

Object and Signs - Transitional Phenomena and Processes from a Genetic Perspective

Genetic aspects of semiotics can be shown based on the more recent child research (e.g. Kernberg 1981, Stern 1983, Lichtenberg 1983, among others), as had already been formulated by Charles Peirce in his conception of selfconsciousness and taken as the basis by M. Bense for his observations on semiotic behaviour.

In object-relation theories stressing the interaction of the child as the focus of the observation of development, in contrast to models based on instinct dynamics as typified by Freud, - "the sign and its relations", which according to M. Bense "belong to the earliest activities of abstraction appearing in the development of the human consciousness"¹, are gaining in significance. The basis for these considerations in the object-relation theory are pre-verbal processes communicating information by means of oral and also tactile and visual components² that determine the interaction between the child and its reference person, mostly the mother, in the first three months. If this interaction is missing, or rather, the "signals" through which it is possible, then the result can be not only a delay in development but also severe psychological disturbances, which are frequently apparent only at a later phase in life, e.g. in the form of neurotic symptoms or borderline illnesses.

The initial interactive relationship between mother and child has a symbiotic character. The child's semiotic behaviour is characterized above all by iconoclasm in its reference to objects (2.1), Kernberg talks also of the mirror stage (1979), and by qualisigns (1.1) and sinsigns (1.2) in its reference to means. An interpretant seems to be not created by the child in this early behavioural phase of symbiotic exchange.

Already in the third month, emotion and action are coupled with "recognition", which allows a limited form of anticipation on the level of behaviour.⁴ That is, the dyadic

¹ Bense, M., 1983 (a), p. 85.

² see. Battegay, R., 1991, p. 16.

⁴ Lichtenberg, J. D., 1991, p. 70.

relationship of object and action and the triadic relations of signs of a lower semiotic level, rhematic-iconical quali- and sinsigns (3.1, 2.1, 1.1 or 3.1, 2.1, 1.2), e.g. gestures and actions of expression, etc. can be reproduced. The anticipation on the behavioural level is above all dyadic, i.e. a "structural and elementary determining representation" and not "categorical and fundamentally determining".⁵

By the 6th to 12th month, the child's ability for intercommunication, based on the separation from the symbiotic relationship to the mother, has only developed to the extent that an acceptance of information, a decoding of emotions by means of a tactile, visual system contains the first intersubjective basis functioning in the child's exchange with its interactional system of reference. Semiotic abilities, which can be used beyond the realm of interfamilial communication, develop decisively in the course of the second year with the establishment of a symbolic system of reference. The acquisition and application of verbal language forms a significant part of this development.

The Semiotic Origin of Artistic Development

If the beginnings of the development of the child's artistic ability are viewed in terms of the background of the above mentioned steps of development of semiotic abilities, then connections between the semiotic and genetic theory of recognition are also evident here.

There is no consensus about the age at which a child makes the first graphic attempts (scribbles). Some researchers into children's drawings have material from the eight or ninth month, others suggest the first half of the second year as the beginning phase of artistic ability.⁶ The precursor for scribbles is "Spurschmierern" (leaving "traces"), which begins in the 5th or 6th month (Navelle, 1950) when the child starts to leave imprints with its fingers or hands in soft material, such as food or feces. This of course presupposes motor skills, such as the movement of central body parts or the coordination of individual movement processes⁷, as well as sensory and, ultimately, also cognitive means of behaviour. J. D. Lichtenberg supposes an "organizer" for each level of action of the child, in which the processes of recognition, decision and will are unified. For this reason, he also

⁵ Bense, M., 1983 (a), p. 85

⁶ see. Richter, H.-G., 1987, p. 34.

⁷ see. *ibid.*

appeals for a new perspective on child research, instead of the "dramatic phase-specific indicators . . . one should develop a view for the gradual development of systems and their mutual accommodation and assimilation".⁸

The area of "leaving traces", neglected or overseen by both researchers in child drawing and child researchers in general, is of special interest from a semiotic perspective, since this activity is not only a gesture or expressive activity, but also creates an objectification which can be viewed, together with M. Bense, as "primitive relational signs or signification", belonging to natural signs (indices).¹⁰ In this way, it belongs to the earliest abstractions, perhaps it is "even the earliest and first artistic, primitive-intelligible or pre-intelligible and operative-applicable creation of this development."¹¹ But not only the "creation" of a trace, but also its identification is already a part of the child's conception of consciousness at this early stage. It provides the child with an experience of permanence connected with the satisfying experience of the longevity of its own production.

In the activity of scribbling, considerably differentiated in comparison to "leaving traces", rhematic-iconical means of adjustment behaviour (3.1 → 2.1) are tested at first at a relatively early "stage of activity" (Lichtenberg 1983). The scribbles, which we perceive as graphic figures, are icons of activities, (*engrams of actions*) controlled sensomotorically, that are caused by external stimuli such as pencil and paper, and that are accompanied by physical feelings and emotional reactions.¹² (Fig. 1) Scribbling presupposes the use of a tool, in this case a pencil, which must not only be grasped or held, but also manipulated in terms of its functionality. But not only the characteristics of the tool as "trace producing" element, but also the characteristics of the artistic surface (e.g. format, expansion and limits) must already be recognized as a "trace conserving" element. This cognitive demand implies that, in addition to rhematic-iconical means of adjustment behaviour (3.1 → 2.1), a decentralized-indexical selective behaviour (3.2 → 2.2) influences the child's artistic ability when scribbling.¹⁴

⁸ Lichtenberg, J. D., 1991, p. 69.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, see. *ibid.*, 1979, p. 5 ff and *ibid.*, 1983 (b), p. 22 ff.

¹¹ see. Richter, H.-G., 1987, p. 34.

¹² (Fig. 1) see. Lichtenberg, J. D., 1991, p. 66.

¹⁴ see. Wichelhaus, B., 1989, p. 46.

The Early Drawing as Process of Creation and Realization

Leaving traces and scribbling as relational, as semiotic activities of the child point to - as could be demonstrated above - the development of consciousness at a very early stage of life.

In contrast to other pre-verbal activities in the early phase, leaving traces and scribbling are also processes of realization and objectification, i.e. products are created. In this process the child functions as an external interpretant in a creative semiosis. A means (material leaving traces) is connected to an interpretant (action, experience, feeling)¹⁵ in order to create a *realisate*, a creative product. This form of conflict implies an experience with the external world for the child, set in motion by the means, the material and an experience from the internal world (e.g. self-motor, dynamics, rhythm, etc.). In this way, the consciousness will not only be indicative, but conscious processes will also be promoted. In addition to the aspects dealing with recognition theory and creativity of this early semiosis, in which presented material (traces and scribbling *realisates*) can be generated in principle to the presenter (Fig. 2), they also have an aesthetic, at least pre-aesthetic (Volkelt 1929) and communicative significance.

Semiotic Object-Theory and Psychological Object-Relation Theory

Not only the semiotic activity of creating a product by tracing scribbling objectification, but also the semiotic character of the *realisate* or its relations of use are of special interest. There are several attempts at approaching the scribbling of a child from a semiotic perspective. H. Brög characterizes them, by including the graphic activity and its product, as a connex that he interprets as a sign situation on an external level.¹⁶ Such an interpretation presupposes a "triadic sign material-thing-use relationship".¹⁷ This type of use is that of the psychologists or teachers, who want to analyze the child and its development, or even possible disruptions etc.¹⁸

The triadic character of the trace and scribble pictures in terms of the psychologist's use of the sign is not intended by the child as sign producer or sign user of its own

¹⁵ see. Peirce, Ch. S., o. J., S.

¹⁶ see Brög H., 1977, p. 48.

¹⁷ Bense, M., 1983 (a), p. 85.

¹⁸ see. Brög, H., 1977, p. 48.

"sign". These realizations are objects for the child that are used in terms of a dyadic sign-thing relation.¹⁹ Missing at this stage of development are the representations of created objects, which according to J. Piaget continue as "internal imitation . . . the accommodation of a schema of the activities of perception"²⁰ Dyadic object relations are as equally significant for the development of the child, especially for the beginnings of the development of self and identity, as triadic sign-relations.

The object "stands in front of the subject, and is the article of human recognition and practice independent from the subject".²¹ As a rule, object-relationships are "relationships of use" that are influenced by emotional relationships. Even the aesthetic relation (on the one side structure, order, symmetry; on the other chaos, innovation) plays an important role, either overtly or covertly. Object-relations are known to us from human *phylogenesis* as cult, ritual and fetish relationships, but also from the archaic cultures and ultimately from the human *ontogenesis*. D. W. Winnicott characterized these relations with the concept "transitional object" for the found and/or created *realisate* of the child, that exists spatially separately, however, psychologically, is inseparably connected to the creator. The transition, the place, in which these objects are produced and used, is the "transitional area" or "room", the connex, in which the early semiotic events take place through imagining, illusioning, playing, etc.²² From this position, "all true, spontaneous gestures of self-fulfilment . . . which are crystalized to a personal tradition of internal reality"²³ are developed. In the "transitional area", also called the "intermediary area", psychological representations are build up out of object relation, out of presented phenomena. An inescapable process on the way to separating the "I" and the self and, therefore, of decisive significance for the development of the human personality.

The special feature of the scribbled picture as objectification consists in its creation in a relatively independent manner from a close mother-child relationship, i.e. they are not coupled to an elementary satisfaction of needs and therefore, have the character of a creative product on the basis of a problem-solving process. This lends these objects a greater non-commitment in terms of object use, often a fetish-like character is also missing, which e.g. the "stuffed animal" as transitional object

¹⁹ Bense, M., 1983 (a), p. 85.

²⁰ Piaget, J., 1974, p. 142.

²¹ Schrage, D., 1980, p. 20.

²² Winnicott, W. D., 1973, p. XIII

²³ *ibid.*

has. The openness allows a greater individual availability, a lesser sense of fixation on a single psychological relationship of significance, which makes the scribbled pictures also suitable for the creation of triadic sign relations from object-relations.

The process of development of the child's graphic expressions confirms this supposition. From active representations with initially absent figurative representation, many children are successful at identifying objects as signs with increasing graphic confirmation. The basis of such sign creation from scribbled pictures are isomorphic relations of a structural, metrical and analogous nature (Stachowiak 1965), which are characterized by a weak iconoclasm (Fig. 3) and are not identifiable without an additional verbal coding for the adult interpreter. In this context, H. Brög also mentions that we are not connected to the communication cable of the scribbling child.²⁴

In summary, it can be said that through the observation of the child's early graphic expressions (tracing and scribbling) in terms of semiotic and object-reality theory, the significance of this activity can be shown, which consists of a given medial area in which the child participates very early in a productive (active) manner in its development in the sensomotor, cognitive and personality-developing and differentiating area. In the interactional relationship construction of the baby and small child, in which in the course of individualization painful experiences, such as the detachment of the reference person, are present, the early graphic confirmation can also have a supportive function in accepting these experiences. In my opinion, this is the result, less in the cathartic getting rid of *emotions*, as in the independent creation of objects for the individual psychological and, ultimately, aesthetic use.

²⁴ see. Brög, H., 1977, p. 50.

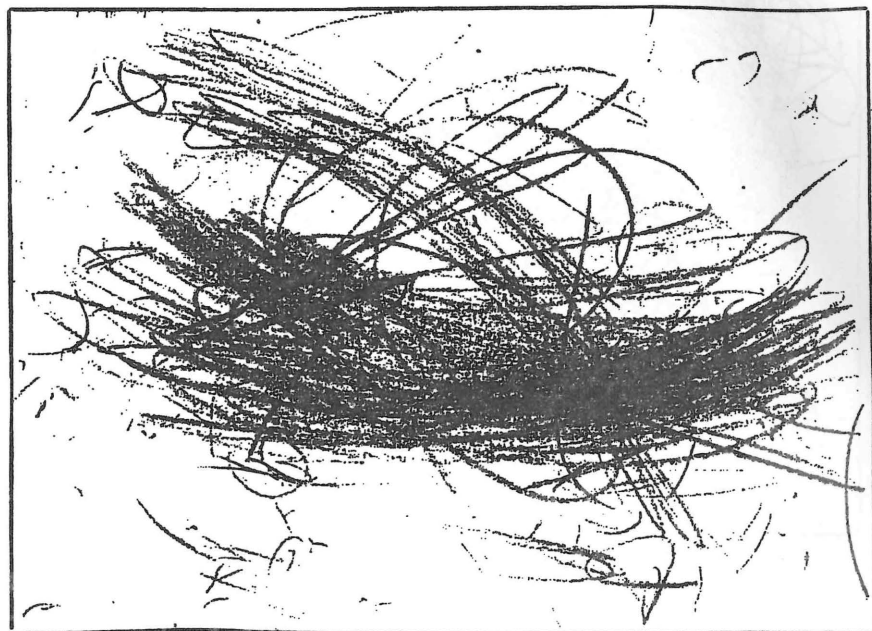


Fig. 1: Phillip J., (at age eighteen months; 1.8 years)
First scribbles, graphic figures, icons of activities,
only controlled in a sensory-motor manner.

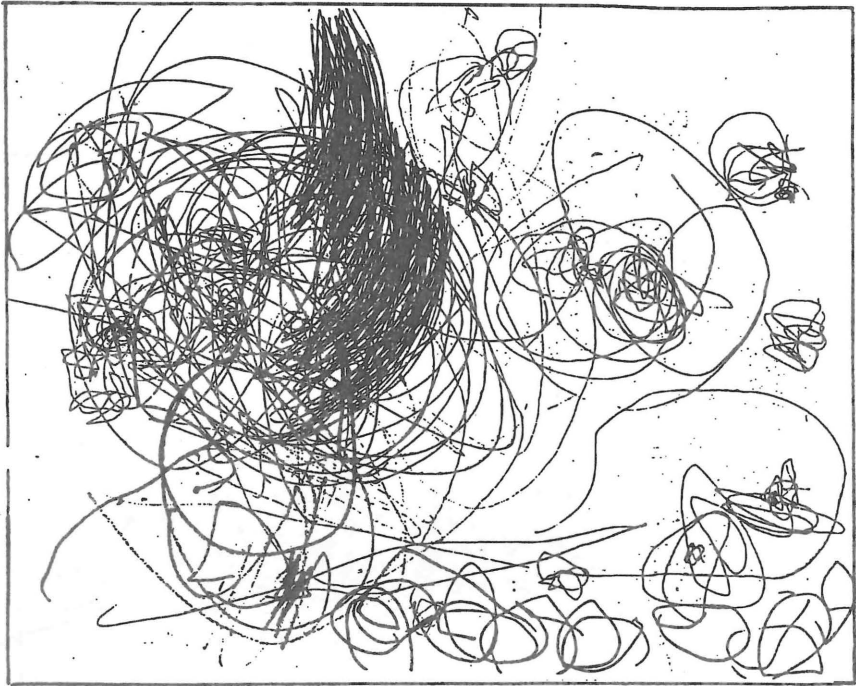


Fig. 2: Kerstin W. (at age two years and five months; 2,5 years)
Scribbles of a later phase of artistic ability, with considerably differentiated figures (e.g. points, lines, circles, crosses, spirals). The figures, icons of activities are generated by the child to icons of objects ("Here is mum and dad and my dog . . ."). These early signs are not identifiable without a verbal coding.

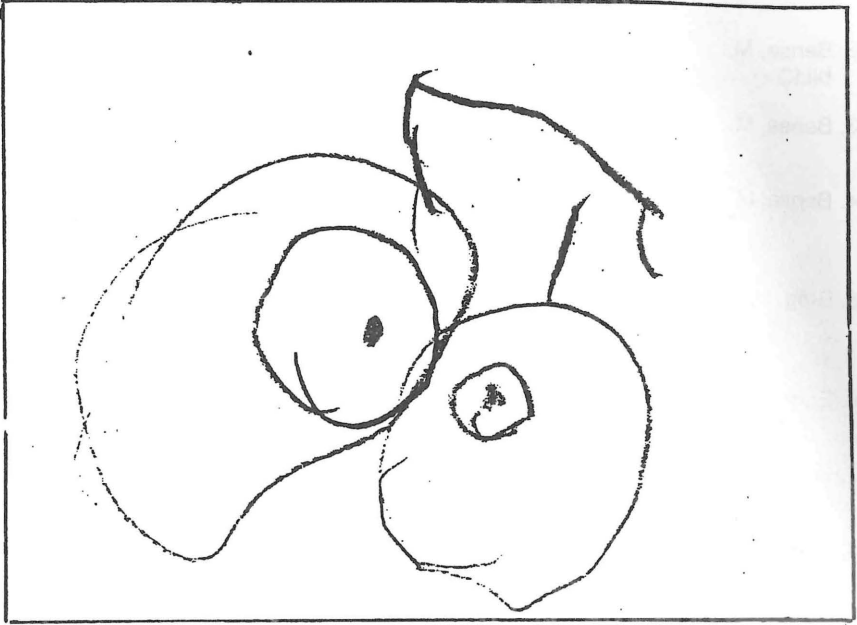


Fig. 3 Saskia W. (at the age of three; 3,0 years), "bus". Scribbling with identifiable relationship of object.

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