

How does an object become symbolic? Rooting semiotic artifacts in dynamic shared

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This paper assumes that people can use objects as symbolic resources: they watch films to imagine places they will see one day, they keep objects that remind them of past events, they listen to music to change their mood, and they read about other people's lives to guide their own (Hijmans, 2004; Gillespie, 2006; Zittoun, 2006). If this is so, then people can be changed by their uses of symbolic objects. But how do objects become symbolic in the first place? Adopting a developmental outlook, I distinguish the semiotic properties of objects (their socially acknowledgeable meaning) from their symbolic functions (how a specific person might use it). On the basis of Nelson's work on children's development (2006, 2007), I present four modes of representing which coexist in adults. The paper argues that objects become symbolic for a person, firstly, when their multiple semiotic modes meet the diversity of representing modes in the person, and can thus be rooted in embodied, event specific memories; and, secondly, as these modes of representing are rooted in interactions with significant others. The argument is exemplified through a case study.

A developmental outlook

Before examining how people are changed by their interactions with symbolic objects, I need to specify assumptions characterizing the developmental outlook I adopt. Firstly, time's advance is seen as irreversible (James, 1890; Bergson, 1911; Valsiner & Connolly, 2003), even if time is not necessarily experienced as linear (van Geert, 2006). Secondly, I admit that people's experiences within the world, be they perceptions, memories, reflections, or embodied experiences, leave some traces in them. These traces can be called elementary signs – intrapsychological ones – on the basis of which other experiences will be apprehended. Other signs are visible in the world, and are the object of shared understanding by humans. These can also be organized in more or less complex semiotic signs. One way or another, signs in the world are translated into internal signs (or internalization), and inner signs find an expression in shared signs (externalization). These processes of sign

constitution and exchange can be called semiotic processes. Semiotic processes are central to the developmental approach chosen here (Peirce, 1868a, 1868b; Vygotsky, 1934). Thirdly, semiotic processes and changes occur while people are interacting together or with objects; and these interactions take place in specific settings, which enrich and guide the semiotic processes taking place. I will thus adopt a dialogical approach to account for the ever-going interactive nature of human action, both intrapsychological and interpersonal (Marková, 2003), and its inscription in a systemic organization, affecting, and affected by human conduct (Cole, 1996; Wertsch, 1998). These complex interactions can be described as developmental systems (Fogel, 2006; Nelson, 2007; Valsiner, 2007).

Two criteria for developmental changes

If the person is constantly changing, what sorts of changes can actually be considered as developmental? Two possible answers to the question can be seen as complementary.

A systemic outlook on change enables us to define development in theoretical terms (Valsiner, 2007). A system can constitute “series of semi-stable patterns of behavior” (Fogel, 2006, p. 8), called *attractors*. For example, in the socially situated system constituted by a mother–child interaction, an attractor might be a stabilized pattern of child smiling to a smiling mother. Fogel (2006) differentiates three types of changes. Level 1 changes occur within an attractor but do not modify it: when sequences of gaze and smile between a mother and a child recur through time, they are different occurrences of the same pattern. Level 2 changes imply innovation. “A change in the pattern of change” (Fogel, 2006, p. 15), they can lead to new attractors. Finally, level 3 “developmental” changes require the whole system of attractors to change: they designate “the creation of new attractor patterns and the loss of others. Development is the destabilization, re-organization, and re-stabilization of the collective system of historical attractors” (Fogel, 2006, p. 15). In such a view, development occurs only when there is a major reconfiguration of the system.

This theoretically defined criterion assumes that complex reconfigurations of attractors are of more developmental value than local changes. Yet this might become problematic when applied to human development. For example, when a child-farmer is given a weapon and asked to shoot, it leads to a level 3, major reconfiguration of his daily life (Hundeide, 2003). In developmental-systemic terms, his becoming a child-soldier is developmental. If this is intuitively disturbing, it is because this theoretical criterion does not account for the specificities of human life in its environments. I therefore propose to complement this view on development with a second criterion that can be called “humanistic”. Openly normative, it is based on the idea that changes in the system induce intrapersonal, interpersonal, and person–environmental changes, which might be more or less adequate for the person

and for the environment. In this frame, development designates a change that, for a given person, is subjectively perceived as standable (i.e., it does not cause an unbearable physical or psychological pain), and is also minimally tolerated or acknowledged by her environment (i.e., the person is not radically marginalized). Of course, the threshold at which social exclusion becomes a psychological burden is highly dependent on the person's specificities, so development becomes very case-specific. According to this second criterion, thus, a change is developmental only when it can bring the person to possibilities for further changes – when it is generative for that person.

Combining the theoretical-systemic and the humanistic criteria, one might say that development requires level 3 changes that enable further change trajectories. In this paper, I propose to identify moments that demand major reorganizations in people's lives (that might lead to level 3 changes). I examine the role played by semiotic artifacts in reorganizations that appear generative – that is, developmental.

A semiotic object, a symbolic object

In this chapter, I distinguish the notion of *semiotic* from the notion of *symbolic*. Something is “semiotic” if it has sign-like properties for someone – that is, if it carries meaning. The notion of “symbolic” is used to designate a unique relationship between a person and an object. This does not correspond to Peirce's distinctions between different sorts of signs, for which “icons” resemble the objects they designate (a picture to a person); “indexes” have some association with what they designate (the smoke for the fire); and “symbols” are purely conventional (this distinction is used by Nelson, 2007, to which I refer below).

A semiotic object

Any object that has a part in a culture is semiotic to some extent – it has some qualities of a sign. Semiotics, the science of signs, proposes this definition:

A sign is any physical *form* that has been imagined or made externally (through some physical medium) to stand for an object, event, feelings, etc., known as *referent*, or for a class of similar (or related) objects, events, feelings, known as *referential domain*. In human life, signs serve many functions. They allow people to recognize patterns of things; they act as predictive guides or plans for taking actions; they serve as exemplars of specific kinds of phenomena; and the list could go on and on. (Sebeok, 2001, p. 3)

Because objects afford actions, evoke feelings, designate histories of objects and usages, and designate genealogies of intentions and inventions, they are always likely to engage semiotic processes in people. This can be said even if

people are unequally aware of the semiotic contents of a given cultural object. For example, a simple stone that a person finds in the woods might mean nothing more for her than its stoniness; yet, an archaeologist recognizes the fine carvings indicating the stone's religious meaning for a specific tribe. An object can thus have various semiotic functions, due to its materiality, its location in historical time, its link to groups, and its ability to evoke complex knowledge systems, narratives, ideas or states of the body.

Some cultural objects, such as books, films, or songs, enable people to have *cultural experiences* such as watching a film, listening to music, or participating in a ritual ceremony. The term *tertiary artifact* has been used to name such objects that do not have an immediate function in the economics of exchanges, and enable off-line imaginary experiences (Cole, 1996). These objects can also be defined as *bounded* (they have clear semiotic or material boundaries), and are *primarily intended to convey meaning* encapsulated in diverse semiotic modes (music, colors, words, textures, etc.) (Zittoun, 2006). Mostly, they are also *multimodal*: their meaning is experienced by people through the interrelations of different semiotic systems or modes (language, music, colors, shapes). The parallel meaning of these different semiotic modes, their contradictions (for example, when in a film the images are happy and light, yet the music is tensed and suggests some danger), which can be synchronic or successive, and their internal transformations (for example, when music changes tonality), are also meaningful (Iedema, 2003; Baldry, 2004; Constantinou, 2005). These tertiary cultural objects are, in principle, available to everyone (in a given society, although social and economical power can constrain this access), but require that people master the semiotic system that is contained or carried by them, if they want to understand their shared meaning: one needs to be socialized to thrillers to be able to build up the suspense and anticipate the dangers when watching such a film (one often needs also to know the cultural context of the object to fully understand its meaning). Such objects carrying meaning I call *semiotic objects*.

A symbolic object

It is thus also possible to examine what a given object means for a particular person. Within the limits of this paper, I will say that an object, which is always social and semiotic, becomes *symbolic* for a person when it evokes some significant experience for her: the object means something *personal* for that person, regardless of its socially shared meaning. Thanks to the personal sense they have for people, cultural objects acquire psychological functions. In Winnicott's work on transitional objects (1971), important functions played by symbolic objects in early development are identified. According to Winnicott, infants need to find a technique to learn to remain calm in the absence of the mother, although they might not yet have a stable feeling of their own continuity, and they might not yet be able to hold the representation of their absent mother. They might thus invest some available object,

such as blankets, teddy bears or a thumb, which are somehow carrying the value of their relationship to the mother. These objects symbolize something of the mother's ability to comfort and reflect the child, and the child's own feeling of safety and continuity when she is with the mother. Winnicott calls this object *transitional*, as it leads to the child's ability to represent himself and his mother as two separate entities. It is also meant to be both "created" – existing as related to the child's needs – and "found": the object has an existence in the socially shared reality and a material existence. The transitional object is thus symbolic in the sense that it is located at the meeting of the person's internal life and the social reality.

In the continuation of this work, various functions of symbolic objects have been identified in adults. Objects can have a *mnestic* function: they remind the person of some past event, state of mind or experience, as when a picture or a scarf reminds someone of a friend. They can have a *transformative* function: the person's emotional state can be transformed by the object, as when a person feels pacified after listening to a symphony (Bollas, 1992). People's representing abilities can also be transformed: playing with pictures, or reading comic books, which have framed contents, people might reinforce their own *thinking abilities* to frame and contain experiences (Tisseron, 1999). Objects can become *programmatic* (Zittoun, 2005): interacting with art objects might enable a person to explore options available to her and thus generate her own proximal zone of development (Vygotsky, 1934), as when a person leafs through *National Geographic* before traveling to an unknown country (Gillespie, 2006). From a more psychosocial perspective, objects – such as clothes or objects in one's room or house – have been shown to support people's sense of personal *identity* as well as their social position (James, 1890; Habermas, 1996). Finally, objects can play an important role in carrying emotions and experiential contents that people are temporarily not able to symbolize or to externalize. They can thus become *lockers* for traumatic or shameful experiences, as when an old piece of furniture is transmitted through generations because it is associated with an unspeakable family secret (Abraham & Torok, 1978; Tisseron, 1999, 2007).

Hence objects can be called *symbolic* when they endorse some psychological function for the person. This calls for a closer examination of the personal *sense* that an object has for a particular person.

A developmental model of representing

In order to show how semiotic objects can become personal symbolic objects, a model of how people make sense and meaning of the world is required. I propose to follow Katherine Nelson's (2006, 2007) developmental model of representing. The idea of representing relies on the assumption that signs (in mind) somehow designate other entities. Representations are semiotic (see also Valsiner, 2003); the term "representation" refers to the theoretical

tradition in which Nelson locates her work. I will use her distinctions between different modes of representing to discuss different semiotic modes.

The ontogenesis of four modes of representation

Nelson (2006) proposes to distinguish four levels of representation in the developing child. She starts with the hypothesis that infants have a first form of basic memory prior to representation, which she terms *experiential*:

Prior to representations there exists a level of memory that simply retains information about encounters in the environment that form the content for the emergent explicitly accessible representation of later infancy. These basic non-linguistic representations include whole events as well as concepts of objects, actions, and people derived from both individual exploration and social participation and interaction. (Nelson, 2006, p. 185)

From there, emerges a first form of representation that Nelson names *dynamic events*, which are rooted in experience, enacted and context specific. Daily patterns, routines or games, these dynamic events can include gestures, emotional qualities, interactive dynamics, words, objects, and so on. Later on, children's attempt to confer meaning on words will be rooted in these dynamic events: it is only progressively that they will identify which part of the dynamic event is designated by the word used by an adult (Nelson, 2007). Thus, an early form of representing is enacted, situation specific, and emotional, and does not yet exist as representation in the mind.

The second level of representation proposed by Nelson (2006) is *imitation*. There is an important phase during which children are repeating gestures, words, or emotional states from their environment. They are not representing anything through these actions; yet, through imitation, they maintain relationships with others and obtain reactions from them (Nelson, 2007).

The third level of representation is given by access to *semiotic systems* and, in general, language and cultural representation. Language is acquired, partly thanks to the two previous levels of representing. At some point, children use words through imitation, or as part of experienced routines. Their use of the word might be adequate in terms of communication and understood by adults, although words do not designate the same sorts of representation in the children and in adults. These pragmatically correct but psychologically inadequate uses of words enable children to elaborate approximate representation of the uses of the words in various contexts: through iterations and others' reactions, they restrict or extend their next uses of the term. (Nelson, 2007; see also Vygotsky, 1934). Once acquired, this level of representation can guide and shape dynamic events. With the progressive mastery of narrative, children become able to share their states of mind, and to have access to other people's perspective. They have access to past and future, to what could

happen, and to what happens in imaginary worlds. This accelerates children's discovery of the world: they do not have to rely only on their first, direct, experienced perspective, but on the discourse of an infinite number of other people and possible experiences.

Nelson (2007) also brings evidence showing that small children clearly distinguish neither experiences happening to them from experiencing happening to others, nor experiences "for real" from experiences in fiction (arguing against Harris, 2000). Some school-aged children seem to think that what happens to Cinderella occurred to some real person long ago (Applebee, 1978, quoted in Nelson, 2007, pp. 174–175). A 2-year-old boy, Kurt, whose preferred story was *Peter Rabbit*, asked to have it reread many times. He started to retell it himself. These retellings were mixing elements of his own life and narrative elements, and he was at times the protagonist of the story (Miller *et al.*, 1993, quoted in Nelson, 2007, p. 176). Mixing fictional and experiential elements seems required for language discovery (Nelson, 2007). Yet, it is also a condition for understanding fiction, which demands a personal sense, obtained through an anchoring of the content of the shared meaning of the story into dynamic events, experience-based representing.

The fourth level of representing identified by Nelson is given by the child's access to complex, pre-existing semiotic systems. She calls this the literate *meta-cultural* level of representation (Nelson, 2006). It designates people's ability to participate in culturally structured knowledge domains, such as physics or economics. Firstly, the person's representing within one specific knowledge system is *domain specific*. In contrast, the two first levels of representation were *situation-bound*. Secondly, this knowledge and its organization are not specific to a person, but carried by and transmitted within a socio-cultural group. In some sense, it is the only level of representation for which personal experience seems not directly relevant (although even scientific thinking can be rooted in a very embodied metaphor; Paivio, 1991).

The coexistence of four levels of representation in adults

These four levels of representation can be seen in terms of dynamic system development: they can be seen as four stages in an intransitive series, of which each results from a reorganization of the previous ones (Fogel, 2006; Valsiner, 2008). This genetic description corresponds to the largely accepted view that more distanced, reflective, or metacognitive semiotic processes are possible at a later ontogenetic point than more embodied, context-specific ones. It is also often assumed that, consequently, the former are higher processes than the latter, which appear primitive or infantile (for example, Piaget, 1951).

In contrast, Nelson suggests that once acquired, the four modes of representing subsist all through life, the earlier one evolving under the constitution of more distanced modes of representation, joining here authors like Freud (1900), Janet (1934) or Werner and Kaplan, (1963):

This perspective on representational levels in development implies that earlier levels are not overridden by later ones, but continue to serve functions throughout life, although their organization and processing are transformed as they are integrated with later symbolic levels, specifically language and external symbolic system and especially written language. (Nelson, 2006, p. 189)

A distinction remains: corresponding to procedural knowledge, *dynamic events* and *mimetic representing* are mostly nonconscious, unless they are put at stake, as when a routine action is interrupted (e.g., when losing one's keys; Nelson, 2006, p. 189). Yet, dynamic events are not only nonconscious, but they might also be unconscious: they resemble the sort of embodied memory complexes that can be mobilized and used in the dream work (Freud, 1900; Bollas, 1992; Zittoun, 2007).

This developmental model thus suggests that once acquired, different modes of "representing" – a term more dynamic than "representation", which will be preferred from now on (Valsiner, 2003) – coexist and coalesce; they play different functions, and they are more or less based on culturally established configurations.

How do objects become symbolic?

Where objects are rooted in dynamic experiences

If we accept Nelson's proposition, dynamic events are groupings of bodily events, actions, emotions, perceptions, and other people's reactions, which are somehow memorized as systemic wholes. During language acquisition, words are not yet distinct components of these wholes. Not only words, but also other objects might thus become relevant to a person as they occur in significant, experienced situations. Typically, a child's teddy bear, which is a companion for sleeping, can evoke the whole dynamic event of falling asleep in a safe environment – this is what makes its quality of a transitional object (Winnicott, 1971). In the example of *Peter Rabbit* mentioned above, the story became Kurt's preferred story because it had immediate echoes in important experienced dynamic events. The boy started to be passionate about the story of Peter Rabbit – a young rabbit lost in a garden – as he was himself very interested by the family garden, where the story was also told to him (Miller *et al.*, 1993). Thus, it seems that a cultural object – word, teddy bear or story – becomes symbolic for a person only if it is rooted in experience-based *dynamic events*.

In adult life, given the multimodality of semiotic artifacts such as films or books, cultural experiences are likely to simultaneously evoke different modes of representing. The plot of a film might require the person to mobilize her knowledge of complex narrative genres (*meta-cultural* representing), understanding its dialogues requires language skills (*semiotic system* representing),

characters on screen can trigger *imitation* of states of the body, and sounds (e.g., deep rhythmical drums, whispers and breath sounds) might mobilize experiential, *dynamic events* (Tisseron, 2002).

Hence, our first hypothesis is that cultural artifacts can become personally significant to a person, because they are always to some extent enabled by embodied, nonverbal modes of representing, rooted in situation-based experiences.

Where objects are rooted in significant interactions

Objects become meaningful for people when they touch upon personal experiences and mingle with memories and embodied representing. Additionally, these interactions with objects occur in the presence of others – a condition for them to become *semiotic*. This is what Nelson represents in a quadrangle model, in which the *child concept*, the *adult concept*, the *word*, and the *referent* constitute poles (Nelson, 2007, p. 137). In that model, the child's personal sense and the adult's personal sense have somehow to be adjusted so as to progressively acknowledge the socially shared meaning linking a word to a referent. It is likely that objects, as well as semiotic artifacts, become relevant to a person in equivalent configurations. Yet this model accounts for the child's acquisition of the shared meaning of the object, but not much for his more personal use of the object.

Before proposing an alternative model, let us go back to Kurt's case (Miller *et al.*, 1993). The little boy was first told the story by his grandmother, and then at his demand, grandparents or parents read him the story again – daily or many times a day. The boy was also starting to retell the story, spontaneously or prompted by his mother. In doing so, he was linking the story with his own life, the mother remaining “attentive and responsive to what he says, she takes a nondirective role, mirroring back to Kurt what he just said” (Miller *et al.*, 1993, p. 99). The boy and the adults were not simply constructing a shared meaning of the story. More importantly, through their patience and their acceptance of Kurt's transformation of the story, the family members were acknowledging the sense that the story had for the boy. I believe that this acknowledgment was a condition of Kurt's ability of turning Peter Rabbit into a symbolic object.

I proposed the *semiotic prism* in Figure 7.1 to represent such configurations (Zittoun, 2006).

This basic configuration is focused on the *person*. It links her to a *cultural object* – which, as such, has shared meaning – to the specific *sense* that this object has *for her*, and to some *other person*, who can acknowledge that personal sense, or not. In our example, Kurt is attached to Peter Rabbit (the *object*) and to his mother (the *other*) – and both know the shared *meaning* of the story. Kurt's retold version reveals the *personal sense* the object has for him. The mother acknowledges the discrepancy between the *shared meaning* of the story and the *sense it has for her son*.

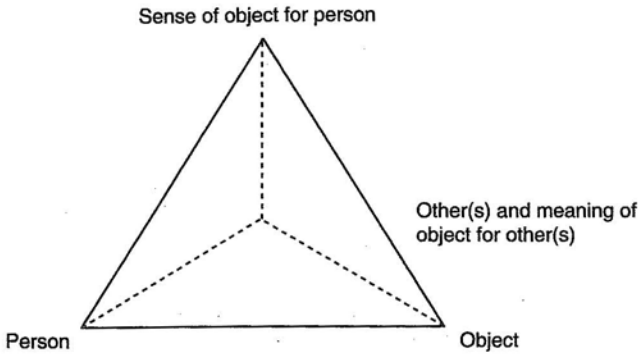


Figure 7.1 Semiotic prism.

Hence our second hypothesis is that an object can become personally significant only if the person's relationship to that object has been, to some extent, acknowledged by significant others (Zittoun, 2006).

Trajectories of symbolic objects: Mary and the arts

Semiotic objects become symbolic for a person when they are doubly rooted within several layers of representing, including experienced dynamic events, and within significant relationship to others. I suggest that this double anchorage is also the condition for people to use objects as symbolic resources.

As symbolic resource, an object is used with some intention, and an orientation that goes beyond the object. For example, Kurt's symbolic object, Peter Rabbit, is used by him as a *symbolic resource* to maintain his relationship to significant others, to symbolize important emotional and psychological issues, and to transform them thanks to progressive semiotic distancing (see Zittoun, 2005, 2006). Indeed, Kurt seemed to have been impressed by the fate of Peter Rabbit in the original version: the character is punished for his disobedience, and the enemy remains hostile. This might have met his own fear of being rejected by significant others, as the rabbit's transgressive actions might have found an echo in his own (Miller *et al.*, 1993). It is thus the ending of the story that Kurt is changing through his repeated version: in his first version, the disobedient Peter is rejected by his mother; in the last version, he is forgiven and even the enemy becomes his friend. The story has thus both evoked Kurt's desires and fears of punishment, and through repetition, offered the means to transform these emotions, until Kurt is able to externalize them through discourse.

Symbolic functions of objects, and with them, people's uses of symbolic resources, are not immobile and acquired once for all. Objects themselves follow symbolic trajectories: they can be moved within the layers of a

person's experience and modes of representing, and their psychological functions can change through time. Thus, in order to fully understand how objects become and remain symbolic, I propose to examine the evolution of their uses through time. So far, I have discussed only the case told by Miller *et al.* (1993), which shows the evolution of the sense given by a boy to a narrative over a 4-week period; the externalizations to which this leads are essentially discursive. We now turn to the case study of Mary. On the basis of her narrative, I propose to reconstruct Mary's uses of symbolic objects and their changing functions over 15 years, during which her main externalizations about these are graphic.

A case study of uses of objects

Mary's case was collected through an in-depth interview as part of a study on transitions in youth development (Zittoun, 2006). Interviews were reconstructive and semi-directive. Young people were invited to talk about the role of cultural experiences in their lives. They were asked to start from their present situation, brought to evoke their past, and questioned about their possible future. Any allusion to cultural experiences was then further explored. Mary, in her early twenties, was contacted as part of a group of secondary school graduates, as she was working part-time in a restaurant and in a bookshop. The interview was analyzed through the framework developed in Zittoun (2006) to identify ruptures, cultural elements mentioned by people, and their different uses. The sequences presented here were chosen as they narrate some relationship to a cultural object, in relationship to other people; semiotic configurations were thus identified. The importance of an object to a person is inferred on the basis of the externalization to which it has led the person (Tisseron, 1999; Zittoun, 2005, 2006; Nelson, 2007). The present interpretation addresses the continuities between these configurations.

Mary's story

Mary grew up with her mother, two older, and two younger siblings. As a child, Mary was a great reader and she used to draw a lot. The family being relatively poor, Mary started after-school jobs when she was 15 to earn a bit of money of her own. After her secondary school, she enrolled in a one-year art program that would lead to university entry. Eventually, family difficulties demanded her presence at home. She quit school, and started to work in a local shop, where she was quickly promoted to manager. Having to accept increasing responsibilities, she soon found herself overburdened and unable to change her situation. At that time, she met by chance her former drawing teacher, who, remembering Mary's skill in the use of color, encouraged her to enrol in evening art classes. This encounter gave her the distance she needed to decide to quit her full-time job for less demanding part-time jobs in order to enrol in an evening program in art. Mary was interviewed after she had

begun this program. Apparently, after the interview, she finally decided to devote herself fully to the study of art. Mary is a great book reader and enjoys creating art objects. Her relationship to books and art plays an important role in the orientations and reorientations of her life. Her story thus offers a case study to explore symbolic objects and their uses as resources in development.

Using and making art objects: from Cinderella to painting

Mary recalls her first experience of enjoyment with art when she was 3 years old. Her mother offered to get the children a box of finger paints. Mary recalls not so much the pleasure of painting as the expectation of that pleasure, which it seems, lasted for weeks:

You have to have the right time when it comes to children . . . with something so messy you need to have the time to have a look on it. I remember waiting weeks and weeks, "Mom, can we have the finger paints? . . . "No, not now, I have to do the shopping." "Oh Mommy, I really want to use these finger paints!" Yes, that's my first recollection of being able to do something.

Her brothers were also painting, and she explains that painting was also a means do the same things as they – even if it was painting the corridor of the public housing apartment! She speaks about her pleasure of drawing in childhood: "[My sister and I] used to sit at home and quite happily just draw. I used to be obsessed with fashion [and we used to draw all the time on every paper]." Also, a book became a resource to develop her drawings, when she was about 8 years old:

There was one particular book when I was very little, that I still have got now – *Cinderella* was my favorite tale, like probably most of the girls, and I found it really, really beautiful – it was only a 50-pence paperback – and I was . . . for years I was just obsessed with the designs, because they were so intricate on these pictures; I was . . . I used to draw seventeenth-century ladies for years and years! I tried so hard. . . .

This first meeting with *Cinderella* – probably through the mediation of the mother – seems to have moved her very deeply. The colors and the shape of the represented princess seem more important to her than the narrative itself. The attempt to apprehend this visual and tactile *Cinderella* is actualized through the act of drawing and painting, embodied semiotic modes of representing (Tisseron, 1999). Thus, the process of drawing seems early to be intertwined in some sort of emotionally significant *dynamic event*, itself enabling constructive *imitation*. These experiences are externalized, and thus her interests are made visible to others.

The practice of imitating figures that impress Mary remains, even if the object changes. Later, her mother takes her to the museum, and a new object gets her attention:

Also I remembered Mom taking us to see the Degas exhibition at the [local museum]; and they had *The Ballet Dancer*. And – I loved ballet anyway; my granny would love ballet and I'd have picked on her anyway. And I have been obsessed with that! You know . . . I was painting these dancers – ballet dancers! Pink tutus!

A new semiotic configuration appears as Mary is viewing *The Ballet Dancer* with her mother. Upon this configuration is superimposed another one: Mary's grandmother sharing her love for ballet. Thus, *The Ballet Dancer* appears overdetermined: on the one hand, the painting seems to touch upon Mary's early experience of Cinderella's dress; on the other hand, it is at the heart of Mary's relationships with two significant persons, her mother and her grandmother. This double anchorage of the painting brings Mary to more externalization through drawing and painting. Her attraction to dresses develops into an interest in observing and drawing dancers, and then more generally, human figures. She thus developed a skill in drawing bodies: "I am terrible at drawing buildings, and architecture. But I can do people just fine. . . . The thing with drawing is that it is practice . . . I think I can do it, because I practiced it." It thus seems that drawing became less specifically attached to the dynamic events associated with particular paintings, and to extend to other possible drawings of humans. Mary thus starts to master figure drawing like a language – a *semiotic system* – with which new sorts of characters can be created and proposed. Again, her compositions are shared and socially acknowledged, but by a social circle extended beyond the family:

And I had a group of friends when I was at primary school. . . . It must have been something to do with *The Ballet Dancer*. We would take pieces of paper that big, and I remember one girl was particularly good at drawing feet, and I was particularly good at painting heads and faces and someone else was good at drawing bodies. So we did ourselves, but each person did different bits . . . I had it for years, this long bit of paper, with [three girls on it]!

Mary also developed another semiotic system, that of colors. It also appears to have been stabilized as such through reiterated acknowledgment by significant persons: "My teachers always said, you know, I was really good at mixing colors, and they still tell it now. They can't be wrong, can they?"

Finally, Mary engages in an art foundation course. A foundation course is a one-year program preparing for the 3 years of undergraduate university studies; it enables students to explore different techniques and supports – drawing,

painting, sculpture – in relationship to art history. Mary has to specialize in one form of techniques, and for her:

My favorite thing was doing etching. It just stands out . . . so a lot of it was waiting . . . hoping for the best, that it will come out . . . You can sit and draw and design all you want, but you don't actually know what it is going to look like for . . . maybe until two weeks later.

Mary chooses to engage with the creation of objects which demand delay and expectation. She spontaneously emphasizes the component of waiting and uncertainty as she presents her passion for etching, as she emphasized her excitement as a child waiting to be allowed to paint. In her choice of techniques, we thus find echoes of her first memories of experiencing art (see Zittoun, 2005, for a similar use of artistic and cultural techniques as symbolic resource to master and tolerate uncertainty). We then also can read her choice of an art discipline essentially based on color as a continuation of her interest in colors. Finally, during this course, Mary's mastery of semiotic systems brings to a meta-cultural mode of representing: understand art within its culturally shared tradition. Mary learns complex techniques, to locate artworks in a tradition, and to orient herself within it, thanks to books and museums (see also Ivinson, 2004).

Mary's relationship to art objects has become increasingly culturally mediated, and has moved through modes of representing – from early childhood pleasures in dynamic events to imitation, through the mastery of the language of colors, before entering the expert domain of art. This evolution occurred in the constant presence of acknowledging others – the mother, the grandmother, school friends, and art teachers, who seem to have legitimized this commitment.

Using books: from Cinderella . . . to folk tales

Mary does not mention experiences of being read other stories than *Cinderella*. However, she describes herself as someone who has always been a great reader: "We always read at home, anyway – just always. If it was raining outside and we couldn't go outside, me and my brothers did the same – we would always read books." Books just seemed available, probably provided by her mother. Additionally, reading certain books becomes a way of regulating her relationship to older siblings: when they rejected her, reading in her room protected her; at other times, reading books they liked was an attempt to get closer to them.

Mary speaks about her current reading practices: she reads light books as a way to relax, books she hears about, or books that might offer the information she needs. She has a series of preferred books, to which she returns: "I read books now that I was reading when I was 7 or 8; even so, I go back to them occasionally." She explains that she rereads some books because they

just happen to be there, some to check a detail, and others in order to change her mood:

One of my favorites is *My Family and Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell . . . I used to want to be a vet, when I was a kid, and this guy became – he started up a Jersey zoo. But they actually serialized it and put it on the TV, and I saw it when I was about 14 or 15, on *BBC Sunday Afternoon*, a family thing, that you can sit with the whole family and watch. And they put this on TV, and I'd never heard of it before. And it is just full . . . it is full of the most hilarious incidents. Basically, his mother gets taught to move the whole family, three brothers and a sister, she gets taught by one of the older brothers to move the whole family from England to Corfu! And she is like, "Oooh, darling", you know, she is like a very skaty English bourgeois who would rather not do anything but her garden. And the youngest one, Gerald Durrell, is obsessed with animals. And it is just full of various mishaps, involving animals and his family, and friends visiting. Well, the whole family just creates havoc all the time! And the frightening thing is that it's his autobiography from when he was a child! [laughs] And that always cheers me up, if I feel in a bit of a bad mood, I will just pick it up and this would cheer me up every single time.

My Family and Other Animals is first a show discovered as Sunday family TV watching. It also seems to represent a complex family structure which resembles her own. The story seemed initially powerful for Mary because it echoed her daily basic dynamic events. Watching the story on TV was probably also a shared experience. Additionally, Mary knows that the author had interests in animals similar to hers, and could be a sort of identity model. Thus, *My Family and Other Animals* becomes a symbolic object, as it is doubly anchored in a shared familial experience, and in a reality that reflects her early memories. Her attachment to that story has migrated from the film to the book – a private re-enactment of shared film-watching. Mary can still be cheered up by that story probably because she can reactualize emotional states associated with these childhood events.

Yet, rereading books is for Mary not simple repetition:

Even though I've read the whole book, I know that I know the whole book, there will be something else that I'll see in it . . . maybe, maybe it is age, maybe it is growing up. You just see more details . . . different details, different incidents – just other things come out. Maybe they don't mean as much to you when you are younger.

Rereading a book is a means to distance from oneself, to compare current experience of the book with past ones. It enables us to establish continuity with our past, while also, by realizing our own change, to define a new

position for oneself. Rereading appears to have the same functions as children's retelling of a story (Miller *et al.*, 1993): it is a way both to master the story and to transform the sense it has for self; therefore, it is a way to change oneself.

Mary's reading habits vary over time; yet she has maintained an interest in one sort of books: "I always, obviously I have always been interested in fairy tales and folk tales, so I actually have quite a nice collection of that sort of thing." Even if Mary has a long-standing interest in fairy tales, it has gone through changes since her first fascination with a particular version of *Cinderella*. That book was anchored in significant dynamic events; she has now a form of expert metacultural knowledge of the domain of folk tales. Thus, *Cinderella* has given birth to a second line of distancing through which Mary accedes to *metacultural* representing of narrative styles. Here also, the presence of social others and the dynamic of recognition around books are constant and changing, involving the mother, the brothers, and eventually, the customers of the bookshop in which she works.

Symbolic objects, semiotic reconfigurations and development

The case of Mary enables us to reconstruct the semiotic configurations in which objects become symbolic. These configurations seem to evolve, or rather, to be constantly reconfigured within the flow of experience. The first symbolic objects of Mary – an illustrated edition of *Cinderella*, a box of paints – rooted both in significant relationships and personal embodied experience, remained important for years in her life, and created options for further changes. Mary pursued her exploration of *Cinderella* in a series of experiences that seem to be variations of an initial configuration – reading a book with her mother, looking at a painting with the mother, and looking at a painting with her grandmother. At the same time, the experiences are extended to different situations, and thus progressively less attached to initial dynamic events. These experiences, as well as the externalizations to which they lead, are acknowledged by an enlarging social circle.

These reconfigurations go along with a real transformation of Mary's modes of representing. Mary's first externalizations through drawing are simply *imitating* until they become the mastery of a complex graphic *system*, before being anchored in art as *cultural domain*. As we have seen, Mary's modes of representing in relation to books go through parallel transformations, from dynamic events of being read stories, to *metacultural* representing of the folk-tale collector.

Mary also extends her uses of books as symbolic resources. After having been read stories, she starts to read others with some intentions – for example, to be acknowledged by her older siblings. She then chooses when and what books to read to fulfil various functions: to gather information about the world or about books, to reconnect with her past, or to transform her emotions. Such reflective uses of symbolic resource can be seen as a form of

semiotic expertise: they imply a reflective stance, from which aspects of the fictional universe created by the artifact are seen as related to, or deliberately put in relation to, aspects of the person's own experience, others, and the world, and this in the present, the future or the past, be these aspects very experiential or very abstract (Zittoun, 2005, 2006).

These changing uses of objects thus engage developmental processes. In developmental-systemic terms, Mary's repetitive drawing of the same object can be seen as a first level of change, and the replacement of one aspect of a semiotic prism by another one can be qualified as innovation of patterns. Finally, the move of that pattern to the level of meta-cultural representation, as well as the reflective breach required by the use of art objects as symbolic resources, can be seen as level 3 changes. These changes reorient Mary's life and open new opportunities for her; they can thus be considered as developmental.

How do objects stop being symbolic?

Mary's case enabled us to follow the trajectories of objects becoming symbolic, and acquiring different symbolic functions through time. This raises the question, "How do objects stop being symbolic?"

Objects are symbolic when they are taken into the configuration that I have modeled as the semiotic prism. To remain functional, these configurations need constant readjustment – the object must have some echo in the person to acquire personal sense, which must be in tension with the object's shared meaning, in some real or imaginary presence of others. Symbolic objects can adjust to the changing experiences of the person: their sense can be redefined, and they have semiotic properties that make them enter in different modes of representing, and that enable them to be used for different functions. Yet objects might also simply lose their sense for the person once they have served their symbolic function: after his fifth retelling of *Peter Rabbit* during which narrative tensions were resolved, Kurt immediately lost interest in the story (Miller *et al.*, 1993, p. 108); Mary's *Cinderella* book lost its initial flavor as she developed a more expert interest in folk tales; tourists who have anticipated a trip to a remote country through works of fiction might totally abandon these once they have traveled. Simply, an object without sense for the person is expunged from its semiotic configuration. Losing sense, these objects lose their symbolic function – they become simply semiotic objects again – and they "fall into the limbo" (Winnicott, 1959).

Openings

The question of how objects become symbolic and stop being symbolic for a person has brought me to explore both meaning-making – the construction of language, socially shared meanings, and thus belonging to culture – and sense-making, which is rooted in the idiosyncratic echoes that objects

awake in people. Of course, both are complementary, and it appears that even personal sense-making is rooted in social relationships. However, with this emphasis on personal uses of objects, I hope to have shed light on an under-explored zone of inquiry.

Psychology has a long tradition of studying people's meaning-making. Generally speaking, what is of interest to the researcher is the construction of the normative, canonical, culturally expected skill, language or use of a tool (Bruner, 1992; Moro & Rodriguez, 2005; Nelson, 2007). Emphasis is usually on the child's progressive mastery of socially shared meaning and of semiotic systems. The examination of the personal sense of semiotic objects is mostly seen, at best, as a means to get there.

In contrast, I have proposed to confer full status on these more personal uses of objects. Following the personal sense given to objects might lead us to explore uncanonical and deviant uses of objects. Deviant uses due to idiosyncratic sense-making are not necessarily marks of pathological or immature modes of representation, nor are they only the mistakes through which correct use emerges. Our exploration suggests that fully examining these personal uses, and giving primacy to the personal sense given to an object – how objects can be both symbolic and semiotic – might be of primary importance to understand individual change, development, and possibly creation, innovation and social renewal.

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