DEVELOPING AN ART UNDERSTANDING INTERVIEW

ROCHA, Luís, COIMBRA, Joaquim Luís
Faculty of Psychology and Education of the University of Porto, Portugal

Introdution

Art is an independent system, closed around its own formal properties that do not need any exterior interpretation, for instance a psychological one. Nevertheless, art, as any other human activity, can be study by Psychology. Art can tell us something about how individuals represent and understand reality. In this sense, our relationship with art should not exclude analytical reasoning; the arts can be thought and not only appreciated. For Read (1982) art has been treated like a metaphysical concept, but it can be measurable. The development of a measure of aesthetic understanding is one of our biggest aims. Housen's (1983) and Parsons' (1987) studies are almost unanimously considered the most important in this area. Their importance arises from the impact they had in art education all over the world.

Parsons' (1987) and Housen's (1983) Theories of Aesthetic Development

During ten years Parsons' showed paintings to people, asking them to talk about it. He used a semi-structured interview exploring some topics. Parsons (1987) main claim is that people react differently to paintings because they have distinct conceptions about what is art and about the characteristics a painting must have: these ways of understanding paintings appear organised in a developmental sequence, in typical configurations of ideas called stages. Accordingly to Parsons there are four big ideas about art – subject matter, emotions expression, medium of expression, form and style, and the nature of reasoning – present in all developmental stages, with the exception of the first, but having a different prevalence in each stage: Stage 1 – Preference: paintings are stimuli for a pleasant experience; to like is to judge. There is not a consciousness of the point of view of others;

391

Stage 2 - Beauty and Realism: the objective criteria for judging a work of art are the beauty and the realism of the depicted subject and the admiration of the artist's skill; implicit recognition of the point of view of others – representation demands a distinction between those things everyone can see in the painting and the ideas that same painting can stimulate on us; Stage 3 – Expressiveness: creativity, originality and feelings are valued; distinction between our feelings and ideas and others' feelings and ideas; recognition of the uniqueness of the subjective experience; Stage 4 – Style and Form: relevance of the medium of expression, the form and style; the stylistic and historical relationships between paintings are brought to light; art has a social dimension; ability of adopting tradition's perspective as a hole; Stage 5 – Autonomy: judgements about art are seen not as a traditional truth, arising from art critics and art history, but as personal statements of an individual who is aware of art's social dimensions, but who is able to make a personal and complex synthesis; the point of view of culture is transcended – this demands the ability of questioning opinions generally accepted and the confidence of being able to answer any of the questions eventually raised in a discussion.

Housen's (1983) main goal was the development of a reliable scoring method for measuring the aesthetic development. The subject was presented three different reproductions of works of art from which he selected his most and least favourite. Subsequently, the facsimile became the centre of a stream-of-consciousness conversation in with the viewer talked out loud about what he was looking at, thinking about, and responding to in the print. The stream-of-consciousness is not an interview, but a direct sampling of the aesthetic response. The researcher makes only an introductory question and does not interfere with, or direct, the viewer's remarks. The process is a real monologue, a process of thinking out loud, of construction of a personal meaning for the object of art. Each monologue is transcribed and analysed in comparison with though domains and categories present in the Aesthetic Development Coding Manual (a manual derived from the analysis of the subjects monologues following a split-sample design). This manual unfolds five stages of aesthetic development: Stage 1 – Accountive: using their senses and personal associations, people make concrete observations about the painting creating a narrative; preferences, beliefs and personal history are the basis for making judgements; Stage 2 – Constructive: viewers build a structure for looking at works of art, using their perceptions, their understanding of the natural world, and the values of the social and moral world as tools; if craft, skill, ability, effort, utility, function are not manifest or if the subject matter seem inappropriate the

painting is judged as having no value; Stage 3 – Classifying: active search of indicators such as the formal elements of colour, line, composition which become the criteria used for understanding, decoding and judging the work of art; categorization can explain and rationalise the work of art's meaning and message; Stage 4 – Interpretative: search of a personal encounter with the work of art; critical abilities are put in the service of feelings and emotions; the encounter with the work of art presents the opportunity of new comparisons, insights and experiences, promoting a new awareness of self and world; Stage 5 – Re-creative: viewers see familiar paintings as old friends who is known intimately, but always capable of surprises; the encounter with a work of art requires an equivalent usage of all faculties; based on what we see, we know and we feel, we can reconstruct the work of art giving it a personal meaning.

Developing an Art Understanding Interview

The authors followed different methodologies. While Parsons used a semi-structured interview, focusing on several topics, such as subject matter, colour, feelings, etc, Housen (1983) used an open interview. Is spite of this difference, they reached to similar aesthetic development theories. The main difference appears at the 3rd stage of aesthetic development. While in the sequence proposed by Parsons (1987) the affective and emotional orientation precedes a more formal orientation, in the sequence defended by Housen (1983) the understanding of the formal aspects of the work of art is prior to the arising of a more affective experience of art. This difference calls up attention to the influence of contextual variables in the aesthetic development. In recent studies, Rossi (2000) and Wang and Ishizaki (2002) concluded that subjects with high exposure to art have a developmental sequence similar to the one described by Housen (1983).

Our intention is to combine these two approaches to the aesthetic interview. Our main goal is to build up a psychological theory of the art understanding cognitive structure. The piagetian concept of cognitive structure (the cognitive development is conceptualised as the representation and internalisation of regularities that emerge from the individuals' interaction with the world, generating crescent complexity levels systems, the structures) is defined by cognitive operations only inferred through the subjects' discourse. The usage of an interview is then appropriate. Housen's (1983) approach will allow us several things: catching all the intermingled feelings and thought in action during an encounter with a work of art; do not distorting the phenomenon with a set of pre-formulated questions; giving the viewer the maximum opportunity to express his experience; and scoring

the entire response, without neglecting commentaries beyond a pre-established set of topics. After this first phase we could explore the topics not yet focused on the first moment, following Parsons (1983) proposal, because the way this topics are articulated by subjects will help us to determine more precisely each subject level of aesthetic development. The exploration of general conceptions about art in the same interview will contribute to the same objective.

Inspired by Parsons' theory, Freeman and Sanger (1995) distinguished the establishment of three main relationships during an aesthetic encounter: 1) Painting-World; 2) Painting-Artist; and 3) Painting-Viewer. They called it the net of intentional relationships. This net of intentional relationships appears in a sequence of growing cognitive complexity. Selman's (1980) concept of interpersonal understanding cognitive structure enters into action because, based on our understanding of Parsons' (1987), Housen's (1983) and Freeman and Sanger's (1995) theories, as well as in our research experience in this field, we believe that when each of us establish a relationship with a work of art, this object is taken as an «other» where many other entities are present: the world, the artist and his intentions, all possible viewers and their remarks, etc. Taking Selman's (1980) formulation we can assume that the aesthetic understanding construct has two components: a) an operative, defined in terms of the understanding of a work of art reasoning complexity, which demands the coordination of several points of view, namely the beholder's with the author's; b) a social or psychological component which demands knowledge and understanding of the nature of art, namely general conceptions about beauty and realism, conceptions about works of art formal properties, such as colour and line, etc. Before us others start to draw this hypothesis. For instance Parsons (1987) and Rossi (2003). While manifesting his debt to Kohlberg's moral development theory, Parsons (1987) depicts several levels of social perspective taking when he describes the aesthetic stages, *i.e.*, each stage also means a crescent ability of coordinate different points of view. The author does it intuitively, using Selman's theory as an analytical tool. Rossi also (2000; 2003) used Freeman and Sanger's (1995) net of intentional relationships as an analytical tool for analysing data collected during interviews inspired in Parsons' (1987) interview script. We intend to use Selman's theory not only as an intuitive analytical tool, but also, and mainly, as the organising principle beneath our interview. This is our present location, trying to render operational our intentions, a step away of concluding an art understanding interview which will allow us to make a more psychological reading of the aesthetic development.

References

Freeman, N. H. & Sanger, D. (1995). The commonsense aesthetics of rural children. *Visual Arts Research, 21,* 1-10.

Housen, A. (1983). *The eye of the beholder: Measuring aesthetic development.* Ed. D. Dissertation. Harvard: Harvard Graduate School of Education, Harvard University.

Parsons, M. J. (1987). *How we understand art: A cognitive account of the aesthetic experience.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Rossi, M. H. (2003). *Imagens que falam – Leitura da arte na escola.* Porto Alegre: Editora Mediação.

Selman, R. L. (1980). *The growth of interpersonal understanding: Developmental and clinical analyses.* New York: Academic Press.

Wang, W. & Ishizaki, K. (2002). Aesthetic development in cross-cultural contexts: A study of art appreciation in Japan, Taiwan and the United States. *Studies in Art Education, 43* (4), 373-392.

e-mail: luis_sebastiao@portugalmail.pt
        jcoimbra@psi.up.pt