The transition from initial vocational training to the world of work: the case of art school students

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Abstract

This contribution is based on a recently finished study. It gives an important place to the empirical dimension and proposes the analysis of two life-paths in the artistic field set against a broader analysis of the whole of the corpus produced as part of this research. The methods of analysis are situated at the intersection of the narrative and the sociological fields. This contribution examines the passage from initial training to the world of work. It reconstructs the ordeal represented by this passage and shows the way this ordeal fissures identity and human agency. It conceptualises in particular the possible links between identity and agency and the social environment. It then proposes an analysis of the process of bifurcation. The failure of intended artistic projects gives way to a bifurcation. The analysis locates this process at the intersection of self-improvement and the search for social roots. Bifurcation gives way to the emergence of a new polarisation of action and to the reconstruction of a new system of networking with the environment. This contribution looks back at the whole of the analysis through the spectrum of low human agency.

Keywords: ordeal; bifurcation; identity; agency; low human agency

Introduction

Modernity contributed to making identity a self-determined project, democratising the figure of vocation and spreading a shared ideal of worldly self-accomplishment. (Schlanger, 1997; Taylor, 1998).

The individualisation which took place within organised modernity is linked to the possibility of planning the itinerary of one's own life. A process of institutionalisation and standardisation underpins this possibility. The self-accomplishment project as a temporal project is inseparable from a reliable succession of temporal sequences, with predictable content, depending on the period of the individual's life. It is a question of finding and choosing a place in a world where projecting and planning out your life is easy and guaranteed by the institutionalisation of life-paths, especially professional ones. In this context, the stabilisation of identity occurs "a posterior". Organised

modernity has given way to a threefold separation of paths: preparation, activity, rest (Alheit, 2010).

Our contemporary societies are wrought by different processes, which contribute to the weakening of the founding principles inherited from the societies of organised modernity. Instability and uncertainty pervade advanced modernity (Rosa, 2005/2010). They contribute to the de-standardisation of life paths. Today, it is a question of accomplishing oneself in a context of uncertainty. (Menger, 2010). The "a posteriori" stability that characterised organised modernity is jeopardised. Bifurcations (Bessin, Bidart & Grosseti, 2010) and conversions (Soulet, 2010) have been multiplied and training is no longer limited to the period of youth.

Fitting in

There is a tension at work between uncertainty and the aspiration towards self-accomplishment in the process of the integration of youth into society and work. Integrating the world of work has tended to become a 'non absorbing' state (Lefresne, 2007). Alongside this process, different research findings point to a transformation of young people's relation to work. These studies show the shift from an ethos of duty to an ethos of self-accomplishment. Within the latter, work is organised and a great deal of energy invested in it with a view to its accomplishment (Roulleau-Berger, 2003). In contemporary late modernity, integration is a process structured by a tensions between the increasing precariousness of the workplace, which weakens a certain understanding of the integration process 'forged in the economies where the vast majority of economically active adults managed to stabilise their situation' (Lefresne, 2007, p. 46) and a desire to accomplish oneself through work.

In such a context, the passage from initial training to the world of work can represent a crisis, which can unsettle 'one's self image, the definition that one gave of oneself' (Dubar, 2007, p. 167). This passage can be 'the end of something' and 'the start of nothing' (Mazade, 2011). It can end up in a constraint to bifurcate and change.

A study

Anchoring

The study (Pita, 2012) on which this contribution is based is itself situated within current trends of biographical approaches in adult education and training (Baudouin, 2010; Dominicé, 1990; Pineau, 1983). This approach addresses the theme of training in an original way. It incites us to step out of educative insularity (Baudouin, 2010), to reinsert training in a temporal perspective and take into account a more subjective point of view. In this approach, the 'person and the agent whom the action depends on have a story, are their own story' (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 137). The analysis of training is located within the biography. The biography is noteworthy in that it integrates 'in a global process of accumulation of real experience fields of experience which are separated and specialised by institutional and social division' (Alheit, 2010, p. 2).

One figure, three questions

This approach considers life narratives as the main access route to training. Life histories permit a restitution of the diachronic profundity of the narrating subject. They give 'free rein to a reflection based on experiences sufficiently significant to be stamped on the memory of the person speaking or writing' (Dominicé, 1990, p. 127). They share

the moments that left their mark in a narrative form of temporality (Baudouin, 2010). Questions of time and memory are decisive in the production of life histories (Menna Barreto Abrahão, 2012) and, in a broader sense, of personal identity (Ricoeur, 2000).

This approach contributed to narrowing the divide between training and the issue of identity (Lainé, 2007). The narrative of a life is an answer to the question "who am I?" (Ricoeur, 1990). It redeploys an identity, which affirms itself by being put into words. It confronts dialectically "idem"-identity and "ipse"-identity[1]. It recuperates the successive "ipseities" that contributed to forming people's identities.

This research considers the figure of the young artist as prototypical of the contemporary tension between aspirations of self-accomplishment and uncertainty. Artistic professions offer the possibility of self-accomplishment. The category artist is particularly blurred (Schlanger, 1997) and artistic professions have yet to be defined (Sapiro, 2007). The field of art is nevertheless a laboratory of hyper-flexibility (Menger, 2010) and hyper-competition. It is a laboratory for transformations in the world of work. The chances of success of an artistic project are uncertain. The artistic project is not guaranteed by the standardisation of professional trajectories. It cannot benefit from the "a posterior" stability of organised modernity. Our research consisted in answering three questions:

- What ordeals structure the life paths of art school graduates?
- What identity configurations emerge for each biographic period?
- What stability and what changes characterise the identity of art school graduates?

Autobiographically oriented narratives

Twelve art school graduates were interviewed during 2008 and 2009. Six of them had obtained a fine arts degree and six had a degree in fashion design. The art school is located in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

The narratives were produced orally during interviews. The interviews took place between two and five years after the end of the initial training, and varied from an hour and half to four hours in length. The purpose of these interviews was to put into words the life-paths of these art graduates.

The instructions given to interviewees invited them to favour the narration of events they felt were important to them (subjective point of view) and to follow as closely as possible a chronological order in the narrative. Our interventions during interviews were limited to asking questions of comprehension and clarification during the narration. The subjects were given a month to prepare and organise the narrative as they saw fit. We then re-transcribed the oral narrative, which was then reread, validated and sometimes completed by the subjects.

The interviews employ the autobiographical genre. This genre supposes a diachronic rather than synchronic perspective, solicits narration rather than argumentation. Its structure is drawn from the individual's life, the story of its development (Lejeune, 1996). The interviews locate this story in the artistic field. They thus enable to apprehend the vocational training and formation of an artist within a long time-scale, with the 'trait of subjectivity' (Baudouin, 2010) characteristic of autobiography, in which a relation of identity links the author (the one invited to narrate himself) and the main protagonists (the different former subjects configured and proposed by the narrative.)

Autobiography as study framework

Periods

From a narratological point of view, autobiographical activity requires an effort of periodization (Lejeune, 1996). The auto-biographers must divide their life path into temporal spans of several years, which constitute the various successive periods. These give the partial limits, which enable the narrative to deploy itself. Through periods, an identity stabilises itself. These periodical identities are linked together by continuities and ruptures. The identity of the narrator is the synthesis of these periodical identities. Links can be made here with interactionist perspectives. These perspectives consider the person as a synthesis of different successive temporalized 'selves' (Menger, 2010).

The narratives have been divided into three successive periods: the artist's vocation, the artist's vocational training and the integration of the art school graduate into the world of work. This choice is at the intersection between a categorisation of narratives (induction) and a theoretical categorisation (deduction). It recalls the ternary division proposed by Dubar (2010) in the construction of social and professional identities.

For each period, typical identities and structuring ordeals have been reconstructed. A comparative perspective (Demazière & Dubar, 2007) has been used. It enabled to spot similarities and differences using a form of analysis that respects the individualising slope of the narrative. These reconstructions took shape following an effort of aggregation, categorisation and nomination. This contribution favours the period integration and does not address the question of the typical reconstructed identities.

Ordeal

The concept of ordeal or trial ("épreuve") is central to our work. It enables us to link narrative characteristics of our corpus to an analysis of social experience. It articulates the narrative and the sociological dimensions.

Periodization does not define the elementary structure of the narrative, which owes its form to the successive ordeals. Inside each period, the narrative develops one or several significant episodes from the point of view of the narrator. The autobiographical narrative emphasises the turning points of existence. Change is 'a quality of the narrative before being a quality of lived experience' (Baudouin, 2010, p. 162). The narrative proposes a poetic of rupture. The periods are wrought by imbalance. Life narratives are particularly pertinent for analysing the moments of identity changes (Field, Merill & West, 2012).

Baudouin's work (2010) shows how change initiated through 'asperities' of experience traverses the narrative via the semiotic category of ordeal (Greimas, 1966). Ordeal is the basic unit of narrative economy. Relating one's life means managing and organising a given number of ordeals in the different periods the narrative discerns in the biographic flux.

The notion of ordeal is relevant today in sociology. Its use by authors such as Martucceli (2006), who supposes 'individuals take hold of social processes in the form of intrigues' (Martucceli, 2010, p. 100). This use is inseparable from hermeneutics of contemporary experience, which considers people's point of view. 'In contemporary society [ordeals] are part of the ordinary conception individuals have of their own life' (Martucceli, 2006, p. 22). From a sociological perspective, ordeals are socially produced challenges. According to the available 'social shock-absorbers', oscillations and energy dispersion can be contained. The ordeal can be more or less intense. These 'shock-

absorbers' are notably supports and resources situated in the environment. An analysis of this environment reveals a certain number of inequalities.

People construct themselves through a series of commonplace ordeals, which succeed each other through the course of a life. They engage people's identities. It is a question today of 'building, on the basis of one's biographic path and relational ordeals, a "personal identity", which must be connected to the biographical narrative and recognisable by one's partners' (Dubar, 2006, p. 197). This modality of identity construction is an 'alternative to the transmission of normative identities, related to constituted roles' (ibid.) Nonetheless, these ordeals cannot be understood without the analysis of the subject's environment. At this level, our contribution proposes a shift away from analyses solely centred on psychological dimensions or on the "habitus" (Field et al., 2012)

Modalities of analysis

From the narrative point of view, the ordeal supposes a diachronic perspective (Baudouin, 2013). It entails a dialectical relationship between passion (enduring) and action (reacting). The canonical narrative reveals a double transition in which the main protagonist is moved to a distal zone and then returns to a renewed identity/proximal zone.

Table 1

Spaces	Topical	Exotopical	Topical
Actions	Deficiency	Ordeal	Reintegration
Zones	Identity/Proximal	Distal	Identity/Proximal

Source: Baudouin, 2010, p. 7

The table above reads from left to right. Reintegration in the identity/proximal zone defines the final phase of the ordeal.

Narrative grammar (Greimas, 1970) enables us to analyse the action demanded by the ordeal in the narrative and thus to apprehend the evolutions and transformations of the main protagonist throughout the deployment of the story. In summary: a subject is in search of a valued object, a protagonist mandates this search, others come to his help or hinder him, and it ends with a new form of qualification.

The ordeal allows us to analyse identity processes and products[2]. It favours the reassessment of identity transactions on a biographic axis and a relational plane giving shape to biographic (continuity vs. rupture) and relational (recognition vs non

recognition) regimes (Dubar, 2010). In the narrative, ordeals lead to 'befores' and 'afters' in value-creation and to a series of successive forms of qualifications.

The ordeal takes place in an exotopic space. In comparison to the subject's usual bearings, this space constitutes a breach. It may concern the symbolic, relational or material plane. Analysing what constitutes the breach allows us to apprehend the amount of passion, which characterises the ordeal, and in a comparative perspective, the 'shock-absorbers' which are present.

Any ordeal is the object of a meticulous narrative treatment. Based on Gennette's works in narratology (1983), we can put forward a connection between modalities of treating narrative and the speed of the narrative. Narratives do not have a constant, steady speed. A long stretch of time can be summed up in a few words (summary) while an episode considered as important can be developed extensively (scene). The slower the speed of the narrative, the more it develops ordeals which marked the author's life path according to his/her own perception. This attention to the speed of the narrative is characteristic of a certain number of works in the field of biographical approaches (Baudouin, 2010; Horsdal, 2011).

Speed is defined as the ratio between a temporal measure (the narrated time) and a spatial ratio (the number of signs). Objectification of these kinetic variations does not pose any technical problems. Word processors make it easy to count the number of signs dedicated to each sequence. These can be put in relation to the total number of signs in the interview and then replaced in chronological order. These kinetic changes can be objectified in the form of graphs. The episodes, which are subjected to meticulous narrative treatment, can thus be easily identified. Objectifying speed has the virtue of bringing the researcher closer to the 'plot development' ["mise en intrigue"] (Ricoeur, 1983) of each autobiographic narrative and thus closer to the subjective point of view of the person narrating him/herself.

The way in which the passage from initial vocational training to the world of work takes place is decisive when it comes to the possibility of continuing an artistic activity and subjectively continuing one's own identity as an artist. This passage is a standard and decisive ordeal in our societies (Martucelli, 2002). Based on two contrasted interviews with young fashion design graduates, we propose to illustrate the ordeal we reconstructed through our research.

Dereliction and failure

Iléana's narrative describes this passage as the 'bursting' of a 'bubble'. Her narrative recalls an experience of fall even dereliction.

Graph 1
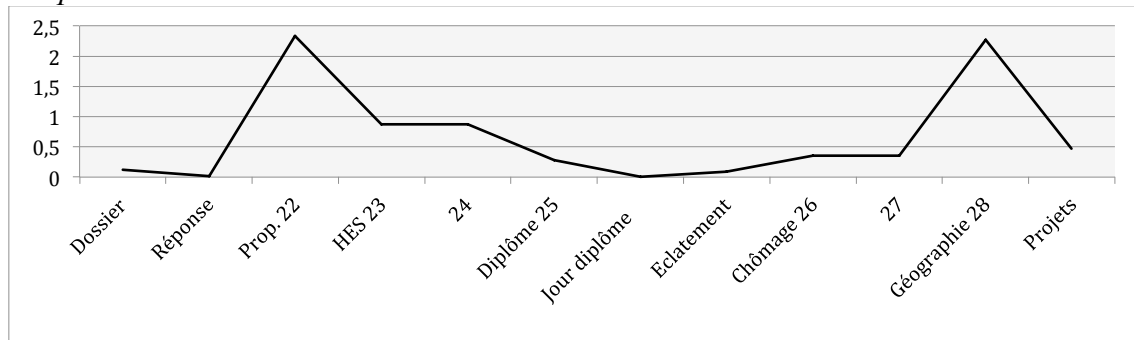
Source: Authors' own design

This graph represents the kinetic variations in her interview. The closer the line gets to the ordinate scale, the slower the speed of the narrative, which corresponds to a significant ordeal. These variations allow us to locate the successive ordeals that Iléana considers to have marked her path in the artistic field.

This graph brings out two consecutive sequences. The first sequence is that of the 'Graduation Day'. The narrative speed is approximately one page for one day. The second one is that of the moment of rupture or 'bursting'. A month is narrated on one page. These two sequences are contrasted. The first describes Iléana's consecration, the second her fall.

The 'Graduation Day' sequence recounts Iléana's graduation jury, as well as the showcasing of the students' projects. It condenses the whole of the processes that marked her training. All ends well here.

> Fragment 1
>
> I gave all I had for this project. It means I do things with my heart, with my whole body. As a matter of fact, I love matter too! I didn't want to do something that wasn't, that isn't, I mean that didn't have anything to do with fashion design and clothing [...] My project was about creating matter, to do with funerary rites. I set up installations, sculptures and also took photos. And the jury is made up of fashion professionals... Will they understand? [...] And then I'm not sure I want to make art to put it in my cellar, it's not very meaningful! I got a good mark even though I'd taken risks... There was even one person from the jury who reckoned my work was so powerful the photos would have been enough! They understood it, those guys! (Iléana).

This sequence is a key moment of recognition of Iléana's identity as a stylist. Her identity stabilises itself and a subjective appeasement takes place. It is a dream come true: becoming a stylist when her background always went against her choice and her former path did not predestine her to an artistic vocation. 'There, we're completely elsewhere, we're not on earth any more'. She is living a dream. The school is described as a 'bubble' where Iléana moves about like a 'fish in water'. This sequence announces however Iléana's imminent fall.

> Fragment 2
>
> All of a sudden: 'Boum!' I found myself all alone, with nothing left, no friends after a while, on the dole... Yeah, all of a sudden you take notice of reality.[...] The funny thing is, in the bubble, in this small creative world, in this small world of friends, well, as an artist, it's a bit like being at the top... You're on a pedestal! And when you're unemployed, in the active world, being an artist, you're just a loser! […] Instead of

considering myself in relation to all those years of studying, and how I saw myself at the time, as a stylist, well all of a sudden, I found myself on the dole as a salesperson.[...] All of a sudden I was forced to go in a direction I'd always tried not to follow! It was to escape from that that I'd done my baccalaureate and studied fashion design! I'd fought for that! And there, everything was broken! (Iléana).

For Iléana, losing her job was a real 'destruction'. The passage from initial training to the reality of the world of work burst her 'bubble'. It was a return to 'reality'. Iléana comes from a modest background. 'Skint', she's forced to sign on the dole. This forces her to look for a job as a salesperson. It must be said here that Iléana's first vocational training was as a salesperson[3]. In her case, this means not recognising her identity as a stylist, but her path is also marked by a logic of emancipation. Honneth's studies (2000) show how important the phenomenon of non-recognition is in the practical relation to oneself. Iléana's self-esteem has been attacked.

Fragment 3

Your friends see you in a totally different way... But they also see you differently because I was also different... I saw myself differently... People who ask you what you did, I wasn't going to say: I'm a stylist. I told them I was on the dole. (Iléana).

Iléana is affected by several losses. Her identity as a stylist falls to pieces with the loss of recognition she found during her time at art school. Unemployment contradicts this recognition, but also that of the 'small world of creativity'. Iléana goes from being 'at the top' (the small world of artists) to being a 'loser' (the big world of work). Unlike the art school, the artist is a 'big loser' in 'active life' Iléana then loses her creative 'energy', the will to create. This 'motivation' was fuelled 'by friends'.

In Iléana's narrative, the periods before and after 'school' are set in contradictory tension. The opposition is radical.

Fragment 4

[At school] You're surrounded by lots of people... Because you go see x, you go and see y, to ask questions and for this and that... I was seething with excitement... There! There are loads of people, loads of things to do... We're like totally buzzing. We're full of ideas... Yeah! We're totally on a collective trip. (Iléana).

Iléana was thrown out of this collective 'trip'. She witnesses the dissipation of her creative energy. She attempts to continue with certain creations, certain small projects, setting her own rules. She nonetheless abandons, grudgingly and at a high psychological cost. She doesn't have any 'motivation' left. She also becomes aware of her need for money, which is entirely coherent with the 'reverse economy' that is characteristic of the world of art (Bourdieu, 1992), in which one needs to earn one's living 'to' create rather than earning one's living 'by' creating. The art school offered an infrastructure and she realises how important this has been for her. 'After leaving the school, the first thing you need is money!'

Iléana 'feels like [she's] stopped living', 'fizzled out'. The 'emptiness' where she seems to find herself after this passage, the 'anxiety' and the paralysis that have submerged her are striking in her narrative. These losses result in her experiencing feelings of deprivation, solitude and failure.

Iléana's narrative establishes a contrast between a fragile set of self-imposed rules (her attempts to continue creating on her own) and very strong excitement (when she was part of the art school). She is forced to search within herself the resources necessary

for the realisation of her artistic activities, but fails to do so. Similarly, she fails to maintain her identity as a stylist outside the art school.

Frenzy

Camille's narrative contrasts with Iléana's. Camille enjoys a certain consistency of identity (the consequence of a harmonious relation between an identity for self and an identity for others) and quickly develops creative activities after her initial training. Both the consistency and the activity can be partly explained by a privileged background.

Graph 2
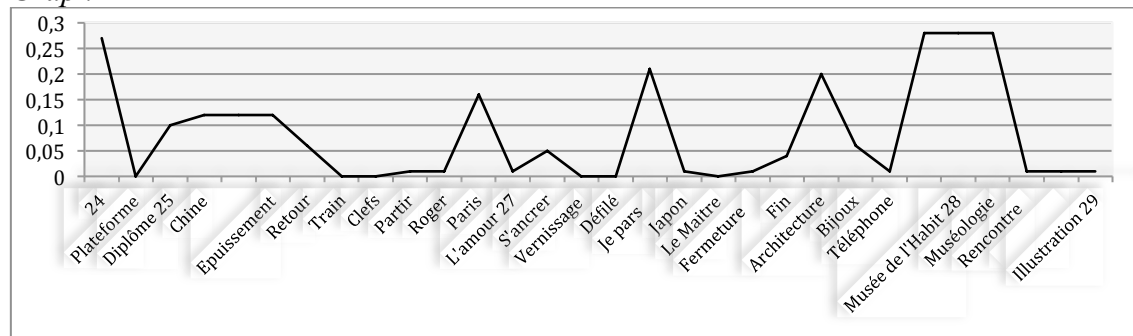
Source: Authors' own design

The graph above represents the speed of Camille's integration narrative. The 'China' sequence is interesting. Camille narrates six months in fewer than four pages. This sequence starts on her graduation day. It concerns the passage from initial training to the world of work. It must be set in relation to the "Plateforme" sequence, where the narrative slows down considerably. One day is narrated in two pages. Her narrative suggests a scene:

> Fragment 5
>
> We're strolling through the stalls at Plateforme, and I come across the most beautiful pair of shoes that I've ever seen! My mum sees the pair. The shoe is called Moebius. She tells me, in front of the guy: 'Hey, look Camille, it's your cat's name!' So I get to know the man. I tell him it's the most beautiful pair of shoes that I've ever seen. He tells me he's the one who made them. He tells me he loves my dress, that it's incredible. I tell him I made it […] It's a shoe made from a single band. And I tell him it's incredible, my dress is made the same way![...] He contacts me for several weeks. I don't know why, but it just doesn't happen. Then a year later, I receive an email in English. He's going to open a design studio in China and asks me if I want to go and live there with him, to set up a clothes department. (Camille).

Camille is in her second year. This chance meeting is crucial. It opens the doors to the industrial and commercial network of fashion design. On her graduation day, she takes the plane to China. She goes from art school to the industrial and commercial network of fashion design without any transition. The environment in which she finds herself allows her to continue her fashion design activities and gives her the opportunity to develop her skills as a stylist.

Fragment 6

I left for China the day I got my degree! I received my degree and left for the airport so as not to miss the plane! I didn't celebrate with anybody.[...] I was a student, I didn't earn anything, and from one day to the next, I become an international stylist. Two thousand dollars in China! I was a multimillionaire! (Camille).

Camille goes on to create shoes, sets up a fashion department, travels from fashion week to fashion week, represents the company in Japan. Her narrative tells of a good deal of personal energy and creative symbiosis with her boss and the work team.

Fragment 7

For the first three months, I lived at work...I lived there with my boss. Your work is your life, and your life is your work. No more private life barriers. And then there was this really strong relationship with my boss of whom I can say he is my (artistic) twin. I remember drawings, where I was drawing and his pen tip would push mine out of the way to continue the drawing. It really is a type of professional symbiosis! (Camille).

The differences with Iléana are striking. The passage from initial training to the world of work, far from proceeding via successive losses, gives way to a series of advantages, which contribute to the development of Camille's artistic activities and identity. Her hyperactivity will sometimes take quite extreme forms.

Fragment 8

I was travelling so much. I had on-going business on different continents! […] It became totally crazy, I broke up with my friend. I was totally disconnected from reality! Well, when you live in China and you arrive in London or Europe... You feel really close to Nyon! You get plane tickets every week, with eighteen-hour flights. I had a stack of tickets as big as that, flights I was going to take in the coming weeks. (Camille).

An ordeal

A strong contrast is evident when we analyse the two life-paths. Agency and identity appear linked to family background: continuing one's activity and continuing oneself in one's identity require a supportive environment. Camille's hyperactivity as well as Ileana's paralysis mixed with anxiety and nostalgia can be partly explained by the nature of their respective backgrounds.

This observation points to a relationship of dependency between identity and agency on the one hand and family environment, background on the other. Iléana suffers from a series of losses, which will provoke her breakdown and her fall. Camille enjoys a series of gains, which will help her to develop her activity and realise her identity. However both received the same recognition from the institution in which they were trained.

This passage can represent a rupture in people's paths. The ordeal of passing from initial training to the world of work, such as we have reconstructed from the analysis of our entire corpus, is made up of two dimensions. The first of these is the notion of losses. These are accompanied by the realisation of what the art school graduate had formerly enjoyed. Their environment is affected at three levels: material, relational and symbolic. On a material level, the infrastructure (tools, workplaces, projects...) disappears. It used to structure and support artistic activity. On a relational level, a

collective organised around art disappears. It was made up of peers, professors and visiting lecturers. It favoured motivation and exchange. The aspiring artist found his/her energy there. Without this collective, this motivation evaporates. On a symbolic level, the aspiring artist witnesses the disappearance of a world organised around common values and categories. Identity is threatened here. It belonged to this world and was recognised by it.

When there is rupture on these three levels, the aspiring artist must 'rebuild him/herself' (the expression is recurrent). Losses are always expressed in passive form. The graduates are not subjects, they are subjected to. This reconstruction demands action. One must react. The tension between these losses, which happen to people (passive form) and a desire to maintain the autonomy and the authenticity that marked the artistic project (active form), forms the heart of this ordeal.

"Shock-Absorbers"

Iléana cannot find the resources in herself to continue her activity and she cannot call herself stylist because she lacks anchorage in a common world. A self-accomplishment process is stopped in full flight. Iléana will never be a stylist. Unlike Camille, she does not have the relevant 'shock-absorbers'.

Camille enjoys support and resources. By support, one must understand the whole of supports to oneself [soutiens à soi] (Martuccelli, 2002). They make up our own peculiar world, a 'meshing around oneself' (Martuccelli, 2002, p. 400). Supports designate a series of 'links with others', with 'ourselves' and with 'objects' (Martuccelli, 2002, p. 400). This meshing allows the person to 'keep hold' because it maintains her. It allows us to retain the illusion of holding out 'from the inside' and of accomplishing ourselves.

These supports have a shoring role. To help her through this passage, Camille can count on a particularly legitimate support: an immaterial job, thanks to the encounter during the 'Plateforme' sequence. Camille is saturated by an environment, which favours her expressiveness.

On the other hand, Iléana faces one of the 'most banal and most difficult ordeals to which individuals are confronted' (Martuccelli, 2002, p. 65) in our societies. It is typical of the modern condition, where it is question of 'managing to keep up in a world […] which no longer provides any holding'(Martuccelli, 2002, p. 44) and which even expels. Iléana is well and truly expelled from what used to be her world.

The notion of resources must be introduced in relation to the question of agency. On the contrary to supports, they can be drawn on by individuals. Supports designate an existentially oriented meshing. Their efficacy depend on a certain level of unconsciousness. This is indicated by the realisation which follows the losses sustained during the passage. People are however conscious of their resources. They can draw on them. Resources however only exist in relation to a context and when drawn upon. Camille gives us an example in the 'keys' sequence identified by the kinetic analysis.

Fragment 9

I was looking for my keys. You come home and you ask yourself where you left your keys from before you know. I looked for them compulsively in my luggage, saying to myself: 'Fuck, I forgot them!'. And in fact, I realised I didn't have any keys! But it was terrible! No keys, that means nobody trusts you, nobody wants to give you a job or an office or anything. It means you don't have a house. It means you have no means of transport, no bike, no car. It means you have no pass-times, no locker at the swimming-pool or I don't know where else. You don't have any flat keys. You have no keys! And in

that second, I swear the ground opened up under me! I told myself: 'You're going to have
to start all over again!' (Camille).

At that moment, the Chinese experience is over. Camille loses the support to her
activity and to her identity. She suddenly realises it. Just as Iléana, she experiences of
dereliction. However, her experience in China has helped her build a network. This is a
resource she will draw on.

Fragment 10

And there, as is often the case with me, escape, I leave for Paris to see all my friends from
Paris I'd made on the job. (Camille).

She cannot stand the realisation. The ground opens up under her. But on the contrary to
Iléana, she will be able to overcome this ordeal. She has resources. She solicits her
network, leaves for Paris and finds a new job in that field. The meshing rebuilds itself.

Bifurcation

The second dimension of the ordeal can be summed up in one expression: 'rebuilding
oneself'. It follows the losses, which come with the passage from the initial training to
the world of work. The analysis of the integration process reveals an effort of redefining
aspirations. It is present in integration paths from the moment the person is expelled
from what used to be his or her world. The artist project ruined, our narratives recount
the progressive emergence of new projects. This entails working on the intersection
between social and autobiographical.

Once the artist project has become impossible, a moratorium on commitments
takes hold, a suspension in a sort of virtuality and a series of abortions before the
subject can get together again and find the resources in its environment for a
professional reconstruction.

Analysing Iléana's path brings out a rupture in her identity. Iléana is forced, to start
with in an extrinsic way, to review her aspirations. She must 'rebuild' herself. She
wants to give new meaning to her life.

Fragment 11

[On the subject of fashion design] There are personal reasons, as well as professional
reasons, because it's really hard... You know you'll always be, financially speaking,
really... Yeah! Always in a difficult situation...Yeah! Having to count your pennies all the
time, something I didn't really want to do...It's also questioning things... Asking myself
what my use is on life! A very strong hesitation developed, and then you have to choose.
(Iléana).

Forced because she's on the dole, Iléana finds a small job as a salesperson. She comes
back to the path she wanted to leave. She 'hates' this job. She does not want to get
caught by the 'destiny' she had tried to elude once before. She stays on the job for five
years. For two years, she tries to find herself while working part-time. This is what the
'rebuilding myself' sequence recounts. Two years during which Iléana feels like she
was 'slowly fading away'. She feels like 'a teenager'.

Fragment 12

How do you know you like chocolate? I mean, I don't know, since I was a kid, I love nature, I love animals, I want to help nature and animals, and so there you are, I just felt like, I told myself: "There! I've already followed a path I liked in my life, why not try another which could bring me more work and try and sort myself out financially. (Iléana).

A new horizon emerges: geography. Iléana mentions however a concomitant desire 'not to betray', and 'lose' herself.

Fragment 13

My intention was to be able to work half-time in the field of ecology and sustainable development, and then have another 50% where I'd still have a small studio and create a few things. Or I don't know, work for the WWF, do creations... Sometimes you tell yourself you might as well give up cos' there's no future... And the some days, I'd wake up and go 'Shit! It's a part of me!' I didn't want to stop... I need that! (Iléana).

The fear of losing part of yourself. But all the same wanting to set up a feasible horizon on the long run. Iléana seeks to establish a biographical regime of continuity and a relational regime of recognition.

Iléana will nevertheless abandon geography at University, after studying for one year. She feels like she's gradually losing herself.

Fragment 14

And it all went rather badly... I realised that I loved nature and animals, but working in that field got on my nerves. (Iléana).

She then tries studying in the field of education for two years, subjecting herself to 'pragmatic' (a stable life plan) self-control. This makes her suffer, become unhappy, and she feels as though she is losing herself again. But she refuses to go through the same emotional turmoil that she experienced with fashion design.

Following a revelation, art therapy becomes an obvious possibility, thanks to a friend who talks about it during a discussion. Art therapy forms a satisfying 'identity offer' (Dubar, 2010) for Iléana. It brings the 'heart' and the 'brain' together. It offers her a viable outcome. This offer links her artistic training with her studies in education and lets her anticipate a form of professional stability: 'I can see myself there!'

It will have taken five years filled with doubt, questioning, loss of motivation, unfinished issues for Iléana to be 'energised' at last by a project which offers her a viable horizon, putting her on the path towards a new-found unity and continuity in her identity. Iléana can thus leave the moratorium and turn her studies into resources towards the reconstruction of her identity and her re-socialisation. In our corpus, the training apparatus appear as an important resource in identity reconstruction and bifurcation.

Low human agency

Iléana's path recounts an experience of expulsion. After aspiring and being recognised as an artist by her Art school, she bifurcates towards art therapy. It will have taken her a period of five years.

By bifurcation, one must understand the act of leaving a used and socially defined trajectory, so as to rejoin another, also socially structured. Bifurcation differs from the concept of transition. Transition designates a predictable stage in a trajectory.
Bifurcation demands work on oneself. It must lead to a narrative reconstruction, which apprehends its story as 'the story of a progression towards a more authentic life or an emancipation from constraint and error' (Rosa, 2005/2010, p. 281).

Bifurcation is favoured by a state of weightlessness, due to the slackening of the social environment. The expulsion that follows the passage from initial training to the world of work makes the process of bifurcation easier.

Iléana's path is characterised by a period of solitude and emptiness. Unlike Camille, she describes an environment using a semantic field of absence, loss and comedown. The short temporality of the expulsion is followed by a long temporality of reconstruction. A biographical crossroad opens up in front of her (Soulet, 2010). This reconstruction is at the intersection between the biographical and the social.

Iléana underwent a rupture in the ordinary conditions of her agency. She was 'driven to the limits of her agency', in a 'structural situation of vulnerability' (Soulet, 2010, p. 277) The concept of low human agency describes this kind of situation. It entails a double refusal. First of all that of the heroising of the subject. The present analysis did not look for 'the factor determining action in the innermost being', in 'exceptional resources' or in 'an essential interior quality possessed by the person who got through it' (Soulet, 2010, p. 278). If the agency is said to be of 'low level', this low level is explained by certain elements from the environment. If the agency is said to be 'strong/of high level', this can be explained by the same environment. The heart of the reasoning reside in this shift.

The concept of low level agency also goes against analyses which favour explaining bifurcation and identity reconstruction based on their result. In an A-B-C sequence, it is a question of giving less weight to C. An analytical insufficiency characterises these analyses: the finalisation of the process and overseeing an open process whose outcome is still undetermined. A crossroad is the meeting of several paths. It proposes several directions. Low level agency focuses mainly on what happens during B. A latency can thus be observed, with its length, its additivity, its sedimentations and its losses. After the temporality of the crisis, it takes the long temporality of a self-transformation on an uncertain horizon and in a sort of weightlessness seriously.

This analysis has established 'a weakening of the ordinary and stable action structures' (Soulet, 2010, p. 281). The integration process is indeed characterised, from the point where the ordeal cannot be absorbed, by a 'breaking of routines' and 'an impossibility to project oneself' (Soulet, 2010, p. 280). Agency is summoned, but in a situation which breaks its regular resources apart. Low level agency refers to this.

This agency, weakened in its resources, is not oriented by ends or norms which control its development any more. This is when it becomes 'creator of possibilities'; poietic. It is characterised by a process of subjectivation. Affected by diverse losses, Iléan must give new meaning to her action (and in a larger picture to her life). In this poietic agency, meaning is 'given by the individual itself', while being the 'object' itself. (Soulet, 2010, p. 284). It entails self-work and self-transformation. Its finalisation will happen as part of an ongoing action. It is only once the action is finalised following an effort of reconceptualisation of its experience, at the meeting point of the social and biographical element, that Iléana can call upon certain resources (in this case her training). 'Before that the resources, whatever they are, are dormant, unusable' (Soulet, 2010, p. 284).

Conclusion

Analysing the biographical paths of young art school graduates has enabled us to highlight the principal elements comprising the ordeal undergone by young artists during the transition from initial vocational training to the world of work. We have pointed to the way identity bearings are destabilised by this ordeal. It leads to the realisation that something has ended, but nothing satisfying appears on the horizon. We have also highlighted the breakdown that agency can suffer. The person cannot deploy his artistic activity using only his inner resources.

The analysis of the ordeal has led us to take into account the situations in which people are evolving. It is the loss of certain elements in the environment, which leads to the realisation that identity and agency are related. This perspective helps not to limit the analysis to psychological dimensions and prevents all form of "heroising". It is not a question of denying the existence of inner 'bearings' and 'resources', but of proposing a complementary approach, in coherence with what narratives with a dominant autobiographical content can help understand.

We have underlined how bifurcation is inseparable from a form of slackening or loosening of the grip. In our corpus it is consecutive to the first dimension of the ordeal of transition from initial training to the world of work. This 'slackening' is one of the conditions that make bifurcation possible, one of the conditions that make it possible for the subject to follow a new trajectory. It weakens the strength of inertia of the former trajectory and opens up a biographical crossroad. It breaks with the habitual, the usual, obliging the subject to work on the intersection between the social and biographical levels in order to find new ends or goals, a new coherent form and unity of identity and thus join a shared world.

Notes

[1] Ricoeur's work (1990) underlines the fact that the identity of a person is the result of a series of successive innovations and sedimentations. "Idem"-identity designates elements, which help re-identify a person as the same through time. "Ipse"-identity designates the dynamic and changing pole of the identity. It is linked to action.
[2] Our approach of identity construction considers a doubly transactional process of socialisation (mediated by language) situated on a biographic axis (interpretation of one's story and self-predicative identity) and a relational plane (interaction and identity attributed by others).
[3] Sales staff train as apprentices, whereas fashion designers study in higher education establishments.

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