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Aesthetic Perception Development during Childhood

Bachelor thesis

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Prohlášení

Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracoval/a samostatně. Všechny použité prameny a literatura byly řádně citovány. Práce nebyla využita k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze dne 3. Května 2024   Katarína Školárová

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Abstract

In my bachelor thesis, I aim to explore how children develop aesthetic perception by integrating aesthetics and developmental psychology. I analyse Edward Bullough's concept of aesthetic distance and its relevance to children's perception. Drawing on Jean Piaget´s theories, I discuss the stages of cognitive development and symbolic thinking. Additionally, I examine Catherine Swallow's research on aesthetic distance in children's perception of theatre. Through critical analysis, I seek to understand the developmental processes underlying children's aesthetic perception.

My thesis will consist of three main parts, one focused on the philosophy of aesthetics, the second on developmental psychology, and lastly, I dedicate a chapter to examining possible intersection of the thoughts of Piaget and Bullough.

Keywords: aesthetics, aesthetic distance, aesthetic perception, Edward Bullough, developmental psychology, Jean Piaget

Abstrakt

Ve své bakalářské práci se zaměřuji na zkoumání toho, jak se u dětí rozvíjí estetické vnímání pomocí integrace estetiky a vývojové psychologie. Analyzuji koncept estetické distance Edwarda Bullougha a jeho relevanci pro dětské vnímání. Na základě teorií Jeana Piageta se zabývám stádii kognitivního vývoje a symbolického myšlení. Dále zkoumám také výzkum Catherine Swallow zabývající se estetickou distancí při dětském vnímání divadla. Prostřednictvím kritické analýzy se snažím porozumět vývojovým procesům, které jsou základem estetického vnímání dětí.

Má práce se skládá ze tří hlavních částí, z nichž první je zaměřena na filozofii estetiky, druhá na vývojovou psychologii a poslední kapitolu věnuji zkoumání možného průniku myšlenek Piageta a Bullougha.

Contents

Introduction

My interest in the development of aesthetic perception brought me to the aim of connecting two distinct fields in my bachelor thesis: the field of aesthetics, and the field of developmental psychology. It is a general understanding that children´s point of view differs greatly compared to the one of adults´, especially when it comes to understanding art. Through this bachelor thesis, I try to come up with an overview of the gradual process of this development and I try to see how a child learns to distinguish the reality from art – an object of aesthetic perception.

Interested solely in the reception of aesthetic inputs, the concept of aesthetic distance will serve as a conceptual base for my thesis. In the first part of my thesis, I analyse and discuss the concept presented by a British aesthetician Edward Bullough in the beginning of the twentieth century. Although the concept is of complex nature, it tells us little about the development of this ability. I aim to see how Bullough´s work and his ideas could relate to children´s view of aesthetic objects. By conducting analysis of his article and consequently presenting some of the critical perspectives on his work by Oswald Hanfling, I try to present the work in a broad perspective and examine it in relation to the development of aesthetic perception of a child.

In the second part of my writing, I aspire to create a theoretical base for my main research problem. For this I have decided to lean mostly on the works of Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, as I view them to be very comprehensive and concise, especially regarding the development of the semiotic function, which is a crucial thing to discuss in relation to this topic. I briefly describe the stages of cognitive development and then I elaborate on some of them, discussing the stages of development of symbolic thinking.

Over the course of the thesis, I build upon critical analysis of selected works. Furthermore, in the last stage of my thesis, I examine research conducted by Catherine Swallow, focused on aesthetic distance and its effect on children´s perception of aesthetics in relation to theatre. I found this to be of great use to help me comprehend the concepts better and gain some authentic insight into the developmental processes I describe. Although this research does not serve as a foundation of my thesis, it offers a broader perspective on my topic.

1. Aesthetic perception

1.1 Edward Bullough and the concept of Aesthetic distance

In my following writing, I extract and draw from the thoughts of a British aesthetician and scholar, Edward Bullough, and his most well-known concept of psychical distance. (Bullough, 1912) Published in the year 1912 in the *British Journal of Psychology*, Bullough´s concept has been from then on discussed numerous times and as a very thought-provoking essay, it has risen many debates in the academic sphere. This influential work delves into the crucial role that psychical distance plays in the experience and appreciation of art. So, what does the term psychical distance, explained in the essay *"'Psychical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle"*, mean and what lies behind it?

Perceiving the world around us, one takes all kinds and forms of a distanced stance towards all the objects and experiences one perceives. A distance could be temporal or metaphorical one, but none of these meanings attribute to 'distance' as advocated here, although it will become evident in this essay that the aforementioned types of distance are unique manifestations of the concept of distance presented here. Thus, in the following discussion, we refer to the phenomenon as aesthetic distance. (Bullough, 1912)

This phenomenon might as well be understood as an attitude the spectator takes towards their object of perception and whether the distance is large or small, it alters the way the spectator views not only art, but the whole world around them. In Bullough´s own words, it is a force that *"appears to lie between our own self and its affections,"* (Bullough, 1912, p. 2)*.* Affections meaning all the practical concerns and feelings individuals normally carry within them; distance frees them from all this burden and allows the desired object to be perceived with "new eyes" – a distanced point of view. This new point of view brings novelty and deepens the experience, serving a special role letting the spectator submerge into it more profoundly.

However, distance point of view cannot be the one we take towards the world regularly. For the purpose of practicality, "*experiences constantly turn the same side towards us, namely, that which has the strongest practical force of appeal.*" (Bullough, 1912, p. 2) In our mundane life, it would not make sense for us to be aware of aspects of things or events that we are not immediately and practically affected by, "*nor are we generally conscious of*

impressions apart from our own self which is impressed." (Bullough, 1912, p. 2) The fact that suddenly, we are able to view the things or events happening around us from this new reversed perspective, makes us experience, as Bullough puts it, a certain "revelation", which is something that is crucial for an experience of art. Without this distance, art would be just a regular object of our perception, therefore there would be no art whatsoever. Being capable of distancing ourselves in this aesthetic sense, we open doors to a whole new way objects and events around can be manifested. The way Bullough puts it, this *"sudden view of things from their reverse, unusually unnoticed, side, comes upon us as a revelation, and such revelations are precisely those of Art."* (Bullough, 1912, p. 2)

Thus, aesthetic distance is indeed crucial for perceiving art, and in Bullough´s thought, it is a factor in all art. (Bullough, 1912, p. 2) This psychological distance enables a balance between emotional involvement and detachment, enhancing the universal relevance of art and enriching the aesthetic experience.

1.1.1 The antinomy of distance

Even though it is highly unlikely for us to be able to view anything objectively without considering our prior experiences and knowledge or our affections, there is still a notion of objectivity created. Therefore, even if we experience our subjectivity invading our experience, we tend to interpret it not as a sign of our personal subjectiveness, but as a trait of the perceived object instead. An escape from the mundane context of life is created and the usual is, within this altered perception, seen as if we looked at art. The mundane becomes aesthetically pleasing, the mundane becomes art. Escape from the practicalities of life, however, does not mean an impersonal experience without any connection to our being. Quite the opposite, an aesthetic experience takes us through an array of emotions, that now, without being linked directly to the "burden" of practicality we experience in our daily lives, has more space to develop. Thus, the experience remains distanced, but at the same time it remains highly personal, which might seem paradoxical, and that is why Bullough calls it the *antinomy of distance[1]*. (Bullough, 1912, p. 5) In other words, the antinomy of distance also refers to a certain tension, which seems to be inherent in the notion of psychological distance in the aesthetic experience. This paradox arises from the fact that, according to Bullough, the viewer must maintain a certain level of emotional detachment – mental or psychological distance, if they aim to have an experience of objective and analytical aesthetic appreciation, viewing the qualities of art quasi objectively. Moreover, there is also the fact that if this detachment becomes excessive, it might diminish the intensity of emotional engagement that could enrich the experience. There is always a desire for personal engagement present, which makes the forces contradictory and the relationship between them paradoxical. This tension between the desire for emotional engagement but at the same time, the need for distance, constitutes the antinomy of distance.

While the former allows us to feel connected to the perceived object and experience a deeply subjective response and empathy, the latter gives us a chance to engage critically and to stay detached just enough to also consider and evaluate the formal qualities of the art. It can be viewed a protection against complete involvement in the art piece - detachment gives us the benefit of objectivity and certain oversight which stops us from falling too deep into our emotions and losing connection with the object perceived. An excess of either one

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[1] Author´s commentary - antinomy is understood as a contradiction between two beliefs or conclusions that are in themselves reasonable.

of these would lead to losing the optimal balance of distance. The antinomy of distance is a contradictory congruence, an essential struggle for the right harmony and balance between these two forces. Antinomy of distance is naturally present in any engagement one experiences with an artwork, and it is through an interplay of these forces that one attains any aesthetic experience whatsoever.

Bullough argues that this distance is a fundamental factor in the aesthetic experience because it allows individuals to perceive and respond to art in a distinct and meaningful way. What is emerging here is, in Bullough´s own words, a peculiar relationship between the perceived work of art and the spectator. This distance allows individuals to engage with art as an aesthetic object, appreciating its formal qualities, composition, and symbolic meanings, rather than being overwhelmed by personal emotions or practical concerns. However, it is still not an impersonal or detached experience, nor it is "*purely intellectually interested*". (Bullough, 1912, p. 3) It is in every sense unique and essentially defined by this antinomy. The distanced view is often deeply personal, or even highly emotionally affected, yet cleared of the "*practical, concrete nature of its appeal*" (Bullough, 1912, p. 3) The experience loses its original constitution and redefines itself in this peculiar way. (Bullough, 1912, p. 3)

But is there a specific amount of distance needed for us to experience the desired feeling and can we somehow influence how much distance we will take towards the object of our perception? According to Bullough, the ideal state of psychical distance requires a delicate balance. Too much of a distance can lead to indifference or apathy, diminishing the emotional impact of the artwork. On the contrary, too little distance can result in excessive emotional involvement, hindering one's ability to appreciate the work objectively. Achieving an optimal psychical distance allows the spectator to simultaneously engage emotionally and maintain critical detachment, fostering a deeper understanding and enjoyment of the artistic experience.

Over-distancing refers to a state in which the observer maintains excessive psychological distance or detachment from the artwork. This can result in a lack of emotional engagement or a certain disinterest towards the object. When someone is *over-distanced*, they may struggle to connect with the intended emotions or messages conveyed by the artist. Therefore, as a result, the work of art may fail to evoke the desired emotional response or impact. Excessive amount of distance toward the object of perception creates an indifference

which hinders the desired experience. Not enough attention nor interest is evoked and as a result, one can hardly experience any emotional impact of the art piece whatsoever. Simply put, wanting to feel or understand something, a certain amount of an ability to relate to what is going on is always needed. Even an excessive temporal distance can cause the spectator to fail in doing so. (Bullough, 1912, p. 5)

On the other hand, *under-distancing* refers to a state in which the observer is overly emotionally involved or immersed in the artwork. This can lead to an utter loss of objectivity and critical analysis, as personal emotions and biases end up hindering the appreciation of the qualities and meanings of the art. When one is *under-distanced*, they may be overwhelmed by their own emotional response, making it difficult to perceive the artwork in a balanced and nuanced way. (Bullough, 1912, p. 5)

For instance, consider a person reading a novel that addresses a sensitive and personal topic they have experienced firsthand. If they become so deeply immersed in their own emotional associations and memories, they may end up struggling to view the novel as a work of art separate from their own experiences. It triggers an emotional response so strong that it completely overshadows an enjoyment they might otherwise have. Aesthetic qualities of the piece might be dismissed, and they might also fail to see the artist´s intentions and symbols and focus purely on what they have experienced and gradually become absorbed in it. One can hardly appreciate art they are looking at when all they can see, and feel are their prior experiences and strong emotions. This becomes especially tangible in the case of painful memories, traumas, or other unpleasant prior experiences. On the other hand, in the case of positive experiences the manifestation of art towards the viewer might become stronger and even enhanced by it. One could relate more closely and personally, but the risk of crossing the line and ending up absorbed by what they have gone through or what they are feeling is high. Therefore, they could end up not perceiving the art as an art piece per se and fail to take a distanced stance towards it.

1.1.2. Subjectivity of Distance

All the aforementioned considerations remain highly personal and are tightly tied to individual characteristic, traits, and set of experiences of a person, as well as to the context, in which this relation between art and spectator emerges. Someone may prefer a deeper emotional immersion and connection with the artwork, while others may prioritize a more detached and analytical approach towards it. Different artworks also need to be differently appreciated, thus there is a crucial role played by the artwork as well. Different levels of accessibility of art also require different amount of distance for their proper understanding. Viewing a drama tragedy as an art piece which is less accessible to a spectator than a light comedy show, we are free to say that the former requires more engagement than the latter. Thus, there is a bigger amount of distance required to fully appreciate a comedy piece than the one of tragedy.

Aesthetic distance takes place within another peculiar relationship, that is one of a spectator, art piece, and of course, it´s creator, and the final experience one extracts from it, is created by a concurrence of them all. However, our artistic "readiness" also matters. Quoting Bullough, "*It will be readily admitted that a work of Art has the more chance of appealing to us the better it finds us prepared for its particular kind of appeal. Indeed, without some degree of predisposition on our part, it must necessarily remain incomprehensible, and to that extent unappreciated.*" (Bullough, 1912, p. 4) Therefore, how successful the art piece will be in its disposition of appealing to us artistically depends on how prepared we are to receive it. That means both emotionally and intellectually. In Bullough´s words, a certain "*concordance between the characters of a work and the spectator*" needs to take place. (Bullough, 1912, p .4)

The absence of such concordance could be either explained as a difference of "tastes", as Bullough puts it, or, in my perspective, a simple intellectual unpreparedness, which could stem from a variety of causes. As I will discuss more deeply in a later part of this thesis and that way elaborate on Bullough´s thoughts, one of them could be a factual immaturity of a man - a child would be simply incapable of understanding an art piece to such an extent that adult person would be capable of doing. Apart from that, it seems to me that a certain harmony needs to be found in order to get a proper aesthetic experience. Drawing on the thought above, one cannot find aesthetic pleasure in a matter one is not

interested in.[2] The contribution on one´s part would not be sufficient and therefore there would be no way of properly engaging with the art. Throughout an individual´s life, through some initial preferences and later encountered experiences, one is developing a unique set of aesthetic preferences, which, in other words, could be called an aesthetic taste[3]. An important element of this so-called taste is also a certain perseverance, which leads us to build upon our preferences – one explores visual art, literature, music, and any other form of art already based on one´s preference, hereby one exercises their taste and dives deeper into their preferred forms of art. Furthermore, in my point of view, one also tends to create certain personal "bubbles" of matters they are interested in and then surrounds oneself with that kind of art in particular and omits the rest. Building upon ~~this~~ aesthetic taste is a lifelong process. It seems that we often deliberately choose our desired objects of aesthetic experience, hence that way we exercise our aesthetic taste. (Munro & Scruton, 2023)

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[2] See *Antinomy of Distance* – 1.1.1 – p. 10-12

1.2. Critical perspective on Edward Bullough´s concept of aesthetic distance - Oswald Hanfling and the "Five Kinds of Distance"

This consecutive part is dedicated to presenting a critical perspective many on the account of Bullough´s concept of aesthetic distance. (Bullough, 1912) As a very foundational concept in the field of aesthetics, it has been supported, but also rejected by many. I provide an extensive overview of Oswald Hanfling´s critical take on the subject, presented in his article titled "Five Kinds of Distance". This article provides a thorough analysis of the one written by Bullough, where, although supporting the relevance of Bullough´s idea, Hanfling presents several objections with a clear categorization. In Bullough´s singular concept of distance, he seeks to distinguish five different kinds of it. I find analysis of Hanfling´s writing to be a great contribution to the thesis, as it supports understanding of the concept of aesthetic distance on a deep level. It lets us build upon it and continuously integrate remarks possibly tying this examination of aesthetic distance to the children´s aesthetic perception development. That is why, in the following paragraphs, I intermittently intend to link Hanfling´s five kinds of distance with potential scenarios incorporating a child spectator instead of the adult one.

"We enjoy, it appears, the contemplation of artefacts and performances that are, and yet are not, like the real thing. The indirect, ´distanced´ experience provides a special kind of enjoyment that the direct cannot provide". (Hanfling, 2000, p. 96)

The "Five kinds of distance" by Oswald Hanfling, is, as far as I believe, an article that can help one understand Bullough´s concept in a deep and nuanced way. How can we, more concretely, contemplate the concept of psychical or aesthetic distance? How does it constitute our aesthetic experiences? And how can we tie it to the main motive of this writing? The article, which was published in the year 2000 in the *British Journal of Aesthetics* elaborates on thoughts of Edward Bullough, analysing the concept of psychical distance. Hanfling argues that Bullough's concept of aesthetic distance may be too rigid and not universally applicable and at the same time highlights the complexity of aesthetic experience. Overall, he suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach, such as Bullough's concept of aesthetic distance, may not adequately capture the diverse ways in which people engage with and appreciate art. Distance, in Bullough´s sense, was intended to serve as a unifying concept that allows for the synthesis of contradictory artistic concepts (such as subjectivity

and objectivity) or the labels idealist and realist and others. These are mentioned by Bullough as opposites reaching synthesis in the more fundamental concept of distance.

He argues that distance is an encompassing concept that brings together several different kinds of distance – hence, Hanfling separates five distinct kinds of distance with their own specifications. Moreover, Hanfling´s work is of great use – with the concept of aesthetic distance deconstructed and analysed thoroughly, it will be easier to look for the components that might be present in child´s aesthetic perception.

Over the course of the article, Hanfling builds on direct quotes from Bullough´s original article. His breakdown of five kinds of distance is as follows:

1. Distance 1 – cutting out the practical side of things
2. Distance 2 – between the feelings of fictitious characters and those of audience
3. Distance 3 – between art and reality
4. Distance 4 – between a work of art and its audience – accessibility
5. Distance 5 – between the work and the artist

1.2.1. Cutting out the practical side of things

In the first kind of distance, Hanfling recalls Bullough´s famous example with the fog on the sea. As for most people, witnessing a foggy view whilst cruising the sea is an unpleasant experience – however, taking a distanced stance towards it can help us witness the experience with new eyes, making it a beautiful spectacle. Therefore, by turning towards the aesthetic side of things we shift away from the practical part of them – we "cut out the practical side of things", as Hanfling puts it. As I have previously mentioned, this stance is not entirely disinterested nor entirely cut away from the practical – it is of a peculiar character. (Bullough, 1912, p. 3) This can be also put in practice when seeing and viewing, as mentioned, nature and natural spectacles, but also objects of everyday use, such as houses or cars. Moreover, paraphrasing Hanfling, sometimes even the practical use or purpose of the given object could contribute to the aesthetic experience we can draw from it, as it could be, for instance, in the case of sports cars.

"Such things are made for practical purposes, but it is also possible, and sometimes rewarding, to contemplate them from the aesthetic point of view". (Hanfling, 2000, p. 89)

Now I would like to offer an example which, I believe, affirms the previously stated citation and paraphrases. Mundane events witnessed in our everyday life are also a great example of shifting our point of view towards the aesthetic one and omitting the practicalities. Picture a busy square in the historical centre of Prague. It is nearly always full of people, roaming about, sightseeing, shopping, rushing towards their next destination, or simply enjoying themselves. If one is crossing this square in a hurry, needing to get to work as quickly as possible, they could hardly appreciate the beauty of this spectacle. On the other hand, if one would choose to slow down and take a minute to look around, they might find the view of the square pleasant, even enjoyable. They could witness people around them simply having a good time, appreciating their surroundings, or spending time with their loved ones. What would normally, trying to get to their next destination, with a focus only on the practical side of things, stand in their way, in this distanced state could be appreciated. Speaking from experience, this simple shift could sometimes change the whole perception of the place we find ourselves in.

This phenomenon, which is the same one illustrated by the example of a fog, however changes in the case of art. Art mostly presents itself to us with a single purpose – the purpose of aesthetic experience, and therefore there is no need or possibility for us to pick between the aesthetic or practical side of thing – they exist primarily as objects of aesthetic interest. An exception, according to Hanfling, can occur mostly in the case of literature, as there are sometimes practical issues debated, which can redirect our attention towards them and away from the text itself. According to Hanfling, in this scenario, we would "*´cut out the practical side´, not by attending to the non-practical aspects of a thing, but by attending to the things that are intrinsically non-practical"*. (Hanfling, 2000, p. 90)

From my perspective, it seems that this could happen with every kind of art, which is contextual and recalls actual issues, whether public or personal, which could the spectator start contemplating, and that way lose touch with the piece of art itself. This could lead to under-distancing or over-distancing of the spectator, which are two phenomena I have described prior to this chapter. As Hanfling puts it, the two kinds of errors that could take place, are either instrumentalism, which would use the work of art purely as a vessel of portrayal of some social or political issues, or unnecessarily considering the practicalities of art despite its irrelevance.

1.2.2. Between the feelings of fictitious characters and those of audience

Hanfling´s second kind of distance is one concerned with the channelling of spectator´s personal feelings and emotions into the art perceived. It is believed that, as it is mentioned earlier in my text, that there is a very delicate line to be stricken if one aims to enjoy the aesthetic experience adequately. However, in this case, we do not refer to the balance between practical and aesthetic, but between the right amount of emotional investment. One should be invested enough to feel involved and captivated by the art, but not as much that the emotional involvement would overshadow the art itself. An example provided by Bullough and discussed by Hanfling is one of a jealous husband watching a theatre performance of "Othello". A case of under-distancing could take place here, with the husband projecting himself into the role of Othello, being "betrayed" by Desdemona. His feelings of jealousy towards his wife would take over and completely hinder the experience – here, the husband is no longer perceiving the play itself, but himself in a made-up scenario, while this scenario is powered by the play.

Hanfling, however, views this example provided by Bullough as "too narrow". As there are usually more characters and an array of emotions to be identified with in each play, for a "*proper appreciation of the play*" (Hanfling, 2000, p. 92), one should probably identify with more characters than just one. What I believe to be Hanfling´s point here is that our experience is not that narrow, nor simple – we exist in a general, human situation and that often allows us to identify with more characters than just one. The way Hanfling puts it, this second kind of distance and the first one are interconnected and interdependent.

"If it is ideal to reduce the distance as much as possible in order to identify with the image, at the same time the distance between us and the practical side of the object increases." (Lojdová, 2011, p. 41)

Furthermore, could the projection of oneself into the art perceived not be a beneficial event for the spectator? I have found myself in a like situation with works of literature numerous times, and even though my emotional involvement in the subject might have taken me further away from the art per se, it has enhanced my experience and made the work more memorable for me as a reader. That way it made me dive deeper into the piece and arose a profound interest in me, which might have not been evoked if it were not for this. For this reason, I believe that under-distancing in this sense of the word, even if it truly does take the

spectator further from the story and arises more feelings from within, it does not necessarily hinder the experience, it deepens it.

This brings us closer to the main topic of examination of this thesis – how does the aesthetic distance function with young spectators? Is there any distance whatsoever, or are there certain limits to it?

"...the spectator may ΄forget΄, but must not really forget, that those characters and situations are not real". (Hanfling, 2000, p. 92)

Sometimes, even an adult is incapable of such thing. But in the case of children, this may become even more difficult – it can occur in theatre, or as Hanfling mentions, in the case of reading a scary story to a young child.

"At first the child is deliciously ΄scared΄, but there may come a point at which it is really scared. At this point distance has disappeared and the story is spoiled." (Hanfling, 2000, p. 93)

This might be caused by a gradually decreasing detachment from the story, which is leading to a complete immersion in the story, making the child truly forget the unreality of it – in Bullough΄s words, *"the utmost decrease of distance"* (Bullough, 1912, p. 5). Here, it is suggested that, for instance, the act of "breaking a fourth wall" in children΄s theatre could lead to the opposite – a sudden increase of the distance. It might cut the connection between children spectators and the story and spoil the whole experience.

1.2.3. Between art and reality

The kind of distance debated in this part is not that concerned with the spectator, as it is with the work of art itself – therefore, in other words, it does not discuss the distance one has between the art and themselves, but more the distance between the art and the reality it is attempting to portray. Bullough "ranks" types of art depending on the amount of threat to distance they constitute, regarding drama as the most "realistic" due to the fact one can witness actual people acting just the way people normally act in real world. (Bullough, 1912) Then, paintings, with their two-dimensional character along with the colour, lightning etc., as being prone to more distance due to these faculties. (Bullough, 1912) The biggest gap and difference between works of art and reality is created, according to both Bullough and

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Hanfling by "formal qualities", such as symmetry, precision, regularity, and other objective aesthetically satisfying qualities, which are not present in real life and human experience, or if they are, they take place due to human habits or customs, not for the reason of aesthetic pleasure. This is, however, not true with art. (Hanfling, 2000, p. 94) As far as Hanfling believes, *"... in actual life we are at mercy of unpredictable contingencies: they occur, as we say, ʹwithout rhyme or reasonʹ thus conforming to Bulloughʹs description. The work of art is not open to such contingencies; it is a finished object and, in that sense, ʹclosedʹ. "*(Hanfling, 2000, p. 94)

In other words, the spontaneity and immediacy of life cannot be fully conveyed and portrayed by the work of art – it is stiff in its stillness, closed to unpredictability and "randomness" of human experience. There is, of course, numerous examples of aesthetically satisfying qualities that can be found in the nature around us, or in the ways the world functions, whether it is the regularity of seasons, or the symmetry and mathematics embedded in the natural world around us. However, this would not be regarded a part of our "practical life", nor art, according to Bullough. As one of Bulloughʹs main theses is that "*art is not nature, never pretends to be nature and strongly resists and confusion with nature*" (Bullough, 1912, p. 8), art simply cannot be equated with nature solely through its definition. The concept of art has always distinguished creations crafted by humans from phenomena that occur naturally, independent of human agency. Symmetry, rhythm, or other formal qualities mentioned by Bullough could not be attributed to the acts of mere mundane regularity, such as daily tasks or regime one has (going to work or other daily human rituals). To conclude, this is what Bullough means by art being unrealistic – that art, even though often imitating life, can never cross this gap of spontaneity, caused by the *"unpredictable contingencies"* of life.

So again, even though art in certain sense imitates life, there is a specific amount of distance needed for a spectator in order to enjoy the art adequately. It applies for both the cases – under-distance or over-distance. With the latter, one might sense and *"impression of improbability, artificiality, emptiness, or absurdity"*. These kinds of art *"fail to invite a personal interest"* and create a gap too large. (Bullough, 1912) On the other hand, one enjoys a certain amount of distance, a certain amount of indirectness – without that, we would not be talking about art, but about a mere, dry reproduction of life, a documentary. Somehow, the art that seems to fulfil the *"ideal of art as an imitation of life"* (Hanfling, 2000)*,* do not provoke as many feelings or as much contemplation as some other pieces do and they are

often not regarded highly amongst the artworks. It seems that art needs to provoke some kind of resemblance, but simultaneously leave space for contemplation, because art too explicit somehow does not seem to give us the proper kind of satisfaction, the satisfaction of contemplation. That way, it leaves us with a lack of distance towards it – *under-distanced*. Thought-provoking and contemplative pieces are indeed a transformation of life and raw material, not just a mere reproduction – as Hanfling puts it, *"a magic of transforming quite ordinary things into objects of aesthetic interest and pleasure".* (Hanfling, 2000, p. 96) We are seeking art as a source of aesthetic pleasure, but for it to truly be art, there needs to be something hidden "behind" it, something that lets us create and contemplate its added value. Contemplation, in my belief, is therefore art´s whole raison d'être. As it has been quoted by Hanfling, the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer also thought the space for contemplation, or in his words, imagination to be absolutely essential for the enjoyment or art. Direct imitation, such as wax figures, could never become real works of art, *"for they leave nothing over for the imagination".* (Schopenhauer, 1818)

1.2.4. Between a work of art and its audience: accessibility

In this part, we finally get closer towards the question of accessibility in art, which is something that is deeply intertwined with the question of the aesthetic perception development of children.

Accessibility, or in other case, inaccessibility, can be created in various ways. Whether it is the age of the spectator, their level of education, or their momentary state of mind, which makes them unable to gain closeness and touch with the work of art perceived, it could be qualified as a certain unreadiness to, in that particular moment, view the art adequately. Moreover, it is not only the spectator who is important here; certain works of art might just be too nuanced, too complex to be understood. The artist might have failed to convey the idea appropriately, which results in an incomprehensible piece, too difficult for the spectators to grasp. Here, the art ends up being simply too obscure and thus unappreciated and diminished. Therefore, a proper experience depends on the character of both – the object and the subject. That delicate balance between over- and under-distance here could be characterized consequently: if we make the effort to understand the said object of aesthetic perception, we can understand it. The effort plays a very important role here, as it is the same

phenomenon discussed in the chapter prior to this one – something too easily accessible ceases to create a certain tension, need or space for contemplation.

"A satisfactory balance between under- and over-distance exists if understanding is possible but not too easy. If we make the effort, the unusual constructions and juxtapositions come to make sense and ´things fall into place´´. (Hanfling, 2000, p. 99)

Here we could argue that not only high art is art and that, sometimes, even light art, such as light pop music, corny jokes, or simple drawings can evoke aesthetic pleasure. That sometimes even art that comes easy and does not require a large amount of prior knowledge or intellectual readiness, is enjoyable. That is, beyond doubt, true. It is though, something distinct that is debated here, and that is that even in the case of that light music, if one wants to feel thrilled or pleased by it, it should not be entirely predictable. A successful piece of art, the one striking the right balance of distance, by making one *"acquire expectations which will be partially fulfilled and partially pleasurably disappointed".* (Tanner, 1985) With high art though, or with art of deep complexity, profoundness or density, the reward is usually higher, directly intertwined with the effort and readiness necessary. Such art, for instance, a psychological novel, could be sometimes understood on many levels: with less exertion, it might be still readable and comprehensible for the reader. The whole potential of the novel is, however, not realized – it does not *"easily yield up its riches to their full extent".* (Hanfling, 2000, p. 100) As an example supporting this case I can provide one of my own experiences – the experience of reading the novel *"Unbearable lightness of being"* by Milan Kundera. (Kundera, 1984) I have read it more than once, first time as a high school student, and the second time, as an undergraduate student of liberal arts, already taking philosophy-oriented courses. The first time, as much as it was pleasurable for me to simply read the novel, my enjoyment and understanding of the story was indeed truly superficial. However, as my knowledge and familiarization grew, I became more aware of the nuances hidden behind the story, the philosophical realm of it. I already became familiar with some aspects of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and I could pin down how Kundera builds the story around the concept of an "eternal return"[4]. (Kabir, 2011) My enjoyment of the novel grew

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[4] Author´s commentary – *Eternal return*, or as it is also known, *eternal recurrence*, is a philosophical concept stating that time is constantly cyclically repeating itself in an infinite loop – death followed by rebirth ad infinitum. This idea has been entertained by many already in ancient Greece and, with certain differences, revisited and revived by Friedrich Nietzsche in both „*The Gay Science*„ or „*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* ". (Kabir, 2011)

along with my readiness – as Hanfling puts it, there was an apparent *"correspondence between exertion and reward"* (Hanfling, Five Kinds of Distance, 2000).

Furthermore, there is one more journal article written by Oswald Hanfling that I will mention regarding this part. This article titled *"Paradoxes of Aesthetic Distance"* (Hanfling, 2003) is a piece dedicated to this exact part of Hanfling´s anterior writing (Five Kinds of Distance) (Hanfling, 2000), debating solely the kind of distance concerned with accessibility – distance between a work of art and the audience. Here, the idea is analysed on a deeper level, with direct examples referencing works of poetry. As it has been said before, overcoming certain difficulties seems to be essential for the enjoyment of not only poetry, but every possible kind of art. We aim to comprehend the thoughts, words, and sentences of the artist, but only with difficulties or a certain amount of exertion. (Hanfling, 2003) One needs to constantly have something to be overcome, something to be resolved. If an experience is to be enjoyed, it simply cannot come easy – it needs to be accessible only with an effort put in. This leads me to think of the philosophical thought of French existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. In several of her writings, she works with the idea of *surpassing* (de Beauvoir, What is Existentialism?, 2020). According to her thought, a human life is a perpetual cycle of constant surpassing, one "goal" after another, and that could be, in a way, understood as the whole purpose of it. We invariably, constantly, and indefinitely need some sort of novelty, next stage, or simply something to move towards – this mechanism is the raison d'être of our life. (de Beauvoir, What is Existentialism?, 2020) She explores this idea also in the first essay of hers ever published – a philosophical inquiry titled Pyrrhus and Cineas. (de Beauvoir, 1944) In this essay, de Beauvoir explores the human condition in its infinite need for a *"then what?"* question, which haunts us over the course of our whole life. We can see an essential need for future goals or future projects of any kind which lack finality and are in every sense non-absolute, as there is always something further to surpass. (de Beauvoir, 1944)

"Life is occupied in both perpetuating itself & in surpassing itself; if all it does is maintain itself, then living is only not dying, & human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation; a life justifies itself only if its effort to perpetuate itself is integrated into its surpassing & if this surpassing has no other limits than those which the subject assigns himself." (de Beauvoir, 1949, p. 49)

I see this to be something present also in the mechanism taking place within our aesthetic experience. The need for overcoming, on in this case, even surpassing, certain obstacles and difficulties, needing to pursue our aesthetic experience with this particular exertion if we want to arrive to the point of enjoyment and fulfilment, could be also characterised by the need for surpassing. What truly delivers pleasure is not remaining at one place and passively consuming what comes to us, but rather actively participating in the whole experience.
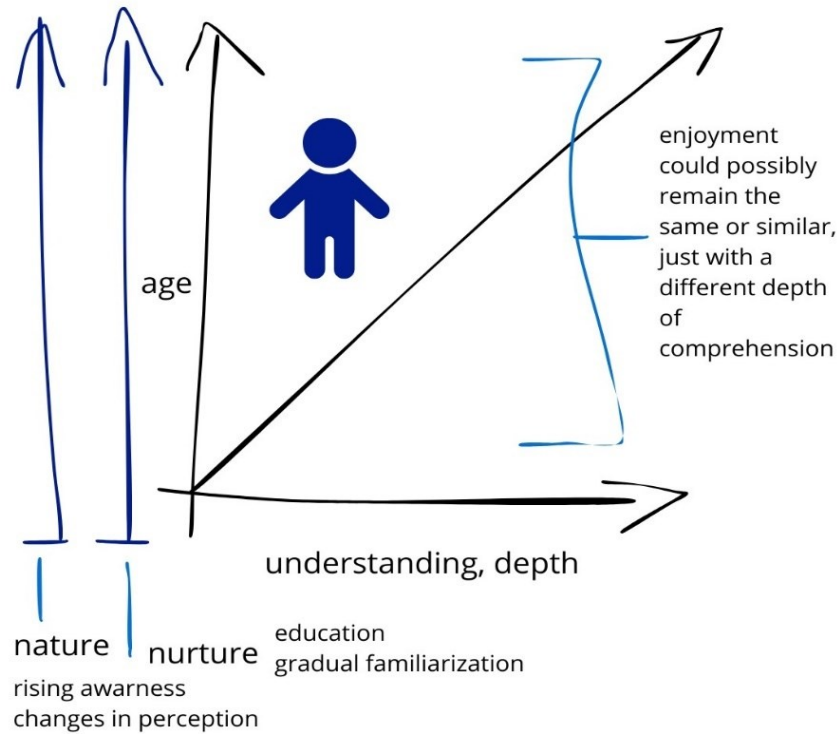
1.2.5. Accessibility – a child´s conception of the experience

Now, let us redirect more towards the main topic of interest of this writing – child´s conception of the aesthetic experience and its development. To illustrate the previously stated thoughts, we can picture a similar scenario to the one with the novel of Milan Kundera mentioned in the preceding paragraph. For the reason of accuracy, let us imagine it with a child spectator instead, and an objectively more accessible medium – a family movie. Movies belonging to this genre are usually characterized by being comprehensible for both children and adults, however, on very distinct levels. The content of the said film is appropriate for young viewers, but at the same time if often contains jokes or nuances hidden underneath the surface, which only reveal their full extent to the adults watching the movies. A child is simply amused by different aspects of the film than the adult – it makes it an entertainment for both generations. Normally, such films also contain a deeper thought or motive. Such is the case with many contemporary family movies – for instance, the issues coming with massive urbanization and degradation of the rural areas portrayed in the movie *"Cars"* or the environmental theme, showing the effects of environmental neglect and consumerism shown in the film *"WALL-E"*. For a young viewer, small child, the enjoyment of the film is based mostly on the stories of the characters, their activities, destinies, and possible character development, whereas older children could already aim to see the bigger picture and gradually, as they age, start to notice more elements of the story. As the child grows older, the distance towards the subject matter grows smaller by the means of education and familiarization, but also with many significant changes in perception.

Via the following image, I intend to illustrate previous statements and graphically support understanding of my thoughts.

age

enjoyment
could possibly
remain the
same or similar,
just with a
different depth
of
comprehension

understanding, depth

nature   nurture

education
gradual familiarization
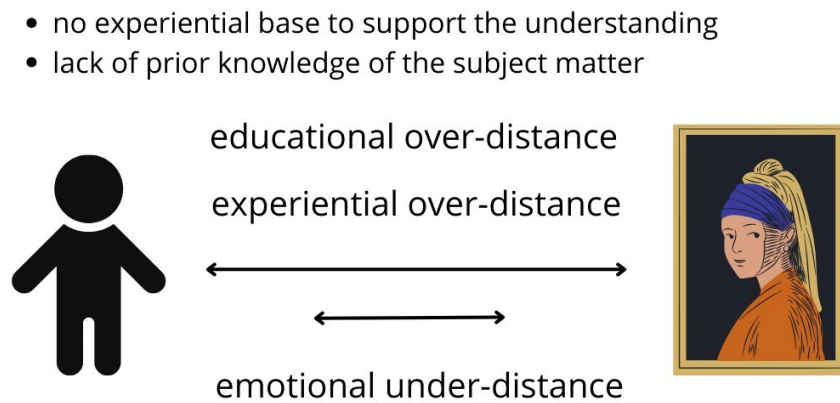
rising awarness
changes in perception

On the other hand, the emotional attachment might be sometimes even deeper than the one of adult´s, leaving the child under-distanced and too tangled up in the story. We could say that in this case, we are again talking about more realms of distance – emotional under-distancing, and experiential or educational over-distancing. As in this subchapter, we are talking about accessibility, what we are tackling here has more to do with the experiential and educational over-distance – we will cover the emotional stance a child might take towards art later in this writing. If over-distance occurs, it might be the case of the child lacking prior knowledge of the subject-matter or simply not having enough experiential base to support understanding of the topic. Whether that is the case of nature or nurture, therefore

genetical or environmental forces[5], both mentioned can lead to an excessive amount of distance.

All the previously stated arguments are deconstructed and debated further in the Chapter 2 of this writing, where we will take deeper focus on the psychology of a child and discuss the concrete stages of development according to the psychology of Jean Piaget.

The following image again serves as a visual aid of my creation for the purpose of clarity and readability.

Image No.2

- no experiential base to support the understanding
- lack of prior knowledge of the subject matter

educational over-distance

experiential over-distance

emotional under-distance

- more prone to feel emotionally involved, , higher probability of strong emotions or emotional attachment (e.g. towards the characters of a play/movie)
- insufficiently developed ability to distinguish between reality and fiction

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[5] Author´s commentary – nature vs. nurture - In psychology, nature pertains to the influence of genetic factors on an individual's personality, while nurture refers to the impact of environmental variables, such as relationships and experiences, on the developmental trajectory of a human being.

1.2.6. Between the work and the artist

Lastly, regarding the writing of Oswald Hanfling, we come towards the fifth kind of distance, which I am free to state is of a lesser importance to the main topic of this thesis - aesthetic perception development. As this writing is purely focused on the reception, not the production of art, the distance between the work and the artist will be mentioned only briefly.

Hanfling discusses the metaphorical distance between the piece and the artist in the sense of a certain severance between them – the art taking on *"a life of its own"* (Hanfling, 2000, p. 101)*.* In the process of a creation, one might gradually divert from their initial motive or intention – what might have started with an intention of self-expression, ends up being a piece of pure aesthetic enjoyment. As an artist wants to *"above all to produce a work of aesthetic quality"* (Hanfling, 2000, p. 101)*,* the initial intention might become abandoned in the process, progressively becoming more and more distant. Therefore, this kind of distance is precisely this – distance between the work of art and the artist´s actual, non-artistic character or intentions, taking a shift towards the purpose of aesthetic enjoyment, *"satisfying the aesthetics judgement"* (Hanfling, 2000, p. 101) of the said artist.

1.2. Conclusion

The previous analysis of Oswald Hanfling´s article "Five Kinds of Distance" brought us closer to the main subject matter by illustrating possible ways, in which an aesthetic distance can manifest itself. It aims to help perceive the thoughts of Edwars Bullough, which are foundational for this thesis, in a broader realm and simultaneously, by the means of deeper analysis, it helps us create a picture of what an aesthetic distance could practically mean.

Although now, we have dedicated a significant amount of writing to examining Bullough´s concept of aesthetic distance from multiple points of view, not much of this writing is focused on the process of development of this phenomenon. Despite having made numerous remarks on possible connections and takeaways in favour of exploring the development of aesthetic perception, in the first chapter of this thesis we stuck to a purely contemplative realm. That brings us forward to a consecutive chapter of this thesis, concentrating on the psychology of Jean Piaget and a child´s perception of aesthetic inputs. A detailed overview of the development of children provided in the oeuvre of Piaget offers a closer look at the topic, bringing more concrete factors into play, such as the developmental theory and an outline of mental progress of a child – stages of development. These help us dissect and break down Bullough´s theory while allowing us to build upon it in an interdisciplinary manner – connecting the field of aesthetics with the one of developmental psychology, just as intended. Furthermore, an exemplary study conducted by Catherine Swallow is provided and analysed, which will serve as a synthetising element of this thesis.

2. Child´s perception of distance

2.1. Introduction

How does one strike the delicate balance of aesthetic distance and are all individuals capable of such balance? How does this change with age? In my next writing, I focus on the relationship between children and art and the capacity of such distance. Although to get to a point, where we will be able to debate when children develop a capacity of a psychical distance, we need to start more broadly. To understand the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived, a context coming from developmental psychology is needed. Hence in the next writing I focus on children´s semiotic function, imagination, and development of symbolic thinking. When does a child begin to understand that what they are looking at is not a reality to be believed and imitated but an object of aesthetic perception to which they must adopt a certain distance? As throughout the developmental process, their essential tool for understanding the world around them is imitation - *mimésis*[6], and art could be also understood as a form of mimesis, how does the child learn to understand that art is a fiction and therefore learn to, at least partly, separate it from the world? How do they constitute their stance towards aesthetics? These are some of the questions the following chapter is looking to answer or, at least, analyse.

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[6] *Mimésis*, a term originating in the ancient Greek, has been widely used in philosophy and aesthetics, especially by ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. It describes the attempt of imitation or reproduction of reality by the means of creation. The term is derived from the Greek verb *mimeisthai*, which means "to imitate". (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2024)

2.2.Developmental psychology of Jean Piaget

2.2.1. Introduction

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, who lived and created at the turn of 19th and 20th century, is known for his work in developmental psychology, primarily focused on cognitive development in children. Piaget himself, however, preferred the term "genetic epistemologist", which is a field dedicated to studying the origins of human knowledge. (Tamm, 1990, p. 16) Observational exploration and constant hypothesis-testing were Piaget´s main tools. His research focused on understanding how children's thinking evolves as they grow, how does that impact their ability to learn and perform different acts and tasks, leading to the formation of his theory of cognitive development. The main takeaway from his lifelong work is the conclusion that children construct their worlds in a fundamentally different way, than is the one of adults´. (Tamm, 1990, p. 16) He interviewed children of different ages and carefully listened and investigated whatever they had to say, along with possible patterns and "errors" he witnessed throughout the process. In addition to his extensive work in the field of developmental psychology, Piaget made significant contributions to numerous other areas within psychology and education. His work laid the foundation for constructivist approaches to education, emphasizing active learning and problem-solving. Piaget also studied moral development, introduced clinical interviewing methods, and influenced educational reform worldwide. His research encompassed perception, language development, and reasoning abilities, leaving a profound impact on our understanding of human cognition and learning.

Although Piaget didn't extensively discuss aesthetic perception, many of his discoveries and ideas can be applied to understanding how children develop aesthetic appreciation. As they progress through the stages of development, their ability to understand and appreciate art becomes more sophisticated, reflecting their evolving cognitive abilities. It greatly contributes to the understanding of how cognitive development lays the groundwork for aesthetic experiences of children, although it does not provide a direct account of the aesthetic distance or aesthetic perception itself.

2.2.2. Piaget´s stages of cognitive development

The developmental theory of Jean Piaget provides a theoretical framework for further discussion of the previously stated questions and statements. My further exploration of child´s conception of aesthetics will be structured according to Piaget´s stages of cognitive development. This outline of mental progress from infancy through childhood to adulthood by contains four main stages of cognitive development. (Piaget, 2005) Each of these stages is marked by significant changes in thinking, perception, and understanding of the world. Each child progresses through these same stages, in the same order. However, they progress at their own rate, which is affected and intertwined with the biological maturation of the given child plus their interaction with the environment. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) It is important to note that Piaget, in his developmental theory, did not highlight the effect of nature, nor nurture, but rather emphasized the importance of both factors ; that psychology of child´s development should certainly not be limited to the examination of biological factors, but that the interdependence of both environmental aspects of development and biological predispositions should be taken into consideration. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) Piaget also proposed that in encountering new experiences, young infants engage in a cognitive process involving processes called *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Assimilation involves integrating new information and inputs into existing mental frameworks, while accommodation means adjusting and refining those frameworks to accommodate the new information. (Malik & Marwaha, 2023)

In the next paragraph, I briefly introduce and describe the four above-mentioned stages of cognitive development.

1. **Sensorimotor Stage**, which ranges from birth to the second year of life and consists of exploration of the child´s surroundings by senses and basic motoric activities. This stage marks the early phase of development where children harness innate abilities like sight, sucking, grasping, and listening to understand the world around them. Basic understanding of cause and effect and an object concept, which is described further below, starts to develop here – therefore we can say that children develop an understanding of causality and object permanence in this first stage. Causality can be comprehended by witnessing, for instance, an effect the child´s crying might have on the parent – if they cry of show signs of discomfort, the parent might come and take care of

them, give them the wanted attention. (Malik & Marwaha, 2023) Moreover, toys for children aged up to two years old also provoke this understanding – whether it is a toy, which sounds after pressing a button, or a basic rattle, in both cases the child can see the connection between their movements and production of a sounds by the toy. Child of this age is still in the process of developing skill in make-believe contexts such as play. (Shonmann, 2006) These children would therefore probably struggle with understanding concept such as fiction and theatre.

2. Preoperational Stage, with a span from two to seven years of life, where the ability of symbolic play and understanding develops. Development of language and communication skills is crucial in this stage of life. (Malik & Marwaha, 2023) Symbolic thoughts are also very important for both creative thinking and aesthetic reception, therefore this stage will be of great importance for the debated topic of aesthetic perception development. Egocentrism is very present in this stage of life, and it manifests itself in both play and understanding of the world. In other words, the child links everything to themselves and is unable to comprehend points of view different from their own. (Malik & Marwaha, 2023) Imitation is, in this stage in particular, one of the main tools for grasping and understanding the environment of a child.

3. Concrete Operational Stage, where children aged seven to eleven years start to use a basic logical thinking. A capacity to understand conservation emerges here. Basic problem-solving skills, reasoning, and logical operations take place. (Piaget, 2005)

4. Formal Operational Stage, starting at the twelfth year of life. Here advanced problem-solving, ability to comprehend abstract and hypothetical ideas, and to use logical and deductive reasoning starts to develop and it´s development can continue and improve throughout our entire life. (Piaget, 2005) Children and adolescents of this age can grasp theories, understand, and share abstract thoughts, or predict possible outcomes of hypothetical scenarios.

2.2.3. The semiotic function

According to Piaget, *"the ability to represent knowledge to oneself and others is a constructive process that presupposes a lengthy series of actions upon the environment. Mental representation by means of symbols, makes possible deferred imitation, symbolic play, drawing, mental images, language - in fact the whole range of symbolic capacités. Piaget groups together this family of representations and refers to it as the semiotic (or symbolic) function."* (Tamm, 1990, p. 24)

From the four main stages of cognitive development, the first two stages will be of the most importance for the further writing. In the sensorimotor stage, there is already a progress in certain forms of imitation. In the sensorimotor imitation, a child can mimic a model present to them in that very moment (e.g., a motion of a hand – waving, clapping) and later, this starts to develop into an imitation more advanced, which does not need the model to be present. However, the sensorimotor mechanisms of a child do not display any presence of a symbol or signifier, in other words, there are probably no mental images or representations involved.

Further on, a child in the preoperational stage is already able to mimic absent representations (e.g., a dance they remember) (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 48). These are the roots of imagination. Around the second year of life a child also starts to develop an **object concept**. It is an awareness of **object permanence**, which in other words means the object still exists in time and space as an independent entity, even though the child cannot see it or interact with it. A child starts to express behaviour which relies on an awareness of an absent object or action. In *The Psychology of the Child*, Piaget and Inhelder describe one unifying character to which all types of this behaviour could be hypothetically attributed to. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 47) This characteristic is known as the ***semiotic function***, or in other words, a representational ability. The semiotic function, in spite of "*the astonishing diversity of its manifestations*", could possibly form the basis of all symbolic or representative activity of the child. (Tamm, 1990) (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) This unified ability allows a child to use one object that is present (**the signifier**), to symbolize and represent something else (**the signified**), such as an object or an event that is not currently there. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 47) A capacity to do this is indeed the semiotic function, which enables the child to represent events and things by means of symbols.

*"Already in the very beginning of childhood (at the emergence of preoperational development stage) the child constructs "inner symbols" of external objects. In so doing, he or she no longer lives in a sensible world that is simply given and present, but in a world perceptible only through a variety of symbols. "(*Tamm, 1990, p. 11)

The ability of creating symbols, whether linguistic, or in the form of images or gestures, is central to the human experience. It has been said that from a philosophical perspective, a human being might be thought of as *animal symbolicus.* It is a concept introduced by the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer. (Cassirer, 1944) Cassirer explores the nature of human beings as symbol-using animals or creatures capable of symbolic thought. The term refers to humans' unique ability to create and manipulate symbols as a means of understanding and representing the world. He argues that symbolic thought is fundamental to human culture and cognition. Unlike other animals, humans have the capacity to create and interpret symbolic systems such as language, mathematics, art, religion, and science. (Cassirer, 1944) These symbolic systems enable humans to communicate, express complex ideas, and engage in abstract reasoning. For Cassirer, symbols are not merely arbitrary signs but essential tools for organizing and interpreting experience. They mediate between the individual and the world, shaping human perception and understanding. (Cassirer, 1944) Symbolic thought allows humans to transcend immediate experience and contemplate abstract concepts, such as truth, beauty, and morality. The concept of "*animal symbolicus*" emphasizes the central role of symbolism in human nature and culture. It underscores the distinctive cognitive abilities that set humans apart from other animals and form the basis of human creativity, language, and cultural expression. (Jensen, 2017)

Research on the semiotic function by Maare Tamm, which is supported by Piaget´s developmental theory, will be mentioned and referenced more as we progress through this chapter, as it provides helpful insights on the topic. Overall, her research contributes valuable insights into the development of the semiotic function in children, enriching our understanding of how symbolic representation shapes cognition and behaviour from early childhood through adolescence. She emphasizes the role of symbolic play and other forms of symbolic behaviour in helping children make sense of their experiences, express their thoughts and emotions, and navigate the world around them. (Tamm, 1990)

Without a symbolic representation, the world would be hardly comprehensible for us. Symbols can be understood as certain instruments, helping us make sense of the chaos

of the world. (Werner & Kaplan, 1984) We use symbols as means of communication, whether among one another, or even within the self. Mythical symbols, religion, or art, lie at the very essence of our culture – they also form the very essence of aesthetics.

"...the reality of man is created by symbols, that the symbols are the functioning of thought itself, and that it proves impossible to think of symbolic activity apart from human imagination and creativity. In other words: man lives in a symbolic universe." (Tamm, 1990, p. 12)

The developing semiotic function can manifest itself in various ways. There are five stages or kinds of such behaviour and activities described by Piaget and Inhelder, ranking up according to complexity of these acts. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 47-73) They often overlap and develop simultaneously; therefore, the order is not necessarily chronological:

1. **Remote or Deferred Imitation** – imitation of a model in an absence of it. A temporal and physical distance is possible; therefore, a child is exercising their memory to create a certain representation of past events or actions, which they later reenact. The act of reproduction is now separated from the sample and the child represents it via a symbol and this ability boosts the child´s symbolic thinking along with working memory. It also serves as a certain accommodating mechanism towards the reality. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 47-51)

   "Action is now liberated from the sensorimotor requirements of direct perceptual copy and reaches a level, where the actions are detached from their context, and become representational." (Tamm, 1990, p. 17)

2. **Symbolic Play** – a play like this can already contain external objects as means of representation (e.g., a banana as a telephone for a child mimicking their parent). A child can reproduce their well-known actions or memories and this gesture serves as a differentiated marking element – a signifier, in a way. From the first type of imitation, it differs by engaging other objects apart from the child´s body. This so-called *pretend play* also plays an important role in the emotional coping of a child – it gives them space to rethink past situations and cope with unwanted or bothersome outcomes of some past events. It also allows them to take in the world according to

their needs without the restraints and pressure of the "adult world" – to, for once, *"not try to adapt to the world´s needs but to try to assimilate the reality according to the child"*. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 52) A child naturally has limited competences in the world, limited decision-making capabilities, and sometimes very few ways to affect the outcome of situations around them. Symbolic play, could therefore hypothetically serve as a coping mechanism for this frustration, letting them act according to their own desires. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 51-54)

In contrast to the aforementioned imitation, which is a perfect example of accommodation, symbolic play is an act which demonstrates assimilation, and these two contrary forces are balanced by the intelligence of the child. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 52) However, it is not until the next phase in cognitive development – the operational stage – that the actual equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation is reached. (Tamm, 1990, p. 18)

3. **Drawing –** in its early stages, drawing can be understood as a stepping stone from symbolic play towards the mental image. It resembles symbolic play in the enjoyment it brings through functionality and mirrors the attempt of a mental image to imitate reality. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) Nevertheless, Piaget believes that an initial purpose of a young child´s drawing is to imitate whichever part of reality they are choosing to represent and therefore it is closer to accommodation (–as in, for instance, imitation and mental images) than to assimilation (which children attempt through symbolic play). (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 54-57)

4. **Graphic representation or Mental Images –** as an internalized imitation. These could be understood as a reduction of the aforementioned remote imitation. There are two main categories of mental images - reproductive images and anticipatory ones. While the reproductive images involve representations of past events and insights from before, the anticipatory images, as the name suggests, involve individual´s anticipation of the future and possible outcomes of the future events, which the child has not yet experienced.

However, according to Piaget, the content of mental images is not just a depiction of child´s experiences. It serves as a system of signifiers or symbols, which helps

comprehend the whole experience an individual has gone through so far. A mental image carries with it a semiotic function and it needs to be understood accordingly. Therefore, as Piaget points out, because of the symbolic nature of the images, they cannot be analysed in an isolated manner, but rather considered as a part of the whole cognitive reality of that particular child. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 57-65)

"They are partly derived from what the child understands or misunderstands, i.e., they provide a more or less accurate but delayed translation of the child's preoperatory level of comprehension." (Tamm, 1990, p. 20)

5. **Verbal representation** – as the child´s ability to speak develops, they gradually become able to represent current, past, future, and symbolic events in a verbal way. The description of, mostly symbolic, events is a proof of the child´s mental image of these situations – they are referring to them in a remote way (the motive which they describe is not present and yet they can describe it). (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 67-72)

"They discover that they can use language both to get things done in the external world and to manipulate the inner world." (Tamm, 1990, p. 13)

Language, as the fifth manifestation of the semiotic function, is a special category as it differs from other symbolic activities. It's not invented but rather discovered by the child through interaction. A child is gradually uncovering an already existing system of expressions, words, and other units of language. Transitioning from sounds to proper language, which starts to happen at the very beginning of the preoperational stage, marks a shift in a child's perception of the world. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008, p. 68) Around the age of two, a child starts to show immense interest in language acquisition through being curious about the names of things and other objects around them. (Piaget, 2005)

"By naming the environment with words, that are common property of all people in a particular language group, the child is building up a symbolic world. This world is characterized by a freedom from immediacy. Since it is dressed in language, it is a world that one can share with others." (Tamm, 1990, p. 21)

Thus, we can say that language enhances thought, freeing it from immediate constraints and allowing complex and rapid representation of actions. Unlike sensorimotor actions, language swiftly represents elaborate sequences, freeing thought from the boundaries of space and time and enabling it to transcend these constraints. At first in the preoperational stage, child´s language is egocentric, blurring the line between words and reality. Egocentric speech reflects their thought process, with language serving thought's structure. Gradually, children learn to detach words from things, understanding them as separate entities. Piaget doesn't privilege verbal language in the development of representational thinking, seeing it as part of broader symbolic behaviour. Ultimately, language acquisition is tied to a child's understanding of the world and symbolic function. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008)

2.2.4. Conclusion

We have now gone through many possible predispositions and factors that could shape the development of aesthetic perception of children. We have discovered that, according to the developmental theory of Jean Piaget, the first two stages – sensorimotor and preoperational stage, are the most important milestones when it comes to aesthetic perception development. As we have determined that the period from the second year of life on is of the greatest importance when it comes to development of the semiotic function, the anterior writing investigated possible manifestations of this function. As semiotic functions concern all depictive and imaginative mind processes, I believe it to be crucial for constituting the aesthetic perception. In the world of art, semiotic functions help us in understanding the ideas hidden underneath the art piece and in grasping the message they are intended to convey.

3. Intersection of Piaget and Bullough – possible development of the aesthetic perception through the lenses of Catherine Swallow´s research

3.1. Introduction

Regarding aesthetic perception, Piaget's theory provides insights into how children's cognitive development shapes their ability to appreciate art and beauty. (Piaget, 1973)In the next paragraph, the abilities and phenomena taking place in different stages of development, are concluded briefly:

Sensorimotor stage: During this early stage, children's aesthetic experiences are primarily sensory and perceptual. They may enjoy exploring colourful pictures, listening to music, or engaging with tactile materials, as that is something that could satisfy their need for sensory stimulation. However, their understanding of art is limited by egocentrism and a lack of symbolic thinking.

Preoperational stage: That, however, changes significantly in the preoperational stage. A child starts to develop the capacity to think symbolically, which can be witnessed in numerous different acts. This ability possibly enhances their capability of understanding artworks of different forms – theatre plays, visual artworks, movies, and many more. This stage could hypothetically be the one, where we can start tracking the development of **aesthetic distance**.

Concrete Operational Stage: As children enter this stage, they become even more capable of abstract thought and symbolic representation. With growing number of experiences and education, they can analyse artworks more systematically, appreciating the use of colour, form, and composition. They may also start to express their own artistic preferences and interpretations.

Formal Operational Stage: In this stage, individuals can appreciate art on a deeper level, recognizing symbolism, metaphor, and underlying themes. They may develop a more sophisticated aesthetic taste and engage in critical analysis of artworks. Their ability to think abstractly allows them to appreciate various art forms and styles. Moreover, their level of familiarization with the world of art and the level of prior

knowledge in many different fields rises rapidly, which makes it more accessible for adolescents of this age to understand gradually more complex works of art.[7]

Could children, therefore, be thought of as defamiliarized spectators? In their young age and with their unexperienced, fresh worldview, their level of familiarity with things and spectacles we, adults, find common and mundane is still very low. Could this be a factor of the aesthetic experience of a child? According to Victor Shklovsky, if we get too accustomed to something, this familiarity can impede our genuine comprehension of it. Shklovsky suggests that excessive familiarity causes us to overlook its unique characteristics, preventing us from truly perceiving it. Shklovsky discusses the concept of "*defamiliarization*" (or "*ostranenie*" in the Russian original) in his essay "*Art as Technique*". (Shklovsky, 1917) In this essay, Shklovsky argues that art's purpose is to make the familiar seem unfamiliar or strange again, thus prompting viewers or readers to perceive it with fresh eyes and heightened awareness. (Shklovsky, 1917) Defamiliarization could, therefore, be the primary aesthetic quality that opens the doors to aesthetic reception. Children, who perceive many inputs for the first time, often seem to see more of these inputs as fascinating and beautiful, or as we might say, aesthetically pleasing. Moreover, children naturally are of a more curious nature than adults tend to be. That, in Shklovsky´s thought, could lead to children truly seeing things, in their particularity. Hence, if defamiliarization is an essential condition of the aesthetic attitude, children might have a better starting point than adults do when receiving aesthetic inputs.

These are just a few remarks on how children's aesthetic perception could gradually develop throughout the stages of cognitive development of Jean Piaget. I have based these remarks on the study of numerous works of Piaget´s, e.g. The Psychology of the Child (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008), The Psychology of Intelligence (Piaget, 2005), and The Child´s Conception of the World (Piaget, 1973), along with my own speculation based on the thoughts of Victor Shklovsky. Following that, I intended to connect these insights with the first part of my writing and all the remarks previously made in the section concerned with aesthetics. In the consecutive subchapter, a study conducted by Catherine Swallow will be discussed. As this research studies responses of child audiences to three concrete theatre works, it supports greater understanding and offers research-based insight into the topic. It

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[7] See Image No. 2 – 1.2.5 – p. 26.

challenges the idea of young children not being able to distinguish between fiction and reality and the idea of aesthetic distance providing a necessary protective function against excessive emotional absorption. It delves into how emotional contagion of children, imagination, and other traits specific for young viewers, can affect, and even improve, their aesthetic experiences. (Swallow, 2012) Using the said research as a frame of reference, a discussion of possible implications and intersections with the concept of aesthetic distance of Edward Bullough are integrated into the chapter. This research analysis serves as a synthetising element of my thesis, linking and intersecting the fields of aesthetics and developmental psychology.

3.2. Children and the aesthetic distance - analysis of Catherine Swallow´s study "Faces of the Captives: Aesthetic Distance and Emotional Absorption in Young Children's Engagement with Theatre." and further investigation of possible links to Bullough and Piaget

"When it comes to children, aesthetic distance is often invoked as providing a protective function that means viewers do not become so emotionally absorbed that they lose sight of reality." (Swallow, 2012, p. 1)

Catherine Swallow's research, "Faces of the Captives: Aesthetic Distance and Emotional Absorption in Young Children's Engagement with Theatre," explores how young children interact with theatrical performances. By examining their emotional absorption and the concept of aesthetic distance, Swallow aims to understand how children perceive and engage with theatre. It is important to note that even though her work focuses mostly on children aged from three to five years, observations of children from infancy to middle school are included. (Swallow, 2012, p. 8) That is because according to Swallow, contemporary models of pedagogy and childhood often prefer not to rely on milestones and age as much as they used to and development is perceived more fluidly. (Swallow, 2012, p. 8) Her work has implications for educators, parents, and theatre practitioners, offering insights into children's aesthetic appreciation and emotional regulation. Bullough proposed that aesthetic distance involves a mental separation from the immediate reality of an experience, allowing for a deeper appreciation of its aesthetic qualities. In the context of Swallow's research, aesthetic distance becomes a crucial lens through which to understand how children navigate the boundary between immersion in the theatrical narrative and awareness of its fictional nature. As Catherine Swallow´s study focuses solely on the medium of drama theatre, in this chapter other forms of art are mostly omitted. Her thesis explores the children´s reception of theatrical performance, therefore theatre produced by adults, for children, or in other words, children´s theatre or theatre for young audiences. (Swallow, 2012, p. 7) My intention is, however, to link Swallow´s discoveries to aesthetic inputs en bloc, as Bullough intended, therefore by the means of generalization, I will seldom refer to aesthetic inputs in general.

By presenting an excerpt from Peter Pan, a foundational play for this study, Swallow introduces us to the theme and main problem of the work – the theatricality and thin line between fictitious and real when engaging with theatre.

The story of Peter Pan is a more than hundred years old play created by J. M. Barrie, which talks about the adventures and stories of a fictional character Peter Pan – a boy, who never grew old. In one of the last scenes of the original version of the play, Captain Hook has his captives – „*the lost boys* "– tied up on his ship. Moments later, Peter Pan appears on the ship to free and save these boys, which is unknown to the Captain. The children have, however, noticed him. By introducing this example, Swallow remarks on the looks on the „*faces of the captives* "- the thrill of mimesis, as she puts it. By being aware of the need to remain visibly scared, to pretend fear in order to not reveal the presence of Pan, the child actor´s fall into double pretence. „*At their own assertion, the Lost Boys are pretending to be afraid. They understand, or at least claim to, that the context requires them to outwardly express a particular emotion whether or not they genuinely feel it.* "(Swallow, 2012 , p. 1) This constitutes an interesting mixture of various types of aesthetic distance and, with young spectators, also a peculiar awareness of the heightened awareness of the bland border between fiction and reality. The audience of such play is led to a „*heightened awareness of theatricality, while at the same time encouraging belief in the fantastic.* "(Swallow, 2012, p. 1)

The way Bullough would describe the relation of a spectator towards an actor on stage, they appeal to the spectator and resonate with them in a very similar way as the characters of our regular, normal life. They resemble events from our life too, it just seems that a certain *"side of their appeal which would usually affect us in a directly personal manner is held in abeyance* ". (Bullough, 1912, p. 4)

We observe them, but do not directly interact with them – the perspective is shifted. It seems that, especially for children, this lack of interaction is precisely what creates the ideal amount of distance needed for proper immersion. Sometimes, actors of plays intended for children tend to break this distance by „breaking the fourth wall ". This act has been briefly mentioned in the previous chapter of my writing.[8] The fourth wall is a theatrical concept, which occurs in theatre, film, or other works of fiction, which imagines

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[8] See „*Between a work of art and its audience: accessibility* "- 1.2.4 – p. 21-24.

a metaphorical wall between the stage and the audience. While for the spectators, the wall is invisible, it is „*opaque to the actors* " (Britannica T. E., 2023). This „wall" is thought to enhance the experience by making it deeper and more realistic. It creates a metaphorical barrier between them and makes the actors on stage avoid direct eye contact, speaking towards the audience or camera, or interacting with them in any other way. This phenomenon allows the spectator to become a „*kind of voyeur, observing the narrative* ". (Britannica T. E., The Fourth Wall, 2023) From my perspective, it seems that the fourth wall could be also understood as a certain metaphor for the concept of psychical distance, as it has a lot to do with the question of estrangement and distancing, adequately, yet not completely. As with Bullough´s aesthetic distance, it seems that with the fourth wall the spectator is involved, mentally and emotionally, yet not participating in the spectacle – they both involve certain level of emotional entanglement along with detachment in a very particular way.

The fourth wall plays a crucial part in the „*suspension of disbelief* ". A suspension of disbelief is a narratological term describing the spectator´s voluntary retreat from claims to the reality, plausibility, or logic of fictional worlds in order to increase immersion into a work of art. This is something that takes place within our experience with many genres and works. For instance, within the realm of any kind of fictional literature – let us take a fantasy novel for example – we tend to suspend our disbelief in the inaccuracy of the story. We omit, or postpone, our awareness of possible discrepancies with the real world, e.g. the universal laws of physics, biology, or non-existence of certain aspects of the story, to fully immerse into it. This distance created by the fourth wall is deemed important, even critical, for proper appreciation of works of fiction. (Britannica T. E., The Fourth Wall, 2023)

Therefore, the act of breaking this fourth wall wound mean disrupting the wall between fiction and reality. In children´s theatre, this practice is often used to boost the engagement of children, as by some it is thought to be beneficial. For instance, the actors might disrupt the invisible wall and ask the child audience a question, or even ask them to participate in the play. However, according to aesthetic philosopher Susanne Langer, this was a moment of extreme frustration for her as a child. In her book titled „Feeling and Form", she describes an experience from her childhood, when she experienced the utmost decrease of distance at a theatre first-hand, and therefore experienced a frustrating moment of detachment from the story (Langer, 1953). Describing this first theatre visit of hers, she recalls firstly feeling completely immersed in the performance until a moment where the

illusion was shattered. At first, the immersion felt, in her own words, „supernatural", and after an actor speaking out to the audience, she realized they were in a theatre with other audience members and actors playing their roles. (Langer, 1953) This experience led Langer to reflect on the concept of "psychical distance," the necessary detachment required for true appreciation of art, as discussed by Edward Bullough. Langer suggests that the failure to maintain this distance in theatrical productions undermines the audience's ability to fully engage with the art.

Apart from this experience, in the said work Langer explores the relationship between human emotions and artistic expression, particularly focusing on music and visual arts. Langer delves into how our emotional responses are shaped by the forms and structures inherent in artistic works. She argues that art serves as a symbolic representation of human experiences and feelings, and through her analysis, she seeks to elucidate the deeper meanings and connections between artistic forms and human emotions. (Langer, 1953)

Considering these findings, in the next few paragraphs I present the main takeaways and synthesis of the numerous theories and remarks stated until now. The most significant difference between adult and child audiences seems to be the fact that adults consciously enter the fictional space and are able to also consciously work with the faculty of distance, whereas children often cannot. Even though, for instance, in the preoperational stage, children already incorporate some form of imitation and symbolisms into their lives and have a certain understanding of the difference between reality and fiction, this understanding is still limited compared to the one of adult´s. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) They may still struggle with fully comprehending the distinction between artistic representations and real objects or events until they reach a more advanced stage of cognitive development.

Numerous studies have been conducted on the child´s reception of theatrical performances and it seems that children tend to prioritise the fictional aspect of the play. (Swallow, 2012, p. 6) For instance, a study conducted by Matthew Reason titled "*The Young Audiences*" explores the responses of children to theatre performances and the "*oscillation between the real and imagined*". (Reason, 2010) Reason´s studies focused on a post-performance analysis of children´s takeaways from the play. His main intention was to discover which aspect of the experience is of higher importance to the children. By reviewing

the drawings and conversations held with the children post-performance, he discovered that it is the fictional element that appeals to children the most. The materially real aspects were often omitted, which could be attributed to "*both the success of the production as well as the power of children´s imagination*" (Reason, 2010).

It should be noted that children, especially in the preoperational stage, even before attending a theatre play, engage in imaginative and symbolic play. This mechanism is therefore not entirely unknown to them, even before attending the first formal theatrical performance. Over the course of preoperational stage, they already start to get familiar with the concept of pretence and imitation – even in the mundane play, there is a certain kind of drama present. (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008) That is not to say that attending a formal performance, with its conventions and structures, is not distinct from their play encounters – it seems that "*children's understanding of pretence from their own experiences would influence their behaviour as spectators, but that the experience of watching theatre uniquely sits within its own parameters.*" (Swallow, 2012, p. 8)

As for child audiences, they are often described as „the most honest ones", with their genuine and transparent reactions. (Swallow, 2012) *„This transparent reaction could be considered a symptom of a lack of distance, of children who are entirely absorbed by the fiction without the temperance of reality.*" (Swallow, 2012, p. 4) Like it has been said, this can either create a full immersion, or, in some cases, a total disinterestedness and lack of any engagement whatsoever. (Shonmann, 2006) According to Shonmann, who examined responses of young audiences to various inputs, if children are not able to adequately distinguish between reality and fiction, "*instead of a vicarious emotion, they will become involved to the point where they lose the necessary aesthetic distance*", which may often be a problem. (Shonmann, 2006)

Swallow examines one primary and two secondary case studies of performance in children´s theatre. Over the course of the thesis, she explored the cognitive and emotional involvement in the performance and described how it affects the aesthetic distance between the audiences and the fictional worlds on stage. Peter Pan as a classic children´s theatre text is used as a background for the comparison of contemporary performances. (Swallow, 2012, p. 10-16) Conclusion and takeaways from her work is a "*synthesis of a wide range of source material from literature, textual analysis of performances, interviews with artists,*

observation of audiences, questionnaire responses of care givers and teachers, and anecdotal evidence." (Swallow, 2012, p. 10))

The result of her study points to how crucial is the genuine emotional engagement with characters for audience empathy, even if that means experiencing real fear by the children audience. Children´s responses to theatre, such as intense excitement or fear, are highly influenced by the performers, but the adults, caregivers, or fellow children surrounding them also play a significant role. A child looking around them in case of fear induced by the performance does not necessarily mean a confusion of reality and fiction – mostly, the child is just seeking a confirmation of a safe space surrounding them or a validation of their emotions. (Swallow, 2012, p. 78) Children tend to mirror the emotions around them - by the adult´s awareness of the impact their embodiment of emotion has on the child, they can support the development of emotional regulation of the child. Young children are yet to learn the conventions that are tied to watching a theatre performance, or to expressing emotions in general. Their emotional regulation is not as developed as the one of adults´, therefore, even when they express genuine fear of a villain, or excitement from a positive outcome, "*it does not necessarily mean that they have failed to achieve a necessary degree of aesthetic distance.*" (Swallow, 2012, p. 96) Within the sphere of theatre, children emotionally interact with adults. As feelings and emotions are often mirrored and interactional, dependent on the ability of emotional regulation, but also on the response witnessed around us.

"*Story and the sensory elements of a performance such as lights and music can be especially provocative emotionally, however it is probably the people present who play the largest role in both children's perceptions and their emotional well-being.* "(Swallow, 2012, p. 98)

It seems that young viewers benefit from performances the most, if it allows them to be both empathetic, and even relatable, but "*without assuming emotional identification with protagonists*". (Swallow, 2012, p. 96) If a play manages to maintain the illusion of the creation, but at the same time keep the audience active and participating, it should not destroy the enjoyment, but rather enhance it. However, this ideal balance between engagement and illusion can be hard to achieve, therefore it also makes the actors and playwriters responsible.

In the aesthetic space, the fictional coexists with the real in the minds of both adults and children. As we have established before during the analysis of the thoughts of Edward Bullough on aesthetic distance, it is not that our personal engagement and reality are entirely put on hold when perceiving works of art. It is rather a peculiar mixture of both. According to Swallow, "*blending* (of fictional and real) *allows separate notions to occur simultaneously so that what we actually achieve during an aesthetic encounter is a sum of combined ideas*". (Swallow, 2012, p. 98) According to Piaget, children around the age of three to five are already capable of representational understanding and symbolisms. (Piaget, 1973) Children in the preoperational stage are capable of complex play-pretend schemes by *"creating a cognitive framework which is discrete from the everyday*" (Swallow, 2012, p. 97). According to Swallow, it therefore seems improbable that young children in the preoperational stage would confuse fiction for reality in the case of theatre performances, the two are likely to be blended together, resulting in a unique sum of blended ideas. (Swallow, 2012)

To conclude the main takeaways from Catherine Swallow´s study, it seems likely that children audiences possess certain characteristics that make them a specific and unique audience with particular requirements that need to be accommodated by the artists. That, however, does not mean that they would experience fiction in a completely distinct manner. Children, too, experience fiction as a "work of imagination that allows a transcendence of the everyday", as a unique blend of reality and fiction. (Swallow, 2012, p. 99) Swallow suggests that children, rather than temporarily suspending disbelief as adults might, engage with fiction in a particular way – by combining ideas of fiction and reality, using an imaginative framework, and having these separate notions of the real and the imaginary coexisting in their minds simultaneously.

4. Conclusion

In this bachelor thesis, I provide thorough analyses of the concept of aesthetic distance and developmental theory of Jean Piaget. Over the course of the whole writing, I intend to combine the two and work towards their intersection. The main motive of this thesis is to create a comprehensive overview of the mentioned topics and connect them in a way that could imagine the notion of aesthetic distance within the realm of child´s conception of aesthetics. In the last section of this thesis, a study by Catherine Swallow supported my work by providing case studies of children´s engagement with theatre, serving as an essential tool for synthesizing the previously stated thoughts. This thesis aims to see how the concept of aesthetic distance could work when applied to children and to create a sui generis synthesis of thoughts of Bullough and Piaget.

Aesthetic distance is thought to serve as a protective function, shielding the child viewer from becoming excessively absorbed by the art and therefore losing touch with reality. When considering aesthetic distance in relation to children, one needs to consider multiple factors which influence this capacity. The phase of development of a child affects it greatly. As children gain more experience with symbols, imaginative play, pretence, or storytelling, they gradually develop an ability to define boundaries between reality and fiction. It is thought that when perceiving, for instance, a performance, it might be challenging for children to set boundaries between reality and fiction.

However, as has been demonstrated in the study of Catherine Swallow, it seems that children often do not become confused or lose touch with reality, but rather experience aesthetic inputs as a blend of real and fictional. Furthermore, it is important to note that the emotional regulation and knowledge of various conventions of a child is not nearly as developed as the one of adults´. While adults knowledgeably and consciously enter the aesthetic space and are able to influence their capacity of distance, children do not yet possess this ability. They are simply exposed to aesthetic inputs and are yet to discover how to shape and affect this capacity of theirs. Aesthetic inputs can also arise intense feelings which children do not know how to grasp. However, with guidance and supportive validation provided by caregivers, child can learn how to regulate and deal with these intense emotions and that way, learn how to maintain a proper level of detachment. Therefore it seems that children experience emotions more genuinely and their emotional absorption is

higher, but that does not have to be the case of a lack of distance, but simply of different emotional faculties. However, because of this lack of emotional regulation, the emotional investment of the child is often high, which could either enhance enjoyment, but also ruin it.

Throughout their childhood, children naturally engage in various forms of imaginative play, where they invent and inhabit fictional worlds. This capacity for make-believe and pretence gradually develops and allows them to explore an array of emotions and perspectives within a safe environment. In this sense, aesthetic distance may allow children to seamlessly transition between the real and imaginary, without excessively immersing in either.

All things considered, we can see that the first two stages of Piaget´s developmental theory, sensorimotor stage and the preoperational one, are the two crucial milestones in aesthetic perception development. In particular, the preoperational stage is of great importance regarding the semiotic function of a child, which I believe to be foundational to the development of aesthetic perception.

Given these points, aesthetic distance through the lenses of child´s development involves a delicate balance between immersion in the fictional world and maintaining a proper degree of emotional and psychological detachment. Throughout the life of a child, they gradually improve in their ability of understanding symbols and pretence along with emotional regulation, which aids them greatly in navigating the differences and boundaries between the world of fiction and the real, material world. A large part of responsibility lies on the shoulders of artists and creators, but also caregivers and educators, as they are the ones who can facilitate the engagement of children with art in a meaningful and emotionally safe way. The capacity of aesthetic distance can develop over the whole course of one´s life, with an array of factors influencing its constitution. Moreover, especially with young children, the enjoyment, and results of exposure to a piece of art is heavily dependent on both the stimuli and the circumstances of such experience.

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