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**THE VISUAL NARRATIVE TEST AS AN EXPRESSIVE MEANS
FOR PROBLEMS AND ANXIETIES OF CHILDREN**

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The *Visual Narrative Test* (VNT) is a drawing task utilisable with children and young people aged 3 - 18 developed by the classic American scholar of child art, Brent Wilson, to test the *cultural similarities and differences of child art*. (ⁱ)

„ Children are creating profound models of themselves, their world - past and present - and their world-to-be. These world-models are means by which the realities of self, of culture, of good and evil and of the future are formed, modified, elaborated and tested. And although the world-models constructed by each individual are to some extent unique, there are striking similarities among the symbolic worlds created by children living in the same culture. At the same time, there are striking dissimilarities in the world-views of children of widely separated cultures.

The task we have set for ourselves is to create a system for the analysis of a full range of features present in children's story drawings. With such a system we are then able to answer the question: to what extent do children draw upon a universal human heritage and to what degree are they modified by a specific time and place? „ (ⁱⁱ)

The test invites children and young people to draw a story - and while doing it, they have to search our visual imagery for suitable characters. In the mind's eye, figures and stories come up that might not have been put on paper otherwise. The narrative calls for problems - and most children have a lot of them to share. Not in words, that may be too direct and revealing, but hiding behind tadpole figures, bulky animals or tangible flowers. *The Visual Narrative Test is also a test of the subconscious* - at least so we found when started collecting narrative drawings of Hungarian 6 - 18-year olds in the times of political turmoil and value crisis: between 1988-1995. In the followings we briefly introduce the test and the assessment criteria then give an overview of *problems, anxieties, worries of Hungarian children as represented in the contents and narrative structure of story drawings*.

1. The Administration of the Visual Narrative Test

The test consists of a drawing task that has to be performed on pre-printed A/3 format sheets of white paper with pen, pencil or crayon. Six frames are printed on each sheet and space for the title, the name, age and school of subjects indicated. The six frames are arranged horizontally, three in a row and indicate that a sequence of images has to be prepared. They also give indication of size and the symmetrical arrangement suggests that the first few frames should be used for the beginning scenes, those in the middle for the main part of the story and the last two frames for the ending. The format suggests but does not inhibit: hundreds of

children completely disregard this arrangement and make a personal use of the frames and the space around them. The task takes 30 - 45 minutes to complete (time elapsed does not constitute part of the analysis) and is introduced with the following words:

„Stories may be told in many ways: they may be told aloud by a story-teller, they may be written in books, or even sung in songs. Pictures, too, may be used to tell stories.

Have you ever drawn a picture to tell stories? Have you ever drawn the adventures that people or heroes, or animals might have? Have you ever drawn adventures that could not really happen? Have you ever drawn stories about strange creatures in strange worlds? Have you ever drawn stories of battles or travels, even of plants and insects? Have you drawn stories about sports, holidays or celebrations? Have you drawn stories about everyday things that happen to people?

On the large sheet of paper, please draw a story. Use the boxes to show what happens in Your story and what happens next. Use as many of the boxes you wish, and if you need more sheets of paper you may have them.

Your story may be about anything you would like it to be. You don't even have to make up a new story right now. If you wish, you may draw again a story that you have drawn before.

Draw the story in your own way and have a good time doing your drawings.” (iii)

Let us consider the implications of this unusually lengthy for both psychological and pedagogical tests introduction! First, it explains that the task is *to represent a dramatic sequence* not just to make a picture the usual way children do. It encourages children to evoke memories of stories read (or read out for them) and sung. The text *contains no direct reference to comic books*, it clearly wants to avoid the usage of these ready-made images as models. (In fact, children in Hungary very rarely turn to comic book or cartoon heroes for protagonists - they actually associate the task with the world of tales and the story-telling moments of everyday life.)

The introduction continues with the assumption that *all children are fond of drawing stories*. This assumption is based on an extensive research of the author of the test on sketches, scribbles, graffiti and pictures by children and adolescents drawn outside the school (^{iv}). Children like to depict events although they rarely do series of such drawings. They draw action but they do not always represent its precedings and proceedings. Some visually more articulate young people will develop a standard set of characters and keep a *visual diary* of their deeds (a famous example is Pablo Picasso who sent cartoons to his aunt instead of letters as an account of his life in a new home) but most average individuals will resort to isolated images. The explanation of the task makes it clear that this time several pictures should be drawn, a story should be communicated .

A series of questions follows about possible topics children might have chosen before. Most of them suggest a conflict to be resolved - a battle, an adventure in a strange world - but the questions also make it clear that events of everyday life may also be depicted. Children are ensured that no one expects them to fantasise if they do not want to. They are not forced to be

creative and „invent”. They have to think instead - to see what in their own lives is worth a picture sequence? Sport events, holidays and celebrations are called to mind.

Then, the test taker explains how the sheets will be used. Again, he/she emphasises that a sequence has to be drawn - what happens first, what next... *The representation of time is a concept that is not at all inhibiting for the generation of video watchers and Nintendo players.* We took about 2000 story drawings and never had a question about the ways time could or should be depicted. Children are used to the moving image and ready to perceive the six frames as takes from a film script. They see sharp changes of angles and scenes that indicate the lapse of an hour or a year and are ready to decode their own scribbles as phases of a story unwinding in time.

The test *avoids all sorts of constraints and inhibitions* - it does not even restrict the number of frames to be used. Quicker or more eloquent children may ask for additional sheets of paper and use 8, 10 or even more frames to develop a story of their own. No time limit is set - fatigue provides for a natural ending point to all narrative drawing sessions. (In Hungary we found that children aged 6 - 10 will need more time to mentally plan and actually draw a story and are very frustrated if they cannot work for at least 40 minutes. Adolescents will need much less time - most of them are ready in 25 - 30 minutes - but are often inclined to do variations, additions or corrections so they normally finish in 45 - 60 minutes.

The last few lines are very important. The test taker encourages the children to *re-draw* a story they have developed before. Many children - especially those aged 8 - 12 - have a well-developed visual repertoire that they feel comfortable with, are willing to use but may hardly ever do so in school settings. The concept of „*school art*”, developed by Arthur Efland in the seventies, gives a good definition of this schizophrenic attitude. *Youngsters have two visual languages* - a stereotypical, uninspired and mechanic „*public idiom*” for school use and another, „*private*”, much more creative language to be used at home. Wilson encourages the child to come up with stories drawn before, to utilise well-known and well-loved protagonists and scenes, not to bother about „uniqueness” but to draw a meaningful story and *have a good time*.

Children and young people actually do have a good time while taking this test. At first, many of the older children (10 years and up) look puzzled and complain that they have nothing to draw about, they simply cannot invent a story to be told in pictures. Soon, however, questions about the use of the last sentence of the „Instructions” qualifies this task as one of the most outstanding measures of drawing ability - one that is based on a natural activity, one that is fun to do. Uninhabited, relaxed children give a much better evidence of their visual language („*child art*”, if you wish) than those engaged in doing a test of spatial depiction or fragment completion.

It is because of this playful and inspiring quality that we decided to use the test as *a measure of drawing level* and elaborated, with the help of Brent Wilson, a set of criteria to be used for assessing excellence in visual representation. We introduced the compulsory *use of colour*, for example, that was there only as an option and developed criteria for the assessment of colour composition. We also included criteria on *aesthetic qualities* although we are aware of the fact that cultural features or psychological problems may be found in extremely displeasing works as well. Our criteria are used as an addition to the original ones and are meant to offer another approach to the narrative drawings - that of the art examiner.

The VNT as a creative, open-ended task that requires the drawing of several images and compositions has proved to be a more reliable measure for drawing excellence than single frame, traditional tasks. As this paper focuses on the use of the Visual Narrative Test as a device for the detection and elaboration of conflicts we outline those assessment criteria not related to this aspect only very briefly.

2. Assessment Criteria of the Visual Narrative Test

The Visual Narrative Test is assessed according to criteria that judge *the symbolic and actual contents, iconography, technical level and aesthetic appeal* of narrative drawings. All frames are considered and the best solution is selected for scoring as it represents the maximum achievement of the child tested.

Table 1: Assessment Criteria of the Visual Narrative Test

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION	SCORING	REMARKS
Figure Structure	The level of elaboration and differentiation of the protagonist - a human Figure or an animal.	10 levels of Figure representation identified. Scores are given according to the level of elaboration and differentiation.	Always the best Figure is scored. An illustrated scoring guide with examples taken from narrative drawings is available.
Frame Organisation	Dominant compositional types as identified in the literature on child art development - from floating figures to symmetrical, arrangements in perspective.	15 frequent compositional types are identified. Scores representing sophistication are allocated to each type.	Always the best frame is scored. An illustrated scoring guide with examples taken from narrative drawings is available.
Aesthetic Quality	Criteria scored: a) <i>subject-centred - ness</i> b) <i>variety of motives employed</i>	Sub-scores given for - choice of motive to express content - choice of composition - expressivity - line quality - texture - contrasts	Always the best frame is scored. An illustrated scoring guide for each country the test is used in is needed but it <i>must be updated regularly to suit paradigm changes in art education and changes of taste.</i>
Narrative Structure	Type of the story told or lack of narrative content.	Structural types of the visual narratives are coded. One or more codes may be given to narratives. (See classification	New categories may emerge - scoring guide should be updated regularly. <i>An illustrated scoring guide for each</i>

		below.)	<i>country the test is used in is needed.</i>
Content Types	Classification of the major theme / subject of the narrative sequence.	<i>Content categories</i> are coded. One or more codes may be given to narratives. (See classification below.)	Imbedded sub-themes and plot elements may also be recorded for a detailed content analysis - important in art therapy! <i>New categories may emerge</i> - scoring guide should be updated regularly.
Colour Usage	Quality and methods of colour composition		The general level observable in the six frames in scored.

Structural types of the visual narratives : 1: Single Object 2: Two or more related objects 3: „Frozen vignette”: single frame narrative with one actor acting 4: „Temporal vignette”: single frame narrative with two or more events 5: Descriptive Sequence: a set of drawings showing a process (growth, development, seasonal change) 6: Action sequence: depicts actions of characters or objects 7: Reactive sequence : character depicted in different moods 8: Goal-based sequence, Type A: no obstacle, no ending 9: Goal-based sequence, Type B: no obstacle but there is an ending 10: Goal-based sequence, Type C: there is an obstacle but no ending 11: Goal-based sequence, Type D: obstacle and ending both depicted.

Content categories of the visual narratives: 1: Developmental/Natural Process (e.g.: growth of a plant) 2: Creation / Construction 3: „Slice-of-Life” - regular daily activities 4: Quest / Odyssey: adventurous travel 5: Bonding/Friendship 6: Assistance 7: Giving a gift 8: Success - often wish-fulfilling, the protagonist becomes a hero 9: Failure: defeat, failure to escape, falling down, failing to rescue someone 10: Fighting / Contest / War - individuals or groups engaged in a battle 11: Trial: test of strength, struggling to survive 12: Crime: a rule or norm is violated 13: Punishment: a penalty is exacted for the violation of a rule or norm 14: Demise/Death/Destruction: someone or something is being killed, eaten, swallowed-up, burned to the ground etc. 15: Misfortune: minor, accidental inconveniences or problems (e.g.: a handbag lost, a window broken) 16: other

3. The Visual Narrative Test in Hungary - Samples and Testing Projects

In Hungary, regular assessment of visual skills and abilities has begun in the eighties when the skills of art criticism of children aged 6 - 14 were assessed three times in a decade to note changes of tastes, attitudes and knowledge resulting from a new curriculum for art education. (^v) The next major curriculum reform movement, the Leonardo Program, co-ordinated by one of the authors of this paper, Andrea Kárpáti, was also a project in assessment: methods for examination of art-related skills and abilities were experimented with in order to assess the special effects of five alternative curricula. The VNT was one of the measures successfully employed here. (^{vi}) At present, a longitudinal study of the development of visual skills of adolescents aged 12 - 18 is undertaken by the same author where the VNT supplements formal tests of colour composition, representation of space and visual creativity. In another study co-ordinated by the Institute for Teachers Training of the Hungarian Academy of Crafts

and Design we document and analyse the immediate visual environment of adolescents; their dressing styles, make-up, home environment and objects of everyday use. (^{vii}) In order to *understand their symbolisation processes*, we included the VNT in their testing battery and have found that *the world they represent gives useful hints for decoding the micro-world they actually create around themselves*.

Besides gathering data on the level of representation of narrative sequences and the use of conventions of colour rendering and space depiction in an informal, creative context we also intend to compile an *iconography of characters and actions* that populate the world of visual narratives of Hungarian children and youth. We are convinced that the information provided by a careful study of VNT will contribute significantly to our knowledge of the visual world of Hungarian adolescents.

For the present analysis we use a sub-sample of our collection of visual narratives with the exclusion of students participating in art education experiments whose visual output significantly differs from the narratives of children and young people who do not intend to enter visual professions. When compiling this sample we intended to include a balanced number of students from the age groups selected.

Table 2. Distribution of the sample according to age

AGE	BOYS	GIRLS	TOTAL
7	54	69	123
8	75	75	150
10	126	56	182
11	99	93	192
12	154	154	308
13	84	97	181
14	81	82	163
15	67	153	220
16	53	82	135
17	24	31	55

Total number of students included in this analysis: 1709. Number of age groups: 10. All subjects attend primary or secondary school in Hungary and none of them attends a specialised programme for visual arts education. The narratives were collected between 1988-1995.

4. The Visual Narrative Test As a Means of Detection and Elaboration of Conflict of Children

When introducing the Visual Narrative Test as a means for the revelation / detection and elaboration of conflicts we refer to E. Aronson who describes three ways of elaborating harmful tensions:

- to convert it to *aggressive fantasies* and „daydream” about scenes when acts of aggression are actually performed
- to calm down muscular tension - and through this, also mental stress - in the course of *physical activities* (running, boxing, gymnastics)
- *to act out an aggressive deed in reality*: to hurt or harm someone or ourselves, to shout, to scream, to cry. (^{viii})

Already as early as in the fifties S. Fenbach observed that aggression in fantasy actually helps young people recovering their balanced, normal mental state. (^{ix})We observed that the VNT may be used as a method for the *conversion of aggression into fantasies and at the same time calm down the body and the soul through the physical exercise of drawing*. We video taped many sessions where small children actually tore the sheets when accompanying their narrative drawings with frightening sounds and words their protagonists were supposed to utter. We have seen many youngsters who became extremely tense when choosing a topic and revealed once it was put on paper.

The *art therapists* who attended our post-graduate course in art psychology started to use *the method of story drawing as a diagnostic device*. They asked many of their patients to keep visual diaries and were confronted with narrative sequences that gave indications of neurotic problems that were not revealed during the amanuensis and the long series of interviews. A case of incest, for example that the patient was most reluctant to speak about were actually depicted as horrible adventures of a female astronaut on a strange planet. Another patient decided to „relive” his entire life through stories drawn and came to events that turned out to be the causes of his present distress while pondering on a scene he found hard to depict. In this paper we intend to discuss the narratives of children and young people who are „normal” and given therefore no extra care or attention however many of them would be in need of this. We will show the dominant content categories of our sample and analyse in detail some narratives that document the use of this method in what we may call „*therapeutic*” *art education*.

When choosing a topic for their narrative drawings, almost half of our sample (23 % of boys and 19 % of girls) choose a conflict as a central theme. The content categories that assume the depiction of a conflict are the following:

4: *Quest / Odyssey*: adventurous travel, very often to a distant planet. Most Hungarian children presume that horrible things are to be expected in outer space. Remarkably, not the science fiction catastrophes are depicted but aggressive acts that often happen on the Earth as well. Nothing is secure, no one is there to be trusted - even the tamest of all creatures, a bunny may turn out to be villainous. (Figure 1: Death on the Island of Cannibal Bunnies)

9: *Failure*: defeat, failure to escape, falling down, failing to rescue someone. (Figure 2: „The Punk”) Here, „falling down” is a dominant theme in our sample. Most girls who choose this category depict such scenes. According to the psychology of dreams, falling or flying means total exasperation - a symptom characteristic for over-achieving teenage girls.

10: *Fighting / Contest / War* - individuals or groups engaged in a battle. Historic scenes are more often depicted than comic book scenes from outer space. The romantics of chivalry seems to still be attractive for young boys. Scenes of war near our boundaries, in former

Yugoslavia, however, are more and more often drawn as a sign of children's growing awareness to threat in reality. (Figure 3: „Bosnia”) Everyday scenes are often represented as stages for the most horrible events. As bull dogs, for example, became a status symbol, many children find the street is a likely place for massacre. (Figure 4: „The Killer Dog Looks for Victims at Full Moon”)

11: *Trial*: test of strength, struggling to survive. Peculiarly, those teenagers who have chosen this topic define their immediate environment: their home or the street they live in as the place one has to struggle hard to survive. Many boys depict themselves while beating up or being beaten by an evil family member. Playing a vicious trick on friends or family members is also a very frequent topic, often with clear wish-fulfilling overtones. (Figure 5: „Happy Birthday!”)

12: *Crime*: a rule or norm is violated. Criminals are often depicted as heroes. When they fail they are mourned by beautiful women and relatives and their graves are decorated with ornaments and flowers. *Crime is often associated with historic events - here, nihilism gives the key note*. Revolution is depicted as a violent coup d'état necessarily doomed to failure. (Figure 6: Revolution Defeated)

13: *Punishment*: a penalty is exacted for the violation of a rule or norm. This topic is rarely depicted - a sure sign that children do not have to be afraid of adults who have a strong set of norms that they are ready to defend. neither at school nor at the homes of these students is punishment a logical consequence of misdeeds. Instead, it is a totally incalculable, capricious act during which an adult mostly over-reacts. A child will be beheaded for a broken window or stub to death for being late. (Figure 7: Batman and the Children)

14: *Demise/Death/Destruction*: someone or something is being killed, eaten, swallowed-up, burned to the ground etc. A very frequent topic. The most tragic ones are those images when death happens without any explainable cause in a very normal setting. (Figure 8: „No Problem”, Figure 9: „The Long Journey”) Also, the nonchalant attitude of the one who survives is a serious sign of moral insanity . (Figure 10: „The Story of Mr. Ugly and Miss Witch”) A person often gets into trouble only because he/she is bored. (Figure 11: „The Death of Mr. X”)

15: *Misfortune*: minor, accidental inconveniences or problems. This is the topic chosen by those „mentally healthy” children who would like to represent „something exciting”. The ending is almost always optimistic - the handbag is recovered, the thief taken away by the police, the broken window replaced and the way home found again. In these stories children „experiment with danger” and prove their coping skills.

Among the conflict types depicted, *death and destruction is most frequent* - also among girls. Of course, videos, computer games and most action movies propagate the cult of destruction. It is also quite easy to depict a body lying on the ground bleeding... Still, the frequency of death in child art correlates with the growing popularity of *Satanist sects* among children. It is peculiar to note that 13-14-year-old girls are quite overwhelmed with this topic. *Illness is almost totally absent* - a topic difficult to render expressively or one that represents a remote threat for the young? 10- and 15-year-old girls like to express anger and excitement - they are very inventive visually in doing so.

It is not surprising that boys draw more bank robberies and car breakdowns while girls produce more images of loneliness and isolation from peers. Minor breaking of the rules - cheating at tax, stealing from the office, travelling on trams without a ticket - are considered national pastimes in present-day Hungary and sociologists often complain that villainy is associated with success and positive values by children. Narrative drawings provide further evidence of the instability of values and the loss of perspective of entire generations in Hungary.

Accident is one of the favourite topics of both genders - it is also a theme that lends itself easily to pictorial composition. (Figure Girls also like to depict broken cars and wounded victims - especially adolescents. In general, in the Hungarian sample, *girls tend to be much more aggressive than boys.*

Many art teachers want to know *how far children were able to express themselves*, whether their lack of skills of representation is responsible for the choice of their topics. We found that the visual rendering of aggression - however hard it is sometimes in terms of technical problems in showing bodies moving, vehicles turning, houses blown to pieces, did not result in inferior drawing development. On the contrary - when contrasted with the performance of the students in other drawing tasks and tests we found that the Visual Narrative Test is stimulating drawing skills. Also because of that, we want to call the attentions of art educators as well as social workers and art therapists to this „*healing and revealing*” task.

LIST OF FIGURES WITH CAPTIONS

1. *Death on the Island of Cannibal Bunnies.* (girl, 16 years)

Text: Frame 1: After a shipwreck, Meatie lands on a deserted island. Frame 2: Oh, a cookie! Let me taste it! Frame 3: Oh, how furry! Disgusting... Meatie was wrong, this was not a cookie... Frame 4 - 5: sounds of eating

2. „*The Punk*”. (boy, 14)

Text: Frame 1: The dirty punk! Now I will kill him!

3. „*Bosnia*”. (girl, 16 years)

4. „*The Killer Dog Looks for Victims at Full Moon*”. (boy, 15 years)

Text: Frame 1: here is a hooker, I suck her blood. Frame 2: Well, I had a nice lunch. Now I go to sleep and then look for another victim. Frame 3: I suck the blood of this fat guy, too... Frame 4: His internal parts were chewy, perhaps because of the hamburger he has just eaten. His heart was nice and crunchy. His lungs tasted like bacon - perhaps because of the cigarettes he used to smoke. Frame 5: Oh, there comes a pit bull... Frame 6: sounds of eating

5. „*Happy Birthday!*”. (girl, 13 years)

Text: Frame 1: Birthday Cake. Here it is for Your birthday! (In English): Happy Birthday to You! Frame 2: (in Hungarian): Happy Birthday! Frame 3: Thank You! Frame 4: Two months later it is the birthday of Gisella. Ha-ha-ha, it will soon explode... Frame 5: As soon as Mike leaves the room and the house ... Frame 6: BUMM.

6. „*Revolution Defeated*” (boy, 17 years)

Text: Frame 1: Poverty Frame 2: Organising a revolution Frame 3: Revolt Frame 4: Victory
Frame 5: Comeback Frame 6: Revenge.

7. „Batman and the Children”. (boy, 13 years)

Text: Frame 1: Help! Frame 2: Mummy! Frame 3: I have to go to the bathroom! You do your job right where you are! Frame 3: Come on here! Frame 4: (rocket kills all children) I am through with it al last... Fortunately I do not have to take care of them anymore. Frame 6: TOWN CEMETERY. Sorry, kids, but I told you... Ha-ha-ha-ha... (In English:) HAPPY END!!! You may see the next part on 42. 20. 3014 (imaginary date.)

8. „No Problem”. (girl, 10 years)

Text: Frame 1: Chemistry Shop (same inscription in all frames on top of rectangle.) What is wrong with You? Nothing. (Literally translated from Hungarian: Is there any problem?) Frame 2: tomorrow. (same text) Frame 3-4: (same text). Frame 5: ... and it went on for years and years... Frame 6: After a while... Apparently, he had something wrong with him... (Literally translated from Hungarian: Evidently, he still had a problem...)

9. „The Long Journey”. (girl, 13 years)

10. „The Story of Mr. Ugly and Miss Witch”. (girl, 16 years)

Text: Frame 5: Oh baby, your hand is cut off...You are dead! Frame 6: Never mind, I have someone on reserve... Frame 7: You are much better, baby!

11. „The Death of Mr. X”. (girl, 14 years)

Text: (Subtitles on top of frames written in capitals.) Frame 1: HE DRINKS HIS TEA IN THE MORNING. I have never read such a boring story! Frame 2: HE READS HIS PAPER. Well, this is better! Frame 3: HE GOES TO WORK, HE WAITS FOR THE BUS. I will have a few words to say to the writer! Frame 4: AND THE STEAM-ROLLER IS COMING... Something exciting, finally! Frame 5: AND THE POOR MR. X. ... What's going on here? Frame 6: REST IN PEACE, MR X.! Hey, I did not mean this!!!

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Assessment Criteria of the Visual Narrative Test

Table 2. Distribution of the sample according to age

Abstract for the SIPE Conference

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In the *exhibition* accompanying the conference we show samples of narrative story drawings by Hungarian children facing problems and conflicts of everyday life.

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