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Research Insights

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THE SPECIFIC DISTORTION OF REALITY IN CHILDREN'S DRAWING

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Abstract. A drawing of a child is an amazing way of visual communication in which colour has a dominant and primary importance. It represents a striving to learn about the universe in its entirety, a striving, nourished by the curiosity to know everything, so inherent in human nature, inspiring each new discovery and leading right back to the dawn of mankind. That is why many researchers of children's drawings look into their objective core searching for the motives for the emergence and development of the pictorial activity in general. According to them, painting is genetically inherent in human species, and according to others it is a reflection of the external intervention of adults in children's development. On this basis, the key issues are set related to the pedagogical intervention by adults in children's education and development.

Keywords: children's drawings; children's development; pre-pictorial and pictorial period

"Art leads the child out of itself"

(Read 1966, p. 56)

A drawing of a child is an amazing way of visual communication in which colour has a dominant and primary importance. It represents a striving to learn about the universe in its entirety, a striving, nourished by the curiosity to know everything, so inherent in human nature, inspiring each new discovery and leading right back to the dawn of mankind. That is why many researchers of children's drawings look into their objective core searching for the motives for the emergence and development of the pictorial activity in general. According to them, painting is genetically inherent in human species, and according to others it is a reflection of the external intervention of adults in children's development. On this basis, the key issues are set related to the pedagogical intervention by adults in children's education and development. Children produce more than art that hangs on walls, which is read out aloud during assembly, or is part of performance or concert piece; for they are, the very manifestation of art (Cannatella 2007, p. 5).

A child's drawing, in a sense, is like a child's speech and this is due to the pictorial core of child's thinking, the strong role of feelings in the perception of the world and the formation of the pictorial concepts. Therefore, in child's development, drawing as an activity precedes writing. And this is natural because initially thinking is predominantly pictorial. Children share their feelings and experiences much easier and gladly in a drawing rather than in words. "Along with the language", says Professor Kazandzhiev, "painting is a way of communication for the child" (Kazandzhiev 1940, p. 189). Therefore, we can more easily navigate in children's perceptions of the world, by examining their drawings rather than by trying to reach them via description, narration or dialog.

For children, the perception of colours is directly dependent on the development of speech. Therefore the development of the pictorial activity and colouring in children's drawings are influenced by the degree of formation of the concepts of colour, tone, shade, harmony, etc. Most experiments and observations in this direction reach similar conclusions, suggesting that the perception and use of colour in pictorial activity are influenced by the individual ability, mental, emotional and physical identity, memory, worldview, experience, cultural, aesthetic, ethnic and even religious affiliation of each individual. "In general", says Kandinski, "colour is the key, the eye is the hammer, the soul is the multi-string piano" (Kandinski 1998, p. 102).



Figure 1. Child drawing (pre-pictorial period)

The pre-pictorial period (from about a year and a half to the end of the second year of the child) is related to the so-called first pictorial manifestations that are purely procedural. During this period, the child's attitude towards colours is irrational (Fig. 1). Preferences for one colour to another are highly subjective, being entirely governed by current emotional state, which in this age also varies like attention and has unstable nature. Drawing in the pre-pictorial period is totally coincidental and the choice of colours is associated entirely with the pictorial material, with the impression and playing and not with the conscious pictorial activity (Fig. 2).

Only with the beginning of the so-called period of conscious pictorial activity we can talk about the emergence of the child's attitude to colour, about creation of complex physiological levels in the perception process and handling of more complex colour values and colour harmonies, a skill that evolves over the entire period of formation of personality.



Figure 2. Child drawing (pre-pictorial period)

At the end of the third year, a display of an approximately similar model of the world appears naturally in children's drawings, in which colours still don't have their definite permanent indication. This phenomenon is directly dependent on the child's evolving perceptions of colour, which are not yet completed at this stage of life. The child is not yet able to compare the perceived objects by colour signs and recognizes a limited number of colours by their names. Therefore, in this age the colours in children's drawings are mostly used in their basic "clean" spectral values. Colour for the child is a carrier of emotional messages, a means by which basic aesthetic categories can be recreated, to be developed a certain attitude towards objects, subjects and phenomena (Nikolova 2020, p. 208).

This initial model of the world in children's drawings has a strongly expressed dynamic nature; it rarely reflects the actual visual qualities of the depicted objects, but rather the idea of them that is highly aggregated and schematic. Children constantly accumulate new, subjective sensations, perceptions and impressions of the world around them to the already established pictorial perceptions, thus enriching and correcting the previous ones, as they are expanded by the conditional systems of colour impressions (Raychev 2005, p. 72).

It is enough to look at each child's drawing to understand that the pictorial surface is actually the whole world. A world in which the bottom horizontal green line marks the end of the earth (often below the line are displayed the underworld with its unlit creatures and elements) and at the top again a blue line marks the sky and space. Thus the upper and lower edges of the sheet demarcate the universe, and the relations in it are organized according to the directions up and down. The vertical on the sheet is simultaneously the boundary of the opposition of known and unknown, and the solution of the problem related to the depiction of space. For example, figures that are farther away are not displayed in the background but simply "climb" up the sheet. And their size is determined not so much by their actual proportions or their distance in space as by their role in the action displayed and by their importance to the content of the drawing.

Colours have a subjective and symbolic indication. It has a primary meaning. Thus, although the depicted objects are not always completely filled with colour, the contour line defines the local (own) colour of the image, which is not affected by the degree of illumination, the spatial transformations of the form, the interaction of colours, environment, etc. The earth is brown, the sun - yellow, rarely red, and the trees, of course - green, but in this so clearly "collared" world, unexpected metamorphoses of colour are not excluded towards the initial represented model, in which the colours of the images are rarely affected by a specific, direct observation.

For instance, children are infinitely capable of registering all manner of things, and detaching from these things their 'true' shape so that their way of looking, and experiencing reflects other meanings, and feelings, creative fictions for the 'true' shape of things. "A child was in a circus, and afterwards painted an elephant and

painted it purple. Grey did not seem to him the right colour for so exotic an animal” (Viola 1936, p. 32). In this example, it dawns upon the child that the elephant has a tumultuous spirit, a majestic presence. To symbolize this elephant, purple is chosen to concentrate our thoughts on its magnificence, a gesture that provokes a different representation and with new meaning, causing us to think again and restore what otherwise may have been blotted out. Herbert Read equates this aesthetic integrity, as the child’s “affectionate exhortation” (Read 1970, p. 217).

With drawing children are not just expressing themselves; they are expressing themselves in aesthetic ways. Merleau-Ponty notes that what constitutes the genesis of appearing in art are important because it represents something in its very act as forget, felt, given, and with “quasi-presence” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 133). These gestures come from children who in their simplicity, stern liberty, self-presented truth, fearlessness, modesty, distress unruliness, fragmentation, surprise, giddiness, unexpectedness, sensitivity, frustration, triumph, and with anxious eyes, deliverance and unblemished mind. Create their art from delights that breathe silently, impatiently, abruptly, and compellingly. (Cannatella 2007, p. 6). Through a bushel of unusual light, the child transmits remembrances that greet the viewer in a new way to recall things only they can bring to light in their touch. Through open windows children can create almost anything. Herbert Read calls this phenomenon the “innocent eye” (Read 1967, p. 24).

“We, says Morris Merleau-Ponty, could try not to render our relation to the world, in accordance with what it is under the gaze of infinite intelligence. Then, at a stroke, the canonical, normal, or “true” type of expression would then be liberated from the constraints that perspective imposes upon drawing - free, for example, to express a cube by six squares “disjoined” and juxtaposed on the paper, free to draw in the two faces of a bobbin and join them by a sort of bent store-pipe, to represent death by transparency in its coffin or the look by two eyes separated from the head, free to have to mark the “objective” contours of the alley or of the face and in contrast to indicate the cheeks by a circle. This is what the child does” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, pp. 49 – 50).

One of the most popular theories about the origin and development of children’s pictorial activity presents children’s drawings as a reflection of the knowledge of the child about the world around it. Thus, according to the intellectualist theory, in their drawings children depict not what they see but what they know (Dimchev 1994, p. 56). This does not mean that the child is not interested in the visual qualities of objects but rather that it is guided by subjective motives at their depiction, as drawing by nature gives way to drawing by idea and impression.

The problem of the depiction of space, which is central to the development of art and has represented a temptation for artists for centuries, is not absent in children’s drawings. Although at first glance in a fledgling drawing of a child, the Euclidean third dimension is not subject to depiction, this is no reason to believe that space,

as a pictorial issue does not excite children. A child ignores only its illusory presentation on the pictorial surface. With the first line on the sheet, it tries to break its two-dimensionality and to forward somehow its knowledge of space and the relationship between the objects in it.

A child seeks to present possibly everything it knows in its drawing, hence its “transparency” – a body could not cover another body in the depiction of plans because a child’s universe must be presented logically intact i. e. completed in its entirety (Arnheim 1965, p. 243). Thus, in children’s drawings, the so-called “reverse” perspective appears (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Child drawing (age 5 years old)

Here we should clarify that in this case we can not speak of a conditional perspective system for space depiction as is the case of the art of ancient peoples or the art of Byzantium, where the “reverse” perspective is actually a conceptual canon of a sacred space depiction, but rather talk about a resource when the child is trying to depict everything it knows about the world on the plane of the sheet. So in a child’s painting one can observe the translation of objects hidden from view, the rotation and the overlapping of profile with full face, the drawing of objects like seen from a “bird’s eye” or the drawing of objects from several different perspectives simultaneously etc. (Raushenbakh 1980, p. 94).

The transmission of the illusion of depth and space through colour change in separate plans is not typical of children's drawings. Only after 12, in some cases we can notice the attempt to separate plans through a transition from warm to cold colour range as a result of training in art and changing the children's attitude towards realistic depiction of the world around them.

Influenced by the feeling that nothing should be missing in a drawing, children often include in their drawings the fourth dimension – time. In different parts of the sheet children depict simultaneously different moments of the same occurrence, which in the process of depicting reveals its beginning, climax, denouement and end. Very rarely, especially between 3 and 6 years, children make their drawings silently. They beautify and add meaning to their drawings with exclamations, whispers and dynamic speech, because they are entirely emotionally involved in what is happening. Unable to distinguish the possible from the impossible, drawing inspiration from its inexhaustible imagination, a child is able to be empathic with the depiction on the sheet to the extent of being a participant in the drawing itself, which changes continuously in the process of painting (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Child drawing (age 4 years old)

A picture of a child reflects its immediate idea of the construction and organization of the world. The centre of the world for a child is a person. The person who gives meaning to chaos and for whom everything exists; Not by chance the first image that appears in children's drawings is the so-called "Cephalopod" (Ricci 1911) – the most primitive and archetypal image of man. With a line the child depicts the shape, own colour and size. To a child, the line closing a circle is the beginning and end of the human body in its entirety. Added to the circle, the limbs are meant to suggest movement and lead us to the action. The number of arms, legs, and fingers thereof is of little importance for the child. Incomparably more important to it are the details that have impressed it as buttons, accessories and clothes with bright colours. When painting a portrait, some details might be missing such as eyes, nose, mouth, but in no way the red scarf and brooch in the shape of a butterfly (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Child drawing (age 3 years old)

In the anthropocentrism of children's drawings we can see the primordial desire of the child to be equated with the environment and its family; it searches for its identity and prototype. By drawing their parents children express and share their feelings toward them, their affiliation to a reasonable and indefeasible world in which their family is the very solar system. In this fragile system, by size and colour, children stress the importance of individual characters and the details supporting the basic conception. For example, the image of the mother is generally most developed and detailed, and the hands with which she embraces and caresses are huge ... Her image can only be compared to the image of the sun, which in children's paintings most often has anthropomorphic features and its rays penetrate into the whole pictorial field. For children consciousness, the yellow colour, the light and the sun are innate characters of knowledge and love, established contents that adults often put into them, too (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. Child drawing. So-called “Cephalopod” (pre-pictorial period)

If we assume that children communicate through their drawings, and then logically the drawings should be an accurate reflection of certain visual stimuli, then why do the characteristic “logical errors” so often appear in children's drawings, in terms of colour, construction of shape and space and others?

The specific distortion of reality in children's drawings is not due to an intentional effect or a conditional pictorial system, but to the extent of formation of children's visual perceptions that are not yet fully completed by 10 – 12 years of age. A child's mind is not burdened; it is able to impartially perceive colour and spatial values and relationships of objects that don't have the same meaning and content for adults (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Child drawing (age 10 years old)

The more important condition is “when we regard the child simply as a future adult, denying him own personality, and right to exercise a logic of his own (which from the point of view of the child is truer than ours, and therefore from the very nature of things different from that of the adult), then it is impossible to speak of child art” (Viola 1936, pp. 9 – 10).

So, much as adults desire, they are unable to place themselves in the same psychological situation in which a child creates its drawing. That is why we, as adult researchers who have undertaken a trip back to ontogenesis, can only believe that we can understand more about the children's world by peering into their drawings and explaining that when drawing, children are trying to explore the world in the light and colours of their feelings.

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