oriented to the matter of art, "On the Questions of the Psychology of the Creative Artist" (Vygotsky, 1984), written in 1932, that Vygotsky once again recognized an important idea that he had abandoned since *Psychology of Art*, that is, the generative and active character of the psyche. In the explanation of this generative character of the psyche, emotions play an essential role. Maybe this work marked a clearer boundary between the second and third moments of his work.

In "On the Questions of the Psychology of the Creative Artist," the essential position sustained by Vygotsky was the following:

In the process of societal life . . . emotions come into a new relationship with the other elements of psychical life, new systems appear, new blendings of psychical functions; units of a higher order emerge, governed by special laws, mutual dependencies, and special forms of connections and motion. (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 328)

In this quotation, Vygotsky emphasized the internal movement of emotions inside psychical systems, provoking an endless process within which would emerge new blends of psychical functions and new units of a higher order. This movement of the psyche responsible for the emergence of new psychical phenomena and unities is an expression of its generative character. The mention of units of higher order was never theoretically explained by Vygotsky, but this term was a clear announcement of the emergence of a new qualitative level in his representation of the psyche. This representation was not developed by him, but in that last moment, Vygotsky entered into strong contradiction with the principle of reflection that ruled the Soviet psychology of the time.

Restating the contradictory character of this period in relation to the cultural-historical one, A. A. Leontiev wrote,

Vygotsky develops the notion that not only the highest psychological functions themselves, not only consciousness, possess a social, cultural nature. It is important to see that personality is social in both origins and nature, and that consciousness and the particular psychical processes become subordinated to it. It is also important to see how different this understanding is from the “classical” cultural-historical conception. (Leontiev, 1992, p. 42)

A. A. Leontiev did not refer to *Psychology of Art* in his works, the piece in which I encountered many of the ideas Vygotsky greatly expanded on in the previous moment. In the previous quotation, Leontiev clarified the idea of personality as a system of individual psyche to which particular psychical processes and consciousness are subordinated, which is to say that consciousness is subordinated to nonconscious processes and unities of the personality. This idea, as Leontiev recognized, was completely external to what is recognized as the “cultural-historical moment” of Vygotsky’s theory. This theoretical moment represented a new qualitative moment in the development of the cultural-historical approach. Unfortunately, this moment was not theoretically pursued by Vygotsky or by Soviet psychology. In another of Vygotsky’s (1987) important publications of this third moment, *Thinking and Speech*, which was also a compilation of different works written at different times (some of which were written before this last moment of his work), we find radical changes from his dominant positions during the second moment of his theoretical trajectory, particularly in the first and last chapters. In the first chapter of *Thinking and Speech*, ideas from the second period coexist with new ideas closely associated to those put forth in *Psychology of Art*. In this first chapter, of which the actual writing date is not clear, Vygotsky still shared a very rationalistic view of psychical functioning repeatedly criticized by different authors. This rationalism is very clear in the following statement:

Social interaction, based on rational understanding of the intentional transmission of experience and thoughts, requires some system of means. . . . Social interactions presuppose generalization and the development of verbal meaning; generalization becomes possible only with the development of social interaction. The higher forms of mental social interaction that are such an important characteristic of man are possible only because—by thinking—man reflects reality in a generalized way. (Vygotsky, 1987b, pp. 48–49)

This quote highlights two characteristics of Vygotsky’s reasoning that are frequently found throughout his work: (a) His preference of referring to cognitive processes in social interactions, that is, empirically exposing the relevance of the social to the psyche, and (b) the importance

he attributed to comprehension and generalization in explaining processes that are not directly associated with them, such as “perezivanie.” These characteristics are in open contradiction with his emphasis on the generative character of the psyche. Both trends overlapped in different periods of his work. The aforementioned facts are not coherent with his dominant view in this third period, which is one reason why I doubt the real date that chapter was written. However, contradicting the previously exemplified ideas, this same chapter clearly affirms the following:

The first issue that emerges in this first chapter when we consider the relationship between thinking and speech to the other aspects of the life of consciousness concerns the connection between intellect and affect. Among the most basic defects of traditional approaches to the study of psychology has been the isolation of the intellectual from the volitional and affective aspects of consciousness. The inevitable consequence of the isolation of these functions has been the transformation of thinking into an autonomous stream. Thinking itself became the thinker of thoughts. Thinking was divorced from the full vitality of life, from the motives, interests and inclinations of the thinking individual. (Vygotsky, 1987b, p. 50)

Vygotsky argued against the separation between cognitive and affective processes in the study of thinking, and he criticized the isolation of thinking from the active, alive, and concrete individual who thinks. The conceptualization of the thinker of thoughts as being an alive and active person shaped by his subjectivity includes all of the concepts mentioned by Vygotsky beforehand, but up to this point, Vygotsky had never integrated them. He left the theoretical consequences of those ideas undeveloped, and they remain a challenge for the development of Vygotsky's legacy, which is far from being used up by the dominant ongoing interpretations of his work. Thinking appeared in that chapter of *Thinking and Speech* as an individual function, based on motives, interest, and individual inclinations. Thinking, in such an understanding, is not seen as a purely cognitive function. It marked the beginning of a new emphasis in his theoretical representations in comparison to the second period of his work.

Finally, I focus on one of the important concepts developed by Vygotsky in this last period of his life: The concept of sense. In a number of my other works, I have made an attempt to understand sense as that new kind of unity mentioned by Vygotsky in the previous quote, as the “emergence of psychological unities of higher order on the basis of the new relationships within which emotions engage in their unfolding movements on the course of psychological development” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 328). Taking this assumption together with other expressions concerned with emotions in this period, as well as his recognition of sense as a system and a psychological formation as put forth in the chapter of *Thinking and Speech* entitled “Thought and Word,” and attempting to integrate the word expression with all psychological facts that emerged in consciousness at that moment, I was led to suppose that sense embodied that new psychological unity to which Vygotsky referred in the previous quotation (González Rey, 2004).

In a definition of sense based on Paulhan's thoughts, Vygotsky stated,

Paulhan significantly advanced the psychological analysis of speech by introducing the distinction between a word's sense and meaning. A word's sense is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word. Sense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability. Meaning is only one of these zones of the



sense that the word acquires in the context of speech. . . . Ultimately, the word's real sense is determined by everything in consciousness which is related to what the word expresses. . . . Ultimately, the sense of a word depends on one's understanding of the word as a whole and on the internal structure of personality. (Vygotsky, 1987b, p. 276)

The difference between meaning and sense is clear from reading this excerpt, which has been quite ignored in the interpretations of his work. Also clear is the progressive and rapid grasp by the author in his recognition of the psychological value of sense. His assumption that sense "is the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness as a result of the word" turned it into a psychological category, itself organized within the whole psychological system. This interpretation clearly appeared when Vygotsky linked sense to the internal structure of personality.

It was precisely the aforementioned ideas that led me to think of sense as a new qualitative moment in his theoretical development. It really was the beginning of a new moment in his reasoning, but that moment did not carry the theoretical consciousness I supposed it had for him. Vygotsky never used sense in his later analyses concerning psychological functions, as was clear in his "Lectures About Imagination and Its Development in Childhood," which was part of a number of lectures he delivered in March and April of 1932. In any case, the use of sense as a psychological category, in which it is difficult to know the novelty of Vygotsky concerning Paulhan's position, represents an important departure point in the search for new alternatives within a novel psychological unity of the new ideas Vygotsky brought forth in the final period of his life. I think now that the enthusiastic reception of sense in my work, as in A. A. Leontiev's paper focusing on that final period of Vygotsky's life, was more a specific new construction supported by his legacy than a real concrete work by Vygotsky on that final period of his life.

Having realized this, I recognized that the concept of sense in the background of Vygotsky's ideas inspired me to take new theoretical paths that had never been represented by Vygotsky. In that moment I became aware that the new ideas surrounding the concept of sense urgently called for research to fill the gap Vygotsky left regarding the amalgamation of affective and cognitive processes into new psychological unities. In my work, I have introduced the category of subjective sense as a new theoretical construction that has allowed me to move forward in filling that gap.

I became convinced that a systematic study of the processes and configurations that organize the living experience as a subjective production remained incomplete. In face of the need to develop new concepts to contend with new problems that definitively had not been solved by Vygotsky, I focused my attention on the subjective unities shaped by those emotions and symbolic processes that evoke one another as an expression of any living human experience. The evolution of that idea led me to define the concept of "subjective sense" as "that unity embodied in dynamic and recursive relationships between emotions and symbolic processes within which one emerges as a result of the other without becoming its cause" (González Rey, 2003, p. 113). Subjective sense, in other words, results from the process of shaping a living system of actions, as in a subjective production.

In the words of A. A. Leontiev:

If Vygotsky had lived only a few more years, he would surely have concentrated his effort on the analysis of this system [the author is referring to the system of sense]. And this would inevitably

have led to that of which he already dreamt in his "Historical Sense of the Psychological Crisis, . . . a complete overhaul of the whole conceptual apparatus of modern psychology. . . . No simple continuing movement, but a complicated dynamic of senses. He never got a chance to do it, however. (Leontiev, 1992, p. 43)

I agree with this author when it comes to a hypothesis of what Vygotsky would have done with more years of life. Paradoxically, this central idea of the system of senses has been completely ignored until now by Vygotsky's followers. That idea represented not only the introduction of one more concept but a complete "overhaul of the whole conceptual apparatus of modern psychology," as is very aptly asserted in the previous quotation.

### SOME FINAL REMARKS

Vygotsky's work does not represent a continuum or a well-organized sequence of progressively linked moments. On the contrary, his work is marked by change and contradictions. Vygotsky's main legacy is an uncompleted work full of brilliant ideas, many of which remained without further expansion within new theoretical models.

The contradiction between a mechanical notion of the psyche—understood as reflection—and his original idea of the generative character of the psyche is evident from the very beginning of his work, in *Psychology of Art*. Following the principle of reflection, he focused on a fragmented and cognitive representation of higher psychological functions, making these the key concepts of his work in the second period.

Vygotsky's emphasis on emotions, fantasy, and imagination concerning art is an indicator of how motivated he was in the study of complex psychical processes evolving in naturally complex and very subjective human activities. Nevertheless he never developed those ideas with regard to the generative character of the psyche, as was evident in his treatment of concepts such as "perezhivanie," personality, imagination, and creativity.

In the first period of his work, particularly in *Psychology of Art*, as well as in some works devoted to defectology, his theoretical emphasis focused on topics of clear subjective character, such as personality, fantasy, imagination, unconsciousness, emotions, and so on. This agenda was abandoned in the second period of his work aimed at the study of the social character of the higher psychological functions, which in turn was a study restricted to analyzing the use of signs, tools, and operations. This was the period in which he reoriented his work in an objectivistic and instrumental direction.

It is amazing that the first and last periods of his work were largely ignored, not only by his Western interpreters but even by Soviet psychologists. It is necessary to go beyond the dominant and fashionable interpretations of Vygotsky's legacy to discover and elaborate new paths of his legacy.

Cultural-historical psychology has the challenge to go forward with the representation of the human psyche as shaped within the complex interwoven facts of historical, cultural, and social nature. This position characterized a number of main trends within Soviet psychology, which included Vygotsky. The so-called cultural-historical theory in the way it appears in psychology today, as synonymous with a concrete moment of his work and associated with particular

concrete categories and problems, has been an interpretation of Vygotsky's work rather than Vygotsky's real purpose. Considering that particular moment as "Vygotskian theory" represents an oversimplification of his work.

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