Ideas “Psychology of Art” by L.S. Vygotsky (View from Modernity)

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Abstract

The first major work of L.S. Vygotsky. The methodological approach implemented in this work and the interpretation of the form as a kind of trap into which the reader or viewer is involved, trying to resolve the contradictions in the structure of the form of a work of art, is analyzed. The author compares Vygotsky’s concept of “art as a machine for the development of the psyche” with M. Bakhtin’s concept of “life in art”. The concept of art built by Vygotsky is due to the Marxist and structuralist methodology, as well as the task of forming a new person with the help of art.

Keywords: Form; Sign; Art; Contradiction; Resolution; Understanding; Experience

This article could also be called “Development through art or life in art?” Why this is so will become clear from what follows, but for now, in order. The year before last, in January, the first seminar “Psychology and Practice of Art” was held at the Russian State Library of Arts (led by Candidate of Pedagogical Sciences A.M. Aylamazyan), at which E.Yu. Patyaeva analyzed the work of LS Vygotsky “Psychology of Art”. Naturally, I read this work, but for a very long time, somewhere in the 70s and 80s, therefore, on the one hand, I could not really appreciate the speaker's theses, on the other, after the seminar I wanted to re-read, but in fact read it again a wonderful piece. I began to read and realized that I did not understand much.

There was a period in the development of Soviet psychology when Vygotsky’s work was hushed up, and in fact was banned. Today we are dealing with the opposite tendency: L.S. Vygotsky is almost canonized and the criticism addressed to him seems, if not indecent, then at least strange. Today, the thinking and creativity of the creator of Soviet psychology are regarded as exemplary, of course, not devoid of search and problems, but still fundamentally correct, withstood the test of time. But is it really so?

Let us dwell on the earliest work of LS Vygotsky “Psychology of Art”. Vygotsky begins with a criticism of the main concepts of art in his time. This is clear. Then, as we would say today, characterizes the methodology of his research, and also introduces the main hypothesis.

As can be seen from subsequent works, Vygotsky, considering himself a Marxist, attaches paramount importance to setting the correct method. “Subjectively,” writes A.V. Brushinsky, - it was Vygotsky who, more than all the leaders of psychological science in our country, sincerely strove to be a Marxist. As far as I know, none of them responded to the ideological criticism of their scientific research as painfully and radically as Vygotsky did in the early 1930s in a confidential, friendly conversation with B.V. Zeigarnik. Vygotsky told her: “I cannot live if the party believes that I am not a Marxist” [1]. Vygotsky himself, in his 1927 work, The Historical Meaning of the Psychological Crisis (Methodological Research), wrote the following: “I don’t want to learn in talent, having tailored a couple of quotes, what the psyche is, I want to learn from the whole method of Marx, how to build science, how to approach to the study of the psyche... Marxist psychology is not a school among schools, but the only true psychology as a science; there can be no other psychology besides this one” [2].

Vygotsky’s central idea in The Psychology of Art is that aesthetic (artistic) experiences can only be reached indirectly through the analysis of the artistic form. At the same time, the form should be taken “structuralistically”, and aesthetic experiences should not be un-
derstood in the spirit of “psychologism”, i.e. as individual experiences and images, but as “objective law-like structures” (hence the name of the method - “objectively analytical”).

“By analyzing the structure of stimuli,” writes Vygotsky, “we recreate the structure of the reaction. The simplest example can clarify this. We study the rhythmic structure of some verbal passage, we are always dealing with non-psychological facts, however; analyzing this rhythmic structure of speech as diversely aimed at causing a correspondingly functional reaction, we through this analysis, based on completely objective data, we recreate some features of aesthetic reaction. At the same time, it is absolutely clear that the aesthetic reaction recreated in this way will be completely impersonal, that is, it will not belong to any individual person, and will not reflect any individual mental process in all its concreteness, but this is only its dignity. This circumstance helps us to establish the nature of the aesthetic reaction in its pure form, without confusing it with all the random processes with which it grows in the individual psyche. This method also guarantees us sufficient objectivity of the results obtained and of the entire system of research, because every time it proceeds from the study of solid, objectively existing and taken into account facts. The general direction of this method can be expressed by the following formula: from the form of a work of art through a functional analysis of its elements and structure to the reconstruction of the aesthetic reaction and to the establishment of its general laws” [3].

What “laws” does Vygotsky establish? In fact, there are three of them. First, it turns out that the form of works of art in relation to the psyche of the individual acts as a kind of formative “semiotic machine”. Secondly, from a psychological point of view, the act of formation can be presented as a mechanism based on contradictions and their resolution (removal). Thirdly, on the psychological plane, this act must be supported, on the one hand, by the activity of the individual (his experiences, fantasy, work of understanding, resistance, struggle, etc.), on the other, by the affects arising in this case.

“Together with Genneken,” explains Vygotsky, “we look at a work of art as a set of aesthetic signs aimed at arousing emotions in people” and we try to recreate the corresponding emotions based on the analysis of these signs [4] <…>.

“The whole task of tragedy, as an art, is to make us experience the incredible, in order to perform some unusual operation on our feelings [5] <…>.

We come to the conclusion that in a work of art there is always a certain contradiction, some internal inconsistency between material and form, that the author selects, as it were, deliberately difficult, resisting material, one that resists with its properties all the efforts of the author to say that he is wants to say [6] <…>.

... the triple contradiction underlying the tragedy: the contradictions between the plot and the plot and the characters. Each of these elements is directed, as it were, in completely different directions... What new does the tragic hero bring? It is quite obvious that he unites both of these plans at any given moment and that he is the highest and constantly given unity of the contradiction that lies in the tragedy [7] <…>.

We could say that the basis of the aesthetic reaction is the affects caused by art, which we experience with all reality and strength, but find a discharge in the activity of fantasy that every time the perception of art requires of us... All art is based on this unity of feeling and fantasy... Its closest feature is that, by evoking oppositely directed affects in us, it delays only due to the beginning of the antithesis the motor expression of emotions and, colliding opposite impulses, destroys the affects of content, affects of form, leading to an explosion, to a discharge of nervous energy. In this transformation of affects, in their self-combustion, in an explosive reaction, leading to the discharge of those emotions that were immediately evoked, is the catharsis of the aesthetic reaction... [8] <…>.

Even the most sincere feeling in itself is not able to create art... a creative act of overcoming this feeling, victory over it is also necessary” [9].
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The design is formally understandable, but there are questions to it. How to understand the formative role of the art form? Who forms, the author of the work of art? For Vygotsky, it turns out that not only the author, but also the one who is being molded: the artistic form forms aesthetic experiences on the condition that the individual “masters his own behavior” (that is, forms himself). In later works (we will continue this technique - comprehending the previous work through the later ones), the idea of "self-formation" receives a more detailed explanation. Let’s remember.

"A new type of behavior," writes Vygotsky, “must necessarily correspond to a new regulatory principle of behavior. We find it in the social determination of behavior, carried out with the help of signs... the entire complexity of the question becomes obvious as soon as we combine the apparatus and the key in the same hands, as soon as we move on to the concept of autostimulation and self-mastery. This is where psychological connections of a new type arise within the same system of behavior” [10].

That is, although the leading one is social determination - “Not nature, but society should first of all be considered as a determinant factor of human behavior. This is the whole idea of the cultural development of the child” [11], - a person masters his behavior himself, hence the phrase “apparatus and key in the same hands” and “autostimulation”.

Naturally, three fundamental questions arise: first, what kind of person is this who, from early childhood, can master his behavior (we know that not even every adult is capable of this), second, if a person masters his behavior, then does this mean that he is “split” into two persons - the governing and the governed, and the third, how does social determination take place? Vygotsky answers the first question as follows: only a personality can master his behavior. There is no answer to the second question, perhaps because Lev Semenovich, like St. Augustine in his “Confessions” believed that man is one, although in fact the idea of management requires two persons. Vygotsky’s answer to the third question is ambiguous. On the one hand, it characterizes mastery by analogy with cognition and control of natural processes. “It remains to admit that our domination over our own processes of behavior is built essentially in the same way as domination over the processes of nature” [12]. But then a paradox turns out: mental processes already exist, and a person only masters them; however, the question is, where did they come from, is it not the origin of these processes that needs to be explained? Besides, why then social determination?

Saving his theoretical construction, Vygotsky uses the opposition “external - internal” and the concept of assimilation, introduced at the beginning of the 19th century by Friedrich Froebel, and the external is defined as social, and the internal as a semblance (“cast”) of the external [13]. But then another paradox turns out: the internal is not a natural process, but rather the result of psychotechnical (socio-pedagogical) influences.

Obviously, sensing these difficulties, Vygotsky characterizes mastery in a different, completely different way, namely, as the constitution of psychic reality on the basis of signs; in addition, development is characterized by Vygotsky as an interweaving of external and internal (including biological) factors. The use of signs, writes Vygotsky, “radically reorganizes the entire mental operation, similar to how the use of a tool modifies the natural activity of organs and immensely expands the system of activity of mental functions. Together we denote both by the term higher mental function, or higher behavior... Equally, when a child learns, seemingly by an external way in school, various operations, the assimilation of any new operation is the result of the development process... every external action is the result of an internal genetic law” [14].

So, what does Vygotsky get in the end? On the one hand, the personality masters what is already there, on the other hand, mastery is, in fact, the creation of psychic reality with the help of signs in the process of assimilating the external, conditioned by internal development. The question is, how can this be understood? However, back to “The Psychology of Art”.

Next question. It is known that any text, including fiction, admits of different interpretations. Vygotsky pretends that his interpretation of fables and other literary works of art is, firstly, the only correct, objective, and secondly, completely fits into the above scheme of speci-

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fying contradictions and their resolution (catharsis). For me personally, it is quite obvious that there are others, no less interesting and shedding light on the nature of the art of interpreting works of art, and also that not always interpretations can be summed up under the scheme of contradictions and their resolution. Then the following question arises: what is the reason for the interpretations of Vygotsky proposed in Psychology of Art?

Another question concerns the “mediation mechanism” itself. The question is, how can the analysis of the artistic form lead us to the reconstruction of aesthetic experiences? Is it possible, without asking the concept of artistic form and mental experiences, to answer the question about the structure of the mechanism of mediation? In addition, for example, M. Bakhtin has a completely different understanding of the connection between an artistic form and aesthetic experiences. Here the artistic form does not form the psyche, but is its other being, or, in other words, mastering the form, moving in it, the individual lives in art.

It is necessary, Bakhtin wrote, “for the creator to enter the visible, the audible, the uttered, and thereby overcome the material, non-creatively determined character of the form... when reading and listening to a poetic work, I do not leave it outside myself, as a statement of another... but I am in the known degree, I make it my own statement about something else, I assimilate rhythm, intonation, articulatory tension, internal gestures... as an adequate expression of my own value attitude to the content... I become active in form and form, I take a value position outside the content - as a cognitive poetic orientation” [15]. In this case, is it impossible to come up with an opposition - “Bakhtin against Vygotsky”, as well as “development through art or life in art”?

Let’s begin to slowly unravel this tangle. At the end of The Psychology of Art there is an interesting proposition, which Vygotsky then repeats almost unchanged in his work The Historical Meaning of the Psychological Crisis. Namely, he writes: “Since in the plan of the future there is undoubtedly not only the reorganization of all mankind on new principles, not only the mastery of social and economic processes, but also the “melting down of man”, the role of art will undoubtedly change. It is impossible to imagine what role art will be called upon to play in this melting down of a person, what forces that already exist, but inactive in our body, it will call for the formation of a new person... Without new art there will be no new person” [16].

Shouldn’t we consider that the starting position is given here, from the point of view of which Vygotsky analyzes art? I would formulate it as follows: art is a means (instrument, machine) for remaking a person. But Vygotsky still considered himself a psychologist, not an engineer; although Marxism carried him along this technical path. In his work “The Historical Meaning of the Psychological Crisis”, as we remember, he argues that psychological knowledge should work for “psychotechnics” and human alteration, and psychotechnics, in turn, rely on psychology (Vygotsky calls it “General”) as a natural science.

“Let’s say right away: he writes, the development of applied psychology in all its scope is the main driving force of the crisis in its last phase... Psychology, which is called upon by practice to confirm the truth of its thinking, which seeks not so much to explain the psyche as to understand it and master it, puts in a fundamentally different relation to practical disciplines in the entire structure of science than the previous psychology... Psychotechnics therefore cannot hesitate in choosing the psychology that it needs (even if it is developed by consistent idealists), it deals exclusively with causal, objective psychology; non-causal psychology does not play any role for psychotechnics... We proceeded from the assumption that the only psychology that psychotechnics needs should be a descriptive-explanatory science. We can now add that this psychology, in addition, is an empirical, comparative science, a science using the data of physiology, and, finally, an experimental science” [17].

Incidentally, it is understandable why Vygotsky calls applied psychology psychotechnics. Just as physics, considered as an example of the natural sciences, is oriented towards technology (engineering) in terms of using its knowledge, so general psychology should be oriented towards psychotechnics. Discussing the value attitudes of psychologists of this period, V.P. Zinchenko writes: “It was a wonderful
galaxy of scientists who took seriously the task of revolutionary transformation of society, the creation of a new person - an active creative figure. The problem of organization of labor activity, professional education, educational activity, professional selection and diagnostics came to the fore. Of course, there were also conceptual achievements, but a pragmatic orientation prevailed” [18].

Just as an engineer can create mechanisms by which a person controls natural processes, so natural science psychology, Vygotsky believes, will make it possible to control human behavior. Finally, if an engineer can create new machines and mechanisms, then why can't a psychologist do this? “When,” writes Vygotsky, “they talk about the melting down of a human being as an undoubted feature of a new humanity, and about the artificial creation of a new biological type, then this will be the only and first species in biology that will create itself... In a future society, psychology really is will be the science of the new man. Without this, the perspective of Marxism and the history of science would be incomplete” [19].

However, Vygotsky saw himself not only as a social engineer, but also as a psychologist. Therefore, he understands the idea of remaking a person as an idea of his development. Then we get the second important point. Art is a means (machine) of mental development. What is this machine, how does it work? We must pay tribute to Vygotsky: he tries to answer this question for his level of knowledge. The machine of art, so to speak, has two working tools - signs and a work of art created by the artist, or rather its form. As can be understood from the above quotations, Vygotsky argues that the form of the work is constructed as a kind of trap: it draws the reader or viewer into opposite experiences (provokes conflicting affects), which then annihilates, resolves (“removes,” as Hegel would say)... Vygotsky clearly borrows the idea of contradiction and their removal from Hegel and Marx, and catharsis from Aristotle.

Since Vygotsky considers psychology to be a natural science, within the framework of general psychology, the description of this trap looks like a law for Vygotsky. For Lev Semenovich it is obvious: just as there are no different laws of gravitation, there is also a single law of aesthetic reaction.

So, the artist creates the form as a trap for the reader (viewer). What, one wonders, does the reader do, what happens to him when he falls into this trap? From Vygotsky’s point of view, the reader masters his own behavior and develops as a result. Where did this scheme come from? I think, from the ideas of the same natural science. Galileo already showed that natural phenomena must be described and explained as mechanisms, only in this case they can be controlled (mastered) (The fact is that although the mechanism operates on the basis of natural processes, human activity, precisely due to the device of the mechanism, allows these processes to manage). Projecting this scheme onto a person, Vygotsky presents the latter as a mechanism. A necessary condition for such a representation is the selection in human activity, on the one hand, of a controlling and controlled principle, and on the other, a mechanism device. This is where the idea (scheme) of mastering one’s own behavior with the help of signs and artistic form appears. On the part of the governing social principle (Who remakes a person? Society!) - these are signs and an artistic form, and on the part of the person himself - mastery of oneself on the basis of these signs and forms. The controlled principle, according to Vygotsky, is the same person, but in the role of a follower, i.e. who is being possessed. The structure of the mechanism is rather complicated: it is a trap of form, and opposite experiences, and affects, and, finally, catharsis.

The explanation presented is, of course, another reconstruction, but based on an analysis of Vygotsky’s own beliefs and inventions. In this I see her dignity. Now, my attitude to these inventions.

Vygotsky was convinced that psychology is a natural science. But is it? In my research, I show that psychology is not a natural science, and an experiment in psychology does not serve to confirm or refute a psychological theory, but rather a special method of analysis. Yes, many psychologists tried to build psychology on the model of natural science, but nothing came of it. An experiment on the model of natural science fails, it is not possible to develop a psychological theory that meets the requirements of mathematization, it was not possible to construct the psychotechnics that Vygotsky dreamed of. Of course, even today many psychologists believe in the natural science approach
and are trying to implement it; take, for example, cognitive psychology or synergetic options for constructing a psychological theory. But do they not resemble those physicists and technicians who are still persistently trying to build a perpetual motion machine, although two centuries ago it was proved that this was impossible?

Now, what is the knowledge gained in the framework of psychological theories. Here it is quite possible to agree with Kjell and Ziegler. “Theory,” they write, “is a system of interrelated ideas, constructions and principles, aimed at explaining certain observations of reality. The theory is inherently always speculative and therefore, strictly speaking, it cannot be “right” or “wrong”... The theory of personality is explanatory in the sense that it presents behavior as organized in a certain way, due to which it becomes understandable. In other words, theory provides a framework or schema to simplify and interpret everything we know about the relevant class of events. For example, without the help of theory (obviously, psychoanalysis of Z. Freud. - VR) it would be difficult to explain why five-year-old Raymond has such a strong romantic attachment to his mother while his father causes him excessive feelings of resentment” [20].

Psychologists who try to build psychology on the model of natural science, as, indeed, on the model of the humanities, in fact, create schemes and develop theories on their basis. Schemes allow psychologists to express their values and comprehend the practice of working with their clients, they set the corresponding ideas about the psyche (ideal objects of psychological theory) corresponding to these practices. That is, schemes first, and then ideal objects. In psychological theories, diagrams are omitted, as a result, it seems that diagrams are so, just sketchy sketches. Experiments, and often very complex and sophisticated (statistics, mathematical modeling, etc.), perform different functions for psychologists than in natural science: first, this is a special research method, in conditions where a psychologist can stop, control, and therefore simulate human behavior; secondly, the method of scientific self-hypnosis, they say, I have confirmed my research experimentally.

How does a schema differ from a model and theoretical knowledge? Models make it possible to calculate, predict and manage, and schemes - only to understand phenomena and organize their own activities. The constructions of Kurt Lewin or modern psychologists outside of theory are schemas. But psychologists think they are models. By the way, precisely because psychologists create schemes, the psyche in different psychological schools can be represented in different ways, in different schemes. The ontological basis of such a plurality is understandable: modern culture allows different types of human socialization and self-organization. As a result, it is possible, which greatly confuses many psychologists, different types of modern man: “a person according to Freud”, that is, one who is in conflict with culture and sexually concerned (is there really a few of these in our culture?), “A person according to Rogers,” oriented, as T. Shibutani would say, to consent (there are even more of them), “a person according to Groff,” who is crazy about esoteric ideas (and there are many of these in our culture), etc. And they all have every right to exist, and for all they have a different psyche.

Psychology is a special type of practice and science, different from both natural science and humanities, but nevertheless closer, as I show, to the second discipline. If we agree with this, then we have to admit that Vygotsky’s foundations and constructions cannot be accepted. Incidentally, this is why, apart from Vygotsky’s direct disciples who acted under the conditions of building Soviet socialism, psychologists did not accept his program of building general psychology.

Let us now consider Vygotsky’s no less significant principle that the art form and, more broadly, art is a machine that allows the development of the psyche. Let’s remember Baldwin’s quote. To it I will add one more thought by Olga Kondratyevna Popova, one of the leaders and initiators of free dance (more often called the “musical movement”). In an interview, she recalls.

“I was a child of terrible psychic responsiveness. <...> It was very easy to reach anything, because my psyche was very sensitive, vulnerable, and life was such that... I thought for a very long time, and all these years and previous years (girls “students” know), I often asked myself: what did the musical movement give me - support? or vice versa? And only now I can say with absolute certainty: if there were no musical movement, I could have reached any degree of mental illness. Absolutely. What it is? And this is the ability to some all of your unrealized experiences, and maybe this whole life... pour out. I am given a real opportunity to speak out to. To pour out, not to keep all this in myself, not to press and worry in silence, but I am given the motor path in this activity to survive... After all, I repeat again: we do not swing that I am dancing like Bach - but this will not happen in my life! I’m dancing my idea in Bach, right? Your experience. And at this moment, apparently, such states and such moods are realized, which otherwise I would have in my soul forever. And they would gradually

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kill me. That is, it can be seen that this activity is some kind of powerful breakthrough and stream that I release from myself. Now I am deeply convinced of this. This is an opportunity to live. And the ability to regulate your states” [21].

So, to develop the psyche or to live and regulate their states? I don’t deny that sometimes a strong piece of art makes us change. But I think much more often art is one of the forms of our life. To understand this, let us compare our stay in dreams and in art. In the first case, our life is unconscious (I am not now considering those rare cases when it seems to us that we understand that this is a dream), in the second it proceeds in full consciousness. Re-living, pro-living works of art, we do not sleep. What are we doing? We live fully. And often more fully than in ordinary life, since artistic events correspond to our aspirations and values that we cannot realize outside of art. It is another matter that in this case, indeed, the artistic form should be special, namely, one that allows one to experience and live not only the plot and collisions of a given work, but also our simultaneous life as such. I am sure that brilliant artists always adhere to this principle.

In this regard, Vygotsky, solving the problem of the formation of a new person, narrowed the role of art to a machine of development, while it is the most important form of our life. Precisely because in art a person creates and finds a reality built by himself, but at the same time built according to the “laws” of being, a person gets the opportunity to live and resolve the contradictions caused by its double existence - as an individual and a subject of culture, or, in other words, the discrepancy between personality and culture to translate into a form of life and creativity. Here the healing and salvific (catharsistic) function of art is revealed.

The question that I posed in my work “The Genesis of European Art”, separating postmodern and genuine art - is art still healing and salvific today? Can a work of art still fulfill its mediating role in the relationship between people and culture? And he answered by making two conclusions? One is that a contemporary work of art by itself, without artistic conceptualizations and the work (culture) of the viewer, is no longer able to fulfill its functions. The second is that contemporary art, in order to correspond to modernity, which is clearly catastrophic, must find such themes and subjects, such a form, generate from itself such an artistic culture that will help a person in his movement on the path to salvation.

If postmodern art, in part, cultivates dissonance and death, then the genuine solves other problems. One of the main ones is the recreation of new life forms that give a person strength and energy, a spiritual perspective, collecting his personality. Another task of genuine art is to create a reality that allows a person to travel to new worlds, to experience unusual events (without this function, art does not exist at all). It is clear that the solution of both problems presupposes creative abilities, because the author, the performer and the viewer must get into the world of artistic reality, which in turn must be built. Another task of genuine art is to create conditions for the realization of the personality.

Conclusion

Although Vygotsky’s work “The Psychology of Art” was the earliest of his works, its analysis allows us to understand the important features of the methodology and creativity of the founder of Soviet psychology. In his thinking, the ideas of natural science and the humanities, social engineering and the humanitarian attitude towards man converged and clashed. Vygotsky’s explanation of art is no exception. On the one hand, art is a “machine of mental development,” on the other, the experience of colliding events. Vygotsky connects and reconciles these different interpretations of art only with his personality, not with the discourse of thought.

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4. In the same place 18.
5. In the same place 236.
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8. In the same place 271.
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13. In the same place. S 144-146.
17. In the same place. S 387-390.
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