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Aesthetic Motifs and the Materiality of Motives

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Abstract

This article discusses how working with aesthetic motifs can be used to cultivating motives for young drug-users and move social work with drug users beyond a problematic framing as ‘treatment’ or ‘therapy’.

The main part of the article is a theoretical discussion of the relations between motive, materiality, and aesthetics in the tradition of Vygotskian socio-cultural-historical activity theory.

Through a critical discussion of the functionalism and anti-functionalism in this tradition we will use the aesthetic theorie of Rancière, to move beyond their scientific realism and the resulting separation of objectivity from subjectivity. Our aim is to propose a more fertile post-psychological understanding of how motives, meta-motives, motifs, materiality, aesthetics and scientific knowledge are intertwined and produced, and how these processes contribute to an ontological politics of creating new cultures and subjectivities.

Key words

Motives, Aesthetics, Art, Drug-treatment, Motivation, Vygotsky, Socio-Cultural-Historical Activity Theory,
Introduction

This article proposes an approach to understanding and cultivating motives by their materialization as aesthetic motifs. We base our argument on the attempt to put into dialogue two strands of analysis: 1. A theoretical discussion of the relations between motive, materiality, and aesthetics in the (post-) Vygotskian tradition(s), expanded by contemporary aesthetic theories, most notably, that of Rancière. 2. Analyses of experiments with art videos as part of attempts at a Copenhagen facility for drug users to move beyond the problematic framing of their practice as ‘therapy’.

One practical background to the relevance of this juxtaposition is the problematic status of the notion of ‘motivation’ in the field of interventions in drug use and addiction. The classic problem in this field is that addiction (or dependence) is a ‘disease of the will’ (Valverde, 1998): You must be motivated for having your lack of motivation treated. This paradox calls forth the problem of what we might term meta-motivation: Motivation for being motivated. As we will explain, aesthetic motifs can be seen particularly to objectify and suggest meta-motives.

The globally dominant and still expanding methods seek to circumvent this problem by either ritually staging motivation through repeated confirmations of the choice of surrender to a program (12 steps, e.g. Narcotics Anonymous), or manipulating motivation by feigning client mastery of a dialogue that avoids addressing choice at all (Motivational Interviewing). In either case, the problem of meta-motive is (partly) neutralized, rather than addressed. The field lacks novel approaches to the issue.

1 This constitutes a Caguilhemian reinterpretation of Maslow’s concept of meta-motives (1967), which, on his account, was about certain individuals’ attainment of higher levels of self-actualization. Notably, Scholer et. al. (2018) have recently (apparently without knowing about Maslow) proposed a concept of meta-motivation which only addresses meta-cognition about one’s motivation – thus ignoring meta-motives. This is an ‘Achilles heel’ of most motivation psychology, an expression of the deference of subjectivity in mainstream psychology.
It is on this background that we suggest it is relevant to study *experiments with aesthetics* in the addiction treatment practices. Continuing a long-standing collaboration (see Stuffsite.org; Bank, 2016, 2021; Nissen, 2012, 2014, 2018; Bank & Nissen, 2018; Nissen & Friis 2020), we will discuss an experimental project at the U-turn counselling facility for young drug users in Copenhagen (https://uturn.kk.dk/). The U-turn counsellors experimented with video sequences recorded by users. A series of 3 sessions were devoted to the ‘film school activity’ directed by film director Arlien-Søborg, embedded within the regular weekly ‘Evening Group’ series. The ‘Evening Group’ met every Thursday evening for 3 hours, 2-3 counsellors and 5-8 users, had dinner and talked. Once a month, new users were admitted and old users said goodbye, usually after a 3 months course (apart from drop-outs). Parallel to attendance in the ‘Evening group’, several of the users had additional individual counselling sessions, usually with one of the counsellors running the group.

For the film sessions, users were given simple tasks such as this: “*Record a moment of video with your smartphone. A moment lasts around 1-3 minutes. The moment you frame must be captioned “A Favorite”. You decide what it is, how it looks, and how it sounds. Try to make parts of, or the whole moment, without words*”. Their videos were then shown and discussed in the group. Arlien-Søborg would begin, giving a detailed account of ‘what she saw’, of a kind that unfolded her expertise in film and impressed the other participants every time with what one counsellor called “a veritable phenomenology of experience”.

This project was experimental since none of the participants knew quite what would happen; they were all exploring the possibilities of this kind of activity. Yet it was far from haphazard: It continued and expanded a practice of using images and poems as part of group counselling, and it was informed by many previous experiments with aesthetics at U-turn (discussed in the papers referenced above). We (the authors) were associated as researchers. Bank participated, recorded and interviewed, and we discussed the activity at several occasions with Arlien-Søborg and the U-turn
counsellors “Jens”, “Dorthe” and “Hannah” who ran the Evening Group. All participants have been informed about the purpose of study and have given written informed consent. The names of users and the counsellors have been anonymized. The name of the institution and the film director are not anonymized according to their own wishes and in agreement with U-turn.²

The group meetings were concerned with the *motifs* of the users’ videos. That is, not simply the things that could be seen on screen, but how those things were edited, produced and framed, what kinds of connotations could be attributed, which projects or intentions could these framings and connotations be assumed to realize, and which tensions would they display. Some users expressed disappointment, when later interviewed, that these discussions were not so much ‘about themselves and their problems’ as they had expected. Yet, the argument of this article is that, precisely by focusing on *motifs*, the discussions succeeded in modelling users’ *motives*. This way, they contributed to (and modeled) the collective work of care that sought to recognize and expand those motives – and thus inspire meta-motives – as part of U-turn’s social work. In this text, the empirical material from U-turn will be used to discuss and theorize about aesthetic practices and the relations between motive and motifs.

In the tradition of *socio-cultural-historical activity theory (SCHAT)*³, the concept of *motive* can be seen to suggest a transformation from mainstream psychologies of ‘motivation’, by turning the gaze from some ‘energy’, imagined as the raw material substance of an inner ‘subjectivity’, out toward the world as engaged with, to the activities and their objects (cf. Sannino & Engeström, 2018, p. 2.

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² The research project does not need Research Ethics Committee approval according to Danish Legislation and meets the demands of The Danish Code of Conduct for Research.

³ “SCHAT” is here meant to circumscribe the ‘Vygotskian’ tradition in an inclusive way. Apart from the references given in this paper, one might study its present organization at https://www.iscar.org/.
Thus, Leontiev, who is generally credited for expounding a proper SCHAT theory of motives, famously stipulated:

According to the terminology I have proposed, the object of an activity is its true motive (Leontiev, 1978, section 3.5)

At the same time, going from ‘motivation’ to ‘motive’ is to move the psychological category closer to the concept of *motif* in aesthetics. In Scandinavian languages, as in German and French, one word (motiv / Motiv / motif) carries both connotations: Reasons for actions, and objects of aesthetic creation or representation. Our suggestion here is that this movement toward aesthetics is not just a terminological coincidence inviting confusion. Rather, it can be a way to realize some of the important potentials in SCHAT: The potential for reflecting and overstepping the boundaries of psychology by starting from the movements between subjectivity and objectivity that characterize activity.

Our overall approach is post-psychological, that is, we problematize how and with which consequences something is constituted in practice as ‘psychological’ (Nissen, 2020; Nissen et al., 2016; Brown & Stenner, 2009; Stenner, 2018). We aim to show that such reflection and overcoming of ‘the psychological’ is not a purely theoretical pursuit, but also fruitful for articulating practices that deal with motives.

**The Legacy of Vygotskian Motives**

One of us authors has earlier discussed extensively and critically some contradictions in Leontiev’s influential theory of motives (Nissen, 2011, 2012). Overall, the point was that, although Leontiev – consistent with Vygotsky’s theory – conceptualized a person’s activity as subjectively constituted by his or her motive, which must be understood on the basis of his or her unique situation and perspective (the *sense* it makes), those motives were also understood to develop as acquisitions of
the motives that were implied in the objects of activity as socially organized in structures of cultural meaning. The concept of motive was thus central to a social-psychological functionalism. Turning the gaze outward toward social activity would mean accepting and idealizing culturally given forms of activity (such as ‘school learning’ and ‘work’), which sociologically were thought to be functional in reproducing society, and which would ‘lead development’ to shape corresponding needs and motives in individuals (Leontiev, 1985; Hedegaard et al., 2011). This functionalism has been criticized heavily by a number of authors within SCHAT (such as Gonzalez Rey, 2015; Holzkamp, 2011; Blunden, 2010). To these, motives, if acknowledged at all, should be purely conceptualized as ‘subjective configurations’ or ‘fabrics of grounds’, which emerged from the individual’s singular situation as viewed from his or her own perspective. The conceptualization of cultural forms and objects of activity was abandoned, and motives were seen to arise from how persons relate to their conditions rather than from their performing of social structures of meaning, although they were symbolically represented and reflected. Vygotsky’s concept of perezhivanie was taken up by Gonzalez-Rey and others (cf. Blunden, 2014; Fleer et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Rey, 2015) to anchor such an anti-functionalist theory of motives – experiences as lived and made sense of in the first person⁴.

The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 339-340)

As we will unfold below, a deeper engagement with theories of aesthetics can lead to a rearticulation of this concept of perezhivanie, which, in turn, can help overcome the dichotomy in the SCHAT theories of motives. Since the functionalism / anti-functionalism divide mirrors the

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⁴ Literally: ‘re-lived’, close to the German ‘Erlebnis’ and the Scandinavian ‘oplevelse’ (Cf. Blunden, 2014).
general opposition between structural vs. phenomenological social theories, this is of broader relevance. In our view, the anti-/functionalism dichotomy follows from the premises of a realist epistemology of science that posits subjectivity as an essence outside of that science itself, yet still also as a utopian anchoring of its purpose. The general humanism that animates the overall project and allows researchers to identify with agentive and reflective subjects is thoroughly argued philosophically, but then contradicted by the requirements of a scientific discipline to objectify and explain. On the basis of this contradiction, subjectivity must be split up into an objectified and alienated form (function) versus a sacred, untouchable abstraction (anti-function).

We take up the SCHAT legacy here to affirm its potentials for moving beyond this dichotomy. These potentials should be found in its reflections on the implications of understanding the human psyche as basically ‘exo-somatic’\(^5\), that is, as outside the body, belonging to the same processes of building and transforming culture that also define the meaning of sciences, including psychology – and of arts. This implies that we can no longer think of the human psyche as an essence, i.e. as independent of our research. In a nutshell, we understand ‘the psyche’ as something we cultivate, and our (scientific) understanding is part of that cultivation. This idea is present already in Vygotsky’s notion of an ‘experimental-genetic methodology’, and it has survived throughout the century in the shape of various methodological reflections nearing on action research (cf. Somekh and Nissen, 2011). But the Vygotskian legacy is ambivalent.

In his first major book, *The Psychology of Art* (1974 (1925)), Vygotsky seeks to understand the experiences [perezhivanie] created by art. Through detailed analyses of literature, and broad critical readings of the psychology of his day, he arrives at the idea that art works by creating antagonistic emotions, in particular by staging contradictions between form and content, and that making sense

of this experience is a *catharsis*, a complex ‘overcoming of one’s own feelings’ (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 248). But look how he frames this insight as psychology:

The purpose of our behavior is to keep our organism in balance with its surroundings. (…) There will always be a certain imbalance in favor of the environment or the organism. No machine can work toward equilibrium using all its energy efficiently. There are always states of excitation which cannot result in an efficient use of energy. This is why a need arises from time to time to discharge the unused energy and give it free rein in order to reestablish our equilibrium with the rest of the world. Orshanskii says that feelings “are the pluses and minuses of our equilibrium.” These pluses and minuses, these discharges and expenditures of unused energy, are the biological function of art. (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 246)

Aesthetic reaction as such is nothing but catharsis, that is, a complex transformation of feelings. Though little is known at present about the process of catharsis, we do know how the discharge of nervous energy (which is the essence of emotion) takes place in a direction which opposes the conventional one, and that art therefore becomes a most powerful means for important and appropriate discharges of nervous energy. (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 214)

In these quotes, Vygotsky’s allegiance to a psychological science is apparent. The overall goal is to anchor the understanding of experience in an object called ‘emotion’, distilled scientifically as ‘discharge of nervous energy’. This echoes the widespread use of the metaphor of ‘energy’ to establish or signal a psychology of emotion and motivation noted by Danziger (1997). Yet, while ‘little is known at present’ about this ‘machinery’ and its ‘discharges’ and ‘equilibriums’, Vygotsky pursues his research in the realm of aesthetic activities and artworks, which are immanently social:

The social also exists where there is only one person with his individual experiences and tribulations. This is why the action of art, when it performs catharsis and pushes into this purifying flame the most intimate and important experiences, emotions, and feelings of the soul, is a social action. (…) The melting of feelings outside us is performed by the strength of social feeling, which is objectivized, materialized, and projected outside of us, then fixed in external objects of art which have become the tools of society. A fundamental characteristic of man, one that distinguishes him from animals, is that he endures and separates from his body both the apparatus of technology and that of scientific knowledge, which then become the tools of society. Art is the social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life. It would be more correct to say that emotion becomes personal when every one of us experiences a work of art; it becomes personal without ceasing to be social. (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 249).

The question that remains is how the emotions embodied in art become personal. Do these ‘powerful tools of society’ form us by eliciting – by having us appropriate – ‘appropriate discharges of nervous energy’? Or rather, do we experience art as symbolic representations with which we may
express the emotions and motives that arise from our individual situation? It is here that we propose that exploring deeper into the ‘apparatuses’ of technology, knowledge and art may lead to a third kind of answer. This will rearticulate perezhivanie as a mediated social production that is, nonetheless, situated and individuated.

**Objectification and Thingness**

Our ‘exo-somatic’ nature means that we create each other and ourselves through making things that embody actions as tools. This is *objectification*. Thus, we make a handbag\(^6\) as a tool for keeping and carrying small items, and so, the handbag embodies and objectifies the action of keeping and carrying. When this objectified action is then taken up and performed, it is re-subjectified. There is an ongoing process of turning subject into object and vice versa. In Ilyenkov’s words, human consciousness, or ‘the ideal’,

…has a purely social nature and origin. It is the form of a thing, but it is outside this thing, and in the activity of man, as a *form of this activity*. Or conversely, it is the form of a person’s activity but outside this person, *as a form of the thing* (Ilyenkov, 1977a).

The idea of objectifying motives is, in one aspect, the simple notion that making a handbag is directed by the motive, and then *forms the possible motive of others*, of keeping and carrying small items. Producing commodities is influencing, even shaping, needs and motives: To objectify is to turn some action or motive into things with which it can be publicly approached – and handled, influenced, transformed. They are given an external shape through which they can be reflected, discussed and imagined. And, at another level, we develop our understanding and practices by using scientific theories to understand motives, for instance by showing how handbags are gendered and

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\(^6\) The classic example in the Marxist tradition is the hammer; but since we are interested in ‘humans’ rather than ‘man’, we propose other things to serve as objects here.
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studying the backgrounds and implications of this. When we do this, we shape those motives as
scientific objects, in the medium of ‘inscriptions devices’ such as text, graphs, or images. That
objectification, too, is a way of influencing. Thus, focusing on, and modelling ‘motives’ as an
object of educational, managerial or therapeutic practice, or of psychological science, is to
participate in the cultivation and performance of power, in the broad sense of influencing people’s
activities and motives. It is these implications, the power inherent to scientific objectification, which
are ignored or shunned in a realist epistemology of science, and which then leads to the anti-

Notably, the process described by Ilyenkov (1977a) passes through the materiality of things, i.e.
through material entities that only become ‘objects’ by their place in this sequence. When he uses
the term ‘thing’ rather than ‘object’, it is no coincidence. The distinction has a specific
philosophical legacy through Kant and Hegel to Marx (cf. Ilyenkov, 1977b). Marx identified
‘reification’ [Verdinglichung], i.e. approaching objects as if they were mere things (thus ignoring
their cultural and social depths), as an issue of ideology and thus power, yet he also saw that the
externalization of meaning into materiality did more than simply express the ideal\(^7\). Since Marx,
then, the concept of ‘thingness’ has a double quality. It may be 1) ‘reification’, an ignorant,
oppressed and alienated reduction of objects of their human-made and thus culturally rich but
modifiable character – perhaps even fixed as ‘fetish’ (Derrida, 1994; Žižek, 1998). Yet,
‘thingness’ may also 2) point to the movement beyond a pre-given ‘objectivity’ toward the material
substance through which just those human qualities are realized in a process of transformation,
creation, innovation.

\(^7\) More recently, the distinction between thingness and objectivity has been rediscovered in science and technology studies (e.g. Latour, 2000), mostly without reference to the legacy sketched here.
The flip side of objectification is subjectification. As highlighted in SCHAT, objectification implies a process of \textit{education}, as the subject externalizes herself, realizes her motives and intentions in \textit{things} that are socially recognized as \textit{objects}, learning their ‘objective’ nature as it is captured in cultural tradition, and, through this, learns about herself. This \textit{subjects} her to the cultural forms of objectivity and selfhood. But this appropriation of culture \textit{passes through thingness}. That is, through a moment when the materiality of things potentially \textit{challenges}, not only the learning individual, but also the given semantic structures that define things as objects in a given culture. But these two moments of objectification have been split apart in SCHAT: The functionalists have emphasized appropriation as reproducing ‘objective’ cultural structures of \textit{meaning}, while the anti-functionalists have stressed thingness as \textit{conditions} that stand mutely opposed to a subject in her singular situation in everyday life.

\textbf{Art as Revolutionary}

This leads us back to aesthetics. In a SCHAT approach, the aesthetic creation of artworks must be an objectification of motives, which expresses their (and the artist’s) given place in a given culture. But, as we shall unfold below, art precisely highlights thingness: Aesthetic objects are not yet or no longer really ‘objects’; their semantics is undecided, open. Thus, art must also, at least potentially, at the same time be the prototypical formation of \textit{new} motives, which challenge culture and the artist’s – and the art consumer’s – place in it.

This is how SCHAT can help us see how motive and motif converge in productive ways. If art, for Vygotsky, is a “social technique of emotion, a tool of society which brings the most intimate and personal aspects of our being into the circle of social life”, this is far from innocent. This should not be surprising for anyone acquainted with Vygotsky’s contemporary Russian avant-garde, with socialist realism, situationism, Brechtian Lehrtheater, Forum Theater, or other art movements
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aligned with communism in the 20th century (cf. e.g. Groys, 2008). And Vygotsky, too, wrote of how art *anticipated* and *prefigured* socio-cultural transformation:

Art is the organization of our future behavior. It is a requirement that may never be fulfilled but that forces us to strive beyond our life toward all that lies beyond it (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 253).

It is hard to imagine the role that art will play in this remolding of man. We do not know which existing but dormant forces in our organisms it will draw upon to form the new man. There is no question, however, that art will have a decisive voice in this process. Without new art there can be no new man. The possibilities of the future, for art as well as for life, are inscrutable and unpredictable. As Spinoza said: “That of which the body is capable has not yet been determined” (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 259).

Yet, Vygotsky did not directly engage in the politics of this revolutionary potential. He was out to found a *science* that would inform the idealized process of building the ‘New Man’ of a ‘New Society’. This abstract utopia would blur the contradictions inherent to his psychology’s place in society and in relation to art. Today’s SCHAT, as an academic community, is extremely diverse, and it reaches far beyond psychology and even academia as such. In some corners, we do find approaches that challenge scientific realism and even suggest aesthetic practices as revolutionary (e.g. Neto et al., 2020). But in many SCHAT reflections on aesthetics, art is viewed as an innocent expression of the universal human creativity, or, at most, performative in the sense of edifying educational tools that may yet lack sufficient recognition (as in Connery et al., 2010). Our contribution to this diversity will be to affirm and expand Vygotsky’s hypothesis, that art creates contradictory emotions, through Jacques Rancière’s aesthetic philosophy. This will lead us to a way of thinking of the relations of aesthetic motifs with motives, and a rearticulation of perezhivanie.

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8 Many of Rancière’s points could also have been found in recent works of Groys (2008, 2016), Stiegler (2021), and Stenner (2018) and these develop theories proposed earlier by Bloch, Sartre, Marcuse, Langer, and others. Further, quite a few artists have joined the choir with different voices – such as Brecht, Boal, Bourriaud, Eliasson. But our space is limited.
Aesthetic Dissensus

First, historically, art was reflected in philosophy as performing (enacting and displaying) in exemplary ways given ethical standards (Plato), or the dramatic reestablishment of these (Aristotle), in sensuous form Rancière calls this the ‘ethical regime’ of art, because art is subsumed to a given ethics. Gradually, and mostly from the renaissance, various art-forms were institutionalized and achieved some autonomy. In concert halls, museums, theaters, literature, etc. specialized aesthetic practices would evolve that could exemplify new standards, new ways of acting, experiencing, feeling, making sense etc. In this ‘aesthetic regime’, art would thus establish a coexistence of the old standards that shaped the expectations of users (thus touched them), with the new standards created (that moved them; cf. Høgsbro & Nissen, 2014). Or, in Rancière’s term, art would (per-) form a dissensus, a conjunction of different ‘regimes of sense’.

This implied that art could no longer be assessed by given standards – it had moved from what Aristotle called poiesis – activities with external goals – to praxis – activities that had no external goal: L’art pour l’art (art for art’s sake). In this modern, ‘aesthetic regime’, art has a difficult relation to other practices. Should art defend its autonomy in its (often elitist) enclosures, or should it move out into life, and risk being reduced to instruments, thus lose its essence? Should art dissolve itself into revolutionary transformation (Groys, 2008)? This dilemma is still today expressed in debates over the ‘use’ of art for various purposes (education, therapy, care, management).

Rancière wants to move art into the broader culture and society, not by reducing or dissolving art, but by recognizing it as challenging culture and society with its alternative experiences. His concept of dissensus is political as much as it is about the sensuous:
What ‘dissensus’ means is an organization of the sensible where there is neither a reality concealed behind appearances nor a single regime of presentation and interpretation of the given imposing its obviousness on all. It means that every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification. To reconfigure the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought is to alter the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. Dissensus brings back into play both the obviousness of what can be perceived, thought and done, and the distribution of those who are capable of perceiving, thinking and altering the coordinates of the shared world. This is what a process of political subjectivation consists in: in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible (Rancière, 2014, p. 55).

**Sense, Affect, and Perezhivanie**

Rancière’s concept of ‘sense’ (French: sens) unites what in SCHAT is distinguished as sense versus meaning: He suggests that aesthetics are ways of relating the sensuous with the sensible, sense with meaning. Aesthetic dissensus potentially moves or reconfigures not only the semantic or conceptual structures (and distributions) of thinking and action, but also how the bodily felt sensation and affective response to a situation is shaped as perception, emotion, or motive.

In SCHAT terminology, aesthetic dissensus occurs or intervenes in the ongoing *movements* between sense and meaning. Just as objectification (creation) passes through a moment of *thingness*, so, subjectification (education) passes through a moment of affectivity. That is to say, a moment when the sensuous materiality (of affect) appears *as such, in itself*, because it moves beyond its previous forms, so that what we feel is no longer quite what can be reflected in our given semantic forms (as distinct emotions). Affect, here, is the unspecified valence, which may subsequently take form as

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9 This is essentially Stenner’s concept of liminal hotspot (2018), partly building on Wetherell’s theory of affectivity (Wetherell, 2012).
emotion – or, in such moments, may reveal itself as beyond given forms. This indeterminate (unspecific, vague) character of affectivity (when compared to distinct ‘emotions’ and ‘motives’) is what art, as a ‘social technique of emotion’, deals with. Even when it seems made to elicit specific feelings or thoughts, its character as art lies in this semantic openness. This reflects how art is released from any given structure of ends and means, and how it must appear as essentially without (pre-given) purposes outside itself.

Importantly, however, when thingness / affectivity is addressed here as a ‘moment’, it is because, in a SCHAT perspective, no human activity is isolated, so that its motive can never be purely inside, nor purely outside. It is no less vital for that – far from it, its truly revolutionary potentials lie just in the way it defies that classic Aristotelean dichotomy (praxis / poiesis). The Hegelian concept of a ‘moment’ signifies an ongoing movement where what stands out at any such ‘moment (in time)’ remains an aspect all through the process. Thus, no matter how familiar to us is an emotion, it always has some flavor that points beyond that familiarity because it is felt in the here and now, in and by our bodies, and thus in a singular or ‘individuated’, situated configuration of (actual and potential) relevances. When what matters affectively finds a form (as emotion), it is always with a surplus, ‘complex-qualitative’ (cf. Holzkamp-Osterkamp, 1975, p. 138) tone of concerns that are not quite in focus.

Further, this ongoing movement is also a movement between the personal and the collective, which is not identical to that between sense and meaning. The collective, itself, cannot be viewed solely in its ‘institutionalized’ form, as enacting a given standard or structure of meaning, but must also be reflected as equally situated, as individuating and making (common) sense (Nissen, 2012). In that sense, affectivity is itself both individual and collective.
This is how ‘perezhivanie’ can be aligned with the basic Vygotskian idea that psychic processes first appear in interaction and later as ‘higher functions’ of the individual. The term is taken from ordinary Russian language, but we can also note Vygotsky’s inspiration from his contemporary, Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski worked in theater, i.e. the aesthetic field of practical ‘techniques of emotion’, and his ‘perezhivanie’ rearticulated Aristotle’s concept of ‘mimesis’ into ‘method acting’. ‘Perezhivanie’ is created as the actor carefully reconstructs the ‘Given Circumstances’ of the play and re-lives the passions they give rise to in the role:

‘The actors should concentrate on the Given Circumstances. Start living them and then “the truth of the passions” will arise of itself.’ (Stanislavski, 2008, p. 56)

Stanislavski detailed the actor’s work, but only backstage: His aesthetics was ‘ethical’ in Rancière’s sense: The theater should recede from view so that Truth would stand out, immediately recognizable as expressions of the universal ‘life of the human spirit’ and as distinct from the ‘stock-in-trade’ generalizations of ordinary comedy (Stanislavski, 2008)\(^\text{10}\). In Vygotsky’s adoption of the concept into a realist science, and in the later reception by Gonzalez-Rey and others, the practicalities of producing ‘perezhivanie’ were similarly set aside. Like Stanislavski, they wanted the universally human, beyond ‘stock-in-trade generalizations’, to appear as such, in the shape of the subject in her Given Circumstances. But they did not write a back-stage book of how to create this apparition. To them, it was always-already there in reality; methodology was supposed to only reveal it. Science is the ultimately self-effacing art.

The alternative articulation that we propose is that perezhivanie is first and foremost socially produced. When we move from living to re-living, it is through ‘the strength of social feeling’ (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 249), ‘materialized’, moving through affect and emotion, thing and object,

\(^{10}\) In this, Stanislavski was interestingly opposite to the ‘epic’ theater that Brecht developed at about the same time.
moments of appropriation and moments of transformation. And this dynamic social feeling moves between moments of identification and moments of differentiation between participants.

This social dynamic is highlighted in the ‘relational aesthetics’ of Bourriaud. Art creates things and situations as ‘proposals of a shared world’ (Bourriaud et al., 2002, p. 9). This becomes pertinent as we move beyond common sense. That shared world is an ‘organization of our future behavior’ (Vygotsky, 1974, p. 253), beyond the fixed ‘distributions of senses’ (Rancière, 2014)\(^\text{11}\) that characterize a given society – and beyond those distributions, also, when they are camouflaged by a ‘common sense’ that does not recognize deviant ways of making sense (such as e.g. those of marginalized drug users)\(^\text{12}\).

**Motif, Catharsis, and Meta-Motives**

When the ‘political subjectivation’ of dissensus, for Rancière (2014), consists “in the action of uncounted capacities that crack open the unity of the given and the obviousness of the visible, in order to sketch a new topography of the possible”, this summons the future as did Vygotsky. Art is a technique of emotions of a specific kind: those that reflect an *anticipated* situation, which we can strive for – i.e., motives. In the classic ‘ethical regime’ of art, certain virtuous motives are given form, represented directly, or perhaps inculcated through a catharsis, a purification of the mimetic identification with hubris. In the ‘aesthetic regime’, dissensus opens to motives directed, not just toward goals built into standard activities – into the topography of the possible – but those directed toward a new topography, a ‘future behavior’ beyond that structure of motives.

Thus, *aesthetic practices might make it possible to arrive at dissensual situations, where dissensual things are met with and/or prompt affective openness, in movements toward new motives.* On this

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\(^{11}\) Rancière’s term is ‘partage du sensible’, which means both sharing and division of the sensible.

\(^{12}\) Cf. to this the analysis of ideology in Nissen (2012, ch. 7).
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background, we can see how the aesthetic motif connects to the psychological motive: It is not that the artwork is simply (or essentially) an expression of what the artist wanted or felt. Much more importantly, it is that the artwork, as a thing in a process of objectification, becomes a prototype (Nissen, 2009; Nissen & Mørck, 2020) of future perceptions, actions, feelings – and thus motives. The motif of the artwork only exists in the singular presence of the artwork itself; if it re-presents and facilitates motives and meta-motives, it is through this creative moment of thingness and affectivity. In the process of making it, or of experiencing it, it may match (‘touch’) pre-given emotions or motives, but what matters most is how the experience moves, through moments of unspecific affectivity, toward new motives. Like other prototypes, it does not enforce a standardization, because its novelty implies that it remains open to debate – with Latour: it hasn’t been black-boxed – and, in Rancière’s aesthetic regime, it only remains a work of art as long as it keeps resisting such black-boxing, keeps its thingness alive.

Rancière’s thingness, however, is conceptualized as dissensus. When the affective moment is seen in its wider cycle of transformations, it unites contradictory regimes of sense in a complex-qualitative formation. This rearticulates Vygotsky’s hypothesis, that art invokes and overcomes contradictory emotions, into a theory of aesthetics proper. The ethical and political implications that Vygotsky also saw, are freed from his functionalist scientific reading of Aristotelean ‘catharsis’ as a ‘discharge of nervous energy’ that ‘reestablishes our equilibrium with the rest of the world’. If ‘catharsis’ deserves a place in a Rancièrian aesthetics, it must be turned around as creative rather than destructive, edifying rather than purifying, complicating rather than simplifying. The joy of aesthetic dissensus is the joy of agency: not a release, discharge, or cleansing, but, rather, the experience of complex syntheses of opposing senses in artworks that propose shared worlds (cf. Høgsbro & Nissen, 2014, p. 158).
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This is how the motifs of aesthetic practices, situations and works can offer meta-motives, or motives for transforming given structures of motives: By suggesting ways to creatively integrate contradictory regimes of sense.

The Bicycle Ride

Let us set these theoretical considerations at work as a commentary on one of the videos created and discussed at U-turn.

As mentioned, some participant users at U-turn were disappointed that the film exercises were not sufficiently utilized in a ‘proper’ counselling, that is, not enough time was allotted to the content and the import of the videos as expressions of the ‘issues’ that the individuals wanted to ‘deal with’ (i.e. to discuss). This was an ongoing concern of the professionals, too. It was accentuated also by the relative fragility and unpredictability of the activity, which derived from users’ life style and circumstances, from technical difficulties, as well as from its general experimental nature. Even at U-turn, there was a constant awareness that the actual activity might deviate too far from standard expectations.

At the same time, however, they noticed and collected evidence that such deviation could be sometimes more useful than the ‘direct’ route. As the counsellor Hannah said in an interview, following up on our questions about recapitulating users’ utterances in (poetic) text or otherwise:

One of the kids said that it was like being inside each others’ heads, to be allowed into each others’ worlds. A bit like you said before. You get to know each other in a different way and perhaps in a faster way… I don’t know...
Her “I don’t know” may be a way of noting the *strangeness* of this idea. It goes against everything that is implied in the ubiquitous notion of ‘authenticity’, which underlies the expectation that, in group therapy, clients reveal their inner self directly with their words, if they are sufficiently trustful of the ‘therapeutic space’ that the professionals have provided (cf. Carr, 2011). If professionals are sometimes required also to *decipher* clients’ words, this is not because those words are inauthentic, but, to the contrary, because those encrypted words, and the form and process of encryption itself, are revealed as going on inside the clients as their particular ‘authentic’ pathology. They are signs that must be read as symptoms, and perhaps as keys to the curative exploration of that pathology (be it in the form of ‘resistance’ or otherwise). This is the ‘clinical’ version of ‘perezhivanie’ as the true subjective experience purified of its pathological distortions.

Given the cultural expectation that the activity of group counselling is thus one of ‘opening up’ and ‘verbalizing’, displaying the pathology that defined the clients’ premise for participating, it appears strange to spend most of the session time discussing videos. And the claim that this should be an even faster route to “being inside the head” of the other appears far-fetched and defensive. Another way to read Camilla’s “I don’t know” is that she urges us researchers to help articulate in convincing ways this strange idea. That is indeed our intention. Our approach to it is to trace the social production of ‘perezhivanie’ as dissensual motifs.

In our discussions with the counsellors, one story became a standard reference. This was the story of the “bicycle ride” video made by – let’s call him: - “Alex”, for the assignment ‘A Favorite’. Perhaps because this video stood out most radically in its ‘thingness’, as the most extreme counterexample to a meaningful expression of an authentic emotion for a counselling space.

In an interview, “Alex” explains:
Well, it was kind of nice to record and watch videos. To see what the others filmed. But some of my videos were really accidental, impulsive. Or, at least, the first one I recorded was, like: “Shit, I forgot to make a video!”, and then I recorded while I was on my bike going there.

_OK! On your bike on the way over?

Yes, I’d completely forgotten …

_Oh yeah, what we see is just that crossbar, and the asphalt running past below_

…and then, that woman from the Film School, she would read a lot of stuff into it.

The 75 seconds video shows the front end of a bicycle from a little above it, moving toward the left, obviously filmed by the bicyclist himself, whose left hand on the handlebar and feet on the pedals we glimpse occasionally. We hear the wind blowing into the microphone, and occasionally, unintelligible conversations of other bicyclists in the background. And we see the asphalt rolling past below, with its varieties of cracks, shadows and sun-streaks, traffic markings, and sporadically sidewalk pavements on the right side (the top of the image), until finally the camera moves up to let us see one of Copenhagen’s lakes, upturned sideways.

Arlien-Søborg from the Film School commented on the film right after it was shown in the group at this very first session:

_Arlien-Søborg: OK, so, here, I see – and it’s not like: ”Now YOU’RE like this”, because I only notice, here’s a story with the title ”A Favorite”, and then I watch this. And I see this bike, which is very very sharp – IN the PICTURE, mind you

“Alex”: It fills the whole frame

_Arlien-Søborg: It fills, - no – I don’t think it quite, like, fills the whole frame, but it’s… look, it really stands out clearly, which the asphalt doesn’t, the asphalt just rushes past, so I sense it goes really, really fast, and I almost forgot this was supposed to be ’A Favorite. ‘Cause I felt it was a little dangerous, and
also, I bike every day in Copenhagen, and - YOU never stopped! But then you, like, kept turning, or, the film keeps turning, so it runs really really fast! So, even if this, like, kind of oozes freedom, this speed, it’s also something a little dangerous. But something to keep an eye on, too, like, there’s a focus, that – like, when you’re biking you wouldn’t look down on the crossbars, but it’s like an anchor, in the middle of all this very, like, fast, confusing, really, it may seem, the asphalt. So, I think really this tells a story a lot about holding on to something while many things move all around you, and also that, eh, this freedom comes with something dangerous. Or, like, they come together, so how much of one or of the other should you, like, and for me, sometimes the danger seems to eclipse the freedom, when I see this, for my taste, and I recently started using a helmet

(...)[in contrast to Snapchat] This was one minute fifteen, so there you’re kind of allowed to stay there, and when you’re allowed to stay, then you’re allowed to feel, I think. And you’re allowed to share the experience that, like, YOU give us of being on YOUR bike, at THIS time (laughs). I don’t know, in any case I think it’s like, staying there, I like when someone wants to show me something, and it, like, becomes important! Like, the bike is important, the shoes are important, the thumbs are important, like, it kind of gets a value that opens to a lot of things, in many... Cool! Thanks!

(...) It’s important to hold on to something, because then speed is OK. If there were only speed, it would be a different film. Or, like, the speed can be there and be seen as speed because something is fixed. That’s already a way to tell a story. This can be important to you, or maybe it’s unimportant. But it’s something you just told me, in any case

Arlien-Søborg meets “Alex” for the first time at this session, and she knows nothing about him. She first frames her talk by stressing that she doesn’t talk about Alex. What she rearticulates is the motif of the film, as she sees and feels it. She states also – almost in the style of a narrative ‘outsider witness’ (White, 2007) – how her rearticulation is situated in her own experience, as someone who has begun using a helmet, scared of Copenhagen traffic. Yet, she rearticulates it as a thing in its
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own right, lengthy enough for her to dwell with, allowing her the experience, the feeling, which she recognizes as shared by Alex, almost as a gift – for which she thanks. And the dissensual themes of freedom and danger, speed and fixity, holding onto something in the middle of constant flux, are rendered as metaphors visible in the mundane view down on a bike, accessible and recognizable for anyone. Arlien-Søborg has made of the video a work of art.

“Alex” continues in the interview quoted above:

“Alex”: Well, OK! That was a narrative, and it was quite fun. I came to think of it later, even though I thought it was a trifle crazy to analyze it. You know, it does get a bit silly if you take it very seriously.

Bank: So how come you thought of it later – how did it make sense to you?

“Alex”: It just popped up in my head. And, oh yes, I think, at the end, that if, we were to describe our video in three words. I chose: Keep the grip! Because you have to keep the grip on your bike, everything moves so fast, and what if he tops over? That was what came to her mind. It does make sense if you use that as a narrative. It’s high speed and things pass by on all sides around you. Then there’s this one bicycle frame, that was just like a church nave hanging down. So, a lot of deeper layers, and if you have A+B=C, but then if someone comes from the outside with an argument, saying it’s not right at all, it won’t work for you – then you might be turned off. But if you have the narrative with the nave and the bike, everything flying past, well, then yes, except you haven’t thought about all those layers in it. I think, only that one layer, the one where you have a goal. And if you walk out and you’re not a resolute kind of person, then it gets tough if you’re thrown off your course. But, if you have that narrative with many layers, and a lot has been analyzed, then there’s a lot to fall back on, if the first layer is knocked off its course.
Motifs and Meta-Motives of the Bicycle Video

The bike turned anchor has become the church nave. In the interview, which Alex and Bank have framed as a meta-reflection of the film session, Alex recounts a thickening of narrative. He has told us that he has used the cognitive (or is it “12 steps fellowships-“?) technique of a wall calendar where he marks a cross for each clean day. This works in the long run, he says, even though just one relapse – or “someone coming from the outside saying it’s not right at all” – makes you meta-reflect in ways that don’t necessarily help you stay on course. But it works only when it is part of meaningful narrative – that is, when a narrative has been ‘scaffolded’ around it (White, 2007). This is materialized in the video, as expanded by Arlien-Søborg’s interpretation: Keep the grip! In themselves, the themes she proposes are abstract, but they are embedded – reflectively articulated – in a collective of relational aesthetics, where she acknowledges Alex’ gift as a “proposal of a shared world”. This is a gift that her aesthetic practice and know-how helps her notice and recognize as such. The conversation is framed within U-turn as positioning Alex as client, but Arlien-Søborg knows nothing of Alex-the-client and addresses instead Alex-the-outsider-artist. This reframes the activity dissensually as defined by its movement beyond therapy, and beyond art.

To these layers, Alex adds an even deeper layer with the metaphor of the church nave. We don’t know the routes this Christian metaphor has taken on its way into Alex’ narrative. It usually speaks of how our human plans and activities are always subject to the winds and the waves of fortune, in the hands of a Higher Power – and of how a religious belief and participating in a religious culture provides a way to meet those accidental shifts.

In any case, the video-thing has moved far. On Alex’ mind before making it was not even a proper motive, just the forgetfulness and the last-minute solution of a “hash-head”. But it was not pharmako-pathology that shaped its further fate. Rather, the video-thing was picked up, almost as a
‘ready-made’ that only became an artwork by being placed at the ‘exhibition’ of the U-turn ‘Evening Group-With-Arlien-Søborg’. Perhaps it was because of this hybrid framing that it appeared so obviously to represent a linear line of action, a ‘goal-directedness’. “Keep the grip” was already present as motif in that landscape of drug counselling, and the video was seen in (a dialogical, inter-textual) relation to that. But, in contrast to artefacts such as the ubiquitous ‘action plans’, ‘counselling contracts’, plans for reducing substance use, or ‘Feedback Informed Treatment’ scales, this obvious sense was made here in ways that did not correspond to the usual distribution of senses. The shared world it invited to was one that offered other views on goal-directedness.

The traditional objectification of goal-directedness establishes a common sense on the basis of the common-sense notion that what clients want – or must, should, ought to want – is to reduce their substance use, or whatever customized version of this goal that appears through the process of negotiation to make sense of the framing structure of counselling. Motivational Interviewing, like Solution-Focused Therapy (and no doubt many other techniques), offers a way to customize the goals that count in counselling, by pragmatically converging the explicit articulation of client reasoning with the tacit orientation to institutionally defined goals. Thus, the meta-motivation problem is reduced to a technique for manipulating motives13.

By contrast, the bicycle video affords the posing of such goal-directedness as a general, shared question. When it is taken seriously, its open and generalizing problematization invites a scaffolding of possible life narratives that include or imply meta-motives. How do we want to relate to that issue of “keeping the grip”? 

13 The frame of Motivational Interviewing as activity is constituted by a separation of the common sense of goal-directedness from the counsellor’s (and perhaps the client’s) private attempts at manipulation. This matches the references to salesmanship in the MI literature, e.g.: “…if you as a helper are arguing for change and your client is arguing against it, you’ve got it exactly backward. Ideally, the client should be voicing the reasons for change. Any successful salesperson knows this” (Miller & Rollnick, 2012, p. 19)
The sequence we have witnessed here rearticulates the bicycle video first in the hybrid frame of the ‘Evening Group-With-Arlien-Søborg’, including the meta-reflections of this activity inside the Evening Group itself, but then again in our interviews with Alex and with the professionals and the artist, and finally in this text itself. Progressively, as the video-thing has been contextualized and made sense of and attributed with meaning, the motif “Keep the Grip!” has emerged as a complex structure of activities, collectives and cultural references, with the video-thing as its prototype model artifact. This structure acknowledges and affirms the motive of ‘keeping the grip’, not by excluding potentially disturbing motives, but by expanding it and placing it within a participatory framework of care for motives. Quite unlike the normal professional structures around clinical counselling, Alex and the other users have participated, not just in monitoring ‘their own’ situation, but in the reflections of ends and means of the collective activity, and of its place in U-turn as well as more widely.

In theoretical terms, we have troubled the Aristotelean distinction of ‘praxis’ from ‘poiesis’ that would have reserved a free space for art – or would have rested satisfied with fabricating clients’ autonomy of choice and competence within counselling. We have not done this, however, in an attempt to instrumentalize art as ‘cultural recipes’, but as ‘redistributions of the sensible’, of capacities and incapacities, and as reconfigurations of how we can relate to motives with meta-motives.

Conclusion: The Post-psychology of Meta-Motives

The analysis presented here of the motifs and meta-motives of the bicycle video would be unsatisfying if we hoped for a deep and comprehensive understanding of Alex. We have not invited you as readers “inside his head” in the imagined role of observers watching the homunculi of ‘functions’ operating the machinery of the mind like in the Disney movie “Inside Out”. With
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SCHAT, we have focused on activities with artefacts and their meaning and sense, thus to break with psychology’s traditional individualism and its separation of objectivity from subjectivity. But our aim was not a closer view of functions, nor a purer grasp of Alex’ situation or experience. In fact, our object has not been the psyche at all, as given to us, as ‘data’, but only as an object of education. What we have traced are activities where we – researchers, social workers, artists, users – have cultivated the reflection and spurred the reconfiguration of motives in the form of motifs.

Just as the use of aesthetics at U-turn moves beyond therapy into a hybrid practice, so, our understanding of it requires that we move beyond psychology – not to leave psychology behind, but to include it in our own reflections as co-constituting its object, and thus, ourselves. The cultivation of meta-motives requires a reflection of our use of psychologies of motives, as Alex did when he pondered the ‘layers’ of goal-directedness.

But a post-psychology of meta-motives is not an emancipation from the motivational structures with which we build ourselves. It is their rearticulation into the new cultures that we build. We need not hesitate to ‘keep the grip’, any more than to ‘surrender to Higher Powers’ or to state ‘self-determined’ choices or preferences. Such motives may be noble. What matters most is how they are integrated and superseded in the dissensual ‘social self-sculpturing’ we are engaged in (cf. Stiegler, 2021).
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