Gender and Genre: A Study of Children's War Drawing

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Questions

"I won't be long," promised my wife as she slipped out of the passenger seat and went into the store. Saturday morning errands being what they are, the children and I settled in for a wait. An assortment of passersby soon engaged my interest, and my thoughts began to wander. But I was brought back to the present rather suddenly when a barrage of sounds erupted in the back seat: the high pitched whistle of a laser cannon; the sustained guttural roar of an exploding spacecraft. Armed with pencil and paper, Stephen was waging war.

Stephen is 9 and fascinated by war. He saved his allowance for weeks in order to buy an army helmet. He collects Desert Storm cards, a military equivalent to baseball cards. He brings home as many library books on the subject as he can carry. And he made a grenade launcher from a mouthwash bottle, paper roll, and several other found objects. Stephen also does war drawings--lots of them.

As a parent, I would like to understand my son's interest in war. I recall my own spontaneous drawings as a child, drawings in which tomahawk-wielding Indians always seemed to prevail over pistol-packing cowboys. And I wonder--what knowledge, skills, attitudes and values are gained through involvement in this genre or theme in drawing?

As an art educator, I am intrigued by the energy children pour into such drawings. No one makes them do it. No one tells them they must fill in all the white spaces. And no one tells them they should research their subject in order to make their airplanes look more like the real thing. They do all these things because they want to. As an art educator, I would like to learn more about the role of self-motivation in art education.

The literature suggests that what differences there are in subject matter preferences of preschool boys and girls seem to dramatically widen in the elementary school years. Boys tend to draw subjects involving sports, vehicles, superheroes, and warfare. Meanwhile girls tend to prefer tamer subjects. Girls draw horses, flowers, domestic scenes, and fashion models (Conrad, 1964; Lark-Horovitz, Lewis and Luca, 1973; Lowenfeld and Brittain, 1987; Wilson and Wilson, 1982).

Though it has been widely reported that such differences exist, little research has been published about particular genres. Wilson (1974) has
written about the superhero drawings of one boy. Fein (1976) has documented the development of one girl’s drawings of horses. A few other studies have been published and these tend to investigate the output of a single young person. But very little has been done on the specific genre of war.

Sylvia Feinburg (1975) wrote about the war drawings of her son Douglas. This study has provided many of the ideas upon which my research is constructed. Feinburg takes issue with some psychoanalytic researchers like Naumburg (1947) who suggest that war drawing is an indication of social maladjustment and suppressed hostility. Noting that war drawing is a genre chosen almost exclusively by boys, she concludes that it has to do with issues of gender identity. In drawing soldiers and their military equipment, boys are coming to terms with what they perceive to be the adult male role. And they are exploring values of cooperation with age-mates in a highly competitive situation. With respect to the weapons and other military equipment, youngsters gain feelings of competence and mastery. Using complex technology is part of the adult world. Feinburg concedes that aggression seems to be part of what these drawings are about; but she reminds us that aggression within socially acceptable limits, is something to be valued.

Perspectives and Methods

In investigating the phenomenon or case, I am employing multiple perspectives. Each is used as a spotlight which, when trained on the case, will help to illuminate it. Various theories of gender identification are being called upon to contribute to the description and explanation of war drawing. So too are theories about imitation and imagination. Further perspectives have been gained by looking at adult art which deals with the subject of war. And children’s drawings from war-torn countries have been examined as well. These works provide dramatic contrasts with North American pictures because they are based on children’s real life experiences of war. In making such comparisons it becomes easier to see what knowledge and perceptions some North American children have about war. And from this one may speculate on the underlying motivation for making such drawings.

Other perspectives concerning children’s play, popular culture, and so forth, have prepared me to see more clearly, and understand more fully what these drawings are about.

My method of performing the case study was first to devise a structure. For this I turned to Hasselberger (1961). The study began by examining the product—the drawings themselves. Next I considered the process by which the objects were made. This lead to an investigation into the intended use of the drawings. For what purpose(s) were they made? Next I inquired about the maker of the object—the “artist.” And finally I looked at the culture which encourages such interests. The structure begins with a
very focused look at the drawings, and it moves back from the object through a series of steps to gain an ever-widening perspective.

In order to conduct the study, I asked teachers of students in elementary grades to identify children who do spontaneous drawings about war. So as not to foreclose on the possibility of finding girls who also like to draw in this genre, the appeal was for "children," not just boys. Through this and other contacts I was able to get a group of 17 youngsters who were willing to be interviewed. All of those recommended to me were boys.

I conducted a semi-structured interview with each one. The conversations began with our talking about the drawings. This gave me an opportunity to learn how the children define war drawing. This also gave me a chance to see if what I learned in talking with the child, could be found in the drawing. Observation extended beyond looking at the product, to watching the child at work on a drawing. This provided additional insights about the process. Visiting the children in their homes permitted the gathering of an even wider body of information. I was able to learn about the social and physical environment in which these drawings were made. I could observe the interaction between the boy and his younger sister. I could see the drawing of a helicopter taped to the refrigerator.

Stephen has played a special role in this study. I kept field notes over a 10 month period on aspects of his life which may contribute to his interest and involvement in war drawing. In addition I have engaged him as a key informant, asking him to explain some of the finer points of Nintendo games or whatever else may be a part of his world and that of youngsters like him.

The final element of the study involved a portfolio review. Here I asked the participants in my study to review whatever they had in the way of a collection of drawings. Besides seeing what other genres are represented in the portfolio, it more importantly enabled us to see how the drawings have changed over a period of months or even years. The review provided answers to questions of particular relevance to art education. How aware are these children of their growth as learners? Do they recognize their shifting interests and developing abilities?

Findings Thus Far

Thus far in my data collection and analysis of the product it is evident that there are sub-genres within war drawing. The first--and few youngsters seem to do this kind of drawing--deals with maps and strategies of war. These provide a context for drawings about action. And they appeal to the strategists who find satisfaction in deploying troops and arranging fortifications. Perhaps these drawings are most closely connected to an interest in war games. The second deals with the machinery of war. Sophisticated, high-tech weapons are presented in almost blueprint fashion with specifications such as speed and firepower listed. Here it would seem...
the child is intrigued by the potential for speed, power, destruction. It may be that this particular interest is in some way related to the assembling of models. By so doing, the youngster comes into intimate acquaintance with the object, gaining some sense of mastery over it, perhaps even possessing some of its capabilities. The third sub-genre concerns warriors. There are Rambo-type contemporary heros, and there are heroes of history and fantasy. Like the machines of war, these carry an arsenal of weapons, and display fearsome power. Perhaps such a fascination develops out of the superhero genre. But unlike a Superman or spiderman, these heroes are not crime fighters. Nor do they operate on their own. These soldiers work in cooperation with others and do not possess such supernatural powers. However impressive their abilities may be, they cannot see through walls or leap tall buildings in a single bound. Finally there are action drawings. This I found, to be by far the most common of the sub-genres. Using a shallow "stage," children often stack the action vertically with planes above, ground forces, and perhaps even tunnels below ground. When more room is needed to extend the stage left and right, additional pages may be taped to the original drawing. Some referred to this as a "continuation drawing." The passage of time may be shown by separate "before and after" drawings. Or the child may choose to compress a number of events into a single page. The most dramatic example is where the scene is first carefully set up for war, and then the battle begins. Through scribbling, erasing, and re-drawing, the objects on the page are finally reduced to smoke and rubble. Here the entire war, from beginning to end, is shown on a single page. This type of drawing in particular, underscores the importance of process. Very little remains to view, when the drawing is done. And some youngsters simply discard the wreckage. If you missed the process, you missed an "event."

An Unforeseen Development

While preparing to begin this study of North American children's spontaneous drawings of fantasy wars, an international crisis developed in the Middle East which affected the drawings of many of the youngsters in my study. Iraq invaded Kuwait. In response, the United States and a coalition of countries joined forces in a defensive campaign known as Operation Desert Shield. This was followed by an offensive one--Desert Storm. Though none of the children in my study had a close friend or relative directly involved in the fighting, almost all showed the influence of these events in their drawings.

One girl who had not previously done spontaneous drawings about war, and so had not been included in the regular study, began a brief series in which she came to terms with her fears and concerns about the war. Her first drawing was of the televised announcement of the start of the air campaign, the initial phase of Desert Storm. In the drawings which followed, she dealt with issues of weapons and human suffering. Evident emotion is represented in the work. Civilians cry, soldiers frown--war is an unhappy business. Finally working through these concerns, her last drawing is much like those of her
brother. There is no more suffering. And the armies of dot figures are presided over by a smiling sun.

The others in my study ranged from showing no awareness whatever in their drawings, to aggressive pictures which taunt the Iraqi leader, or predict his demise. The taunting took several forms. One youngster drew characters from popular culture. A Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle challenges Saddam Hussein. And television "bad boy" Bart Simpson, is dressed like a commando. Through his sharp teeth he growls "eat my shorts Saddom [sic]." Another youngster chose to copy editorial cartoons from the newspaper, ridiculing the Iraqi president. Most youngsters however, preferred to deal with the war by showing U.S. and Iraqi military forces engaged in combat. Here outcomes became important. Instead of drawing action for its own sake, there was greater interest shown in who the winners and losers might be. U.S. forces are provided with certain advantages. They have greater numbers of soldiers, their equipment is more modern, and they enjoy tactical superiority. In addition the Americans have luck on their side. An American gun discharges accidentally, hitting an Iraqi soldier. Fortune does not smile on the Iraqis however. When an Iraqi soldier shoots, he unwittingly hits one of his own comrades.

In making these drawings the children reveal a knowledge about details such as the appearance of Scud Missiles and Stealth Bombers, though within the same drawing there can also be aspects which are quite fictional. These depictions may be objects never before seen on a field of battle, or weapons may be given impossible capabilities: a single bullet may tear through a mountain and keep going or it may ricochet several times, each time touching off a chain of catastrophic events. There are other ways, too, in which fantasy and reality co-exist within the confines of the page.

Continuing the Study

The analysis is continuing as I investigate: use, artist, and culture. But it is clear that the process is a very important part of the drawing. Though children encounter difficulties and sometimes experience frustrations arising from the challenge of representing objects and events, they persevere. They do so because the satisfactions of the process make the struggle worthwhile. Observing that process has contributed to my overall understanding of the drawings and the children who make them, I began this paper by describing the sounds Stephen made as he waged war on the page. This is only one example of aspects of the process which go unnoticed by those researchers who attend only to the product.

And as I conducted the study it became increasingly evident that war drawing is part of a much larger picture. It relates to children's play and to the identity they project through clothing and posters on their walls. It is nurtured by popular culture and by an even wider culture through visits to museums,
television news, conversations with parents and grandparents who are war veterans, and so one.

My conversations with these children convinced me that they are well adjusted young people, secure in their identity, warm in their relations with others, successful at school. And most of all, they are clearly able to distinguish fantasy from reality. They do not confuse their graphite scratches on the page with real human suffering. On the whole they regard war as something to be avoided if at all possible.

There is much for the art educator to gain by such a study. We come to a greater understanding of the interests of some children and we can look for ways to connect and extend those interests. My study suggests that we look for effective ways of helping the educator to find connections between the interests of some children and the wider world of art. Looking to art history for example, some of the most potent works deal with the theme of war. Picasso, Goya, Kollwitz, Rivera and many others have created pictures which evoke emotional responses in all of us. Such works can become points of entry into dialogue with students. And such works provide multiple points of view on a complex and important topic such as war.

Children arrive in our classrooms having their own store of knowledge and a high level of motivation for some things. We are obligated to make education relevant for them and in so doing, more rewarding for ourselves. A greater understanding of children's spontaneous drawing can lead us in that direction.

References


