

The Development of Visual Literacy in Art Education

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Abstract: The conception of *General Educational Program in the Czech Republic* in the art education sector, implemented *the semantization process* as main differentiating approach from traditional *reflexive model*. *Visual art* is by this methodology understood as non fungible means for cognition and communication, and *creativity* as basic element of dynamic artistic process, where student acts as self-reliant individuality. The art production and interpretation consist of sign-constructs that enable existential self re-creation of students in interpretation process, and so becomes personal and social experimental practice in semantization. The main innovation, compared to the traditional art education, resides in semantic interpretation of visual expressivity and content interpretation of visual perception that facilitates conscious perception, creation and interpretation of visual expressions, emphasizing the role of *communication*. The second part discusses practical application of semantic approach on selected projects. The project *EduArt*, developed on national level, as a pilot methodology of *imaginary* implemented in the elementary education that verifies semantic methods in form of experiments. The results from theoretical research have been also utilized into the curriculum of 2 newly accredited disciplines at the *Charles University in Prague (CHUP)* – 1) *Electronic Culture and Semiotics*; 2) *New Media Studies*.

Key Words: Art Education, Czech Art Curriculum, Creativity, EduArt, Elementary Education, Higher Education, New Media Studies, Visual Perception

1. Introduction

In *the Czech Republic*, the elementary and secondary level of educational system is undergoing a fundamental reform, which concerns also education in the visual arts. Its aim is to abandon instruction conceived as a sum of knowledge and to move towards developing the active competence and ability of the individual student to independently find and read information and use it in communication process. This requirement places new demands also on art education. In order to hold up in competition with other subjects, it was necessary to carry out a thorough analysis of the function of art classes in the overall sphere of education, as well as to perform a new analysis of their defining characteristic – their relationship to the visual arts.

2. The Concept of Czech Art Education

It was found that the previous *concept of Czech art education* was accepted by professionals from educational sector as very satisfactory regarding its established relationship to the visual arts. Art was primarily being used as an aegis for the proclamation of the indispensable role of art classes in the nurturing of the pupil's creativity. Yet it lagged behind the current notion of visual arts as it conceived of creativity through notions that became obsolete – in the sense of Kandinsky or Apollinaire, as the exclusiveness of the “soul” of the subject, in binary opposition to quotidian experience. This was naturally useful in its own way in terms of resistance against the universalizing pressure and conformity of the former totalitarian society. When the pupil left the class, however, he or she had no idea as to how this pleasant and even diverting game might have been relevant to real life – of which it was in this extreme form presented as the opposite pole. Thus this interpretation of art tending towards the psychological gradually rendered art education somewhat sterile, which then began to undermine its right to form part of a general education system.

The Czech curriculum which is being introduced at the moment, however, employs *creativity* as a natural component of education as such, not only as part of “art-related” subjects. This new foundation was found in a newly articulated relationship to art, brought up to par with the actual needs of today. In analyzing the creative artistic process, the tradition of *Czech Structuralism* in art history (*Jakobson, Mukarovsky*) rigorously differentiated between individual and social levels of structure, defining their specific features and mutual relations. Since *universalism* professed utopian belief in a certain degree of social contract regarding the basic values to be achieved, at least in some distant future and from this arose the notion that the structure of the content of art for the individual is identical with its structural content for the society.

A newly proposed *pluralist* definition of the content of the artistic process, however, distinguishes more strictly between the levels of its individual and social value. While individually it may be claimed with justification that for instance *Cubism* to be just as exquisite as *Egyptian art* and through this aesthetic equation this art may be conceived as timeless, in the social approach certainly *Egyptian art* – in the way it articulates space, for instance – is a system created with a lower level of structuring of the spatial experience than *Cubism* or *Futurism*.

On the structural level of society the artistic process is regarded historically, as a progressively more structured system of signs and signifiers.

3. A Semantic Model of Visual Perception

We may imagine such a *pluralist model of visual perception, cognition, and communication*. The individual is represented on several levels, as a physical, chemical or biological object (whose biological structure, however, specifies the mode of their visual interaction), a psychosomatic (individual) object, and also as one constituent part of the overall social structure. In order to better understand this, we may project into this model also *Peirce's classic semiotic model*, first graphically articulated in *Ogden-Richard's triangle*.

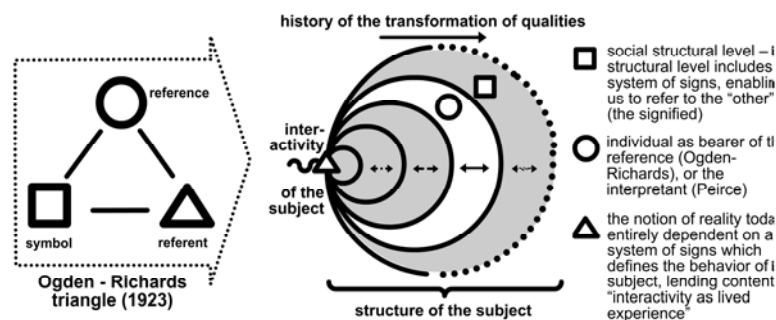


Image 1 – Transformation of Ogden – Richards triangle to the Structure of Subject Model

The symbol exists on the level of a social structure, and the reference within the psychosomatic level of the structure (in the case of our field, the role of the imagination). The referent (for some also the object of perception) paradoxically does not lie outside of this structure, but is found on its margins, in the interaction with our physical, chemical, biological, psychosomatic and social structure. Imagination, which in this case is what most concerns us, is neither a direct image of external reality, nor a non-committal personal illusion, but a unique structural quality of the individual, which cannot be bypassed in its structural relations when passing from the biological (sensory) to the social structural level, but on which the signified are invariably (!!) built on – therefore, not only artistically but also scientifically signified.

4. Modified Semantic Model – Structural Levels of Visual Perception

Interaction with the outside environment on the level of physical structures – interaction between the physical and chemical levels of structure (physical impulses and chemical reactions).

Interaction with the outside environment on the level of chemical structures – interaction between the chemical and cellular levels of structure (chemical impulses and hormonal activity).

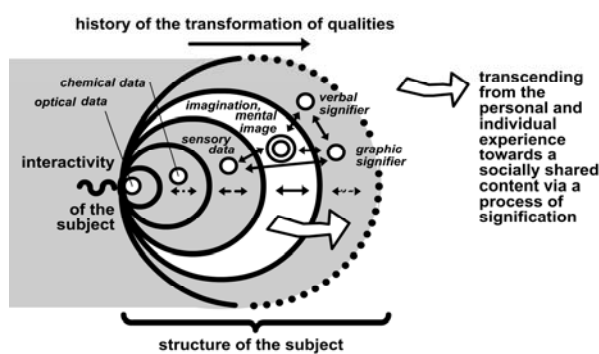


Image 2 – Structural levels of perception

Interaction with the outside environment on the level of cellular – sensory – structures – interaction between the cellular and psychic levels of structure (pain x will).

Interaction with the outside environment on the level of the psychosomatic structure – the individual – interaction between individual psychic and social levels of structure (emotions x sign statements).

Interaction with the outside environment on the level of a social structure. Transcending from the personal and individual experience towards a socially shared content via a process of signification.

The artistic visual process from this point of view performs a different role on each cited structural level – on the individual level it connects the singular, unique experiences of the individual (pupil) which cannot be reproduced in terms of time and space (and relation) with their socially received signifier. This enables the pupil to realize his or her experience as part of the social structure, as part of the experience of the others (while within the framework of universalism they might falsely believe that they share the same experience with others, plurality thus enables the student to see their own unique position – which cannot be cancelled – as distinct from the experiences of others). Thus in relation to the individual, the artistic process fulfils the cognitive function. The complexity of this perception for the individual at the same time inseparably brings about an aesthetic experience.

On the social structural level of the artistic process, however, art performs the communicative function. The communicative interconnection of

individuals is what constitutes a social unit. Thus the artistic process renews and re-creates the function of communication, when the reality to which the social unit refers changes, and both the external and the external system of signs no longer guarantees the ability to assert within it either one's personal experiences or the comprehension of its relations. In this innovative approach to the communicative process, art is a system of signs which can adapt to each newly created work.

From these positions of the artistic process in the life of an individual and also of a social unit, as rigorously revealed by structural semantics, it transpires that some of the above-cited functions of the artistic process were employed by *Czech education in the visual arts* rather unintentionally, while others are yet to be asserted. Works of art were often approached only from a perspective that concerned their aesthetic gratification alone – which was not necessarily in any relationship to the individual cognitive message or the subject, or to the communicative potency to disseminate a personal experience. It surely makes a difference whether we seek out visual content or form only because it strikes us as beautiful, or when with a considerable effort (and perhaps without success, for art is above all an experiment) we endeavour to push through to a new and hitherto unknown statement of signs in order to express our new experience. Also, a consistent assertion of the communicative function of the artistic process in the intentions of this sort of personal involvement is difficult for many teachers, since it requires them to relinquish their authority in favour of an open and equal discussion with their pupils regarding personal experience – with not entirely predictable results.

The new Czech curriculum of education in the visual arts takes in all the functions of the artistic process, the cognitive as well as the communicative, as understood in this pluralist way, as its conscious foundation. Conceived in this way, directives as to the method of teaching can remain very general, allowing the teacher a degree of freedom as to what concrete examples to explain to students.

In the three structural phases outlined in the above figure, the *curriculum binds the teacher to*:

- cultivate the sensory perceptibility of the pupil, both through creative practice, and the observation and interpretation of both reality and works of art, by drawing comparisons and creating systems of relations;
- employ the unique individual experiences of the pupil as a necessary starting point for personal expression;
- the indivisibility of interpretation and verification in the communication of the created work from the previous two stages of the artistic process.

To teach the pupil a conscious employment of these three basic abilities is the primary aim of the education in the visual arts within the curriculum that is being introduced.

With this pluralized semantic concept, education in the visual arts becomes a field which cannot be excluded from the curriculum, since it teaches the understanding of the message of a sign statement not only in the direction from society to the pupil, but also in the direction from the unique existence of the pupil towards its expression in the social context. It teaches the pupil to grasp his or her active role in the formation of the signifier, revealing the pluralist share of personal experience and personal existence in the co-formation of their generalized value, which is created in the process of communication.

Education in the visual arts thus plays an active part in education not only in terms of its hitherto specific areas of the visual arts and visually figurative means, but in the ability to work creatively with the sign in general, and thus the ability to consciously reinforce one's competency as a citizen.

5. The Implementation of Educational Principles from Czech Art Curriculum for Elementary Schools in Frames of the *EduArt* Project

The instruction of semantic approach to reality, exploiting the potential of student's imaginary and experience has been specified according to the educational level and the student's age. Our knowledge grows from interactions with pupils at secondary level of elementary schools, with students at bachelor level of studies in the humanities and master level in the new media studies.

The pupils or students shall embrace that signs do not reflect the reality directly, but through individual experience, respectively through processing of personal interaction by memory and its further mediation. This basic approach has been accepted for learning on both educational levels. If, the semantic approach to education may be supported at university level by theory, then at elementary school level becomes more important to educate pupils in process of art creation itself, because this may ease pupil's understanding of sign creation and sign value assessment processes. The methodology of systemic creativity education for elementary schools has been informed by utilization of art process's elementary values. During the development of art education curriculum for elementary schools we identified several basic educational principles. These principles are in liberal political systems certainly implemented, but in the case of the *Czech art curriculum* their implementation and methodical concretization became to be very painful process.

The list of basic educational principles we define as follows:

– self-awareness as creative base of individuality (related to pupil's ability to fearlessly express his or her own experience.

– experimental approach to education as the creative process – such an approach has dual position to creative process. Firstly, from position of creator attempting to sign, understand and share his or hers unique experience in the process of creation. Secondly, the position of viewer allows students to gain insight to the transformation of symbolic means, production of new contents and potential for their interpretation in the creative process.

– evaluation of art work designed as author product. The coupling of art producer with his or hers art work, grounded on premise that creators in his or hers art work embody own experience, is needed to approach with highest, not yet common, respect.

– interpretational and communicational usage of art work as a base for its appraisal and value creation. These issues were in post-socialist education often marginalized. The opportunity for mutual discussion between pupil – art creator with the viewer of his or her work has been often substituted by evaluation that exerts not adequate teacher's authority.

– to work with portfolio, means here to support continuity of historical course of pupil's creative work as fundamental to pupil's ability to progress, during his or hers continuous development, as self-reliant individual in the process of life long learning.

The utilization of listed educational principles has become the fundamental approach to systemic creativity education including graphical methods application, on national level implemented in frames of project *EduArt*, supported by *Czech Ministry of Education* and *European Social Fund*. Pupil's production in the field of *relational maps* has become fundamental to their individual projection into instruction and helps mobilize the pupils in the sense of above listed principles.

6. The Utilization of Creativity at the Creative Module in the Frames of Studies in Humanities

On bachelor level at *Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague* we attempt, by systemic utilization of creativity, to work with imaginary and creative expressivity as essential parts of studies in humanities. The above presented structure implies that the foundation of personality in imaginary shall not be ignored, because the structural foundation of his or hers nature is based partly on sensum, partly is co-produced and sorted by socially conditioned symbolic classification. If we agree that the science have been established as rational opposite to subjective imaginary, then its relevant to make statement that imaginary has been

embraced in fundamentals both of artistic and scientific (exact) thought.

The creative module on bachelor level at *Faculty of Humanities* aims at utilization of specific techniques for expression and communication of imaginary. The lessons as *Creativity as a shift*, *Gnoseological aspects of visual media*, *Computer-supported Graphical Communication*, *Inter-medial art production*, *Multimedia project in 3-D etc.* apply mentioned systemic knowledge on creativity development both on theoretical and practical levels. We may characterize practically oriented education on creativity in the studies of humanities as „*art production for non-artists*“. The artistic process has been here deconstructed to emphasize the part of artistic process, when creator works „*for himself*“ and with all sincerity tries to capture his or hers perceptions and experiences.

The assignments are not set as related to established art production and student's art production results are not qualitatively compared to the established art alike. In this educational method the output is constituted during the pluralist student discussions about their experience and reasoning about the cause that students highlighted precisely selected experiences. Such a process leads to understanding of artistic process as a innovative tool for identification of the new interactions and experiences, generated during these interactions, both on personal and social level.

7. The Utilization of Creativity in the Field of New Media Studies

We focus on the utilization of creativity in the field of new media studies, realized in the frames of lately established studies at *Faculty of Humanities, Electronic Culture and Semiotics* and at *Faculty of Arts, the New Media Studies* disciplines.

The students develop their outputs informed by principles of the relations between objects of visibility established in the structural analysis of modern art, photography, cinema and interactive media.

The visual signs are interpreted in interdependent levels. From the visual sign level (relations between colours, shapes and the configurations of elements) to visual object level, object cluster level and the object clusters configuration level.

Such a process allows students to understand the visual sign system in its complex dynamics and interactivity from the origins of painting to new media era.

We apply above presented approach to our research focus, established in examination of the complex structural object clusters related to the contemporary Czech and global visual art.

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