

## The Additional Value of Art-Psychotherapy - Visual Symbolization

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### Abstract

Art-Psychotherapy is based on visual symbolization: paintings, drawings, sculpture, collage, etc. The unique characteristics of visual symbolization and their emotional and epistemological implications are discussed on psychoanalytic and philosophical basis. The visual symbol is a tangible entity available for reflective contemplation that can initiate therapeutic change. Symbolization involves movements that leave traces in the visual symbolic product. Contents that cannot yet be expressed verbally can be first expressed non-verbally. The intersubjective context of treatment can enhance development at the level of symbolization: from concrete to abstract, from acting-out to mentalization, from sub-symbolic to symbolic and from non-verbal to verbal. If a change had occurred it would be present in future visual symbolization. Thus, visual symbolization can function as a diagnostic device throughout treatment along with its expressive and working-through functions.

**Keywords:** Visual symbolization, symbol, intersubjectivity, art psychotherapy.

### Visual symbolization - the additional value of art-psychotherapy

The additional value of art-psychotherapy is based on visual symbolization and its emotional and epistemological implications. The interdisciplinary discussion of the unique characteristics of visual symbolization is based on philosophical, psychoanalytic, neuropsychological, cognitive and developmental research.

### The capacity to symbolize is an essential condition for mental health

Ernst Cassirer claimed that no content can be present in one's consciousness unless it is symbolized (Cassirer, 1953). He defined the human being as an "animal symbolicum" (Cassirer, 1944). Melanie Klein (1945) and Donald W. Winnicott (1960) linked the capacity to symbolize, object relations and mental health. Wilma Bucci (1997, 2001, 2005 and 2009) divided mental contents into three levels of symbolization: they can be sub-symbolized, non-verbally symbolized and verbally symbolized. She argued that in human development and in psychotherapy, mental contents should develop through these three stages. Later, Bucci raised the question of whether it is always essential for therapeutic change that the sub-symbolized content should be symbolized verbally as well or, in certain cases, non-verbal symbolization can suffice:

*'If we take seriously the endogenous organization of the subsymbolic and symbolic nonverbal systems, we need to examine the possibility that subsymbolic modes of communication themselves may be sufficient in some cases to bring about therapeutic change, and we need to identify the ways in which this may occur'. (Bucci, 2009, p. 73).*

This question is crucial in relation to art-psychotherapy in which the relation between the verbal and visual symbolization can vary tremendously in different treatments and in the same treatment at different periods. There are treatments in which verbal expression can be minimal and the therapeutic process is effective.

The capacity to symbolize develops in the first infant-care givers relationships. Throughout life there is continuous mutual influence between intersubjective processes and symbolization processes. People use symbolization differently and have different preferences concerning modes of symbolization.

Visual symbol formation and intersubjectivity are like the warp and woof of the same fabric of consciousness that is at the basis of art-psychotherapy. A change in one of these processes immediately initiates change in the other process as well, and vice-versa. When the content has been symbolized, it is available for additional mental activity; endless connections and developments in symbolization. When development in symbolization has initiated change in intersubjectivity, it will be evident in future visual symbolization. Thus, in addition to the importance of visual symbolization as an expressive and working through tool, it has a diagnostic value throughout treatment.

In this paper 'visual symbolization' refers to work such as painting, drawing, sculpture, and not to virtual visual symbolization produced by electronic devices. The characteristics of visual symbolization can explain the therapeutic advantages of art-psychotherapy. Visual symbolization is based on visual perception, which – together with touch, smelling and hearing - is the one of the main senses involved in intersubjectivity since birth, before verbal symbolization develops. The ability to mime facial expressions comes into existence forty-two minutes after birth (Meltzoff & Gopnick, 1993).

Visual symbolization involves movement and the senses of touch and smell. Any movement leaves its traces in the visual product, available any time for reflective contemplation. In cases of treatment of more than one person, all the participants can benefit from joint contemplation of the joint art projects that reflect their intersubjectivity explicitly. Thus, participants' awareness can expand and initiate change in their future relational processes.

Merleau-Ponty (1962) and Husserl (1964) claimed that perception is based first on the concrete phenomena of the world. Merleau-Ponty emphasized the body as the first tool of perception and as its target (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The body is the first symbol of the world and at the same time is

in charge of its perception in which visual perception plays a central role (Merleau-Ponty, 1968).

The discovery of mirror neurons validated the centrality of the body in intersubjective processes. The mirror neurons are automatically and continuously active. When someone is watching the other's movements, the neurons responsible for the perceived movements are activated in his or her brain without actually carrying out the observed movements. "*The discovery of mirror neurons provides a new empirically based notion of intersubjectivity, viewed first and foremost as intercorporeity*" (Gallese, 2009, p. 523).

Freedberg and Gallese described the activity of mirror neurons in the aesthetic experience: "*This reconstruction process during observation is an embodied simulation mechanism that relies on the activation of the same motor centers required to produce the graphic sign.*" (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007, p. 202). They argued that when contemplating an art work, the neurons responsible for the human motion depicted in the picture become active. In addition, there is activation of the neurons in use in order to execute the painting or sculpture, or the implied movements that are connected to the content of the work. The automatic neural activity is in relation to the realistic, as well as to the abstract components of the art work:

*With abstract paintings such as those by Jackson Pollock, viewers often experience a sense of bodily involvement with the movements that are implied by the physical traces – in brushmarks or paint drippings – of the producer of the work.* (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007, p. 198).

Hanna Segal (1952) and Cassirer (1979) argued that when we are contemplating an art work, we reconstruct what the original creator had experienced while creating the piece of art.

In art-psychotherapy the mirror neurons activity is relevant to the patient's and therapist's contemplation of the patient's works, of conjoint works by patient and therapist, or of other participants undergoing treatment. The intersubjective processes can be intensified by actually symbolizing together. In addition to the neural activity, actually symbolizing in a similar way to others, or conjoint visual symbolization can enhance empathy and mutual understanding. The awareness of the relational process that

were visually symbolized can be expanded and worked-through verbally as well. Thus, relational change can be initiated. If change had occurred, it would be present in future visual symbolization.

### **The unique characteristics of visual symbolization**

#### 1. Visual symbolization is an active process involving movements that actually manipulate art materials.

While visually symbolizing reality is being manipulated. The form of materials is continuously changing and a new entity is created. Langer (1967) and Cassirer (1979) emphasized the importance of the active component of visual symbolization. The aesthetic experience of the spectator is an active process as well. The art-psychotherapy patient is the creator and the spectator at the same time.

The visual symbol is available for contemplation by patient and therapist at any time. Dancing, singing, playing, and acting do not leave concrete traces of the movements involved in the symbolization. Daniel Stern named these arts: "The time-based arts" (Stern, 2010, p. 3). In visual symbolization, a concrete symbolic form can be given to subsymbolic content that had not been symbolized before. Thus, it is available for reflective contemplation independent from the time dimension. Intersubjective processes can enhance development at the patient's level of symbolization as it occurs in normal development since its earliest stages. The therapist can help in reconstructing the symbolization process and in relating to the patient's point of view. The therapist's understanding can expand on the basis of the patient's impressions. Following contemplation, the patient's awareness of the symbolized content can expand and initiate change.

#### 2. Visual symbolization involves a few senses simultaneously

The fact that visual symbolization involves various senses simultaneously can intensify its emotional and epistemological implications. Sounds can be heard as a result of actions such as beating clay or applying brush strokes. Art materials can be smelled during the symbolization process. The newborn senses the world by observing, hearing, touching and smelling his /her care-givers and immediate environment. In addition he/she is being fed, held, touched,

heard and observed. These activities are involved in his/her communication with his/her surrounding. Catherine Hyland Moon argued that art materials can be viewed as a metaphor for food (2010). Language develops later on based on these corporal non-verbal means of communication.

#### 3. In visual symbolization there may be relatively stronger proximity between the symbol and the symbolized in relation to other types of symbolization

Cassirer (1979) and Langer (1953) emphasized the proximity between the symbol and the symbolized in the arts, as opposed to linguistic symbolization. In visual symbolization the proximity between symbol and symbolized is evident since the beginning of the symbolization process. For example, while expressing aggressiveness, actions such as beating the clay, tearing the paper or applying harsh brush strokes, are closer to being aggressive in reality in relation to verbal description. Catharsis and sublimation can result from the productive activity of visual symbolization. A visual tangible form is given to formless contents. Michael Krausz, an artist and philosopher, argued that visual symbolization has a unique transformative power because of its "thingliness":

*Their products are physically embodied in palpable ways. The thingliness in other artistic endeavors such as music, dance, or conceptual art is not so easily identified. In these domains the distinction between process and product is not easily drawn* (Krausz, 2009, p. 202).

The visual product is available at any time for contemplation and additional working through that can enhance development at the level of symbolization; from acting out violence to expressing violence non-verbally. Thus, the visually symbolized content can be worked through verbally as well.

Hanna Segal divided symbolization into two levels; symbolic equation and symbol. Symbolic equation is more primitive in relation to symbol:

*A part of the ego becomes identified with the object, and, as a consequence, the symbol, which is a creation of the subject, is equated with the thing symbolized. The symbol does not represent the object, but is treated as though it was the object* (Segal, 1998, p. 354).

Symbolic equation is concrete, as typical of the psychotic way of thinking. The way the symbol is used is crucial as well. This might be the reason for the psychotic's difficulty in distinguishing between reality and imagination – between the symbol and the symbolized. In normal development symbolic equation develops into a symbol where there is a clearer distance between the symbol and the symbolized; and the symbol can be used flexibly. Symbolic equation belongs to the schizo-paranoid phase, while the symbol belongs to the depressive phase.

The capacity to symbolize in the depressive phase includes the ability to contain the primitive aspects of the symbolic equation (Segal, 1998). People can symbolize at various levels in different life situations and at different times. Someone can symbolize at a very high and abstract level concerning his profession, and at a primitive level in his relationships. Regression at the symbolization level can occur in stress, trauma, or infatuation.

The visual product can include an aggressive scene. As explained by the activity of mirror neurons and body simulation (Freedberg & Gallese, 2007), we can be affected by the abstract visual phenomena, as well as by the way the visual product was created. Although Freedberg and Gallese reference referred to the aesthetic experience, their view can be applied to art-psychotherapy. The patient can be affected deeply by contemplating his/her own products. In addition to the expansion of his/her awareness of the content symbolized, he/she can develop empathy toward him/herself. This is especially important in the work with trauma survivors, some of whom tend to feel guilty and responsible for the trauma. Through contemplating their works, they have an opportunity to separate the past from the present and the molester from the victim. Annie Buk investigated the implications of activation of the mirror neurons on art psychotherapy with trauma survivors:

*Research on the MNS provides us with a new understanding of the intimate physiological links between embodied simulation, gesture and the spoken word. This can help us refine our interventions so that we can enhance the possibility for the inchoate to become expressed and understood, in whatever form is possible for the patient in a given moment. These discoveries also give us a more*

*nuanced understanding of why our patients typically articulate their memories and feelings after making art in our presence (Buk, 2009, p. 72).*

In visual symbolization, primitive contents can be legitimately expressed and embodied in tangible form. The proximity between the symbol and the symbolized is evident in the symbolic product. If the symbol is realistic, a human figure for example, it is likely that two people will see the same figure. While reading a description of a human figure, however, it is likely that two readers will have different mental images of this figure because they have less detailed and concrete information about its appearance in relation to a figurative visual image.

The visual symbol is not dependent on the spoken language. In any country, a painting of a flower represents a flower. Words, apart from onomatopoeic words, are arbitrarily connected to the content they represent. What is the connection between the letters F. L. O. W. E. R. and a real flower? Cassirer argued that there is greater proximity between the symbol and the symbolized in the arts (Cassirer, 1979). Visual symbols are not subordinated to scientific rules, to the rules of every day life, or to a dictionary (Langer, 1967). Painting, for example, has gone through more radical changes in styles than changes in the spoken language during the same period of time. This enables the creators of non-verbal symbols a wider space of freedom of expression. The emphasis on the symbolization process and not on products in the therapeutic process may decrease judgmental elements and enhance freer symbolization processes.

#### 4. The visual symbol can include a multiplicity of contents that can be perceived at once.

While contemplating an art work, the whole work can be captured at once. Multiplicity of meanings and various ways of expression can be present (Cassirer, 1979).

In other types of artistic symbolization, the symbolic phenomena are being revealed over time. For example, while listening to a music one sound leads to the next. While contemplating a painting, the variety of brush strokes can be absorbed at one glance which can affect the working through of the expressed contents.

5. The visual symbol can function as a mirror for its creator while being created, and as the final visual product

The visual symbol is located outside its creator since the beginning of the symbolization process. In movement, musical and in theatrical symbolization, the person who symbolizes is an inherent part of the evolving symbol and cannot contemplate it from afar. In visual symbolization the creator can flexibly move between actually creating using art materials, and contemplating. The evolving symbol can be looked at from various angles and distances. Contemplation affects the following stages of the symbolization process. The possibility of flexible movement between actually symbolizing and contemplating facilitates flexible movement between primary and secondary working through processes, from being self-oriented to reality-oriented and vice versa (Noy, 1969). The patient can contemplate the evolving symbol. He/She can share impressions with the therapist while symbolizing and in relation to the final product.

Winnicott emphasized the importance of the mirror role of the mother and of the family in normal development: "...the mother role of giving back to the baby the baby's own self..." (Winnicott, 1971, p. 138). The evolving symbol functions as a changing mirror as a result of any single movement involving art materials. Freedberg and Gallese (2007) described the neurological activity in the aesthetic experience. These findings are relevant when the creator is contemplating his own symbols. It is a unique opportunity to watch the embodiment of mental contents as is usually done toward the works of others. This port of entry can direct the creator to grasp some of the contents that may not be available for consciousness otherwise. Thus, self-reflection based on visual symbolization can enhance self-knowledge.

It is possible to contemplate various visual products simultaneously for comparison and notice the changes in symbolization in case they occur. Changes in visual symbolization can reflect the therapeutic process for the patient and the therapist.

6. Visual symbolization can include cognitive functions

By visual symbolization the sub-symbolized contents can acquire a tangible form. This process must involve cognitive skills such as clarification, intensification, concentration,

judgment and sound criticism (Cassirer, 1979). Rudolf Arnheim argued that visual symbolization involves the perceptual function of the discovery of structure:

*"In fact, perception is the discovery of structure. Structure tells us what the components of things are and by what sort of order they interact. A painting or sculpture is the result of such an inquiry into structure. It is clarified, intensified, expressive counterpart of the artist's perception [...]. The individual percept stands symbolically for a whole category of things"* (Arnheim, 1986, p. 253).

Cassirer and Langer emphasized the power of the arts to symbolize contents that cannot be symbolized by other types of symbolization. Langer named these contents as 'non-discursive'. Cassirer (1960) argued that the target of art is way above imitation. It always supplies a new way to reveal the world. He noted the unique perceptual function of the arts: *"In art we do not conceptualize the world, we perceptualize it [...]"* (Cassirer, 1979, p. 186). Along with the aesthetic pleasure, visual symbolization contributes a unique mode of perception that does not exist in other modes of symbolization.

7. Visual symbolization and the time dimension

An incest survivor explored the influence of visual symbolization on her concept of time. She felt that contemplating her visual products helped her enjoy the present moment without fearing an approaching catastrophe. Following contemplation, she could locate traumatic events at the time when they really happened. She had an image of her parents grabbing her by the skin on her back, thus preventing her from moving forward. In her own words:

*Along the works and through them the "the backward time" was also created. The fear of checking backward still exists, but now it is taken care of, and usually it does not threaten to annihilate me [...] As a result of creating the backward time the time of the present was created – this is the time of the treatment itself. Later, around the axis of treatment an axis of every day time was created, of "before treatment" and "after treatment". The time slowly expanded and stretched, and fears and anxieties connected to it were alleviated"* (Personal encounter, 2010).



The tangible mirroring of her works helped her to locate past events actually in the past and thus reduced their disturbing influence in the present.

8. Visual symbolization always includes productive components

In visual symbolization, although problematic contents can be reflected, there is always an evidence of the productive component involved in the symbolization process. The visual symbolic product is a newly created entity, present in space. The opportunity to express in an unfamiliar way can widen the creator's awareness as a result of the new port of entry.

If the process is a joint process that includes two or more participants, it can reflect their ability to cooperate productively, even if the cooperation is incomplete.

As a result, an optimistic point of view can develop and generate hope in improving the participants' future communication.

9. Visual symbolization facilitates reconstruction of earlier stages of development and expansion of memory

Visual symbolization has much in common with the earliest stages of development in which the non-verbal communication involving corporal activity is at the base of any occurrence. In visual symbolization those implicit non-verbal contents are embodied in a tangible way that can facilitate relating and remembering early stages of development while visually symbolizing and through the following contemplation. Enactment leads to tangible products available for working through verbally as well. Thus, consciousness can widen and initiate change.

10. The visual symbol reflects its creator's personality and biography.

Cassirer (1960, 1996) argued that we know each other better through the works that we create. Visual symbolization is the objectification of objective contents of nature as well as of subjective contents. Goethe admired the ability of drawings to externalize the most inner and secretive contents:

*In drawing, the soul draws out part of its inmost beings into music, and those are the greatest of nature's secrets which, for their principles, rest on the drawing and modeling by which they are divulged* (Goethe, 1807, p. 40).

The visual symbol externalizes inner contents; behavioral, cognitive, emotional, relational and biographical. Contemplation can expand the creator's self-knowledge, as well as others knowledge about him.

Winnicott (1971) argued that through contemplation of their children's squiggles, parents can understand their children better in relation to verbal account.

11. Visual symbolization can initiate change. If a change had occurred it would be evident in future symbolization

Although the theoreticians mentioned related to the artist, their arguments are applicable to the child, patient and layman. In Cassirer's words:

*The capability of expressing his emotions is not a particular but a general human gift. But a man may write a most passionate love letter in which he may succeed in giving a true and sincere expression to his feelings without by this fact alone becoming an artist* (Cassirer, 1979, p. 192).

Hegel (1993) understood the artistic activity as a universal need to externalize inner contents. If the visual symbolization reflects personality in its various domains, it is possible to initiate therapeutic change through change in the patient's usual ways of visual symbolization. Future visual symbolization should reflect the change in case it had occurred.

12. Visual symbolization can turn the implicit to explicit

By visual symbolization a concrete tangible form is given to contents that had been formless before. Cassirer exemplified the implication of symbolization of 'passion'. By symbolizing passion we are no longer overwhelmed and passive, but can become active: "...*what remains is the inner motion, the vibration and oscillation of our passions without their gravity, their pressure, and their weight...*" (Cassirer, 1979, p. 164).

The visual symbolization of implicit contents that underlie our emotional life in a hidden manner can help us become aware and active in relation to them. Formless contents acquire a tangible form that can improve self-regulation because the known can be better regulated than the un-known. Therapeutic change depends on the patient's relation to the implicit relational knowing (Bruschweiler-Stern et al, 2002).

In addition to intersubjectivity that can take place in any therapeutic modality, by visual symbolization intersubjectivity is articulated in additional unique ways:

- a. The way in which the therapist supplies art materials and the way the patient accepts, rejects, or asks for them is an explicit way of their intersubjectivity.
- b. How the therapist helps the patient to symbolize and how the patient asks for help and is being helped are explicit intersubjective processes.
- c. Joint art projects of two or more participants can function as a tangible entity that reflects their interactions. The joint product is available for reflective contemplation.
- d. Intersubjectivity occurs between the patient and the evolving visual symbol and finally, with the visual product. The evolving symbol is changing by any movement of its creator which affects the next move of the creator (in a similar way it occurs between two subjects).
- e. Intersubjective contemplation can occur between patient and therapist or with any other group of participants.

The implicit components of intersubjectivity are embodied in a concrete, tangible and material way. The art materials are crucial in these processes: "...*the sensory, physical characteristics of materials can become a powerful component of the therapeutic exchange*" (Moon, 2010, p. 61). This port of entry to implicit contents through the explicit process of visual symbolization and the visual product underlies the therapeutic processes of art psychotherapy and its unique advantages.

### Summary and discussion

Visual symbolization is a multi-sensual, active and productive process that involves physically manipulating real materials. Any movement involved in the symbolization process leaves concrete traces in the tangible symbolic product. There is a new entity in space available for contemplation at any chosen time.

The unique characteristics of visual symbolization and the following contemplation facilitate epistemological and emotional processes in a way that cannot occur in other types

of symbolization. By artistic symbolization our emotions are objectified (Cassirer, 1979). The use of art material functions as emotional learning by catharsis, emotional expression, and by giving form to emotions that were formless before (Langer, 1953).

Visual symbolization can embody mental processes in a tangible form; the implicit can become explicit, the formless content acquires a definite form, the sub-symbolized can become non-verbally symbolized. Thus, even the most primitive unconscious enactment leaves visual traces in the final product that can be contemplated. By reflective contemplation a development in the level of symbolization of the expressed contents can take place.

In art-psychotherapy the patient is aware of being contemplated by the therapist while symbolizing. The therapist's gaze and the art materials include containing function for the expressed contents. The intersubjective contemplation by patient and therapist can enhance development in the patient's symbolization and expand the therapist's and patient's point of view. Verbal working-through processes can occur as well. As a result, intersubjectivity of patient and therapist can change and affect the patient's relationships outside treatment.

If a change had occurred, it should be present in patient's future symbolization. Thus, in addition to being a major tool of expression and change, visual symbolization can be diagnostic tool of a patient's mental state throughout treatment.

In art-psychotherapy the unique characteristics of visual symbolization enable expression at different levels with visible products that can enhance development in the patient's level of symbolization that can initiate therapeutic change.

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