

L.S. Vygotsky's Critique: Between Aesthetics, Publitsistika and Psychology

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This paper discusses L.S. Vygotsky's early activity as a critic through an analysis of texts in which the author himself reflects on the task of the critic. Fragments from the essay on Hamlet, Psychology of art and theatrical reviews of the Gomel period (1922–23) are analyzed to provide an overview of how his understanding of the role of the critic has evolved and changed in time. By moving from the reader's critique to the objective analytic method, Vygotsky has placed the critic in a position of social and educational engagement, a public figure committed to raise the level of the arts and the audience's capacity optimize the aesthetic experience. His stance to the critical work is also analyzed within the context of Russian critical traditions, particularly some ideas of Boris Eikhenbaum and the Formal School of literary studies. Finally, the critical activity is seen alongside an extensive list of attributes that has been linked to Vygotsky (scientist, methodologist, philosopher etc.) as an equally important and complementary facet of a person fully committed to social transformation.

Keywords: Psychology of art, Critic, Publitsistika, Aesthetics, L.S. Vygotsky.

Критический анализ Л.С. Выготского: между эстетикой, публицистикой и психологией

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В статье рассматриваются ранние критические работы Л.С. Выготского сквозь призму текстов, в которых он сам размышляет о позиции и задачах критика. Анализируются фрагменты эссе Выготского о Гамлете, «Психология искусства» и театральные рецензии гомельского периода (1922–1923), позволяющие воссоздать картину того, как эволюционировали его представления о роли критика. Переходя от читательской критики к объективному аналитическому методу, Выготский перемещает критика в позицию социальной и образовательной вовлеченности: он становится публичной фигурой, взявшей на себя обязательство повышать уровень искусства и способность аудитории к оптимизации эстетического переживания. Отношение Выготского к критическому анализу также рассматривается в контексте традиций русской критики и, в частности, идей Бориса Эйхенбаума и «формальной школы». В заключительной части статьи деятельность Выготского как критика соотнесена с его обширными достижениями в других сферах (Выготский как ученый, как методолог, как философ и т. д.) и делается вывод о равнозначном и комплементарном характере этой стороны деятельности человека, полностью посвятившего себя социальной трансформации.

Ключевые слова: психология искусства, публицистика, эстетика, Выготский.

For citation:

Marques P.N. L.S. Vygotsky's Critique: Between Aesthetics, Publitsistika and Psychology. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya = Cultural-historical psychology*, 2019. Vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 25–34. (In Russ., abstr. in Engl.). doi: 10.17759/chp.2019150403

Для цитаты:

Маркес П.Н. Критический анализ Л.С. Выготского: между эстетикой, публицистикой и психологией // Культурно-историческая психология. 2019. Т. 15. № 4. С. 25–34 doi: 10.17759/chp.2019150403

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Introduction

In his short lifetime Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896–1934) strove to rethink the bases of scientific psychology through a historical-cultural prism as well as to establish a new methodological and theoretical approach to themes such as art, human development and defectology. He presents existing research problems in an original and most importantly historical perspective, aiming at overcoming both pure idealism and shallow materialism.

This intention permeates also his writings about art. The corpus examined by this research consists of a large number of texts that until recently were unpublished and thus almost unexplored by vygotskian scholars. The disclosure of Vygotsky's early writings and other unpublished materials has given way to the investigation of different facets of this otherwise world-famous soviet psychologist, and opened a fertile field of new possibilities of interdisciplinary studies.

Until the beginning of the 2000s, the main attempts to retell Vygotsky's intellectual biography were made by Van der Veer and Valsiner [25], Vygotskaya and Lifanova [28], Yaroshevsky [37] and Veresov [27]. All of them acknowledge the existence and describe without much detail Vygotsky's writings on art that were published before his admission at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow. For Veresov, Vygotsky's early works are examples of literary rather than psychological analysis, though they should not be disregarded in understanding the evolution of his ideas in psychology. Van der Veer and Valsiner also point to the importance of Vygotsky's origin in aesthetics by claiming that "By moving from art to psychology, Vygotsky could test his theoretical constructions derived from one complex domain on another. His work in art enabled him to tackle complex psychological problems and – the present authors would like to claim – far more rigorously than investigators trained as psychologists per se, in his time or ours. It was to Vygotsky's benefit – rather than detriment – that he moved to psychology from literary criticism and education. It is no doubt a tribute to that background that this eloquent, even if sometimes mystical, ideas continue to fascinate us in our search for our own synthesis of ideas" [25, p. 35].

However, the actual volume, scope and importance of Vygotsky's early work could not be properly assessed, since it remained either in the family archives or in newspapers of Gomel local press. It was only at the turn of the century that new research appeared and brought to light details and new sources to Vygotsky's early work and life. In 2000, Feigenberg [6] published *From Gomel to Moscow*, a volume with memories of Semion Dobkin, a contemporary and friend of Vygotsky's, and a selection of early texts about literature and Judaism, including Vygotsky's very first essay (1912-1913) about the Jewish problem in Dostoevsky's work. Feigenberg's book was the first to point to the issue of Judaism as a central topic for Vygotsky during the years prior to the October Revolution. In 1916 and 1917, Vygotsky published reviews of literature and a translation from Hebrew in the weekly journal *Novyi Put*, a publication dedicated to

the Jewish life. The works of Bella Kotik-Friedgut [13; 14; 15] and Ekaterina Zavershneva [43; 44; 45] have recently provided new information on this topic.

The remarkable archival work carried out by Zavershneva [46] has provided valuable findings and shed light on moments of Vygotsky's life that had been so far obscure. One of the main results of this research is a volume with selected materials from Vygotsky's notebooks, published both in Russian and English coedited by Van der Veer [35; 36], a work that unveils paths of elaboration and reformulation of his ideas.

In 2012, Yasnitsky [40] announced an independent and global project for the publication of Vygotsky's complete works at the *Dubna Psychological Journal*, that first published Vygotsky's early theatrical reviews from the Gomel period (1922-1923). A few years later, the author published three books [38; 40; 41] with the ambitious and somewhat controversial purpose of promoting a "revisionist revolution" in Vygotskian studies. More recently, the enterprise of the publication of the complete works was advanced by Russian scholars, led by Vladimir Sobkin, editor of first volume and the only published so far [34]. The book presents all texts on dramaturgy and theater and is furnished with thorough footnotes and comprehensive commentary.

Vygotsky's contribution to the problem of the psychology of art appears in its most mature and consolidated form in the work written in 1925, which was presented as his doctoral thesis. In the preface, Vygotsky states that *Psychology of art* was a result of previous works and based on three unpublished essays (about Krylov's fables, a short story written by Bunin, and Shakespeare's Hamlet) as well as on "a number of articles and notes published in various periodicals" [33, p. 164].

It is now clear that such articles and notes constitute a large volume of texts, mostly theatrical reviews published between 1922 and 1923 in local newspapers (*Nash Ponedelnik* and *Polesskaia Pravda*) edited in Gomel, Belorussia. The study of this corpus discloses a sort of laboratory where Vygotsky was able to hint at some of his aesthetic ideas and elaborate what he later called *analytic objective method*. Attempts at providing an overview and analysis of this corpus have appeared in recent years [21; 22; 23; 19; 26; 18].

The reviews did not have theoretical ambition in the aesthetic discussion but were rather practical exercises of analysis of artistic procedures and their effects on the audience. Moreover, unlike the works analyzed in *Psychology of art*, the reviewed plays were not undisputable canonized works. Gomel theatrical season consisted of performances by guest ensembles, with a repertoire that varied from classics of world literature to minor operettas and dramas. They were all equally subjected to fine criticism, which focused not only on the choice of the repertoire, but mainly on the performances of the director and the actors.

During the Gomel period, Vygotsky was very active in several professional fields. He had duties in the educational area, as a professor in teacher education, as well as in the cultural sphere [28, p. 47–49]. He served as the director of the theatrical subsection (1919–1921) of the

Gomel Department of Education and later as the director of the Department of Art of the Gubpolitprosvet¹. In the pedagogical field, his activity was consolidated in the book *Pedagogical psychology*, a textbook for teacher education written in accessible style that covered several relevant topics, including a chapter on aesthetic education. In the editorial field, Vygotsky was part of a collaborative enterprise to create a publishing house (Ages and days/*Veka i dni*) and had prolific work as a critic in Gomel press. A total of 73 reviews were published only in *Nash Ponedelnik* and *Poleskaia Pravda* from September 1922 to December 1923. Before that, Vygotsky had also collaborated with the periodicals *Novyi Put*, *Letopis*, *Zhizn Iskusstva*, as well as written a book chapter (“Theater and revolution”, published in *Verses and prose of Russian Revolution*).

These texts aimed at a general audience and lacked the typical traits and rigor of standard scientific production (references to other theories and authors were often not properly exposed). It is important to observe that Vygotsky did not restrict himself to the work of the scientist confined within the limits of experimental or theoretical-speculative work. He was active in the divulgation and popularization of the achievements of science and culture, which is testified not only by textbooks and theatrical critique but also by publications in the popular general audience periodical *Khochu vsio znat*, a “scientific technical journal for young workers”². The fact that Vygotsky was engaged in *crossing the bridge* between arts (and academia) and general audience should be seen as a historically motivated action in the context of a changing post-revolutionary society. This production is a fully integrated part of his creative laboratory and should not be dismissed as products of “no theoretical value” and restricted to historical interest, as argued by Yasnitsky [39, p. 78–79].

As noted by Yasnitsky [39, p. 78], “almost half of Vygotsky’s publications were general-audience newspaper and journal articles, non-specialized encyclopedia entries, book reviews, editorial introductions, conference abstracts and proceedings”. Also important were book reviews and prefaces, in which Vygotsky established fruitful dialogues with other theories and offered profound and critical insights to them. Be it in the realm of culture or of scientific psychology, Vygotsky appeared as a promoter of dialogue and a voice of his own in the dialectical tradition of critique. According to Dafermos [2, p. 232], “the transformation of the body of the psychological knowledge by Vygotsky occurred on the basis of a dialectical critical reflection on the existing psychological theories”.

In the field of art, Vygotsky expressed himself as a polyvalent social actor, playing the roles of critic, peda-

gogue and psychologist. As a critic, he had a vast production of reviews and some longer essays; his contribution to art pedagogy were the book chapter “Aesthetic education” and the essay “Imagination and creativity in childhood”, in the sphere of psychology he authored the book *Psychology of art* and the chapter “On the question of the psychology of the actors creative work”.

This body of work should be considered as an integrated whole of equally important parts, since Vygotsky’s intellectual production was not developed in a vacuum, but within a concrete social and historical context. According to Stetsenko [24, p. 90]: “Vygotsky’s well-known theoretical notions about cultural-historical and social embedding of human development and about cultural mediation as the main pathway for development were combined with, and embedded within, his social activism and a passionate quest for equality and justice (the point that has been all but ignored in western interpretations of his scholarship). This orientation was realized and made possible by Vygotsky’s participation in the radical revolutionary project of his time. The project of immediate relevance to Vygotsky and his colleagues consisted of efforts at creating a new system of education for society that was in the process of being created and forged, practically from scratch, rather than taken for granted, presupposed, and adapted to”.

As a critic, Vygotsky assessed the quality of theatrical plays bearing in mind contrasts between province and capital and having as an unwavering cause the raise of the quality of the city’s cultural scene. His remarks on the work of actors and directors reveals several ideas that appear in a systematic and scholarly form in *Psychology of art*.

In *Psychology of art*, a critical dialogue is also present, since the author establishes a debate with major contemporary theoretical approaches to art, like the Russian Formalism³ and psychoanalysis. The book still stands out as an original contribution to the field. In his attempt at restructuring theoretically and methodologically the field of intersection between psychology and art, Vygotsky’s originality rests in the fact that he developed a *psychology of art*, that is, not of the artist, of creation or of receptor. His object is the work of art itself “at the level of its form rather than an author or a viewer [...] as a system of stimuli the author consciously arranges in order to draw an aesthetic reaction” [1].

Recently, some authors have pointed to the fact that Vygotsky’s early work on art has more continuities than discontinuities in relation to his later psychological theory. For Kubasov [16], “between the theatrical reviews and later psychological works there is a complementary relationship, one that allows to see the ‘points of growth’ and their ulterior realization in the great works

¹ Gubernski komitet politicheskogo prosvescheniia (Regional Committee of Political Education).

² In 1930, Vygotsky published in this almanac articles on the biological basis of affect and on exceptional memory.

³ Russian Formalism, or the Formal School, is an approach to the study of works of literature developed in the early 20th century around the Moscow Linguistic Circle and the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOIAZ). Its main representatives were Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984), Boris Eikhenbaum (1886–1959) and Yuri Tynianov (1894–1943). They defended the creation of an autonomous science for the study of literature, based on the investigation of the poetic language and literary procedures (such as defamiliarization/ostranenie).

of specialized content". González Rey mentions the importance of emotions and the concept of *perezhivanie*⁴ in *Psychology of art*: "The real importance of the concept of *perezhivanie* in *The Psychology of Art* has long passed unnoticed and many Vygotsky interpreters who are interested in the concept still do not consider the use to *perezhivanie* given by Vygotsky in this book. It was in *The Psychology of Art* that Vygotsky highlighted *perezhivanie* as the set of emotional processes that integrates the unit fantasy-emotion as inseparable from artistic creation. The involvement of emotions in human creation was promising due to its potential for explaining a new qualitative level of the human psyche within which emotions are inseparable from intellectual operations. This position anticipated Vygotsky's emphasis on the intellectual and emotional unity that characterized his holistic period, between 1932 and 1934" [7, p. 341].

Vygotsky's oeuvre evolved throughout the years with the devise of concepts, research objects and theoretical perspectives. Cultural-historical psychology is neither a monolith that appeared at once as a harmonious whole nor a patchwork of disconnected and fragmented elements that appeared with the emergence of new paths. The uncovering and exam of each step in this trajectory can reveal threads of continuity and discontinuity as well as the multiplicity of facets of Vygotsky's work.

Vygotsky, the critic

This paper aims at reconstructing one of these facets – Vygotsky, the critic – by comparing three moments in which the author explicitly reflects on his task as a critic: 1) *The tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark*, written in 1915; 2) "About the author of 'not exactly a review'", a text from the Gomel period; and 3) *Psychology of art*. This critical activity is analyzed here in the intersection of different fields: aesthetics, *publitsistika*⁵ and psychology.

The systematization of Vygotsky's critical activity hereby presented is the result of an ongoing project that consists in the study of Vygotsky's texts about art, the translation of this corpora into Portuguese, and critical commentary to it. The objective is to offer a contribution to vygotskian studies, with new and unpublished materials written by the author, as well as to studies of early 20th century Russian and Soviet culture, as it places Vygotsky as one of the protagonists of the *intelligentsia*⁶ of the time.

Vygotsky's first academic work was a critical essay about the tragedy of Hamlet, by William Shakespeare.

In this text, Vygotsky developed an approach called *reader's critique* (*chitatelskaia kritika*). Based on the idea that no literary work exists without a reader, he devises a type of dilettante critique that is based on immediate aesthetic impression. Its main characteristics are: 1) it is indifferent to who the author is, because, "Once it is created, the work of art separates itself from its creator" [34, p. 80], that is, the meaning of the work is not to be found in the author, because the aesthetic object, for its nature, has multiple meanings; 2) it is indifferent to other criticism, that is, the critic does not aim to refute or reply other critics; 3) third and most important, it focuses the work of art itself: "While the critic is not bound to anything in the sphere of the studied work – neither to the perspective of the author nor to the opinions of other critics – he is, on the other hand, entirely bound to the work itself" [34, p. 82]. As it can be seen, at this point, the activity of the critic involves only two poles: the critic/reader and the literary work.

After finishing his graduation studies in Moscow, Vygotsky returned to Gomel, where he worked in the fields of culture and education. This included a stable position as a reviewer of theatrical plays for the local newspapers *Nash Ponedelnik* and *Polesskaia Pravda*. On the issue published on March 12th 1923 of *Nash Ponedelnik*, Vygotsky uses his space for a personal account. The text "About the author of 'not exactly a review'" is a statement on his role and task as a critic: "A bit too late, I am going to put a full stop, provide some explanation. I have explained actors so often, that now I have to explain myself. To build 'air bridges of criticism' between the spectator and the stage, because 'what is authentic is not what was printed, but what was read of what was fugitive and fleeting lines. It is not about giving a label – good or bad – or handing a diploma for talent or lack of talent. But to help the spectator critically build the play in his perception. The assessments may be wrong, the judgements, light-minded. But the main idea seems right to me, and I want to formulate it and place a full stop here: just as electricity is not only to be found where there is lightning, but also where there are 25 lightbulbs, so is poetry and art not only to be found in great creations, but also in the 16 candles of the provincial stage. My oblivious words were dedicated to the small poetry, to the small art of our stage, ephemeral and, therefore, oblivious" [34, p. 362].

One of the most important differences between this position and the reader's critique is the emergence of a third element, or rather the separation of reader and critic. Here, the circulation, understanding and production

⁴ *Perezhivanie*, or emotional experience, is a dynamic unity of conscience. It encompasses the social situation of development and the personal prism through which this situation is lived by the individual. It is the indivisible unit of subjectivity and the environment.

⁵ *Publitsistika* is a field of literature concerned with social and political issues that creates an atmosphere of debate of different points of view aimed at tackling social problems. It can be found different genres, such as pamphlets, essays, letters and also memoirs and diaries. In the 19th century, it had profound impact on the development of cultural and social life. The works of critics in this form of polemicizing journalism was crucial to the evolution of Russian literature.

⁶ Since mid-19th century the term *intelligentsia* was used in Russia to designate a certain social group formed by educated people (critics, journalists, and fictionists) that held a critical position towards the autocratic regime and were particularly concerned with social issues and progressive values. The moral attitude and social engagement are features that distinguish the intelligent and the more neutral concept of intellectual.

of meanings based on art involve three cornerstones: the work of art, the critic, and the receptor. In this formulation of the critic's task — “to help the spectator critically build the play in his perception” —, we see that Vygotsky overcomes subjective impressionism and steps outside towards social reality. The critic extrapolates individual perception and appears as public figure, a mediator between works of art and audience, an agent of the social life with an enlightenment/educational duty. Moreover, the extract anticipates Vygotsky's understanding of art as an organized complex of stimuli that should be rebuilt in the receptor through active work of perception, an idea that will be further elaborated in *Psychology of art*.

Another aspect that can be highlighted from this text is Vygotsky's concern with the arts outside the main cultural capitals (Saint Petersburg and Moscow). The final excerpt challenges the idea that Vygotsky was a Eurocentric that favored the literary canon, as it was argued by Smagorinsky [20]. In the Gomel reviews, Vygotsky appears as a highly engaged social actor. His acute criticism was deeply committed to raising the level of the cultural life in the province. Although he did not spare sharp criticism to the performances, his perspective was always a constructive one. Here, the use of the adjective “small” (*malyyi*) and the image of candles is not so much derogative, but rather affective and a testimony to how close and intimate he felt to the art of the province.

In the reviews, Vygotsky consistently provided detailed comments on the work of the director and the performance of actors individually and as an ensemble. Such remarks were invariably followed by advice, recommendations and suggestions that aimed at taking Gomel's cultural scene to a higher qualitative level as well as at increasing the audience's aesthetic awareness. One example of this attitude can be found in “Without steering and sails”, published in *Nash Ponedel'nik* in 1923, where Vygotsky urges for direction, unity and plan in the theatrical season: “What was staged and presented was deprived of direction. [...] There was no ensemble, intention, style, or integrity of the plays and stagings. [...] There was no integral spectacle, not even a meaningless director intention or a talentless interpretation with a unified intention. This good theatrical machine has screws and wheels but was lacking a minor detail: the machinist who could operate it” [34, p. 359].

While in the Gomel period the cultural activist side comes to the foreground, in *Psychology of art* emphasis is added to the pedagogical potential of art and the critic's role in its due exploration. Art has a practical and vital effect in human behavior, and the critic has a special role in making sure that it fulfills its underlying psychological intent: “One can say that, from a psychological point of view, the role of the critic is to organize the consequences of art. He provides a certain educational orientation to its action [...] The task of the critic is [...] not to

interpret the work of art or to prepare the spectator or reader for the perception of the work of art. One could definitely say that nobody has ever read a writer differently after having read the critics. Only half of the task of the critic belongs to *aesthetics*, the other half belongs to social *pedagogy and publitsistika*” [32, p. 404, highlight added]; “This type of criticism takes a conscious leap from the realm of art to the realm of social life, in order to guide the forces awakened by art in a socially necessary course” [33, p. 405]

For Vygotsky, criticism is a two-sided activity: on the one hand it must be rooted in aesthetics, that is, it should not be based on historical, social or moral values, but rather on the aesthetic merits of the work of art; on the other hand, it is expected to be engaged in a concrete social context. The first half of the critic's task requires a deep and penetrating understanding of artistic form. This was actually a long-lasting trait of Vygotsky's attitude toward art, that traces back to his essay on Hamlet⁷ and to an even earlier work, written between 1912–1913.

In “Jews and the Jewish question in the works of F.M. Dostoevsky”, a special and unique moment in Vygotsky's production as a critic, the impressive maturity of the 16-year-old-author stands out. The portrayal of Jews as inferior people and the derogative attitude towards them in Russian literature is examined not as an ideological problem, but rather as an aesthetic one: “The future historian of Judaism in Russia, as he studies the manifestations of anti-Semitism, will stand perplexed, as if before a puzzle, towards the relationship of Russian literature to Jews [...] It is strange and incomprehensible: while defending principles of humanism, evolving under the sign of humankind, Russian literature has introduced very little of human character in the portrayal of the *zhid*. [...] While taking realism to its extreme expression, and stepping over the boundary where the real becomes symbolic through the path of genius psychological understanding of the mysteries of human soul, Russian literature introduced very little psychological depth in the portrayal of Jews, so that these images placed in genius creations do not live up to the most modest demands of artistic realism. [...] Certainly, this grave sin of Russian literature (not before Judaism, of course, *but before artistic truth!*) is not exclusive to it” [29, p. 75–77, highlight added].

By defending artistic truth, Vygotsky establishes aesthetics appreciation as the basis of criticism already in a very early point. Far from being a pamphlet against Dostoevsky's ideology, the essay is rather a literary/aesthetic manifest. It points primarily at the discrepancy between the heights of psychological realism achieved by Russian literature and the shallow representation of Jews, which is seen not as an ideological but rather as an aesthetic flaw.

However, it is clear that alongside with continuities there were also discontinuities, or rather, a broadening

⁷ See, for instance, the third rule of the readers' critique: focus on the construction of work of art itself, undistracted by other criticism and biographical interpretations. For Ivanov, despite all the symbolic subjectivism of Vygotsky's interpretation of Hamlet, it remains a significant contribution to the problem of “Hamlet and Russia”, as it was one of the first attempts at “investigating the play as such, outside historic-literary and biographic hypotheses (exterior to the play)” [12, p. 440].

of Vygotsky's views. Besides being an aesthetic problem, art becomes also a matter of social and pedagogical concern. The departure from a strictly aesthetic assessment to the understanding of the critic as operating in the entanglement of aesthetic, social pedagogy and *publitsistika* happens during the Gomel period.

Vygotsky and the Russian critical tradition

Vygotsky's practice as a critic and his reflections on it can be traced back to the Russian tradition of *publitsistika* starting in the 19th century, founded by the Decembrists, Belinsky and the generation of 1860s (Chernichevsky, Dobroliubov and Pisarev) [8]. The emergence of the *intelligentsia* in the 19th century as a specific Russian phenomenon is connected with the idea of intellectual and social progress going hand in hand. The image of the ivory tower where artists or thinkers were confined was alien to every front of the intellectual debates, from Slavophiles to Westerners⁸. According to Hosking [11], "The intelligent was someone committed to closing that gulf [between the elite and the masses] by raising the people to the level of a humane and cultured existence [...] This intelligentsia would represent the people 'conscious of itself' and help integrate them into a worthy national life".

Besides this link with the past, Vygotsky's critique should also be contextualized against the background of contemporary trends, such as the Formal School in literary studies. An interesting comparative analysis can be established between Vygotsky's ideas and Boris Eikhenbaum's.

In "Speech on Criticism", Eikhenbaum considers that Pisarev's⁹ alleged lack of understanding of Pushkin was "more productive than all the understanding of Pushkin scholars" [5, p. 330]. Likewise, Vygotsky praises Tolstoy's controversial views on Shakespeare as a demonstration of being sincerely affected and liberated from preconceived judgements derived of other critics. In "The king is naked", Vygotsky [32] states that Tolstoy avoided the admiration of the fool and dared to fight the type of critique that seeks to interpret, add, and create over art, i.e. that sees it as allegory of something else. For Vygotsky, the task of the critic is not to interpret or explain art. He must not prevent, oppose to or replace the sometimes disquieting effect of art on the receptor, under penalty of killing the aesthetic effect. The critic acts *after* art has triumphed, as an organizing force that provides an impulse and an orientation for future action.

For Eikhenbaum, the critic should "capture what makes art a labyrinth so that the respected readers will not think it looks like a corridor for taking walks during

the intermission" [5, p. 330]. In his effort to build a new type of criticism, Eikhenbaum denounces traditional interpretations of art: "Art is a 'labyrinth of entanglements'. The critic must tell the reader it is impossible to 'understand' a work of art. He must prove to the reader that he *does not understand*, that he is surprised and confused — then we will understand he is telling the truth and will listen to him. [...] Critics and historians of literature! Let us recognize now, while it is still not shameful to recognize anything, recognize simply and honestly that we *do not understand* literature, just as the physicist or chemist does not understand nature, although they know very well its 'laws'. [...] Let the artists unmask art, we must unmask readers" [5, p. 330].

According to Eikhenbaum, while the average reader seeks civilization in art, the critic, in his turn, unmasks civilization. For Vygotsky, art too unmasks civilization, in the sense that it reveals its limits and provides a destination to possibilities that cannot be fulfilled in other spheres of life. This is the biological meaning of art, that Vygotsky explains by resorting to the Freudian notion of sublimation: "Sublimation makes in socially useful forms what dreams and diseases makes in individual and pathological forms" [30, p. 295]. For both Vygotsky and Eikhenbaum art should not be reduced to a rational explanation. But while for Eikhenbaum critics are "somewhat barbarians, and this is our highest calling" [5, p. 330], in the case of Vygotsky, it can be argued that the target of the critic would be better defined as *supercivilization*, that is, overcoming civilization as we know, based on directions and impulses provided by art.

Just as Vygotsky acted to advance the field of psychological science and as a critic, Formalists were striving to consolidate a science of literature (*literaturovedenie*) and a type of criticism. At first, science and criticism were seen as radically different spheres. For Eikhenbaum, "criticism is amazed, while science understands" [3, p. 9], that is, the material for criticism is the aesthetic experience (amazement), whereas for the scientist the task is more objective and analytical. Therefore, he distinguishes between the critic and the literary scholar (*literaturoved*), since the latter interprets, analyzes structural data from the text, while the former assesses the works from a specific position and is a representative of a certain group of interests [9]. Critics are concrete social actors that play their part in the transformation and evolution of literature, that is, they have a social task.

Towards 1924, Eikhenbaum [17] overcomes this binary opposition and reaches a unity of science and criticism in "Nuzhna kritika", where he states that "the critic is expected to be able to react, to analyze the elements of the required form [...] according to the concrete sense of contemporariness as an epoch" [4, p. 12].

⁸ The debate between Slavophiles and Westernizers dominated the *intelligentsia* in the Russian Empire in the mid-19th century. Slavophiles advocated the development of Russia on the basis of early Slavic traditions. Their main representatives were Aleksei Khomiakov and the brothers Konstantin and Ivan Aksakov. Westernizers, in their turn, proposed the adoption of Western technology and forms of government for the future of Russia. The most eminent figures of this trend were Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen.

⁹ Dmitri Pisarev (1840–1868) was a radical social critic, an enthusiast of natural sciences and advocate of utilitarian aesthetics.

Therefore, the critic's task is directed outwards, to the social life, and his reaction must go beyond personal impressionism: "criticism should come closer to science [...] the time of reader's critique is over, authoritative professionals are required to which the writer can resort" [4, p. 12]. Eikhenbaum's urge to overcome a reader's critique¹⁰ and emancipate literary science from other sciences echoes almost literally Vygotsky's attempts at expanding and deepening the scope of his criticism based on a systematized set of ideas and concepts about art.

This was the path taken by Vygotsky in *Psychology of art*, a work intended to be not a piece of critique, but a scientific work. As such, it is rooted in a specific methodology, the objective analytic method. In "Historical meaning of the crisis in psychology", while meditating on the methodology employed in *Psychology of art*, Vygotsky [30] describes it as a type of analysis that is indirect, artificial and tending to abstraction. He claims that he was not interested in examining fables, tragedies or prose in general, nor did he intend to analyze Krylov's fables, Shakespeare's Hamlet or Bunin's novella specifically. His goal was to uncover the nature and mechanism of the aesthetic reaction. Therefore, this work reveals the emergence of the scientist who analyzes processes in their essence and seeks to uncover the rules governing aesthetic reaction. For Hansen-Löve [10], Vygotsky takes the definition of perception as a creative act to the sphere of scientific interpretation that should infer the structure of the text from the structure of the reaction, a methodological approach that is almost identical to that the formalist's, except for the fact that it overcomes the reductionism of its early stages with a theory of aesthetic reaction.

As it happens with later Eikhenbaum, the roles of scientist and critic are not dichotomic, but complementary. Vygotsky starts *Psychology of art* stating that the book was derived from his previous critical work [33, p. 164]. Moreover, a substantial part of the book consists of a section called "Criticism" and another called "Analysis of the aesthetic reaction", the first is composed of chapters with discussions of theoretical nature with other existing approaches while the second presents specific analyses of works of literature.

The third section is entitled "Psychology of art" and consists of the chapters "Art as catharsis" (chapter 9) and "Psychology of art" (chapter 10). The first presents his ideas about the aesthetic experience, that is, which effects can be derived from the structural/formal organization of material in art. The second extrapolates the laws to other types of art (poetry, theater, painting). For a strictly scientific project, this would suffice: the problem and methodology are presented (chapter 1), existing theories are discussed (chapters 2 to 4), the formula is verified in practical analysis (chapters 5 to 8), and a generalization is reached (chapters 9 and 10). However,

Vygotsky adds a final chapter: "Art and life", in which he takes a step further and contextualizes his ideas in the broad sphere of life and reflects on the social meaning of art, both historically and for the future. It is precisely in this part of the book that he discusses the role of the critic and of the pedagogue.

Scientist and critic are complementary roles that are equally engaged in the construction of the future. They both face reality and strive to change it through their praxis. Science and art (to an even higher degree) are constructions that bring the seed for reshaping mankind and society. In this context, it is emblematic the fact that Vygotsky ends the book with Trotsky's idea of superman and the potentials of human body according to Spinoza¹¹. For Vygotsky, "it is unquestionable that in this process art will say the heaviest and most decisive word. Without new art, there will not be the new man" [33, p. 412]. Therefore, art is considered to have a central role in the recasting of humanity.

Final remarks

With this article, we have intended to present a less noted aspect of this polyvalent author. For Yaroshevsky and Gurdenidze [38, p. 365], "Vygotsky the philosopher, methodologist, and theorist of science spoke his word before the apparition of Vygotsky the investigator of higher mental functions, the author of the cultural-historical conception in psychology and the leader of one of the most important Soviet psychological schools".

Alongside with these features of "Vygotsky before Vygotsky", there was the critic, the precursor and pre-supposition of the scientist. The critic engages in social reality and establishes a direct dialogue with the general audience. His task involves concrete and thorough analysis of specific aesthetic objects (or theories). For art critique, the specificity of the artistic form is a central and inescapable aspect, and Vygotsky demonstrates a highly developed and accurate aesthetic sense from his very first steps, as it could be seen from the aforementioned excerpts.

His experience and evolution as a critic for a decade (1915–1925), particularly during the Gomel period, has provided Vygotsky with a solid ground to enter the field of science, to extrapolate concrete analyses and create a broader theoretical system of the aesthetic experience in *Psychology of art*. However, as we have intended to demonstrate in this paper, these roles are not disconnected, neither is one annulled by the other. A holistic understanding of Vygotsky should consider every front of his actions as an integrated whole. In a dialectical dynamics, the critic engenders the scientist, who then culminates in a return to the critic as a socially engaged actor that takes part in the transformation of reality.

¹⁰ While Eikhenbaum uses precisely the same terminology (*chitatelskaia kritika*), he is not referring to Vygotsky's ideas. However, this cannot be taken as a mere coincidence, as it reveals a radical overturn in the status of subjectivism in criticism. What was formerly taken by Vygotsky as a banner becomes outdated and a stage to be overcome.

¹¹ The book ends with the following quote by Spinoza: "No one has ever shown the limits of what our body is capable of" [32, p. 412].

Funding

This paper presents some of the results of a Doctoral thesis and an ongoing post-doctoral research. The doctoral research was funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes), and the post-doctoral is funded by São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp 2015/17830-1).

Финансирование

В статье частично представлены результаты кандидатской диссертации и постдокторского исследования автора. Диссертация была выполнена при поддержке агентства по надзору за качеством в сфере высшего образования (Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, Capes); настоящее постдокторское исследование выполняется при поддержке научного фонда Сан-Паулу (São Paulo Research Foundation (Fapesp 2015/17830-1)).

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