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## Agnieszka Wiśniewska

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

e-mail: 274754@stud.umk.pl

# Drawings by children aged 3–12 in the context of new media

**Abstract.** Dynamic social and cultural changes undoubtedly affect such a basic form of human activity as creative output in visual arts. Alongside physical, psychological and psychomotor ramifications, uncontrolled access to new media also bears a impact on children's artistic expression. This article considers this issue and discusses the role and significance of drawings in child development.

**Keywords:** new media, threats, children's drawings, artistic expression, types of visual arts.

## Introduction

More and more often academics ask themselves questions about the influence of new media on people, and especially on children<sup>1</sup>. The source literature provides many examples of what negative impact the irrational usage of technological achievements makes. They undoubtedly pose threats to the physical, psychological, social and emotional sphere (Manowich 2011, Bauer 2013, Lister et al. 2009, Gajda 2007). However, just a few academics have considered the impact of new media on children's drawing activity<sup>2</sup>, and that is why I have chosen to conduct a theoretic-

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<sup>1</sup> I base this statement on the analysis of publications by B. Didkowska, W. Godzic, M. Filiciak, R. Patzlaf, M. Listter and others.

<sup>2</sup> B. Didkowska was trailblazing in researching this issue.

cal analysis of this problem, which in the future is also going to need an empirical verification. My deliberations were first included in my BA thesis, the fragments of which are used in the below presented articles.

My analysis of the subject shows that new media have a strong impact on the youngest generations and therefore it is worth to understand their character. What are they then? This term – still not fully defined – raises great interest among contemporary academics<sup>3</sup>, which resulted in a multitude of its definitions. In this article I assume the understanding suggested by Mirosław Filiciak. According to him new media include:

Any material generated with a computer, which - alongside cinema and printing - is nowadays one of the main media used by the human kind. Therefore among new media we can count websites, virtual worlds (understood as all 3D computer-generated environments), virtual realities, multimedia (incl. cinema and television but only in its modern, digital form), interactive installations, computer animations, digital video, human-computer interface and obviously also video games.<sup>4</sup>

This definition seems to be painting the fullest picture as it provides particular examples.

Alongside defining the key term related to media, while talking about how the visual language used by new media impacts on children's artistic activity it is also worth explaining what this artistic expression actually means. The fullest definition has been suggested by Stanisław Popek, who understands artistic activities of children as: "A process of making a change, transforming and creating visual forms (on a surface or in the space) and providing these so-far unknown and original visual forms with new idealistic (mental) qualities expressed in non-material (idealistic, aesthetic) values and amounting to relative material values" (Popek 2010, p. 9). It is worth pointing out that the author indicates a process-like character of creative output and focuses on making changes, so that the creative output could be considered as one of the best strategies of managing development.

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<sup>3</sup> Those include first and foremost : M. Lister, W. Godzic, L. Manowich.

<sup>4</sup> Filiciak 2006, p. 41.

## **Role and significance of artistic creativity during childhood**

Drawing, as an inborn activity, is naturally inscribed into the development of an individual and as such forms a point of interest for the already mentioned S. Popek as well as other outstanding pedagogists: Stefan Szuman (Szuman 1990), and Irena Wojnar (Wojnar 1966). The world-famous circle of academics in the field of drawing studies include: Jean Piaget, Rudolf Arnheim, Lew Wygotsky, John Dewey, Viktor Lowenfeld, W. Lambert Brittain and Georges – Henri Lequet. The ideas and positions taken by the above-mentioned academics mostly concern phenomena which are no longer fully up-to-date. At the same time we can observe a lack of new research that would include rapid social changes, especially in technology, which is a sign of our times. However, a process of producing creative output and its significance are described from a variety of perspectives: medical, psychological, humanistic, and artistic, too. Despite the lapse of time, these concepts retain their significance and are still providing cognitive value but have not addressed the question of etiology of this phenomenon.

Stefan Szuman argued that artistic activity is taken up freely and unconsciously by almost every child. He formulated it as follows: “A very high percentage of people in every cultured society feel a need of artistic activity, artistic expression, artistic creativity” (Szuman 1990, p. 150–153). Małgorzata Anna Karczmarzyk (Karczmarzyk 2004, p. 50–52) claims that a child that has not yet grasped a developed verbal language discovers the surrounding reality by drawing<sup>5</sup>. This function is specified as “getting used to the world by drawing” with a drawn communique serving as a non-verbal message about child’s experiences. S. Popek talks about the functions of drawings in a more syncretic way (Popek 2010, p. 9). He distinguishes the basic meanings of drawing activity. So he points out the therapeutic, projective, developmental and educational roles with each creation having a coded information that, if read correctly, could become a source of knowledge about a child and his or her views on the world around.

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<sup>5</sup> U. Szuścik writes about it.

Drawings serve as a personality shaper and form a base for intellectual and emotional development. Expressing oneself through artistic activities is compared by R. Arnheim (Arnheim 2011, p. 156–158) to a play as a need of developmental age. He describes this children's activity in the following way: "They like exercising their muscles, regardless whether it is to show their strength or to move with the rhythm; they also like it when something turns up in a previously empty spot, especially if the new object stimulates their senses with intense colors or a festival of shapes; they also enjoy messing up, attacking and destroying" (Arnheim 2013, p. 169–197). Although they do not have technical abilities to show a real picture of spacial relations and depict the shapes of objects in a largely simplified way, this is not an obstacle to creativity. A realistic convention does not seem to be an artistic hurdle, whereas being unaware of it, accompanied by a lack of necessary skills, have a positive impact on the creative potential. Sketching free forms of straight lines, curves, spirals and zigzags is a natural need of human beings (Kościelecki 1977).

Contemporary children have more and more difficulties with organizing spontaneous plays, and imagination and creativity, characteristic features of childhood, fade away, which is a subject of interest not only for pedagogists by also psychologists, philosophers, sociologists and artists themselves. Creative individuals were already described as above normal deviants, rebellious personalities, opposing social norms by a Polish sociologist Florian Znanięcki (Znanięcki 2001). The term 'creative output' from the ancient times until today was also analyzed by the philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz (Tatarkiewicz 2005). It was no sooner than in the Middle Ages when the term was coined to describe a decisive power of God: making something from nothing, hence creating, forming. According to the author of the monograph, creativity gained its broad scope of meaning only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, being a creator these days means producing new things from the available materials or resources. Rudolf Arnheim says: "Drawing, images and other similar tools are used not only to translate ready-made thoughts into visual models, but also to assist in the process of problem-solving (Arnheim 2011, p. 157). This position is very common in academic research as proved by the legacy of Roman Zawadzki (Zawadzki 2005) or Wiesława Limont (Limont 2010). Following the footsteps of W. Tatarkiewicz, they understood the creative output not as creating reality out of nothing but as addition,

explanation. It is also a recognition and definition of so-far unknown aspects of life.

In contrast to the concept of creative output stands the concept of copying which is defined by Polish PWN's encyclopedia as "following something". In accordance with this way of thinking, it means a passive mirroring of adult's behavior, situations observed around, and media images. My analysis of research shows that children are keenly referring to patterns known from animated movies, and reach for images and scenes suggested by the media. Images are more and more often borrowed from the virtual reality instead of the experience of the reality. Children are more willing to present characters from favorite cartoons than those they see around. This indicates a strong link between audiovisual media and children's spontaneous creative output (Didkowska, 2015).

### **Characteristics of children's drawings at 4 to 12 – interpretation in the context of new media**

As confirmed by many academics new media impact on both psychomotor and emotional sphere of a child<sup>6</sup>. However, only a few of them talk about a strong inspiration of young children by the images from movies, animated movies or the TV. One of the first academics who directed the attention to a strict dependency of drawing activity and audiovisual tools was Philippe Wallon (Wallon, Cambier, Engelhart 1993, p. 163). He talks about computers as a medium used for artistic activity. He indicates its role as a medium of creating the space for new, original opportunities of artistic creation. It could not only help stimulating child's creative output but also work as a tool facilitating artistic activities. He notices that computer-based works differ significantly from works drawn on paper. However, they seem much less complicated with the computer replacing activities involving paper, scissors or glue. Research and conclusions which I have drawn from it, seem to be quite optimistic. The academic omits the possibility of technical tools' impact on the way a child understands and sees the world. Although this is one of the key activities in child development, it is often pushed out by more attractive pastimes,

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<sup>6</sup> Those include first and foremost: R. Patzlaf, J. Izdebska, J. Morbitzer, and J. Gajda.

led by first and foremost those linked to new modern technologies, such as watching TV or surfing the net.

For the youngest ones video games are especially attractive (Stasiakiewicz, 2000). A researcher in this field noticed an interesting relationship between children's drawing activity and new media, especially regarding aggression-generating context. Although young people are willing to talk about cartoon characters, cite words they have heard, it is especially difficult for them to transfer multicolor expressions onto the surface of paper using only color pencils and each attempt to copy the model ends in failure. For children, animated characters are unquestionable ideals of beauty. Their failures in transferring the original onto the surface can only hamper a free drawing activity, not stimulate it.

Bernadeta Didkowska (Didkowska, 2015) suggests that these days' children are more willing to transfer ready-made characters from TV programs than to create their own characters. Media seem for them a really interesting source of iconic expressions, and that is why they reach for cheap patterns or introduce elements familiar from movies, child programs and commercials already watched. Already in 1870s, S. Popek noticed that: "The world of five-year-olds widens with new TV programs, illustrated books and stories. However, it should be emphasized that these sources of creative inspiration often trigger an early process of disruptions to child's expression" (Popek 1978, p. 77). Hence, it seems justified to analyze drawings by children and young people regarding their content and images suggested by media as well as appearing elements of aggression.

As written by B. Didkowska (Didkowska 2015) drawings by three-year-old children most often depict closest family members: their mum, dad, grandfather and grandmother. Artistic depictions of animals are formally distracted and more complicated for comprehension. As a child is impacted on by various visual stimuli (Patzlaf 2008) it has growing problems with developing its own characteristic depiction and composing its work, i.e. creating such a scheme of elements on the surface that would form a complete entirety. The empiric verification by (Didkowska 2015) concludes that artistic works of youngest children are characterized by non-original approach to the main topic which results in creating similar pieces. Attempts of creative expression by drawing rather reminds of clumsy attempts of copying that creativity free from any bounds. One

of girls participating in the research strongly rejected the idea to draw an animal. She said: “I cannot draw animals because my mum said so”<sup>7</sup>. Boys and girls aged 3 to 6 have clear difficulties with depicting animals and their creative output includes peripheral and distracted compositions as well as impervious forms. The latter are patterns taken solely from the media, which hampers the self-development of an artistic vision. As asserted by B. Didkowska, whose academic achievements I often refer to as I share her views, the influence of media is a substantial factor shaping child’s psyche, a creative child, however, could easily transform patterns observed in the media.

The impact of media patterns is clearly depicted in drawings by children faced with a task to portray a person in motion, which for a young person aged 7 to 9 is a challenge. In order to achieve a dynamic effect children introduce into their composition popular writing such as: “BOOM” and a trace of movement in the form of lines positioned just behind the figure. Yet another method of illustrating a person in motion is blurring its outline, which has a direct link to popular cartoons. What is more, they keenly use a particular gesture of the person itself, hence uplifted arms or bent knees, which is further emphasized by arrows-shaped lines or simply drew-aside hair (B. Didkowska 2015).

An interesting piece of research was carried out by Paweł Kossowski (Kossowski 1999, p. 212–226). It was about the perception of TV commercials among 5-to-10-year-old children also with a reference to their drawings. Asked to draw a picture about a commercial that they were shown, children got down to work. Effects in the form of putting a few captures on one piece of paper, introducing slogans or depictions of a marching box of washing powder were astonishing. The researcher stated that children’s drawings at the age of 7 were characterized by attention to detail. Although drawings by younger children were only impressions about the commercial, older children pursued a true capture of its content, which points to a strong acceptance of both its idea and its convention. Already in 1999, the researcher formulated a critical thesis referring to the influence of the media, narrowing its scope only to TV commercials, and said that: “Commercials make a very strong impact on children’s imagination and leave there a permanent trace, which is shown in the pictures drawn by

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<sup>7</sup> The research was carried out by B. Didkowska.

children. Commercials' scripts are easily and keenly learned by children, more often than offers directed at them intentionally, which is confirmed by teachers" (Kossowski 1999, p. 223). Beside drawing attention to the trace left by TV commercials on children's minds, the researcher talks about pseudo-cultural message carried through a TV set. Using a strongly persuasive and attractive audiovisual language, that message is not linked to childhood or a child himself or herself but nevertheless has a strong impact on the artistic sphere of a young person.

A tendency to show the world in a realistic convention is formed with age (Szuman 1990). On drawings by older children, however, there is still plenty of topics taken from the media, which could prove that new technologies are firmly rooted in children's reality. The largest group of drawings is centered around computer games. They seem to be inspiring young people, especially boys who are keen to transfer captures from favorite games onto paper (Didkowska, 2015). Such depictions often catch aggressive behaviors. Alongside characters from games played only in virtual reality, futuristic images of reality also appear, with technological achievements domineering the composition. In creating the space young people are keen to refer to a perspective seen from bird's view and reach for simultaneous ways of depicting situations. The reasons of seeing the space in such a way could be found especially in computer games (Didkowska 2015). These observations find a proof in drawings by children, who are more willing to depict a couple of situations occurring simultaneously but often skip the depth of the depiction, which makes their drawings flat. Such a way of composing their works could be linked to a flat vision of scenes (B. Didkowska). It is also worth paying attention to the fact that older children more keenly use writings, which replaces iconic method with a graphic presentation in the form of text. This on the other hand, requires less effort from a child, and takes less time, which has a significant impact on the end state of the composition.

## Conclusions

As artistic output is a key activity inscribed in child development, the youngest children should take it up keenly and spontaneously. However, this theoretical construct often has no bearings in reality. Hence the duty of providing artistic stimuli to a child should rest first of all upon parents

and then on teachers, tutors and pedagogists. Knowing the list of benefits from spontaneous drawing activities, these people should encourage a child to create artistic works and then spend more time on an in-depth, conscious analysis. Following first rich experiences of impressionism and then those of vanguard trends originating from it, which rejected mimetic function of arts long time ago, there came the 21<sup>st</sup> century. New views on reality and new goals the art sets find no justification in teaching arts to contemporary children who are still expected to produce nice (realistic) drawings. Lack of awareness of contemporary social and cultural context contributes to limiting children's drawing output. By judging the works of children through the prism of realistic convention, parents and other people engaged in upbringing simply limit young people's creative freedom.

What is more, it seems that contemporary children do not have time for artistic activities as they are offered a wide range of opportunities to spend free time. Watching favorite cartoons or playing favorite computer games seems to be more attractive than less interesting artistic tools. In confrontation with galore of colors and undisrupted stream of boosts, characteristics for media massage, a simple pencil seems very unattractive and a picture drawn with it does not match popular cartoon characters. Children are keener to refer to their fictional idols and while depicting characters, they try to make it as similar as possible to the model earlier seen. Hence, they become imitative and unconditionally accept the aesthetic convention enforced on them by the medium. Rejecting spontaneousness in exchange for often clumsy coping could contribute to shaping a critical attitude towards one's output, which on the other hand, can hamper it.

What is more, the majority of artistic behaviors is linked to unwanted mess that parents or guardians would rather prefer to avoid. Due to the fact that they cannot give their children as much time as required, they try to offset this imbalance by often leaving their child in front of a screen of a TV set or a computer. Rapidly developing technologies allow to watch almost surrealistic images, captures from places previously too remote. Media easily create new realities or introduce fictional elements to the already existing ones. It is a common conviction that an image cannot lie, which in the context of a complex character of new media seems to be rather deceptive. Hence a demand to prepare children for using new media seems not only justified but first of all necessary.

Media images could be a source of inspiration, however, it seems that if there is too much of it with its formal language, it has a negative impact on children's drawing output, as it is confirmed by, among others: impregnated form, distracted compositions or illustrations of violence appearing in pictures of youngest children. Visual art are based on images and hence they shaped visual culture of each era. Therefore, if properly used, they could have a positive influence on the psyche of a young person, teach them visual sensitivity, and develop a critical approach to perceived images.

Many hours of uncontrolled access to new media can have a lot of negative consequences for the youngest generation. By disregarding the role and significance of visual activities adults contribute to losing creative abilities and creative thinking in children. As a link between media and children's drawings seems to be clear, parents, tutors, and teachers should encourage children to take on spontaneous drawing activities and spend a lot of time on analyzing their works. In the context of discussed issues such an approach seems to be a reasonable attitude to contemporary childhood.

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