

**Visual and Written Imagery Through a Vygotskian Lens:  
Semiotics as a Psychosocial Construct**

**James Anderson, Ph.D.**

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### Semiotics as a Psychosocial Construct

“Art is the organization of our future behavior” - L.S.Vygotsky

Exactly one hundred years elapsed between the first appearance of a photograph and the release of The Psychology of Art (1925), penned by the Russian scholar, psychologist, artist, and prolific writer Lev S. Vygotsky. That year marked the release of Vygotsky’s study of the processes by which imagery engages and transforms people-- a task to which he had applied himself from 1915 to 1922. Vygotsky’s post-doctoral work resulted in a decade-long search dedicated to the study of the production, criticism, history, and aesthetics of art, which in turn became an early but seminal piece in the development of a fresh Marxian perspective in the field of psychology.

For the purposes of this article, “art” as such, should be understood by the reader to be a term used in its broadest, most lateral definition. By art, I mean any form of creative endeavor that conveys a semiotic message in need of decoding by the individual viewing the material or act. Semiosis is the process by which an individual engages in the process of deciphering symbols—be they ink on paper in word form, dance, music, pictorial imagery, etc. Additionally, I will occasionally refer to the semiotician Connery’s terminology in reference to the relationship between the producer of the art (creatist) and the reviewer of the art (re-creatist) (Connery, 2000.) Her distinction and terminology reflect her concern for emphasizing the semiotic relationship inherent in the meaning-making process. Connery insists that this collaborative aspect of semiotics is an indispensable part of the sense-making paradigm.

Reflective of his wide range of interests and intellectual aptitudes, Vygotsky sought to link issues from disciplines traditionally thought to be mutually exclusive. He saw commonalities among the arts, science, physiology, economics, psychology, and other such fields, while providing critiques of established educational belief systems. These critiques were to provide the impetus for a new understanding of the dialectics of word / sign, intellect / emotion, and individual / social *inter* and *intra* relationships. In turn, Vygotsky’s innovative methods of approaching any given topic led to a refutation and subsequent re-addressing of previously comfortably held assumptions about applied scientific methodology. The young Vygotsky’s willingness to reexamine the work of such established theorist / practitioners as Pavlov, Freud, and Tolstoy proved successful, as he more than matched hubris with sound reasoning.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, photography had been used as a form of historical documentation with ever increasing frequency. During Vygotsky’s life span, cinema was confined to “talkies”, news reels, and other early attempts at filmmaking. Thus, when speaking of art and its various manifestations, Vygotsky was inclined to write about music, dance, poetry, painting and other more traditional forms of creative outlet. His findings, however, formed an excellent fit with the imagery produced by photography and cinematography, and have

served as a highly innovative precursor to postmodern thought. Vygotskian forays into socio-cultural relativism would, in time, help redefine neo-Marxian positions on psychoanalytic theory, Formalism, German idealism and other ‘sacred cows’ of the late-Modern era. It is for these reasons that the collected works of Vygotsky (while seldom edited to a high sheen) have endured to provide the impetus for a continuing dialectic regarding the psychology of art production, criticism, aesthetics, and history.

### **The Collaborative Nature of Transubstantiation**

Dissatisfied with certain stigma associated with the artistic process, Vygotsky sought to remove the classist element of art by de-mystifying the aura surrounding its production. Ever mindful of the usurping of ‘fine art’ as a symbol of social status, Vygotsky expanded the concept of art production to embody the creative act as an expression of and by *any* social individual (Vygotsky, 1925). In neo-Vygotskian terminology, the cognitive/affective processes produced by the creatist [né artist] come to fruition through the re-creatist [né the spectator, viewer](Connery, 2000), who constructs new knowledge through the allegorical connections reflected in the art piece (Vygotsky, 1925). Transubstantiation is intensely personal and existential, yet intimately associated with social interaction. In this respect, Vygotsky noted that art’s true nature is “something that transcends *ordinary* feelings; for the fear, pain, or excitement caused by art includes something above and beyond its normal conventional content” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 243).

This cathartic quality of art (in the Vygotskian sense) bears little resemblance to the Kantian or Cartesian model of the *sublime*; a condition of the intellect through which transcendental awareness of the significance of a work of art is considered the comprehension of a static, time-honored, universal truth established through the application of pure Reason. To the contrary, Vygotsky held that all life conditions were in a constant state of flux, and that change was inherent in all composite constructs (Vygotsky, 1925). In this respect, Vygotsky employed a form of post-Hegelian dialectics as a way to insure a high level of dynamism in the pursuit of knowledge-- a knowledge that, in Vygotskian terms, is unachievable without locating oneself within the woven fabric of the social mind (Vygotsky, 1925).

Transubstantiation served to distance Vygotskian Socio-cultural Theory from the neo-Platonic idealism that permeated mainstream thought during his time. Whereas the Kantian notion of the *sublime* dealt with the “ripening” of the intellect to accommodate a higher truth inherent in the aesthetics of a given work of art, Vygotsky elected to view art production as the physical manifestation of an idea in motion (Vygotsky, 1925). Through this dynamic relationship between the creator of the object under study and he/she who receives semiotic stimuli, art forms serve as a catalyst for the crystalization of meaning deeply rooted in the psycho-sensory process (Vygotsky, 1925).

In this pursuit, the organization of stimuli has been deliberately arranged by the author of the work to elicit an aesthetic reaction from the observer (Vygotsky, 1925), but this aesthetic reaction is not to be confused with the Cartesian belief that the form of the artwork alone is sufficiently imbued with a static, universal power capable of delivering an irrefutable Truth to the viewer. Thus, in the words of Leontiev, “knowledge is not internalized directly, but through the use of psychological tools” (Leontiev, 1981). Vygotsky further explained that “what we are unable to understand immediately and directly can be understood in a roundabout way, allegorically” (Vygotsky, 1925).

Transubstantiation is a specific cognitive function that first takes place within the consciousness of the author of the work, but which is then braided with the lived-experience of the receiver to form the co-constructed environment within which new knowledge is formed. Spring-boarding off the thoughts of Wittgenstein, Wertsch refers to this semiotic transference as a “socially provided tool kit” (Wertsch, 1991, ) indispensable to the process by which tools and aids help develop “streams of internalized language and conceptualized thought that sometimes run parallel and sometimes merge” with those intended by the author (Bruner, 1996, p.7). Vygotskian thought on the relationship between author and viewer foreshadowed postmodern thought exemplified by neo-Marxian scholars of the late twentieth century. These contemporary writers’ insistence on a dynamic set of relative truths has challenged the notion of a totalitarian ideology touting a ‘one size fits all’ paradigm devoid of critical, socio-cultural considerations.

### **Creativity as a Psychosocial Process**

Rather than accepting the dichotomous notion that mind and body, intellect and emotion, individual and society are separate entities, Vygotskian principles stress the interconnectedness of all psycho-physiological processes (Vygotsky, 1925). Through this paradigm, knowledge is not simply a matter of comprehending a fixed understanding of Reality, but rather the keen observation of the complicated interplay of human perceptions, emotions, imagination and fantasy (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 199). These inner-workings of the social mind involve an integrated approach toward *how* meaning is made. “Since the intellect is nothing but inhibited will, we might possibly think of imagination as inhibited feeling” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 48). A work of art reflects (rather than *form-ulates*) a topic, idea, or concept, which is then compared and contrasted with pre-existing schema derived from experience (Vygotsky, 1925; Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1938). Vygotsky elaborates: “Once we establish that the crux of the matter, so to speak, is not the content planned by the (creatist) but that attributed to it by the (re-creatist), it becomes obvious that the content of the work of art is a dependent and variable quality, a function of (the) psycho-social (hu)man” (Vygotsky, 1925, p.39). Thus, in terms of empirical psychology, “emotion is beyond the domain of consciousness”, because “everything that cannot be fixed within the attentional focus is pushed to the extreme limits of the conscious” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 200).

Whereas Cartesian absolutists such as Christiansen (Christiansen, referenced in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 206) maintain that “any action of the external world” entails a specific “sensorial and moral effect”, Vygotsky states that “art arises originally as a powerful tool in the struggle for existence; the idea of reducing (art’s) role to a communication of feeling with no power or control over that feeling is inadmissible” (Vygotsky, 1925 p. 245). Vygotsky felt so strongly about the dialectic nature of knowledge-building that he punctuated his comments on this critical issue by quoting Von Lange, who lamented that “there is a sorry resemblance between contemporary civilized man and domesticated animals: limitation and monotony”. Von Lange, in turn, further cemented this viewpoint by noting that “it is astonishing how limited is the number of ideas, feelings, and actions that modern man can perform or experience” (Von Lange, 1901).

Vygotsky acknowledged this condition of intellectual and affective malaise, and sought to locate phenomena within the parameters of his emerging sociocultural and psychological theories. His leanings indicated a “shift away from formalist, analytical positions-- functionalism, structuralism, and so forth-- toward more phenomenological perspectives” (Banks, in Prosser, 1988, p. 9). In order to show that irrefutable, empirical knowledge was not necessarily sole property of scholars, Vygotsky emphasized that “the psychologist may, at best, reach the stage of analysis; he has absolutely no access to the synthesis of an aesthetic response” (Vygotsky,

1925, p. 205).

Through this admission, Vygotsky illustrated that “sociocultural approaches are distinguished by the importance they place on cultural variation and its interrelationship with development” (John-Steiner & Panofsky, 1992). In so doing, Vygotsky refuted the notion of Grant-Allen that “aesthetics are those emotions which have freed themselves from association with practical interests” (Grant-Allen, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 247). Rather, Vygotsky “conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1995), and so “freed himself from the beat (of positivism)”, to borrow quite liberally from Stravinsky (in John-Steiner, 1999, p. 94).

### **Image-based Inquiry and the Deconstruction of Formalism**

Occurring simultaneously with the work of Vygotsky came the growth and development of sociology as a recognized, ‘scientific’ discipline (Harper, 1993). By the time *Psychology of Art* was first published in 1925, photography had found a strong niche within accepted forms of sociological research methodology (Harper in Prosser, 1998). Much of that acceptability hinged on the perception that photography would form the basis for alleged value-free chronicling of data. Image-based research, through photography, found itself “with one foot in the old traditions”, and was considered at the time as a “simple... truth-revealing mechanism” (Edwards, 1992, p. 4).

Harper is quick to note how sociology embraced the proliferation of camera usage as “conventions of the ‘realist tale’ -- taken-for-granted in traditional ethnography-- (to solve) obscure problems inherent in the anthropologist’s attempts to gain scientific legitimacy” (Harper in Prosser, 1998). Methodological procedures in the field suggested that inclusion of the camera would provide an objective tool with which to decipher sign and symbol. Through rigorous examination of data, the researcher was believed to be assured of reliable and reproducible findings, which would then serve to bolster understandings perhaps undermined through more subjective research approaches (Becker, 1986, p. 252). By the time of Vygotsky’s death in 1935, much of the excitement caused by inclusion of photographic imagery had waned (Becker, 1986). Collier claimed that the camera had become “incidental to research activity” and that the camera was not so much a research technique as it was “a highly selective confirmation that certain things are so, or as a very selective sample of reality” (1967, p. x).

Thus the division between positivism and relativism was crystallized through varying perceptions of what constitutes a sense of truth. “It is a contentious field, deeply divided between those searching for universal features of the mind, and those who see human activity grounded in historical and cultural experiences” (John-Steiner, 1996). This position runs counter to the more traditional proclivity toward a dichotomous, analytical separation of form and meaning, which fostered the mistaken “socio-cultural neutrality “ of photographic reproduction (Banks in Prosser, 1998, p. 17). This misperception was strongly refuted by Baudry (1970, p. 537) and others, who insisted that “there are no socially neutral techniques” in image-based research. Echoing these sentiments of interactionist theorists, Banks (in Prosser, 1998, p. 15) has also found the assumption of photography and film having captured ‘reality’ highly problematic, because such positivist “unidirectional transmission freezes debate” (Wertsch & Stone, 1985, p. 163).

The Formalists’ approach toward imagery suggested to Vygotsky that such ideologies “intend(ed) to construe the theories outside sociological and psychological foundations” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 52). In doing so, Formalists

viewed “the artistic form as something completely objective, independent of thoughts, ideas, feelings, and other psychological material of which the forms exist” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 56). Consequently, much of the anthropological approach to film and photography “has been largely anti-aesthetic and focused upon the technological and methodological” (Banks in Prosser, 1998, p. 14). This ‘scientific’ approach approximates the Deweyan notion of ‘anaesthetics’ (Dewey, 1938), in which researchers seek a form of sanitized positivism. Traweek notes that such educators “long passionately for a world without loose ends, without temperament, gender, nationalism... and (seek) extreme cultures of objectivity” (Traweek, 1988, p. 162).

Derry (1996) has indicated that cognitive constructivist research and practice has intended to place the individual under observation within the context of her / his natural environment. Much of this movement has occurred as a result of the pioneering work of Mead in the 1940’s, which offered a novel paradigm in direct contrast to earlier attempts to understand indigenous groups through a decidedly Western lens. Mead’s ethnographic studies did serve to broaden and question accepted methodological practice, but her much-copied field praxis fell short of the Vygotskian concern for specifically locating each subject within a larger social context. Mead was conscious of the need to develop rapport with the target group in question in order to more successfully legitimate her findings. Her approach did serve to lessen the gulf between observer and those being observed. Many researchers, who have followed, however maintain a view of cognition that lacks the lived-in qualities of intimacy, engagement, conflict, and negotiation. Their view resembles other analytical dichotomies separating interrelated human experiences, such as the separation of thinking from feeling, or the individual from the social (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 195). In this manner, current research strategies valued by sociocultural theorists stand “in opposition to the more traditional reliance on universal cognitive algorithms” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 194).

### **Image-based Research: Resolving Estrangement Through Dialectics**

According to Vygotsky, art is “subject to the general law of historical evolution, at least in its substantial parts” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 41). Sociocultural theory holds that “human activities take place in cultural contexts, that they are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can best be understood when investigated in their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Further, communicative networks are formed when “acts of representation are embedded in social practice and rely on socially developed semiotic means. Ecology, history, culture, and family organization play roles in patterning experience and events” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Through this perspective, Vygotsky notes that “formalists fail to understand the final significance of the rules of estrangement... (therefore failing to understand) the psychological significance of the material” (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 57).

This Marxian concept of *estrangement* was originally designed to pinpoint and identify the debilitating effects of marginalization through the exponential growth of capitalism during the nineteenth century. Vygotskian concepts of alienation included Marx’s vision of a more equitable workplace and therefore an overall higher quality of life for the family / communal unit. Aspects of estrangement were also extended to encompass the ontogenic, phylogenic and sociocultural aspects of humankind, which are at once the ill effect of inequity and the vehicle for potential psychosocial evolution (Vygotsky, 1925). In order to investigate the correlation between the material forces and human needs, Iggers made the following observation:

The term dialectic must be used with care... because it too involves an inner contradiction. On the one hand the dialectic repudiates the positivistic notion of the primacy of the phenomenal world of science, because it holds

that all visible manifestations are problematic and must be understood within the broader contexts of conflicting forces. Marx questions the assumption of classical political economy that the world of economics can be understood in terms of the economic forces operating in them, and he demands that they be measured in terms of human needs (1997, p. 80).

One's estranged relationship to oneself-- one's biologic and / or psychosocial positionality--serves as both an irritant and a healing mechanism in the meaning-making process. Although many people seek to align themselves with a quick-fix dogma, "there can be no universal schema that adequately represents the dynamic relation between external and internal aspects of development" (John-Steiner & Soubberman, 1978).

As participants in contemporary society we are bombarded, each and every day, with imagery from countless directions. Vygotsky, using the analogy of five trains entering a tunnel with only room for one to exit, has indicated that "the world pours into (a hu)man through the wide opening of a funnel..... thousands of calls, desires, stimuli, etc. enter, but only an infinitesimal part of them is realized and flows out through the tiny opening" (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 54). Art provides the special impetus for transubstantiation to occur-- a deeply reflective consideration of seemingly disjointed input in need of (re)organization.

In order to accommodate and arrange such stimuli into a cohesive semblance of order, "dialectics surmounts dichotomies by looking at phenomena as synthesis of contradictions" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). "Art", Vygotsky wrote, "simultaneously generates in us opposing affects acts according to the principle of antithesis and sends opposite impulses" (1925, p. 213). Analysis of this process recognizes the need for "an integrative mode of thinking aimed at overcoming the Cartesian ghosts of dualism and dichotomy" (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 100). Dialectical processes present "world pictures which balance each other and constantly need modification" (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 100).

Working, in part, from the principles outlined by pragmatist George Herbert Mead, Vygotsky "believed that thought develops first through interdependence with others and later is internalized (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 188). Accordingly, creating new knowledge does not occur in a void. "Joint mediated activity is the proper unit of psychological analysis and hence, is inherently socially shared" (Cole, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 192). Although he has consistently been misquoted, misread, and misunderstood, Kushner exclaimed that "Marx was right. The smallest indivisible unit is two people, not one" (Kushner in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 64).

Such collaborative ventures have been thoroughly analyzed by Vygotsky, whose conceptualization of the zone of proximal development has led to an increased understanding of the positive advancement of learning in a social context. The relationship between peers, between 'master' and mentor, or between groups, offers an opportunity for interactive meaning-making to occur. In many cases, art acts as the catalyst for a very different form of jointly mediated knowledge-building. As a crucial element in the social construction of understanding, "a need arises from time to time to discharge unused energy and give it full reign in order to reestablish our equilibrium with the rest of the world" (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 246).

Art allows for a shared vision between creatist and re-creatist, as well as the opportunity for "complimentary" collaborators to offer their particular, unique approaches to facilitate deeper cognition. As Vygotsky put it, "initially an emotion is individual and only by means of a work of art does it become social or generalized" (Vygotsky, 1925, p. 242). In this way, art acts as an indispensable component of the zone of proximal

development. Kozulin emphasizes that “the internalization of social interaction in the construction of knowledge (leads to a) dynamic interdependence of social and individual processes” (Kozulin, 1990, p. 87). This process of internalization of stimuli is not an instantaneous phenomenon. “We may call art a delayed reaction”, wrote Vygotsky (1925, p. 253). “He (Hennequin) is correct in saying that aesthetic emotion does not immediately generate action, that it manifests itself in the change of purpose” (Hennequin referenced in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 250).

### **Collaboration as Catharsis**

This ‘change of purpose’, which Vygotsky has identified as a pivotal element in the creative / recreative process, has its roots firmly planted in psychosocial interaction. “Socialization practices prevalent in contemporary Western society emphasize competition and the adversarial mode of self-presentation” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 100). This need to view the socialization process as one of competitive one-ups-manship may well be a virulent form of alienation illustrative of the “frequently neglected role of mutuality” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 92). Feldman offers a possible solution to this debilitating feature of competitive individualism by stating that “the purpose of cultural organisms... (is) to organize existing knowledge and to provide the challenge and the context for individual and joint creativity” (Feldman, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 88).

This “collective sense-making,” as defined by Weick, “is a need to act in order to think... where shared experience leads to engagement with culture” (Weick, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 193). As certain ethnic groups redefine themselves in opposition and resistance to racist, classist, and gendered forms of elitism, we are reminded that in our current state of devious factionalism, heightened forms of individualism have produced an “unproductive autonomy” (Wertsch, 1998). “Partners need to shed some of their cultural heritage, such as the powerful belief in a separate, independent self and in the glory of individual achievement” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 204), while in doing so, contribute more fully to the well-being of a community in search of a healing pedagogy. Through this process, “a cooperative structure is formed and reformed in order to enhance the possibilities for discovery, development, and (occasionally) optimal expression of human talents in various domains” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 191).

This process of neutralizing the effects of self-estrangement could conceivably be accomplished through specific techniques, which allow one to be “liberated from the prison of the self” (Bennis & Biederman, in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 188). John-Steiner added that “through collaboration, we can transcend the constraints of biology, of time, of habit, and achieve a fuller self, beyond the limitations and the talents of the isolated individual” (2000, p. 188). Catharsis allows for the transformation of passion into virtue (Lessing, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), a transition from displeasure to pleasure (Muller, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), healing and purification in the medical sense (Bernay, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213), and the appeasement of “affect” (Zeller, in Vygotsky, 1925, p. 213). It is within these varying locations of the ontogenic, phylogenic and psychosocial self that truly meaningful change can “contribute to the realization of human possibility” (John-Steiner, 2000, p. 187).

In today’s postmodern setting, a strict definition of art has come to be viewed as problematic. Traditional considerations of art, dictated by late-modernist concerns for form and function, are now hotly contested issues. As corporate financial interests, backed by a corporate-owned media, continue to inundate our lives with not-so-subliminal, consumer-oriented propaganda, one might sense an urgency to not only resist modes of conspicuous

consumption, but to deconstruct the ill effects of accumulative greed and avarice.

Banks (in Prosser, 1998, p. 19) believes that visual anthropology is more than a pedagogic strategy or a tool to be used in certain fieldwork contexts: Rather it is an exploration by the visual, through the visual of human sociality, a field of social action which is enacted in planes of time and space, through objects and bodies, landscapes and emotions, as well as thought (Banks in Prosser, 1998, p. 19). Regarding any possible 'misunderstandings of purpose', catharsis through the collaborative process "gives voice to contradictory and dilemmatic aspects of team practice" (Middleton in John-Steiner, 2000, p. 89).

Photography and cinematography have come to the forefront as avenues for transmission of competing ideologies. The scope and sphere of influence of imagery is now fully global in nature, which becomes problematic in light of the fervor with which corporations vie for consumers' attention. Photographic iconography, acting as agency for both proactive and counterproductive forms of meaning-making, is at the heart of this 'new art'. Image-based research offers the opportunity for practitioners to weigh the merits of a methodology which seeks to better understand the use of photographic technology as a semiotic tool capable of engaging the creatist / re-creatist in a co-constructed comprehension of sign and symbol. It is through this semiotic process that iconographic symbolism is deciphered and the ideological structures that are embedded in the imagery recognized, analyzed, and internalized by the viewer (Peirce, xxxx).

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