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Constructions of Artistic Creativity in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh

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Abstract

Artistic creativity is presently considered to be a multidimensional phenomenon that unfolds over time and is in constant conversation with the social and historical context of the artists, as well as their personal life experiences. This article adopts a narrative perspective and explores Vincent van Gogh's understanding of the constructs of creativity as reflected in his letters to his brother Theo, friends, and other family members. To inquire into van Gogh's correspondence, narrative thematic analysis was employed. Findings highlight the artist's constructs around creativity, which seem to depict elements of both modern and post-modern views of creativity. Major themes include creativity as (a) a developmental, dynamic learning process characterized by dedication and persistence; (b) a relational process in the context of people and nature; (c) an embodied action; (d) an oscillation between asceticism and socio-cultural participation, (e) suffering, and (f) a larger-than-life force. With this study, we join the conversation of scholars around recent developments in the field of creativity, calling for a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches to this complex and multifaceted construct. Moreover, we hope to move beyond the 'mad genius' stereotype and myths around psychopathology and artistic creativity, as exemplified in the present analysis of van Gogh's correspondence.

Keywords

artistic creativity, narrativity, narrative thematic analysis, relational, embodiment, Vincent van Gogh's letters, qualitative inquiry, sociocultural

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Constructions of Artistic Creativity in the Letters of Vincent van Gogh

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Artistic creativity is presently considered to be a multidimensional phenomenon that unfolds over time and is in constant conversation with the social and historical context of the artists, as well as their personal life experiences. This article adopts a narrative perspective and explores Vincent van Gogh's understanding of the constructs of creativity as reflected in his letters to his brother Theo, friends, and other family members. To inquire into van Gogh's correspondence, narrative thematic analysis was employed. Findings highlight the artist's constructs around creativity, which seem to depict elements of both modern and post-modern views of creativity. Major themes include creativity as (a) a developmental, dynamic learning process characterized by dedication and persistence; (b) a relational process in the context of people and nature; (c) an embodied action; (d) an oscillation between asceticism and socio-cultural participation, (e) suffering, and (f) a larger-than-life force. With this study, we join the conversation of scholars around recent developments in the field of creativity, calling for a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches to this complex and multifaceted construct. Moreover, we hope to move beyond the 'mad genius' stereotype and myths around psychopathology and artistic creativity, as exemplified in the present analysis of van Gogh's correspondence.

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Introduction

Capturing the interest of scholars, research on creativity has focused on different aspects of this multifaceted phenomenon, using a variety of perspectives and methodological approaches (Kozbelt et al., 2010; Sternberg & Kaufman, 2018). Gradually, research interest around creativity moved from a modernist perspective, focusing on the individual, to a post-modern view that takes into account the socio-cultural elements of creativity (Glăveanu, 2010a, 2010b). In this article, we explored Vincent van Gogh's understanding of the constructs of creativity, as reflected in his letters to his brother Theo, friends, and other family members, taking into account both the way he personally experienced, viewed, and valued his artwork, as well as the role that the socio-cultural context played in the construction of his understanding of creativity. Based on a review of literature, no other study has explored the constructs of creativity in Vincent's letters.

For over a century, biographies of van Gogh, along with various editions of his letters, have been extensively analyzed in various fields and with different purposes (psychology and psychiatry in particular), trying to find an answer to the riddle of his mental health (i.e., Blumer, 2002; Heiman, 1976; Monroe, 1978; Marrant, 1993; Runyan, 1981). Brower (2000) used the correspondence of van Gogh as case study material in order to explore, through a cognitive/developmental lens, the temporal aspects of Vincent's creativity, the "mad genius"

stereotype, and the role of repetition in his creativity. Another research attempt, from the field of sociology, has just been added in the available literature by Atkinson (2020), exploring the role of the early family environment and secondary field effects (Bourdieu, 1998, as cited in Atkinson, 2020) in the development of van Gogh's artistic oeuvre and confirming the impact of family heritage and expectations, relations with the clergy, and the artistic zeitgeist on his art.

In this study we hope to move beyond the "mad genius" stereotype and myths around psychopathology and artistic creativity, and to join the contemporary conversation of scholars around the phenomenon of creativity, calling for multidimensional theoretical and methodological approaches to the construct (e.g., Glăveanu et al., 2019; Montuori & Purser, 1995). In particular, we explore van Gogh's own constructs of creativity and highlight the way an artist of modernity, namely Vincent van Gogh, incorporated in his understanding both modern and post-modern elements of creativity, thus confirming the complex and multifaceted aspects of the phenomenon.

From the Modern to the Post-Modern Approach to Creativity

In the aftermath of World War II, J. P. Guilford's landmark speech as President of APA (1950), called for more studies of the creative personality, regenerating interest in creativity studies in the field of psychology. In the 70 years that followed, three major waves developed in creativity research: the first wave, influenced by the romantic myth of the "lone genius," attempted to explore the creative personality and the particularities of prominent artists and scientists. With the second wave, cognitive psychological research addressed issues such as the mental processes, stages, and mechanisms involved in the creative process (Glăveanu, 2010a). At the same time, most definitions of creativity centered around themes such as originality, value, and quality of the creative product, and the role of chance in the creative endeavor (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2007; Rhodes, 1961; Runco & Albert, 2010), with research focusing mainly on the creative, cognitive processes of the individual and the creative personality.

It is through criticisms of this individualistic view of creativity that the third wave in creativity research, which adopted a more systemic, ecological, situated, and relational approach, gradually developed (Montuori, 2017). Research focuses now on the social, cultural, developmental/dynamic, relational, and embodied aspects of creativity (i.e., Amabile, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Glăveanu, 2010a, 2010b, 2015; Glăveanu et al., 2019; Gruber, 1988; Harrington, 1990; Montuori & Purser, 1995, 1997). In particular, postmodern scholars view creativity as a multidimensional activity. More specifically, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1988), creativity is influenced by three components (culture, the social system, and the individual) interacting with each other. Johnson (2001) proposed that creativity is an emergent process which is distributed (Glăveanu, 2014) and socially embedded (Montuori, 2017), inherent in every action of individuals (Joas, 1996). Additionally, Gruber (1988) suggested that creativity is an activity compatible with other needs, values, and goals of people.

Moreover, they stressed the centrality of the body of the creative person as "a constitutive or transcendental principle, precisely because it is involved in the very possibility of experience" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 135). The existence of a living body is what makes experience and action possible; it is the source and the means through which we are able to construct and give meaning to a world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945). Therefore, artistic creativity is inherently embodied in the form of an expressive work of art containing aspects of the experienced cultural and social world, and the artist's interpretations and address.

In all, creativity is perceived as a psycho-social and material/physical phenomenon, which is culturally embedded, relational, and directly intertwined with the sociocultural context in which it takes place (Glăveanu, 2010b). This view is consistent with Vygotsky's (2004/1967)

position on creativity as the combination of lived meanings, symbols, and knowledge, and the construction of a new reality in the imagination of the creative person, which then crystallizes into a tangible cultural outcome that lasts over time. It is also consistent with Dewey's (1934) emphasis on the role of the cultural, social, and historic context as the source from which emotions and ideas arise and as the destination where the work of art fruitfully proposes new meanings and understandings of the world and the common experiences of people.

Situating Vincent van Gogh in his Time

The word, "creativity," made its first appearance in the English language in 1875, in A. W. Ward's *History of Dramatic English Literature*, referring to the poetic writings of Shakespeare (Weiner, 2000). At the time, Vincent van Gogh was 22 years old and worked as an art gallery employee in London. He spoke English, Dutch, French, and Latin, and had already lived in Paris and London. For the next 5 years he pursued many vocations, but he abandoned them all. Later, he became an evangelist in the mining village of Borinage. It was during that time that he studied classical literature and began to draw. Two years later, he and Theo agreed that he would pursue painting, abandoning any other vocation.

During the second half of the 19th century, Western European society was gradually transforming due to industrialization, urbanization, and political and scientific developments (Bessel, 2000; Trebilcock, 2000). In the world of art, the existence of two opposing forces had already been acknowledged: academic art, taught in the art institutions, bought by the wealthy middle-class and supported by the state, and revolutionary or bohemian art, which sought to introduce new techniques, new subject matters, and refused to follow the great masters and to imitate nature (Denvir, 1992; Wittkower, 1973). Van Gogh was clearly part of the latter, denying the descriptive and decorative character of art and favouring instead the use of a vibrant and bold colour palette, coupled with intense emotional expression (Denvir, 1992).

At the same time, art was no more considered a symbol of social unity, as thought of in Antiquity, but followed the fragmentation of self and society, due to the division of labor, the growing significance of trade, and the market system which had been established during the 18th century (Mattick, 2003). Alongside these major changes in society and art, a new narrative for the artist was born: that of a person who denies mass production and commercialization and instead focuses on freedom of expression, with "poverty, obscurity, and insanity," being the dire "cost of this freedom" (Mattick, 2003, p. 75).

Along with the rapidly changing social environment around him, van Gogh's religious beliefs, his relationship with Theo, and his close ties with contemporary artists such as van Rappard, Émile Bernard, Paul Signac, Paul Gauguin, art dealer Julien Tanguy, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, played a significant role in the formation of his artistic identity, oeuvre, and life. In the present paper, we return to the correspondence of van Gogh in order to explore his constructs of creativity, taking also into account the sociocultural aspects that informed his narratives.

Situating the Authors

We designed this study in the context of the Qualitative Research Center in Psychology and Psychosocial Well-being at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. Our work is influenced by contemporary discourse regarding the complex and multifaceted construct of creativity. More specifically, I, Antigone was interested in this project in the context of my Ph.D. dissertation in Psychology, in which I explore artistic creativity and specifically, the way artists themselves understand and narrate their artistic engagement and inclination, the embodied aspects of creativity and the role of the socio-cultural context in which their artistic

work is embedded. Philia (dissertation supervisor) enjoys collaborating in this study, as she is interested in constructionist, narrative, dialogic and postmodern ideas in her teaching and counseling work, and uses qualitative research methods and multimodal, art-based research.

Methodology

The present study is influenced by a post-modern, social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1985), emphasizing the significance of socio-cultural elements that inform narratives told by people. Moreover, it adopts narrative knowing as the ontological and epistemological lens of inquiry (Bruner, 1986; Gergen, 1985; Polkinghorne, 1988; Somers, 1994; Tamboukou 2010, 2011), treating van Gogh's letters as narratives which, among other things, provide insights about the way he constructs the notion of creativity.

Narratives are sensitive to the content of the stories and to the mental reality of their protagonists, taking into account the intentions, actions, and feelings that make up their plot. Emphasizing the social and relational aspects of stories, narration is perceived as the medium by which reality, meaning, and understanding of the world, of life, and of the self are formed within a particular fabric of social relationships, and within a defined space and time (Gergen, 1999). In other words, the stories people tell are shaped by the way they perceive themselves and, in turn, shape their self-perception as part of a wider grid of social and cultural relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 1988). Stories allow us to pinpoint elements related both to their plot and to the origins of the perspective adopted by the narrator; that is, the prevailing (or not) narratives of society, the social and historical conditions in which the story is told, and the perspectives that society has set for the subject storied (Frank, 1995; Issari & Karayianni, 2013). Moreover, every story is embodied, as the cognitive function of narration, the recalling of information, and the synthesis of these in a single narrative unit are functions incorporated and originating from a physical entity (Frank, 1995).

Stanley (2004) pointed out the usefulness of letters as a source of rich data for social research. Letters are written documents of life (Plummer, 2001), communicating experiences, feelings, and thoughts to their recipient (Tamboukou, 2010). Moreover, letters are relational, since they engage in a mutual interaction between not only the writer and the recipient, but also the reader of the correspondence. Additionally, they communicate the specific perspective and voice of the writer, and at the same time are characterized by emergent qualities, in that their content and form arise spontaneously at the time of their writing (Stanley, 2004). In other words, letter-writing is a relational act of social interaction and communication. As such, letters comprise an invaluable source of data for research in the social sciences. For example, Lebow (1999) studied Emily Dickinson's letters in order to explore the autobiographic character she constructs through narratives in her letters. Tamboukou (2010, 2011, 2021) has also extensively studied women artists' correspondence in order to explore aspects of the life of women.

Along with their communicative and informative content, letters as a collection display a narrative structure (Altman 1982; Tamboukou, 2010, 2011) which is able to highlight aspects of the writer's life chronologically, content-wise, and contextually (Stanley, 2004). Storied in epistolary form, a person's life, views and experiences may seem fragmented and incomplete, but taken together as a body of correspondence, it forms a narrative landscape of meanings. As Tamboukou (2011) notes:

Narrative sense [...] emerges as an agglomeration of fragments, stories that are incomplete, irresolute or broken. Yet when brought together, these fragmented narratives create a milieu of communication... (p. 4)

The narrativity of letters is highlighted in Tamboukou's work with the letters of Carrington (2010) and Gwen John (2011), where she perceives letters as ways to construct a narrative of the self and as mirrors of the historical dynamics surrounding the writer's life. Through letter-writing, correspondents become engaged in narrative phenomena (Tamboukou, 2010), creating stories and characters (MacArthur, 1990).

Data Collection

Data were collected from the anthology, *Vincent van Gogh: Ever Yours, the Essential Letters* (Jansen et al., 2014), containing 265 letters translated from Dutch and French to English. The book is an abridged version of the complete collection of van Gogh's correspondence compiled by the same research and editorial team and offered through *The Van Gogh Museum & Huygens ING* website (vangoghletters.org), which contains 903 letters and 25 related manuscripts of the artist (Jansen et al., 2009). The site provides open access to all the original correspondence of Vincent van Gogh, translated into three languages, and annotated with complementary facts and background information, thus enriching knowledge and understanding of the artist in his time, family, and society.

Of the 265 letters contained in the printed anthology and used for the purpose of the study, 218 are addressed to Theo van Gogh, 11 to Vincent's sister Willemien, 11 to his friend, artist Anton van Rappard, 11 to Émile Bernard, one to his father, Theodorus, and the rest to other artists such as Gauguin and Paul Signac, and art critics such as Albert Aurier and Octave Maus. We studied these letters along with the complementary information provided by the editorial team, offering the necessary socio-historic context of the letters and van Gogh's life.

Reflecting upon the source of our data, we acknowledge that the anthology used consists only of a fraction of Vincent van Gogh's correspondence and thus it may be deemed small. This can be a limitation of the study. We nevertheless decided to proceed with this source of data as a purposeful sample of the full correspondence of the artist, based on the fact that the anthology was compiled by the same editorial team responsible for organizing, translating, researching and annotating the complete correspondence (Jansen et al., 2014). Given their expert knowledge at the selection of the letters, along with the information provided on the website for every letter studied, we believe that the anthology offers an in-depth and extensive portrait of the artist.

Original letters were written in Dutch and French. For the purpose of the present study, the English translation provided by the research and editorial team was used. Methodologically, the use of a translated document is consistent with the aims of thematic narrative analysis (used in this study), which focuses not on how things are said, but on what is being said and the meanings constructed through narratives (Riessman, 2008).

Data Analysis

For the analysis of van Gogh's letters, thematic narrative analysis was adopted (Riessman, 2008). Thematic narrative analysis is applied to stories and is suited for a wide range of texts, such as narrative interviews, correspondence, and diaries, among others (Riessman, 2008; Tamboukou 2010, 2011). In the present study, the purpose of analysis was to identify the way Vincent van Gogh, through his letters, makes sense of creativity. To that end, each letter was taken as a basic unit of analysis (Riessman, 2008), while at the same time treating each letter as part of a wider narrative correspondence (Altman, 1982; Tamboukou, 2011).

In the first phase of the analysis we engaged in reflexive reading and re-reading of the letters (keeping also initial notes and thoughts; Riessman, 2008) in relation to the construct of

creativity. In the second stage, we began the systematic analysis of the letters through coding. More specifically, we coded extracts of the letters related to creativity that were of interest, named the generated codes (e.g., study, hard work, discipline, maturation process rather than talent alone, purposeful act, relationship with nature, brother, other artists, etc.), highlighting and underlining the text (words and phrases, statements, short stories) associated with them. In the third phase we began to search for areas of similarities and overlap between codes and then grouped them together, working towards candidate themes and subthemes (e.g., creativity as a process, creativity as learning, relational aspects of creativity, etc.). In the fourth phase we reviewed the candidate themes and subthemes, and in the fifth phase the final themes and subthemes were named and produced (e.g., postmodern aspects (overarching theme), creativity as a relational process in the context of people and nature (major theme); modern aspects (overarching theme), creativity as the work of an ascetic (major theme). In the course of the analysis and due to the volume of the data, we turned to NVivo (11) software for optimal organization of the coding process. It is also important to note that throughout the analysis, in order to better understand the context of his letters, the dominant narratives of his time (e.g. the notion of genius), and specific references that van Gogh made in his letters (e.g., names of artists, people that he painted (like the miners and the villagers), art and sociopolitical events, artistic movements, etc.), we turned to additional biographical and historical information provided on the *van Gogh Museum/Huygens ING* website and elsewhere (art history books, mainly). Moreover, throughout the analysis process, there was an ongoing dialogue between researchers and the data, as well as among the researchers (Issari & Pourkos, 2015; Riessman, 2008), who also tried to acknowledge their assumptions regarding van Gogh and the construct of creativity as informed by modern and postmodern literature.

Research Findings

The present paper focuses on the constructions of creativity emerging in Vincent van Gogh's narratives, which seem to depict elements of both modern and post-modern views of creativity. Major themes and sub-themes include creativity as (a) a developmental, dynamic learning process characterized by dedication and persistence; (b) a relational process in the context of people and nature; (c) an embodied action; (d) an oscillation between asceticism and sociocultural participation, (e) suffering, and (f) a larger-than-life force. The excerpts used to present research findings were taken from the website vangoghletters.org. which, through personal communication between one of the authors and the Department of Rights and Reproductions, granted permission for their use in the study and published paper.

The research findings will be presented in the historical present tense. This choice was informed by the performative and emergent character of correspondence as means to construct an understanding of the self and the world, among others (MacArthur, 1990; Riessman, 2008; Tamboukou, 2011). Additionally, as Altman (1982) notes, "The letter writer is engaged in the impossible task of making his reader present; the epistolary dialogue attempts to approximate the conversation of the 'here' and the 'now'." (pp. 135-136). Bringing van Gogh to the present, we invite readers to engage actively in a dialogue with him and his time, thus allowing for additional interpretations of the artist, his narratives, and our own understandings (Riessman, 2008).

Creativity as a Dedicated, Developmental Learning Process

Vincent van Gogh views creativity as a developmental, dynamic process and an action characterized by complete dedication, patience, and continuous learning through study and practice. Although he doesn't dismiss altogether the genius element of the romantic notion of

the artist, he challenges some aspects of it, emphasizing the steadfast deliberation that lies behind art-making, and the role of learning and practice.

As he writes,

I don't deny the existence of genius [...], nor even its innate nature. But I do deny the inferences of it, that theory and training are always useless by the very nature of the thing. [450, 6/1884, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

For van Gogh, creativity doesn't happen by chance, nor by external forces. There is no Muse whispering in the ear of the artist, nor a God-sent inspiration that suddenly takes hold of the artist's mind. It's hard work and patience, an effort characterized by the persistence to finally succeed in transforming feelings to an image; a painting.

What is drawing? How does one get there? It's working one's way through an invisible iron wall that seems to stand between what one feels and what one can do. How can one get through that wall? —since hammering on it doesn't help at all. In my view, one must undermine the wall and grind through it slowly and patiently. And behold, how can one remain dedicated to such a task without allowing oneself to be lured from it or distracted, unless one reflects and organizes one's life according to principles? [...] And the great isn't something accidental; it must be willed. [274, 10/1882, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

Viewing creativity as a purposeful, difficult act, Vincent adds the value of patience and practice in the gradual maturation and development of the artistic abilities:

There's a saying of Gustave Doré's that I've always found exceedingly beautiful —I have the patience of an ox —right away I see something good in it, a certain resolute honesty; in short there's a lot in that saying, it's a real artist's saying. When one thinks about people from whose mind something like this springs, it seems to me that the sort of arguments one all too often hears in the art trade about 'gift' is such a hideous croaking of ravens. 'I have the patience', how calm that is, how dignified that is. They wouldn't even say that if it weren't precisely because of all that croaking of ravens. I'm not an artist —how coarse that is —even to think it of oneself —should one not have patience, not learn patience from nature, learn patience from seeing the wheat slowly come up, the growing of things —should one think oneself such a hugely dead thing that one believed one wouldn't grow? Should one deliberately discourage one's development? I say this to show why I find it so silly to talk about gifts and no gifts. [400, 10/1883, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

This is an interesting comment concerning wide-held beliefs about talent, giftedness, and the image of the artist in modernity. Indeed, at his time, it was a popular belief that geniuses were natural-born and had no use of learning, gradual development or practice in order to produce great works (Montuori & Purser, 1995).

As Weiner (2000) notes, the romantic view of creativity in modernity was that it is “beyond the conscious, purposeful control of the individual genius creator” (p. 20). Moreover, the notion of genius meant an “emphasis on originality and creative imagination, spontaneity and inspiration” (Wittkower, 1973: 307). Combined, natural giftedness, untutored mastery, inspiration, spontaneity, and effortless skill, sketch a picture of the artists as denying the need for a social world and environment around them (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Van Gogh, instead

of accepting this (then popular) dichotomy between artist and society (Montuori & Purser, 1995), seems to acknowledge a contextual aspect of creativity; namely, the role that practice and learning from others play in the development of the artistic capabilities.

Creativity as a Relational Process

Creativity: Relationship with the Artistic World and Collaboration with Other Artists

Van Gogh's relationship to the artistic world is quite strong; he reads avidly about art, painting, technique, and perspective, and works for years on hundreds of sketches and drawings, repeatedly studying "the masters" like Delacroix, Rembrandt, Millet, Hiroshige. Along with his close relationship with Theo, he also collaborates with contemporaries like Gauguin and Mauve, and writes of his vision of strengthening the associations and collaboration between painters:

...but I do desire a reform or rather renewal and strengthening of the associations and the collaboration between painters, which would certainly have the kind of influence that would make even exhibitions beneficial. [332, 3/1883
- Letter to van Rappard]

Creativity: Relationship with Nature

Vincent has a very personal and close relationship with nature. His letters are filled with descriptions of natural landscapes and the emotions arising during his long walks. It is in the open air that he finds "eternal beauty," solace, calmness, and sincerity; a guide for life, teaching him patience and the circle of birth, growth, and death, which is an influence for his palette, and also his subject-matters. Writing to Theo from London in January 1874, while he is still working as an art gallery employee and before starting drawing and painting, he says: "Always continue walking a lot and loving nature, for that's the real way to learn to understand art better and better. Painters understand nature and love it, and teach us to see" [17, 1/1874, Letter to Theo van Gogh]. It is a relationship that has its roots in his childhood, cultivating into a deeper and sincere understanding of nature; feelings that he tries to express through his work:

I often think I'd like to be able to spend more time on landscape proper. I often see things that I find remarkably beautiful, which moreover make me say instinctively, I've never seen this or that painted like that. In order to paint it — how to do it — I would have to give up other things. I would like to know whether you agree with me that in landscape there are things that have still not been done...Many landscape painters don't have that intimate knowledge of nature possessed by those who have looked at the fields with feeling from childhood... And I believe that the public will begin to say, deliver us from artistic combinations, give us back the simple field. How good it feels to see a fine Rousseau...How good it feels to think of people like Van Goyen, Old Crome and Michel...Do I want them back, or do I want them to be imitated? No, but I do want the honesty, the naivety, the faithfulness to remain...Copying nature absolutely isn't the ideal either, but knowing nature in such a way that what one does is fresh and true —that's what many now lack... You will say, but everyone has surely seen landscapes and figures from childhood. Question: was everyone also thoughtful as a child? Question: did everyone who saw them —heath, grassland, fields, woods —also love them, and the snow and the rain and the

storm? Not everyone has that the way you and I do. [252, 12/1882, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

John-Steiner (2000), discussing the role of collaboration in creativity, focused, among others, on the relationship between Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo, noting the importance of the emotional and financial support that the latter provided van Gogh with, as well as van Gogh's relationship with nature. More recently, Gergen (2009) described creative acts as "embodied actions...fashioned and sustained within relationship" (p. 95). The relational aspect of creativity seems to extend to all kinds of interactions, explicit or implicit, between the self and the world.

Creativity as Embodied Labor

Vincent van Gogh narrates the process of creating a painting using the metaphor of childbirth; a process which takes time, gradual development and maturation, pain, agony, and then relief and joy:

You can see, then, that I'm working like mad, but for the moment it isn't giving very heartening results. But I have hopes that these thorns will bear white flowers in their time, and that this apparently sterile struggle is nothing other than a labor of giving birth. First pain, then joy afterwards. [158, 9/1880, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

Eight years later, he will describe again the somatic character of the creative process and the labor involved in painting, this time in fuller detail. The following excerpt introduces the centrality of calculation and logic in the creative process, as well as elements of intense, embodied cognitive work, which is present throughout his writings about painting.

But when I come back from a session like that, I can assure you my brain is so tired that if that sort of work is repeated often —the way it's been during this harvest — I become totally distracted and incapable of a whole lot of ordinary things. At these moments the prospect of not being alone isn't unpleasant. And I think very, very often of that excellent painter Monticelli, who people said was such a drinker and insane, when I see myself coming back from the mental labor of balancing the six essential colours, red —blue —yellow — orange —lilac —green. Work and dry calculation, in which one's mind is extremely stretched, like an actor on the stage in a difficult role —where you have to think of a thousand things at the same time in a single half hour. Afterwards —the only thing that comforts and distracts —in my case —as in others, to stun oneself by taking a stiff drink or smoking very heavily. [635, 7/1888, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

An exploration into the embodied aspects of artistic creativity highlights the significance of the body as an agent of changes in everyday life, forming alternative meanings for the world and phenomena and opening new and different understandings and perspectives on them (Shilling, 2004, p. 10). This ability stems both from sensory, cognitive, and psycho-emotional functions, as well as from the body's practical, literal ability to move in space, to feel pain, to stretch and to be exhausted (Shilling, 2004).

Creativity: Oscillation between Asceticism and Socio-Cultural Participation

The following sub-themes highlight the way van Gogh himself narrates and constructs this interaction between the two poles of the much-needed asceticism and the socio-cultural web of his life.

Creativity as the Work of an Ascetic

Throughout his letters van Gogh writes about the centrifugal need to relate with others - contemporaries, partners in life, friends, family - and the centripetal urge to withdraw from social life and relationships, in order to devote himself to his art. The latter is most evident in his words as he writes to his friend and artist Bernard about love and sexual life:

...we must sometimes resign ourselves...and...be, according as our temperament demands, soldiers or monks. The Dutchmen, once again, had morals, and a quiet, calm, well-ordered life. "Delacroix, ah, him —I," he said, "found painting when I had no teeth nor breath left." And those who saw this famous artist paint said: when Delacroix paints it's like the lion devouring his piece of flesh. He...had only casual love affairs so as not to filch from the time devoted to his work. Personally, I find continence is quite good for me. It's enough for our weak, impressionable artists' brains to give their essence to the creation of our paintings. Because in thinking, calculating, wearing ourselves out, we expend cerebral activity. The whore...has my sympathy more than my compassion. Being exiled, a social outcast, as artists like you and I surely are, "outcasts" too, she is surely therefore our friend and sister. [655, 8/1988, Letter to É. Bernard]

Positioning artists on the fringes of society, van Gogh echoes the zeitgeist of modernity, which viewed artists in opposition to society and norms (Montuori & Purser, 1995). Attached to it, is the significance of a life in isolation, which allows him unimpeded devotion to his work. On the other hand, he continually stresses the importance of communication, be that in the form of learning, studying, reading, or being informed of the socio-political developments, as evident in the following subtheme.

Creativity as an Embedded, Sociocultural Act

Vincent's letters are full of references to painters and art schools of both past and present, and writers, poets, and philosophers, as well as comments about events and people in the socio-political milieu of his times. So rich and insightful are his views on the sociocultural aspects of his life, that it becomes clear to the reader that he is deeply and directly involved with his times. His work is influenced by the social world he experiences, leading to an oeuvre characterized by social realism. Inspired by the lives of miners and weavers, he pays particular attention and feels for "the poor and obscure workers, the lowest of all," aspiring, in his own words, to bring them to notice.

The miners and the weavers are something of a race apart from other workmen and tradesmen, and I have a great fellow-feeling for them and would count myself happy if I could draw them one day, so that these types, as yet unpublished or almost unpublished, could be brought to notice. The man from the bottom of the abyss, "de profundis," that's the miner; the other one, with a

dreamy, almost pensive, almost a sleep-walker's air, is the weaver. And now it's roughly 2 years that I've been living with them, and to some extent I've learned to know their original character, mainly that of the miners at least. And more and more I find something touching and even heart-rending in these poor and obscure workers, the lowest of all, so to speak, and the most looked down upon, which one usually pictures through the effect of a perhaps vivid but very false and unjust imagination as a race of criminals and brigands. There are criminals, drunkards, brigands here as elsewhere, but that's not at all the true type. [158, 9/1880, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

Besides the social awareness, an abundance of cultural influences seems to also inform his artistic oeuvre. The following excerpts about Dickens and Shakespeare are characteristic of the way that social, cultural, historic, and personal elements affect and construct his understanding of the world and are in turn reflected in his work: "my whole life is aimed at making the things from everyday life that Dickens describes" [267, 9/1882, Letter to van Rappard].

I've begun to read the series I know the least well...the series of the kings. I've already read Richard II, Henry IV and half of Henry V. I read without reflecting on whether the ideas of the people of that time are the same as ours, or what becomes of them when one places them face to face with republican or socialist beliefs &c. But what touches me in it, as in the work of certain novelists of our time, is that the voices of these people, which in Shakespeare's case reach us from a distance of several centuries, don't appear unknown to us. It's so alive that one thinks one knows them and sees it. So what Rembrandt alone, or almost alone, has among painters, that tenderness in the gazes of human beings...—that heartbroken tenderness, that glimpse of a superhuman infinite which appears so natural then, one encounters it in many places in Shakespeare. And then serious or gay portraits like the Six, like the traveller, like the Saskia, it's above all full of that. What a good idea Victor Hugo's son had of translating all of it into French so that it's thus within the reach of all. When I think of the Impressionists and of all these present-day questions of art, how many lessons there are precisely for us in there. [784, 7/1889, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

Evidently, creative people need to take their time and their space to work in isolation. This, however, doesn't mean that they are disconnected from social and cultural reality, nor that they forget it. On the contrary, the social is always present in the artist, either in the form of experiences and influences, or as meaningful understanding of the phenomena of the world (John-Steiner, 2000). Instead of a polarization, what emerges here is a dialogic and integrative position, combining the need to isolate and the need to make sense of the others and the environment.

Creativity: Hardships and Suffering

Vincent van Gogh's life is not an easy one: poverty, the attitude of people towards him, his difficulty in social relationships, and his unstable mental and physical health are some of the main causes of his distress:

One wants to be an honest man, and one is, one works just as hard as a porter, and yet one falls short, one has to give the work up, one sees no chance of

carrying it out without spending more on it than one will get back for it. One has a feeling of guilt, of falling short, of not keeping promises, one isn't honest as one would be if the work was paid for at its natural, fair price. One is afraid to make friends, one is afraid to stir, one would like to call out to people from a distance like one of the old lepers: Don't come too close, for contact with me will bring you sorrow and harm. With this whole avalanche of cares in one's heart, one must set to work with a calm, everyday face, without moving a muscle, carry on with daily life, try things out with the models, with the man who comes to collect the rent, in short, with all and sundry. One must cool-headedly keep one hand on the tiller to continue the work, and with the other hand try to ensure that one does no harm to others. And then come storms, things one hadn't foreseen; one doesn't know what to do, and one has a feeling that one may hit a rock at any moment. One can't present oneself as somebody who can be of benefit to others or who has an idea for a business that's bound to be profitable —no, on the contrary, it's to be expected that it will end with a deficit and yet, yet, one feels a power seething inside one, one has a task to do and it must be done. [288, 11/1882, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

He seems to perceive this suffering as needed for artistic expression: "But I just think about what Millet said: 'I would never do away with suffering, for it is often that which makes artists express themselves most vigorously'" [493, 4/1885, Letter to Theo van Gogh]. In line with the romantic notion of the "lone genius", van Gogh seems to embrace the view that artists are able to express themselves better, exclusively due to and/or through their suffering (Mattick, 2003; Montuori & Purser, 1995;). Interestingly, in *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood*, Vygotsky included a chapter titled "The agonies of creation," wherein he discussed suffering as a result of the embodied tension between the willingness and desire to create and the actual capability to create:

Creation is difficult, the drive to create does not always coincide with the capacity to create, and this is the origin of the agonizing feeling of suffering caused by the fact that the word does not capture the thought, as [Fyodor] Dostoyevsky said. Poets have called this suffering the agonies of the word [...] this phenomenon discloses to us the last and most important feature of the imagination...This feature is the imagination's drive to be embodied, this is the real basis and motive force of creation. Every product of the imagination, stemming from reality, attempts to complete a full circle and to be embodied in reality. (Vygotsky, 2004/1967, pp. 40-41)

Creativity as a Larger-Than-Life Force and an Offering to Humanity

Although he rejects formal religion, Vincent van Gogh keeps a very personal relationship with God, finding him in humanity, in people's feelings and emotions, and in nature. Maybe, by leaving the church and having no children himself, he finds another, bigger-than-life force – that is, creativity – thus constructing an alternative meaning in his life, "because I've walked the earth for 30 years —to leave a certain souvenir in the form of drawings or paintings in gratitude" as he writes elsewhere [371, 8/1883, Letter to Theo van Gogh].

Ah, my dear brother, sometimes I know so clearly what I want. In life and in painting too, I can easily do without the dear Lord, but I can't, suffering as I do,

do without something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create. And if frustrated in this power physically, we try to create thoughts instead of children; in that way, we're part of humanity all the same. And in a painting, I'd like to say something consoling, like a piece of music. I'd like to paint men or women with that *je ne sais quoi* of the eternal, of which the halo used to be the symbol, and which we try to achieve through the radiance itself, through the vibrancy of our colorations. [673, 9/1888, Letter to Theo van Gogh]

Discussion

The present study, adopting a narrative perspective, explores Vincent van Gogh's constructs of artistic creativity as they appear in his correspondence with his brother Theo, friends, and family members.

Implying both notions of post-modern and modern views of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Glăveanu et al., 2019; Montuori & Purser, 1995), van Gogh's narratives draw a multidimensional picture of creativity. On one hand, in his narratives, we find elements associated with the more recent, socio-cultural approaches of creativity as a socio-cultural, developmental, dynamic, embodied, and relational learning process. These aspects seem to complement modern elements of the notion of the artist which emerge in his letters, such as dedication, suffering, and asceticism, centering more on the individual and less on the social environment. Constructing a personal meaning of creativity, Vincent van Gogh finds in the "power of creation" a larger-than-life force and a way to leave something behind, in gratitude, as an offering to humanity.

Van Gogh emphasizes in his letters the role of dedication, persistence, and learning in the creative endeavor, acknowledging diligence, patience, and absorbed devotion in his work as prerequisites for mastering painting. This is consistent with older and current research on creativity, which highlights as a common denominator of creative people their endurance and absorption (Roe, 1953), or that "the artist persist[s] single-mindedly, disregarding hunger, fatigue, and discomfort" (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 239). The notion of persistence appears also in Amabile's work on creativity (1983), where it seems to be related to the intrinsic motivation to create, as well as in the work of Chemi et al. (2015) on the way artists define creativity themselves as "persisting and persisting" (pp. 60-61), among others.

In this light, patience and persistence also relate to an approach to creativity as a dynamic, developmental, learned process, which develops through time and practice until reaching a maturation point. Practice, as exhibited through industriousness, allows for progress, which in turn paves the road for innovation and outstanding accomplishment (Weisberg, 1998). Emerging in van Gogh's constructions of creativity, is a process of gradual development and maturation of the artist, as opposed to the concept of "uncreated creator" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 259).

Van Gogh finds the much-needed patience for his work in nature. Ever since his childhood and along with Theo, Vincent maintained a close relationship with the natural landscape, which emerges in his letters through long descriptions of his walks in the open air. It is also evident in his love for the French South, but also in the very subject-matter of his works, thus highlighting an important relational and contextual aspect beyond the mere existence of an inspiring natural setting; it is an attachment which helps him understand colours better, find themes for his works, and feel healthier, more serene, calm, and eager to work – it is his "creative situation", as Amabile (1983, p. 5) described it. Having also found evidence of a connection between natural landscape and creativity, Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p. 242) asked if the same works that were produced in a natural site would have been produced anyway also

in an urban environment - the answer is yet to be found. Still, for van Gogh, it is a life-long commitment that he feels towards nature, being inspired and taught by his natural surroundings.

Alongside the view of creativity as a mental process characterized by intense cognitive workings (Runco & Chand, 1995), or the newer theory of flow (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), van Gogh adds the corporeal dimension. Merleau-Ponty, writing about the painter, notes that "it is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 162), adding elsewhere that "the process of expression brings the meaning into being" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962/1945, p. 183). Indeed, many artists spanning from all artistic domains have described the creative process as pregnancy (Friedman, 1987). It could be argued that using the childbirth metaphor, van Gogh offers an embodied understanding for painting, which, combining physical and mental labour, focuses on bringing something new into life – something existentially and personally meaningful.

Vincent van Gogh also constructs mental suffering and hardship as related to creativity. He doesn't disregard his dire straits, nor his suffering; he tries hard to make ends meet, acknowledging that hardships get into his creative work, either in the form of lack of income for buying materials and paying for models, or in the form of physical and mental fatigue. Writing from a psychoanalytic standpoint, Niederland (1976) comments that "pain, in both the physical and psychic sense, is one of the most consistent features common to creative people" (p. 191), relating artistic creative process to an ever-present physical hardship. Indeed, both research literature and the autobiographies of exceptional personalities in all creative fields are abundant with stories of suffering due to trauma, loss, grief, or other challenging conditions. Sensitivity to criticism, difficulty in expression and communication, a vulnerable mental makeup, the distance between mind and matter, the heavy investment in their work, and the frustration when one is not working are among others the causes of this agony of creation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Vygotsky, 2004/1967; Wittkower, 1973).

Throughout his letters, van Gogh describes an oscillation between two different states; on one hand, a much-needed asceticism in order to concentrate on his work, and on the other hand, a web of social relations. He acknowledges this duality himself when he writes to his brother: "...if it wasn't for the fact that I had something of a dual nature, something of both the monk and the painter" [709, 10/1888]. This negotiation of distance and closeness acknowledges again a dynamic, socio-cultural, and relational dimension of creativity, in line with the current post-modern approaches (Glăveanu et al., 2019), focusing on the interconnectedness between the person and the socio-cultural and natural environment (Gergen, 2009; John-Steiner, 2000; Montuori & Purser, 1995). Creative works of art are co-constructed by individuals working and living within a web of supportive, collaborative relations with others, society, and their respective fields (Becker, 2008; John-Steiner, 2000).

Constructing his own meaning of creativity, van Gogh stresses the importance of leaving behind something that will survive him. Combined with his aim to validate his existence, he relates creativity with being part of humanity and eternity. This is also in line with a newer understanding of creativity, extending beyond the individualistic self-expression and reaching the social world as interrelation, externalization, and communication, thus combining both the individual and the socio-cultural domain (Glăveanu et al., 2019).

Acknowledging his being an artist of modernity, imbued with the beliefs current in his time, our inquiry highlights the complementary socio-cultural elements at work in his life as a creative artist. Vincent van Gogh's letters reflect aspects of a post-modern construction of artistic creativity: social awareness, cultural influences, relational, dynamic and developmental dimensions, along with the corporeality and the personal meaning of creativity, all of which imply a more social, situated and emergent view of the artistic endeavour, highlighting both the way in which the social, the personal, and the cultural include one another, and the multiple interactions taking place between person and environment. This view does not exclude other

understandings and approaches; instead, it proposes only one of the multitude of interpretations which may be offered of his correspondence and writings. For example, different researchers may focus on van Gogh's creativity in relation to his mental health, his personality traits, his artistic oeuvre and techniques, or his knowledge of the artistic world, the creative process, etc., thus enriching knowledge and highlighting "multiple realities and truths" (Riessman, 2008, p. 198).

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