

# The Process of Artwork Interpretation

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## **Abstract**

**In my dissertation, I am mainly interested in the process of artwork interpretation. I explore this process especially in the relationship between the student/viewer, the teacher/gallery, lecturer/parent and the unique artwork itself. Visual studies and theory of art education are the professional discourse that guide my research. I am concerned with the didactic level of the teacher/lecturer/parent accompanying the student in a gallery. I focus especially on the process where the interpretation appears. I am also interested in who creates this single interpretation. What is the space for pupils' voices and their empirical viewership? What is the difference between the student's and the expert's interpretation, where the experts are a team of professional art historians, curators, etc. At the same time, I deal with the gallery as a specific viewers' space. The paper is based on a concept of gallery and museum education. The key concepts of the discourse approach are presented in the publication Gallery and Museum Education 1 and 2 by M. Fulková et al.**

## **Keywords**

**Art education, interpretation, visual literacy, discursive educational models, critical thinking.**

## **Introduction**

I began my study with a critical reading of the Czech book *Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy* [Why Paintings Don't Need Names] by Ondřej Horák (2014). This children's book based on art dialogues between grandparents and their grandchildren formed on a transmissive model, where the adult supplies some information and the child receives it. Grandparents, as guides for children in the gallery, mediate the art transformations of the 19th and 20th centuries. The way in which their discourses are transmitted – in particular the theory of the history of art culture and kunsthistorie – is more or less one-sided and based on causal connections in the context of art history. The child viewer stands and listens while the guide explains all the contexts he considers to be crucial in relation to a particular piece of art. The book basically respects the linear historical timeline. The popular book presents to both professional and amateur readers how a gallery visit and the subsequent dialogue between the child and the adult should look like and what all is needed to be said about a particular piece of work. In the text, modernist essentialist ideas of expert interpretation can be revealed as the primary goal to be reached and accepted in its own, even when interpreting an artwork in education. This led me to initiate teaching, led by a colleague art educator, which I could later use as a research resource to compare approaches. Their pedagogy is based on discursive educational models. In their approach, the teacher played the role of initiator and mediator of the viewers' artwork perception and their own experience in their paths to art. In my empirical study, I put together a conversation about a particular work – *Piano Keys, Lake* by František Kupka from the book and the preconceptions of the

pupils, followed by a discussion leading to the interpretation of the same work of art during the art lesson in the National Gallery in Prague. My intention was to reveal the extent to which students' judgements differ from those of an art expert.

## **Methods**

The empirical study is based on qualitative action research. Examples in this paper are based on the outcomes of a study resulting from qualitative action research focused mainly on analysis of reflecting education, students' outcomes, extracts from the children's book *Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy* [Why Paintings Don't Need Names] by Ondřej Horák and a professional interpretation from the exhibition catalogue (L.L. Blum 1997). The outcomes refer to the painting *Piano Keys, Lake* (1909) by the Czech artist František Kupka.

## **Research questions**

- What is the space for pupils' voices and their empirical viewership and critical thinking in art education in the 2nd grade of elementary school?
- What is the difference between the student's and the expert's interpretation provided by a team of professional art historians, a curator in this case (empirical study)?

## **Outcomes of the study**

### *The discursive educational model*

Visualization of teaching as a dialogue with a high degree of student autonomy, the concept of a reflective practitioner, with the concept of discourse as a medium organizing audio-visual regimes...

Visualization reveals the power of discourse, which is the theoretical background of the field, including the curriculum. The graph is drawn over photos from the National Gallery,



Figure 1: František Kupka, Piano Keys, Lake (1909). Photo from <https://www.ngprague.cz>

where pupils, teachers and artwork are visible directly in the context of the gallery. The graph expresses the three phases in which the pupil came to interpret the artwork in the studied art

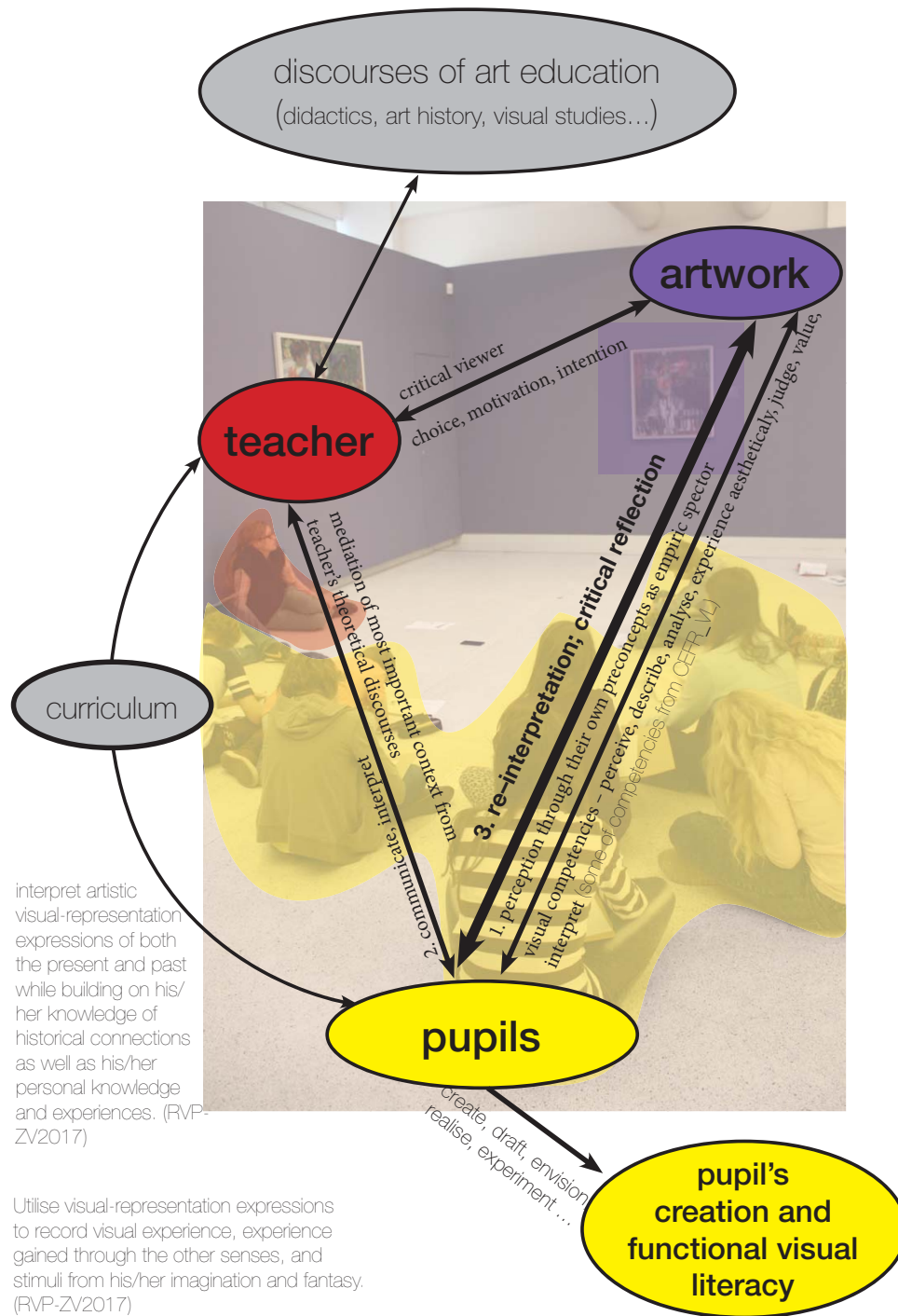


Figure 2:

lessons in the National Gallery.

*The rate of questioning in the book versus art education*

**The proportional questioning  
in a book interview**

**The proportional questioning  
in art education**

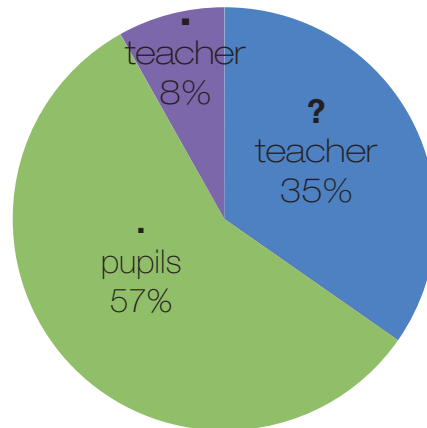
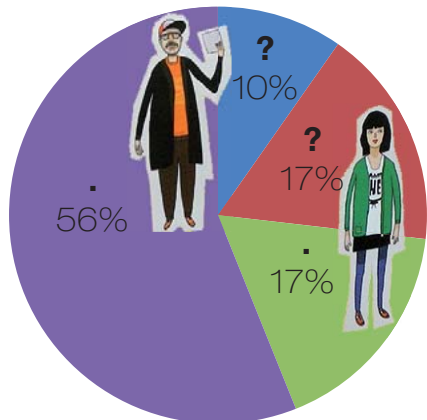


Figure 3: Drawings by J. Frante from the book Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy [Why Paintings Don't Need Names]

The rate of questioning shows the ratio of the transmissive transfer of knowledge at the expense of the empirical and subsequently critical level of pupils' thinking.

Comparison in three different ways of interpretation – in art education, in the book and in catalogue by L.L. Blum (in Anděl, J. 1997)

Code to visual components of the artwork:

- “state of mind” – the empathic level of the work – the emotions or feelings displayed, or the experience artistically evoked;
- “idea of representation” – the ways in which the work is created and represented;
- “idea of style” – contextual and causal connections of the work – the theory of art history.

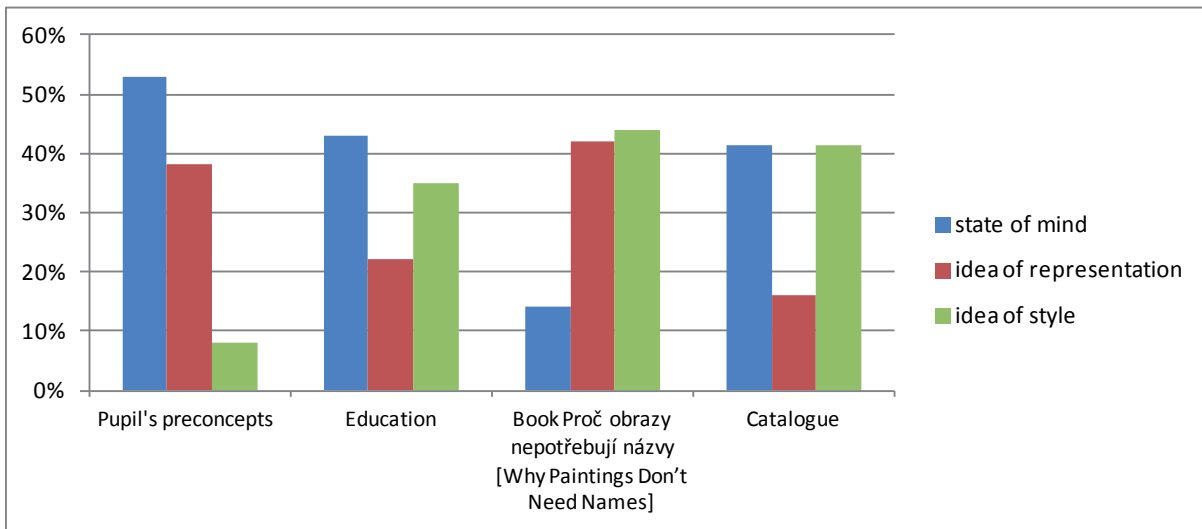


Figure 4:

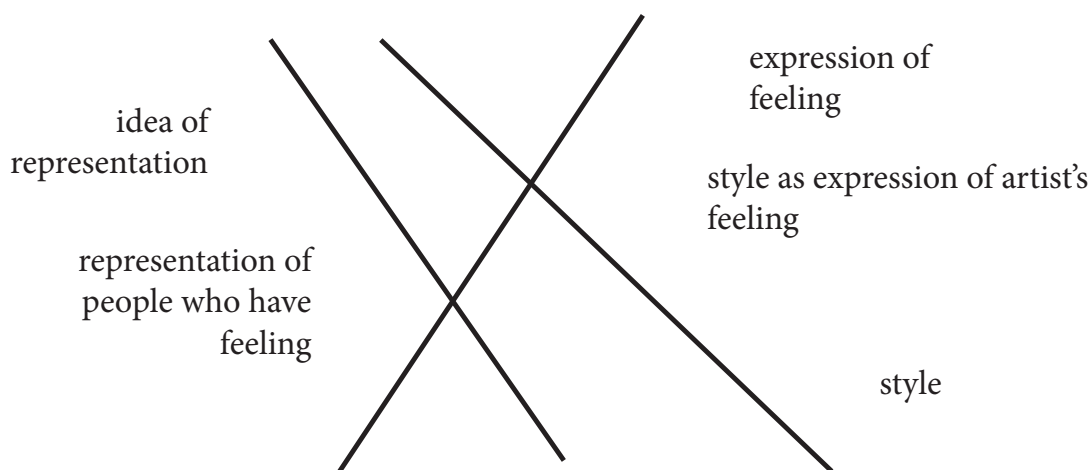


Figure 5: The development of expression and style by Parsons M., in InJAE 1.1 copyright NTAEI 2003

In all three cases, through the interpretation of the work, the concept of abstract art is interpreted. In education, the concept of abstractness is grasped by the pupils through the concepts of “music” in the image and the principle of the interconnection of two worlds. On the other hand, Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy [Why Paintings Don't Need Names] presents a theoretical analysis of the abstract concept on the causal circumstances started in the previous paintings.

The empirical study has shown that the expert interpretations presented in the publication are based especially on historical contexts that are causal to a particular piece. The work is placed on the timeline and through it is introduced to the young viewer. It is based, in particular, on the “idea of style” and “idea of representation”. The student’s interpretation consists of a state of mind – an emphatic component of the perception of both the feelings invoked by the work and the perception of the work through the author.

## **Conclusion**

The empirical study aims to compile the results of the research and the theoretical framework, based mainly on visual studies, to reveal the interpretation possibilities of students aged 11–13. It is crucial that students (in discursive educational models) are able to fully understand the work and come up with conclusions similar to the expert (in the theoretical framework from the catalogue *Painting the Universe: František Kupka Pioneer in Abstraction* and the grandfather’s interpretation from *Proč obrazy nepotřebují názvy* [Why Paintings Don’t Need Names]). It has even been shown that in the case under consideration they are very sensitive to what the specialist (grandfather) has completely neglected, and that is the level of the multisensory aspects of the work – musicality in the painting. In order to understand the origin of the abstract work, this metaphor can be crucial. The research results confirm the current trends in approaches to teaching art history in art education based on a high degree of student autonomy, the concept of a reflective practitioner, with the concept of discursive critical approaches.

## **Online resources**

<https://www.ngprague.cz>



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