

DOSSIER “Human development, drama and perezhivania:
Vygotsky and the question of the psychology of the actor’s creation”^{1 2}

Concrete Psychology of the Actor’s *dvoistvennost*: Emotions and Art as Vygotsky’s means for rethinking Methods of Psychology^{3 4}

*A psicologia concreta da dvoistvennost do ator: emoções e arte como o
meio pelo qual Vigotski repensou os métodos da psicologia*

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Abstract

Vygotsky’s article about the psychology of the actor is a good example of continuities and connections between the early and late work of this psychologist and theater critic. Contrary to a divide between an “instrumental”, “mechanistic” and “reductionist” phase before 1930 and later a “holistic” phase (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, 2016, p. 92), the discourse about the actor and Diderot’s notion of “artificial feelings” (*sensibilité artificielle*) proves Vygotsky’s ongoing commitment regarding questions of experience (*perezhivanie*), catharsis and the status of emotions. The dichotomy of the actor’s emotions as shown by Diderot in *Paradox of Acting* is a key for Vygotsky to insist on the historicity of emotions and a transformation of psychology’s methods. As part of the creative work, the actor’s emotions are divided with opposing forces. In Vygotsky’s *Psychology of Art*, the formalist term for such a division is *dvoistvennost*’ (twofoldness). Only by overcoming naturalist assumptions and by placing emotions in the context of other mental functions, psychology with indirect methods would be capable of dealing with this historicity. This is a “psychology in terms of drama”, as suggested in “Concrete Psychology”. My paper will focus on the connections between early reviews, “The Psychology of Art” (1925), “Concrete Human Psychology” (1929) and “The Psychology of the Actor’s Creative Work” (1932).

Keywords: *Perezhivanie*, Russian Formalism, Emotions, Subjectivity, Drama

¹ For more information, please see: Vigotski (2023).

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Resumo

O artigo de Vigotski sobre a psicologia do ator é um bom exemplo de continuidades e conexões entre a obra inicial e final desse psicólogo e crítico teatral. Contrário à divisão entre uma fase “instrumental”, “mecanicista” e “reducionista” antes de 1930 e uma fase “holística” (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, 2016, p. 92), o discurso sobre o ator e a noção diderotiana de “sentimentos artificiais” (*sensibilité artificielle*) comprova o compromisso permanente de Vigotski quanto a questões da vivência (*pereživânie*), catarse e o status das emoções. A dicotomia entre as emoções do ator, como mostrado por Diderot e “Paradoxo do comediante”, é a chave para Vigotski insistir na historicidade das emoções e em uma transformação dos métodos da psicologia. Como parte do trabalho criativo, as emoções do ator são divididas em forças opostas. Em *Psicologia da arte*, o termo formalista para tal divisão é *dvoistvennost* (duplicidade). Apenas ao superar as suposições naturalistas e colocar as emoções no contexto de outras funções mentais, a psicologia seria capaz, por meio de métodos indiretos, de lidar com essa historicidade. Esta é uma “psicologia em termos do drama”, como sugerido em “*Psicologia concreta*”. O presente artigo se concentra nas conexões entre as resenhas iniciais, *Psicologia da arte* (1925), “*Psicologia concreta humana*” (1929) e “*Sobre a questão da psicologia da criação pelo ator*” (1932).

Palavras-chave: *Pereživânie, Formalismo russo, Emoções, Subjetividade, Drama*

Artistic and real-life emotions: Liubov’ Gurevich and GACHN

“Penetration and no sensibility”: According to the first of the two fictional speakers in Diderot's dialogue *The Paradox of Acting* (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*, 1773–1777), an ideal actor should be equipped with these features, as an “unmoved and disinterested onlooker” with “a deal of judgment” (Diderot, 1883, p. 7). Are actors supposed to experience the feelings of the scenic character themselves? The first speaker, in the reception often associated to Diderot's own positions, negates this answer. By juxtaposing sensibility (*sensibilité*) and penetration (*pénétration*), philosopher and writer Denis Diderot initiates a paradigm shift about how actors and actresses can evoke feelings in the audience and make them believable on stage. By addressing judgment (*judgement*), a central term of the philosophy of Enlightenment, Diderot is unfolding a discourse on the ideal citizen and the potential of theater to educate the subject morally and politically. The actor's judgment is related to the possibility of the audience to observe while being separated from stage by a “fourth wall”. This invisible wall paradoxically results in intensified affection.

Diderot thus established a tradition of acting theories that favored virtuoso emotional work with calculated distance from inner emotional excitement over empathy for the role. In the method of the Russian actor and director Stanislavsky and the subsequent Method Acting, empathy predominates, while in Meyerhold's biomechanical approaches and in Brecht's theater, there is distance from the portrayed and from the feelings shown in the character. The historical debate about "hot" and "cold" actors was critically recapitulated at the State Academy of Artistic Sciences (GACHN) in Moscow in the mid-1920s. In the early Soviet Union, in 1923, Diderot's treatise on the actor was published in a new translation within the context of a predominant reception of Diderot as precursor of materialism and philosophical monism. At GACHN however, in her study about the creative work of the actor, the scholar and close collaborator of actor and director Konstantin Stanislavsky, Liubov' Gurevich focusses on the historical European debate on creative methods and the status of emotion and experience in acting.

The GACHN was founded by artist Vasily Kandinsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, People's Commissar for Education. As an interdisciplinary network of artists and researchers, it included a department for theater and sections for the psychology of scenic creative work (*Sekciia psichologii scenicheskogo tvorchestvo*) and for audience research, which invited Lev Vygotsky in 1928. Vygotsky's manuscript of his talk about the psychology of the actor is a draft for his article written in 1932 and published posthumously in 1936.

The theater section of the GACHN in 1924–26 conducted a series of surveys among Russian actors. Already in 1897 the French psychologist Alfred Binet (1857–1911) had presented questionnaires to nine French actors about the problem of whether an actor or actress should only show the feelings he or she portrays. Since then, Diderot's "paradox" entered the conceptual inventory of theater studies. Gurevich and the team at GACHN devoted their surveys to general problems of acting technique and the interrelationship between actor and audience. With the help of the questionnaires, the section tries to fathom to what extent the acting practice includes the actual feeling of scenically portrayed emotions. The question the first speaker in Diderot's dialogue negates, whether real passions of the actor were necessary for good acting, was also posed to several known actors in Moscow. Next to the interrelationship between figure and person, actors like Michail Chechov also replied to questions about the difference between scenic and lifeworld feelings.

In his article, Vygotsky (2015, p. 438) criticizes the empiricism of Binet and indirectly also the attempts at GACHN “to proceed from what is on the surface, to establish facts that are directly grasped and to elevate them to the rank of a scientifically discovered pattern.” While this argument completely confirms his general view about methods of scientific and psychological investigation, he nevertheless explicitly agrees with the conclusions Gurevich is drawing after evaluating the questionnaires. Gurevich (1927, p. 44) suggests the dramaturgical alternative is not, as previously assumed, between simulated feeling (*prityoryatsya*) and authentic transformation (*pretyoryatsya*). It is rather a matter of differentiating between artistic and real-life emotions:

“[...] the actor is not supposed to reveal on stage his immediate, psychological [dushevnoj] being under the mask of the role and with the words of the role on his lips, but rather the artistic overcoming, the artistic processing of this element, as a kind of raw material, from which the creation of art is to emerge. In reincarnating, the actor must disassociate from his empirical ‘I’ from real life, with its personal interests and feelings, for it is only by renouncing himself, he truly becomes a creator and artist who reveals in his creation something super-personal.”

The creative work on this “raw material” and the overcoming of personal interests and feelings are not artistic devices and tasks of the actor, for Vygotsky this “raw material” also proves the historical rather than biological factors of emotions. Therefore, the task of psychology is to differentiate emotions in life and on stage, not isolating emotions as

“[...] exception different from other manifestations of our mental life [*dushemaja zhbisn*]. Like all other mental functions [*psikhicheskie funkci*], emotions do not remain in the connection in which they are given initially by virtue of the biological organization of the mind. In the process of social life, feelings develop, and former connections disintegrate; emotions appear in new relations with other elements of mental life, new systems develop, new alloys of mental functions and unities of a higher order appear within which special patterns, interdependencies, special forms of connection and movement are dominant.” (2015, p. 445)

Interdependencies and the antithesis

The notion of relations and interdependencies (*vzaimozavisimosti*), patterns and “special forms of connection and movement” (*osobyie formy svyazi i dvizheniia*) illustrate the systemic character of Vygotsky’s late work. A formal and to a certain extent rhythmic analysis of patterns and forms of connection is necessary to understand how “new systems develop”, and my thesis is that Russian formalists greatly impacted Vygotsky into being aware of these special forms. Especially the formalist notion of a split or double (*dvoistvennost’*) as principle of antithesis - which Vygotsky combines with Plekhanov’s interpretation of Darwin’s antithesis in expression and movement - can be found in early theatrical reviews and late works.

Theatrical and literary reviews published between 1915–1922 and his thesis on *Hamlet* provide important foundations for the *Psychology of Art*, but they also stand on their own and have their own quality independent of the later attempt to objective psychology. Whereas for Vygotsky for a large part of the traditional Shakespearean reception a duality (*dvoistvennost’*) of Hamlet’s character is at the core of the tragedy of the play, in his 1922 review of the satirical play “Khorosho sshityj frak” (“The Well-Fitting Dress Coat”) double structures are related to several aspects of comedy. The comedy in four acts, written in 1908 by Hungarian playwright Gábor Drégely (1883–1944), was a great success on many Russian and other international stages at that time. Already in this review, Vygotsky refers to a doubling of the actor’s creative work. The play is about a tailor’s apprentice who sneaks into a millionaire’s house wearing borrowed tails and henceforth poses as a minister. Vygotsky’s article in the newspaper *Nash ponedel’nik* damned not only the “vulgar humor” of the play but also the failure of main actor Zolotarev to break out of an ordinary, monotonous play into a dichotomy that would allow real comedy to emerge. A permanent doubling and metamorphosis of the style of acting let the audience have the experience of a true comic effect. Not only is Vygotsky, a young theater critic who by then already conducted psychological experiments in Gomel, skeptical about the “monotonous humor” of the play itself, how it was played revealed no “double” quality of acting: “The journey from an assistant to minister provokes only one decisive objection: there is no metamorphosis, transformation, trick, imitation, it is not double all the time - this game is, as it should be – monotonous and ordinary.” (Vygotsky, 2015b, p. 349).

The levels on which Vygotsky pursues double of the play and modes of speech also become clear in his mention of speaking *à part*, a stylistic device that can be addressed directly

to the audience or can also pass the “fourth wall” in soliloquy past the dialogue partner. In the history of theatrical practice, speaking *à part* on stage has been superseded by the “fourth wall”, which Stanislavsky still employed, for example, in productions of Anton Chechov’s *Vishnevei sad* (*The Cherry Orchard*). Vygotsky addresses “speech to oneself, the soundless voice of thought, resounding silence, mute tones” (2015b, p. 350), thus differentiating various modes of speech and acoustic presence on stage. This can be read as a background to his later exploration of “inner speech” and the process between thought and speech. On the level of dramaturgy, in many theatrical reviews Vygotsky already focusses on artistic devices like the shifting of terms or playing with double meanings. Sobkin emphasizes how in Vygotsky’s theatrical reviews inner conflict does not so much apply to the relationships between characters but to the development of a scenic or stage image (Sobkin, 2016, p. 32). The metamorphosis of the actor in a series of transformations is at the same time part of the development of the role as it is a part of the scenic image.

Vygotsky completed the *Psychology of Art* as a thesis two years after this review and did not plan to publish it (archive materials suggest that he continued to work on the subjects, for instance at Zakharino Hospital in 1926; Vygotsky, 2018, p. 80). In his thesis, Vygotsky returns to double structures, not so much as guaranty for true comedy like in the review, but as a key principle for intense aesthetic stimuli to be analyzed in art and aesthetic emotions in reception. Analyzing different literary genres, Vygotsky states that the dichotomy (*dvoistvennost*) in content and form raises our interest. With the example of a textual case study Vygotsky aims at illuminating a whole genre. Next to a small number of fables, Vygotsky analyzes a short prose text by Ivan Bunin, who left the Soviet Union in the early 1920s because of his anti-Bolshevik views.⁵ The Russian title of this *povest* (a short narrative text, which is not exactly the genre of short story) is *Legkoe dychanie* (*Easy breathing*; Russian publication 1916). *Dychanie* translates as breath or as breathing. Van der Veer and Valsiner decided for the latter to emphasize the actions, and not the abstractions (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 28). In different genres Vygotsky finds similar dichotomies. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is the example for tragedies, whereas fables are chosen from Russia’s best-known fabulist Ivan Krylov.

⁵ Referring to Bunin in 1924, also to other sources such as to works of Vygotsky’s teacher Yuly Aykhenvald, was at that point of time already a complicated matter in terms of censorship and possible publications. Vygotsky’s citations of Nikolay Bukharin and Lev Trotsky are only included in the 2001 Russian edition (Vygotsky 2001).

Without the dichotomy, fables such as Krylov's *The crow and the fox* would lose their charm (Vygotsky 2001, p. 272). In Krylov's fable, wordplays and double meanings support the development of opposing motifs: The flattery and the humility of the fox, on the one hand, and his mocking and intellectual superiority on the other hand. Our perception results in an affective contradiction or "short-circuiting of the two of two opposite currents, in which this very contradiction explodes, burns up and is resolved" (2001, p. 295). One could call this a catharsis in energetic formalist terms. Vygotsky's approach to define poetic structure coincides with that of the Russian formalists, who likewise (referring to Potebnya) generalized dichotomies in artistic technique. Even though Vygotsky criticizes formalists like Shklovsky for an alleged reduction to hedonistic pleasure of art in focusing on sensation (*osbhushbenie*) and the renewing of perception with defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), the psychologist and the formalist critic share general assumptions about the parallel contradictory subject lines in the fable, novella or tragedy and their final surprising overlap in the "punch line" "catastrophe", in which the compositional contradiction semantically "dissolves". The theory of syuzhet construction in Shklovsky's *Theory of prose* (first version published in 1925) is in many ways congruent with Vygotsky's approach. The literary critic, theorist, and a founder of *Obshchestvo Izucheniia Poeticheskogo Iazyka* (*Society for the Study of Poetic Language; Opoiáz*) Shklovsky especially in his early articles about the artistic device (*priem*) excludes emotion from the field of art. Nevertheless, Vygotsky accepts the value of "new" devices in art but adds crucial theses about the affective and mental process of the structural coping with semantic contradictions, a psychological approach to art and literature remaining completely ignored in early formalism. Hansen-Löve (2001, p. 436) points out, that the cathartic task of restoring balance between individual and society coincides with the function of de-automation of perception in formalism.

In his late work *Tetiva* (*The Bowstring*, 1970), mixing history and theory of narrative fiction with memoirs, Viktor Shklovsky explicitly mentions Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art* next to the works of Bakhtin. Both of them were rediscovered in a similar context of the 1950's Khrushchev Thaw period, after linguist Roman Jakobson, who had manifold relations to the programmatic and activities of the formalists, in 1956 publicly mentioned Vygotsky and Bakhtin in a speech in Moscow. *Tetiva* is not only Shklovsky's attempt to rethink earlier positions about syuzhet and defamiliarization (*ostranenie*), obviously with a new position on the role of emotions and the "wholeness of perception" in art:

“By refuting emotion or ideology in art, we are also refuting the knowledge of form, the purpose of knowledge, and the path of experience that leads to the perception of the world.

Form and content then are separated from each other. The brilliant formula is actually a formula of capitulation; it divides the realm of art – destroys the wholeness of perception.

The *Drosophila* flies are not sent into space for a vacation. They enable the study of how the cosmos affects living organisms.

You can send the cat and flies into the cosmos, but there ought to be a purpose to these expeditions.” (Shklovsky, 2017, p. 8)

The formalist input: Shklovsky and Vygotsky

Not much is known yet whether the rethinking of the “brilliant formula” of defamiliarization and Shklovsky’s embracing of emotion as part of a “wholeness of perception” might be influenced by his reception of Vygotsky. In any case, the statement about “refuting emotion or ideology in art” as a refuting of “the knowledge of form” seems strikingly compatible with Vygotsky’s notion of emotion and ideology in the article on acting. While Shklovsky does not mention social implications of art, he includes a discourse on organism and milieu by mentioning the scientific experiments with *Drosophila* flies as enabling the study of “how the cosmos affects living organisms”. With his last sentence in the article on the creative work of the actor, Vygotsky emphasizes in particular an “ideology” in the context of a social status of aesthetic emotions:

“To study the order and connection of affects is the principal task of scientific psychology because it is not in emotions taken in an isolated form, but in connections combining emotions with more complex psychological systems that the solution of the paradox of the actor lies. This solution, as might be expected even now, will bring the investigators to a position that has a fundamental significance for all of the psychology of the actor. The experience of the actor, his emotions, appear not as functions of his personal mental life, but as a phenomenon that has an objective, social sense and relevance, serving as transitional stage from psychology to ideology.” (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 445)

While Shklovsky addresses the aims of contemporary science in a rather essayistic and ironic manner (“You can send the cat and flies into the cosmos, but there ought to be a purpose

to these expeditions”), Vygotsky focusses on the “principle task of scientific psychology” with a direct and serious statement. It is not about psychology having to adapt to any ideology, but rather about a transformation of psychology as science to overcome its limitation in abstracting from the “historical development of human emotion and its concrete expression at different stages of social life” (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 445). As far as the experience (*perezhivanië*) and the emotions of the actor are not functions of his personal mental (*dushhevnaia*) life, they belong to the much broader context of social life. The official accusations against formalism around 1930 and those accusations against the cultural-historical school of psychology a few years later have in common that both groups supposedly failed to work in terms of the official ideology. Nonetheless, neither Vygotsky nor Shklovsky has contributed to a party ideology with their own use of the term ideology (*ideologija*). The step or “transitional stage from psychology to ideology”, Vygotsky states, is possible when emotions are localized “in the air”, while the “psychology of the actor expresses the social ideology of his epoch”.

In the *Psychology of Art*, the task for a future, objective psychology is already set in a similar way. In the manner of historical materialism art is seen as an expression of the ideology of its time. The principle of antithesis, conflict or contradiction is important for any artwork. Vygotsky’s examples of the antithetical principle are not only fable, novella, and tragedy, but also non-time-based arts such as architecture or graphic arts. To extend the principle further, Vygotsky also devotes himself to drama and acting in the *Psychology of Art*. Already in the *Psychology of Art*, Vygotskij refers to Diderot’s paradox and expands the “catharsis formula” about the dichotomy (*dvoistvennost*) of affects with examples from further arts. The effect of artistic form is to resolve and transform negative emotions such as despair.

The life of drama and the drama of life

Vygotsky divides the theatre into a literary half – the drama – and a second half of the play of the mimes and the performance. Both halves confirmed the cathartic formula of a doubleness, dichotomy and ambivalence. In acting, Vygotsky assumes the “doubling of every actor’s emotion”, only this is less a paradox than a prerequisite for any artistic performance on stage:

“Diderot is absolutely right when he says that after the performance the actor does not retain in his soul any of the feelings he has portrayed – the spectators take them away with them. Unfortunately, to this day it is common to regard this assertion as a paradox; no reasonably comprehensive investigation has uncovered the psychology of acting, although the psychology of art would be much more equal to its task in this field than in all others. We have every reason, however, to assume from the outset that this investigation, whatever its results, would confirm the fundamental doubleness of the actor’s emotion to which Diderot points and which, it seems to us, justifies extending the catharsis formula to theatrical creation.” (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 385)

According to Mareev (2017, p. 163), the difference between Diderot and Vygotsky resides in the fact that Diderot contrasts artistic feelings with natural ones, while Vygotsky presupposes a fundamental contradictory structure of all human feelings. While this is certainly true for the article of 1932, in the *Psychology of Art* Vygotsky presupposes the affect conflict especially for the aesthetic reaction. Regarding the actor, he supports Diderot’s notion of “tears flowing from the brain”. Characteristic for the essence of the “artistic reaction” (chudozhestvennaia reakciia) – which is equated with the “aesthetic reaction” – are thus the features of “stagnation” (*zaderzhka*) and solution in fantasy:

“Thus, the very stagnation of outward realization is the specific symptom of artistic emotion while preserving its unusual strength. We could show that art is the central emotion or the emotion that is mainly solved in the cerebral cortex. The emotions of art are mental emotions. Instead of being expressed in clenched fists and trembling, they are mainly released in fantasy images. Diderot is quite right when he says that the actor cries real tears, but his tears flow from the brain. Thus, he expresses the essence of the artistic reaction as such.” (2001, p. 359)

The first speaker in Diderot’s dialogue repeatedly assures that sensitive actors are at a disadvantage:

“For diverse modes of feeling arranged in concert to obtain the greatest effect; scored orchestrally, played *piano* and played *forte*, harmonised to make an individual effect — all that to me is food for laughter. I hold to my point, and I tell you this: ‘Extreme sensibility makes middling actors; middling sensibility makes the ruck of bad actors; in complete absence of sensibility is the possibility of a sublime actor.’ The player’s tears come from his brain, the sensitive being’s from his heart; the sensitive being’s soul gives unmeasured trouble to his brain [...]” (1883, p. 17)

Diderot's speaker widens the discourse about actors to a broad anthropological assumption about all human beings. This seemingly radical dualist notion about sensitivity as "trouble" to the brain paves way for a rather monistic view on the ability of the actor to let tears flow from his brain (which, to a certain extent, is also "trouble to his brain"). Vygotsky comes closest to such a generalization in his essay about "concrete psychology", a dense treatise inspired by Hungarian-French philosopher and activist Georges Politzer. The psychology "in terms of drama" connects the earlier assumptions on art and acting with the dialectical and "concrete approach" of the 1932 article on acting. In this manuscript from 1929, published from the family archives, the human being is "concrete" only in the social context. Vygotsky would reframe the discourse on the brain in constructivist terms and in terms of drama, with a sharp critique of the reductionist metaphor in reflexology of the nervous system as telephone:

"I want only to say that without the human being (the switchboard operator) as a whole, we cannot explain the operation of the device (the brain); it is the human being who controls the brain, not the brain that controls the human being; without the person, we can not understand the person's behaviour, and psychology must be understood not in terms of process but in terms of drama. When Politzer says: it's the human being who works, not the muscle, that says it all. It can be said of all human behavior." (Vygotsky, 2005, p. 1033).

When in the *Psychology of Art* Vygotsky supports Diderot's notion of the actor's tears flowing from the brain, he would not only address Diderot's particularly materialist understanding of a plasticity of the brain (Wolfe, 2016), but he also prepares a constructivist position, which he would further elaborate in the late 1920s. Then, he would "identify constructivism as an ontological and epistemological principle of his approach, opposing his framework decisively to essentialism" (Vassilieva & Zavershneva, 2020, p. 21). Thus, by interiorizing the social interactions into the elements of higher psychological functions, human beings have the potential to construct themselves. The *Paradox of Acting* in constructivist terms would be a dialogue on the construction of emotions on stage, which are not simply an invention of human will or a rational choice, but they are constructed from the "raw material" of the emotional sphere of each epoch. Therefore, strict dichotomies between internal and external states become rather questionable. Brodsky (2014, p. 235) argues, that Diderot's paradox implies such a dichotomy, because the inner state of an actor is simply empty: "The actor – or any representer – composes emotion into a language of emotion just as he portrays human life in

the form of characters, because nothing, no immediate experience of feeling or particularity of character, gets in 'his' way.”

When the second speaker sums up, “[a]ccording to you the great actor is everything and nothing”, the answer of the first speaker remains somewhat undecided: “Perhaps it is just because he is nothing that he is before all everything. His own special shape never interferes with the shapes he assumes.” (Diderot, 1883, p. 53). Does that mean emotion could be composed like on a tabula rasa and nothing gets in the actor’s way? Vygotsky suggests a different reading of the paradox. Neither for the actor’s nor audience’s experience (*perezhivanie*) it is the case that internal life would never interfere with external observation. The concept of “drama” refers not so much to strictly separate realms as to dialectical oppositions in conflict with one another. As the Marxist philosopher Politzer states in his *Critique des fondements de la psychologie* (1928), a human being in action is a human being in *drama* and this action cannot be grasped with abstract terms or methodologies. Politzer targets conventional experimental psychology as “classical” and abstract. His polemical stance against psychology as a science is also a methodological critique in terms of drama: “[C]lassical psychology tries to replace the personal drama with an impersonal drama, the drama wherein the actor is a concrete individual *who is a reality*, with a drama where the players are *mythological creatures* [...]” (Politzer, 1994, p. 35).

In Politzer’s opinion psychology of the 1920’s is determined by positivism and empiricism. Psychologists especially in the experimental tradition would only trust in data derived from their devices:

“Their scientific needs being satisfied by the handling of devices, even when without results, and by obtaining a few statistical averages that do not usually survive their publication, they proclaim that science is made of patience, and they reject all control and all critique using as an excuse that ‘metaphysics’ has nothing to do with science.” (Politzer, 1994, p. 5)

In the article on the paradox, Vygotsky states as well, that

“[p]sychotechnical investigations [...] lose sight of all specificity, all the uniqueness of the actor’s psychology, seeing in the creative work of the actor only a special combination of the same mental qualities that are found in a different combination in any profession. Forgetting that the activity of the actor is itself a unique, creative work of psychophysiological conditions, and not analyzing these specific conditions in all the variety of their psychological nature, the investigators-psychotechnicians dissolve the problem of the actor’s creative work in general, and at the same time, banal test psychology, paying no attention to the actor and all the uniqueness of his psychology.” (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 438)

For Politzer as well as Vygotsky, in the orientation towards the concrete the anthropological premise behind a possibility of balance between organism and milieu is opposed to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory. While Freud's reality principle includes tragic contradiction between satisfaction of pleasure and painful adaptation to reality, Vygotsky postulates as the starting point of the development of higher functions a cathartic harmonization between organism and milieu. Within the framework of this anthropology, human beings are generally able to assess an individual position in a social context and thus to take conscious, subjective actions. These actions are nevertheless thwarted by "dramatic" and conflictual aspects. As a key to psychological development, the "drama of life" is a blend of cognitive, emotional, and bodily layers of human subjectivity. As "concrete" psychology it is also a manifestation of the development of Vygotsky's own psychology from an "objective" standpoint as taken in the *Psychology of Art* – a rather formalist focus on the artistic strategies of the work of art – to the psychology of the actor as an example for an individual experience in a social and historical context.

Politzer's work has influenced the debate about psychoanalysis in France for many decades, including works of Merleau-Ponty and Lacan. Merleau-Ponty criticizes the scientific presuppositions of a reductionist understanding of behaviour, which can be found in B. F. Skinner's *Science and Human Behavior* in extreme form. The radical behaviorism of Skinner is based on a strict subject-object dichotomy which is called into question in phenomenologically oriented psychology. The concern with lived experience in this psychology has several convergences with Politzer's concrete approach. At the same time, Vygotsky's notion of lived experience as *perezhivanie* with its emphasis on process is much closer to the French phenomenological tradition than to the rather punctual and static German tradition of the term *Erlebnis* in Dilthey's theory. Regarding the different meanings of *perezhivanie* as a psychological phenomena or process which can be empirically observed and as a theoretical tool for analysis of the process of development, especially a "dramatic" *perezhivanie* (Veresov, 2017, p. 59) is relevant in the context of concrete psychology. Specific types of social relations can become a mental function. Veresov refers to these relations as "dramatic" social relations. A dialectical, concrete psychology deals with social relations that appear as a social collision and contradiction in a dramatic event between people. "Drama" as social collision demonstrates the genetic law of development, which generalizes how the social becomes the individual. Politzer's polemical stance against abstractions in experimental psychology also tackles the incapacity of this research

to concretize developmental processes and the human activity behind it. The French tradition of Activity Clinic offers a practical, interventionist approach of these issues (Kloetzer, 2020).

Yaroshevsky argues that drama as collision and conflict of characters is for Vygotsky a “drama of development” of the personality (2013, p. 237). In this regard, drama as collision is much more a crisis with the potential outcome of further developed higher functions. My assumption is that Diderot's conflictual model of actors in experiencing and modifying artistic emotions and the simultaneous affecting and distancing of spectators behind the “fourth wall” is compatible with this notion of drama.

For Vygotsky “drama” is mostly associated with tragic disharmony, problems of referential capacities of language and the complex, structure of consciousness. In a note from 1932 he states almost a negativity of consciousness, citing Russian poet Afanasy Fet:

“The complaints about the inadequacy of the word. But how are they stated in the word: ‘O, if the soul could express itself without the word,’ ‘a thought once uttered is untrue’: But this thought has been uttered, i.e., it is untrue (cf. the sophism about the Cretan who lies). Where is truth: The word does not introduce an idyll in consciousness, but drama, even (insoluble) tragedy. In general, the life of consciousness is unlike the life of an organism (this is why consciousness stands outside organic life), it is not an idyll, not Spinoza’s peace, but tragedy: amor fati.” (Vygotsky, 2018, p. 272)

With the paradigm of played naturalness, the technique and play of acting is hidden as much as possible. For the audience it is exciting to see how the played character on stage deals with the relationship between experience and behaviour. As a character on stage, she does not pursue simple goals of satisfaction (hunger, drive, pain relief) as in Commedia dell’arte. The relationship between inner life and dramatic-situational action becomes much more complicated. With the historical difference of these two modes and traditions of acting and drama Vygotsky (2005, p. 1031) demonstrates the difference between traditional and progressive psychology:

“*Compare*: the actor’s natural gifts (role) determine the range of his roles, but still every drama (= personality) has its roles. Commedia del’arte: fixed roles, role types (Colombina, Harlequin, etc.) that change the drama, but the role is the same = itself. Drama with fixed roles = a representation of the old psychology. The new one: in the circle of role types, a change of roles.”

Autonomy, freedom, and ideology

The reception of Diderot in the Soviet Union focussed on the materialist and monistic presuppositions of Diderot's philosophy as a basis for an analysis of class conflicts. In his article on the paradox, Vygotsky's theoretical approaches oscillate between terms like "class" on the one hand and rather subjective processes like *perezhivanie*. It has to do with the fact that Vygotsky's notion of the "social" and "class" do not follow the narrative of orthodox dialectical materialism about a direct determinism of consciousness dependent on class. Vygotsky would neither isolate consciousness as the one and only object of psychology, nor reduce behaviour to externally visible and measurable reflexes.

What are the implications of these notions of drama and disharmony for a future psychology from the perspective of Vygotsky in 1932, after the "concrete" approach of 1929 was yet again reframed in terms of the actor's creative work, as "investigation of historical development of human emotion and its concrete expression at different stages of social life"? (Vygotsky, 2015, p. 445)

To rethink the dialectical approach it is worth reconsidering again, what kind of understanding of the tragic is at stake, when Vygotsky states that "the life of consciousness [...] is not an idyll, not Spinoza's peace, but tragedy: amor fati". Against the background of Vygotsky's constructivist attitude, in the tragic, although explicitly disharmonic and characterized by *dvoistvennost* in connection with the basic antithetical principle of art, tendencies of negativity do not predominate. The developmental process, although in terms of drama, is a process about the capacities of the subject (Vygotsky rather refers to personality (*lichnost*). Nevertheless, these capacities are not static and biologically determined, but in a constant process and shattered by the "dramatic" and conflictual condition of the human being. Aesthetics since the Enlightenment have dealt with the capacities of the subject regarding the question of the subject's autonomy.

The philosopher Christophe Menke, who in the last decades intensely worked on the tragedy, the subject and aesthetic experience, tackles the different meanings of capacity in aesthetics, while underlining that this is also a debate on freedom. Vygotsky prefers the concept of "form" to "beauty", due to his formalist background and the decisive focus on the work of art without its extra-aesthetic factors. At the same time, Vygotsky is also influenced by the poet

and philosopher Friedrich Schiller and his notion of form and beauty in a series of *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794). Nevertheless, Menke's notion of aesthetics in many ways echoes the objective, psychological aesthetics of Vygotsky in the *Psychology of Art*. If we understood beauty as a *force*, Menke argues, rather than an empirically relevant *value*, we are experiencing the antithetical dynamics of our capacities, the passive and active sides of it at the same time:

“Aesthetics, in theory and practice, is the arena where the meaning of beauty is contested. But since this struggle regarding what the beautiful is – a value or a force – is also the struggle regarding what power is, what action is, what achievement is, what subjectivity is, we find that aesthetics is the site of a struggle regarding who we are: whether we are subjects, nothing but instances of capacities, or whether we are at once less and more than capable subjects. What is at stake in this struggle is thus whether there is freedom – freedom beyond autonomy.” (Menke, 2021, p. 105)

It is exactly a state “beyond autonomy” that Vygotsky postulates with his dynamic understanding of feelings “in the process of social life” (2015, p. 445): When “feelings develop and former connections disintegrate”, which is the precondition of the actor's creative work, actors in specific and human beings in general are “beyond autonomy” faced with the question, “whether we are at once less and more than capable subjects” (Menke, 2021, p. 105). The autonomous subject, a central instance not least of the conception of the subject addressed by Diderot, is challenged by the tragic experience of beauty. For Vygotsky, a further challenge of autonomy is at stake: The tension between autonomy of the subject and social context is indeed a question of “class”, and Marx's anthropology as laid out in the “Theses on Feuerbach” provides a particular starting position for an insight into this challenge.

What does that have to do with freedom? Being in a state of “at once less and more” is a dialectical conflict. Is it in the end “the structure of experience”? In his notes of a talk by psychologist Roza Abramovna Averbukh on a conference dedicated to contemporary research of 1933 and issues of educational and developmental psychology, Vygotsky summarized her talk on holistic approaches and analyses of units:

“The structure of experience [*struktura perezhivaniia*]: the internal structure (the meaningfulness and its various degrees + the various degrees of inner freedom [*vnutrennaia svoboda*] + the passive and active side of experience – passions and actions – in the experience the unity of suffering and functioning) + the systemic connection of experience (i.e., the tissue, in which the cell is present). The essence is the systemic and semantic structure of experience.” (Vygotsky, 2018, p. 395)

From the time of his earliest manuscripts about the “tragicomedy of strivings”, an interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes, till shortly before his death, when Vygotsky was rethinking Spinoza’s philosophy of freedom by mastering human passions, the question how to reach freedom and what it consists of haunted him. Spinoza holds that our emotions (what he calls our ‘affects’) can be actions rather than passions, so we do not undergo something rather than do something. “The grand picture of development of the personality: the way to freedom” (Zavershneva, 2010, p. 66) – one of Vygotsky’s core notes on the philosophy of Spinoza. How far we can master our emotions up to a particular state of harmony, which Vygotsky put into question?

After Vygotsky in 1932 dissected the psychological tendencies of his time and analyzed the reductionist methods of separating any phenomenon into independent entities or elements, the state of contemporary psychology casts doubts whether much has happened in between. With a plea for a dialectical psychology in the present and future, Dafermos (2021, p. 371) zooms in on

“problems associated with the dominant metaphysical outlook in psychology, with its ahistoricism, reductionism, and elementalism [...]. The dialectical way of thinking in psychology opens a wide range of possibilities for the understanding of human development in terms of drama and participating in transformative practice.”

This plea for a psychology which frames human development as *transformative* practice, rather than passive and mechanical response to external circumstances, is very similar to Vygotsky’s notion of “ideology” which is underlying his understanding of art and society. Not only is it Vygotsky’s conviction that every era has its own values and ideology that shape emotions and theatrical and other artistic productions, but it is also the potential of art in its manifold ways to let an audience have an experience that art becomes an active force in the shaping of present and future epochs, rather than just mechanically responding to an epoch.

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