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The process of transformation: Kegan's view through the lens of a film by Wenders

Alexis Kokkos
Hellenic Open University, Greece (kokkosalexis@gmail.com)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is the exploration of Kegan's constructive-developmental theory through the analysis of the behavior of an agent within Wenders's film Alice in the Cities, which is used as a case study. In the first part, we will approach Kegan's ideas regarding the evolution of human beings' consciousness as they move through five progressively more complex orders of consciousness. We will also approach the connections of Kegan's perspective to Mezirow's Transformation Theory. Then, we will draw insights from the film in order to expand the exploration of some crucial issues of Kegan's theory, such as: How is a person's consciousness developed? Are there signs, when a person is situated in a certain order of consciousness, that he/she has the potential to move toward a next one? Which might be the adult educator's role in assisting the learners' evolutionary process? Finally, in the last section, some limitations of Kegan's perspective will be critically discussed.

Keywords: aesthetic experience; consciousness; object; subject

Kegan's theoretical perspective

Robert Kegan's constructive-developmental approach (Kegan, 1982, 1994, 2000) describes the way in which human beings gradually construct their understanding of reality. He argues that this process is developed in five stages or orders of consciousness throughout a person's life course. Each one of these stages is characterized by a growing maturity and integrity regarding the way we make sense. Each qualitative movement from one stage to the next requires a whole mental structure that had been

experienced as *subject,* in the sense that we come to know everything through the subjectivity of our needs, interests and wishes (Lahey, Souvaine, Kegan, Goodman & Felix, 2011) and shifts it so that it becomes seen as an *object*, meaning we become objective towards our assumptions, reflect upon them, see what is true and exercise control over them.

The first order of consciousness roughly covers the time period from the second to the sixth year of life. Within this stage, we perceive reality through imaginatively constructed lenses. Our thinking tends to be 'fantastic and illogical, our feelings impulsive and fluid' (Kegan, 1982, p. 29). In other words, we are not able to construct a logical relation between cause and effect, and we are attached to whatever is present at the moment.

During the second stage, which is common to adolescents, we develop a sense of who we are and what we want. We organize our desires as things that persist through time. In the 'social-cognitive' domain we are shortsighted self–oriented and we manipulate others to achieve our own goals (Kegan, 1994). Our challenge to develop further involves not to be mostly concerned with our own desires, but to take into consideration the expectations and needs of others.

During the third stage (the end of the teenage years and beyond), we make commitments to communities of people and/or ideas. Our sense of self, our assumptions and values derive from our relation with the others and they are constructed in terms of their respective points of view. We subordinate our individual interests to the shared norms, expectations and demands of the community to which we belong (peer group, family, social group, etc.). Our challenge at this stage takes the form of resisting codependency and establishing independent ways of making meaning and behaving.

At the fourth stage, we have the capacity to take responsibility of our internal authority and make human relationships a part of our world. We can elaborate circumstances and expectations of others synthetically, and – in the light of our value system – (re)define our behavior in a functional way, toward our emancipation. In other words, we see ourselves as the author of our inner psychological life.

Finally, at the fifth stage, which according to Kegan (1994) is rarely reached, individuals are less likely to see the world in terms of dichotomies. They deal well with managing the tension of opposites (Berger, 2013). They recognize the partiality that is inherent in any system of beliefs and they have the capacity to make holistic sense of their experience and hold on to multiple systems of thinking.

A crucial component of Kegan's view is his understanding regarding the texture of the changes that occur across the constructive-developmental process (Kegan, 2000). In each stage, there is change in *what* we know – that is further learning of informative sort – but also change in *how* we know. The latter does not only provide new information, but causes a reconstruction of our preexisting frame of mind or an epistemological paradigm shift. According to Kegan (2000) only this sort of learning is transformational and leads the individual to a next order of consciousness.

Another core point of Kegan's theory concerns the very process within each stage of development. Actually, there is a continuous process of misbalancing and restoring the balance, a formation and reformation of our frame of mind, a setting and resetting of the distinctions between what is subject and what is object (Lahey et al., 2011). Hence, while we move from one order of consciousness to the next, we are placed in a fully transitional state where we may experience both orders at the same time. Also, we eventually tend toward the next order but we may also regress, finding ourselves embedded in the norms of the previous one. This spiral and dialectical process has been eloquently described by Lahey et al. in the *Guide to the Subject-Object-Interview*

(2011). This Guide identifies twentyone possible distinctions in the on-going evolution of subject–object relations. For instance, passing from stage 3 to 4 involves four distinctions: 3 (4), where the person is situated mainly at the 3rd stage but there are indications in the behaviour demonstrating that she is beginning to move towards the 4th stage; 3/4, when this tendency is reinforced; 4/3 when the person behaves mostly according to the characteristics of the 4th stage and less according to those of the 3rd; 4 (3), when the person seems ready to move to the 4th stage, however some inner forces still hold her back.

The connections of Kegan's view to transformation theory

The Transformation Theory was introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978 and, since then, it has become the basic point of reference for the development of the transformative learning theoretical framework. The basic idea, which is prominent throughout Mezirow's work (inter alia 1981, 1991, 1994, 2000) is that people usually find themselves in a system of habits of mind through which they interpret reality, without being able to judge the true value it has for their lives. In adulthood, however, they might realize that this system is dysfunctional, as it contains distorted or incomplete assumptions. Therefore, adults need support in order to critically re-evaluate their assumptions and transform them, giving vital meaning to their experiences.

Mezirow claimed (inter alia 1985, 1991, 1997) that there are four types of learning; the last two of them are those where the transformational process occurs. The first type involves the elaboration of an existing point of view. It is a process during which we improve or change a specific assumption we have embraced, without questioning the broader system of our mental habits in which this assumption is embedded. The second type of learning refers to adopting a new point of view, which is nevertheless compatible and consistent with those that have been already embraced. Therefore, it is a process in which we gain more information, but without transforming our way of making sense. The third type constitutes a radical transformation of a point of view, while the fourth type is the transformation of one or more habits of mind. In the latter, we transform not only what we know, but also the way in which we perceive reality and learn from our experiences.

By comparing Mezirow's view to Kegan's theory, we realize that there are some differences, but also important points of convergence.

Their major difference is that, according to Kegan, transformational learning is not explicitly the province of adulthood, while Mezirow claims that transformative learning can occur only during this stage of the life span. Hence, the epistemological shifts which are identified by Mezirow as the third and fourth type of learning correspond to Kegan's model only regarding the transition from the third to the fourth order of consciousness.

On the other hand, a crucial point of convergence between the two theories is that mental transformation is about changing the *form* of the meaning-making system. Hence, transformative learning does not refer to just any kind of learning but to the sort which incites deep changes to our frame of reference and let us 'know in a different way' (Taylor & Elias, 2012, p. 151).

Another significant commonality between the two perspectives concerns the capacities that are required from a learner in order to move from the socialized to the self-authoring mind (according to Kegan's conceptualization) or to transform certain points of view or habits of mind (according to Mezirow's conceptualization). Both

theorists claim that this shift demands a specific order of mental functioning which is characterized by a capacity of abstract, critical mode of thinking. More specifically, Kegan (1994) argues that the person might create the ability to integrate her various values, beliefs, ideals, convictions and interpersonal states into a complex system of organizing experience. She might view them as parts of a whole upon which she can think critically and act. Mezirow (2000), in his turn, states that the transformational process is open-ended and includes a meaningful, holistic exploration and (re)organization of perceptions and feelings through critical reflection:

> Learners may be helped to explore all aspects of a frame of reference: its genealogy, power allocation, internal logic, uses, affective and intuitive dimensions, advantages, and disadvantages [...] The learner can look at the same experience from a variety of points of view and see the concepts and feelings depend on the perspective through which they occur. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 29)

Kegan's perspective meets transformation theory

If we consider the total of the dimensions which have been stated regarding the components of Kegan's theory and the points of convergence and divergence with Mezirow's view, we can arguably claim that Kegan provides a significant contribution to the development of Transformation Theory. He broadens the concept of transformational learning and explores the whole spectrum of radical changes which occur within the person's consciousness during the life span. Moreover, he contributes to a better understanding of the trembles and alterations which emerge within each stage of development. Hence, his approach strengthens the understanding of the learners current meaning-forming and their actual capacities to transform it. Thus, an adult educator becomes able to examine the fit between learners' abilities and her demands made upon them. Kegan is indeed careful at this point. He underlines that adult educators need to understand where precisely 'the student is' (Kegan, 2000, p. 61) and how costly the transformational project may seem to her, so that not to create designs that 'get out too far ahead of the learner' (Kegan, 2000, p. 66). Also, he points out another gentle differentiation from Mezirow's work, stating that although the latter's suggestion concerning the enhancement of a student's ability toward self-authority is an appropriate transformational aim, adult educators should however discern 'how rapidly or gradually this shift in authority should optimally take place for that student, which is a function of how far he or she is along this particular bridge' (Kegan, 2000, p.66).

The contribution of aesthetic experience

The role of aesthetic experience – a notion understood as systematic exploration of a work of art – might have a significant impact in unearthing insights on a learning issue whose content is related to the meaning that could be drawn from the work of art at hand. Aristotle (335 B.C./1999), Dewey (1934/1980), Gardner (1990), Adorno (1986), Greene (2000), Castoriadis (2008) are among the scholars who have argued that our contact with great art may trigger a large spectrum of emotions and reflections, and create dialogue with our inner thoughts, desires, fears and hopes that are normally hidden under a decoy of conventional meanings. What is more, Nussbaum (1990) and Halliwell (1998) argue that works of art with high aesthetic value can be sources of insightful ideas and can help us to comprehend phenomena in a holistic manner. Hence,

art may complement philosophical or scientific thought which, due to its abstract nature, is limited in terms of expressing in an emotionally accurate way both the complexity of each situation and the wealth and truth of human existence, in general.

Kegan himself seems to share this conception. In his major works *The Evolving Self* (1982) and *In Over our Heads* (1994) he approaches, through the exploration of poems by T.S. Eliot, M. Stewart Hammond and R. Masten, as well as novels by H. Hemingway and J. Joyce, the underlying ideas, intuitions and feelings that are articulated during the shift from previous to present stance of human beings' beliefs and values. Moreover, he includes in his contribution to Mezirow and Associates' (2000) volume extended references to Ibsen's *Doll's House (Nora)* in an effort to show how the heroine is reaching a new set of insights regarding her assumptions, where they came from, how and why she had been unawarely identified with them, and how she starts exercising control over them.

Furthermore, a number of important philosophers and theorists of education and art (e.g. Eisner, 2002; Marcuse, 1978; Perkins, 1994) have revealed that it is not only the content (the meaning) of a work of art but also its morphological elements that, in correlation to it, may have an impact on triggering critical reflection. [Indicatively, elements of the morphological structure in a film are the narration, the role of music and the sound design, the camera's frame and placement, the choice of scenery, the handling of colour, the symbols, etc. Respectively, in a literary text, components of the morphological structure are the narration point of view, the time period, the space, the expressive means; in paintings, the colour, the shape, the lines; in music the rhythm, the melody, the tempo, etc.]. In another paper (Kokkos, 2017) I have claimed that the interplay between the content and the morphological structure of an important work of art offers the learners an opportunity to obtain a holistic approach toward it, and come to its thorough comprehension.

For those reasons, I take Wim Wenders's film *Alice in the Cities* (filmed in 1974) as a case study, and I will explore its spiritual content in relation to its structure, in order to expand the treatment of some crucial issues of Kegan's theoretical framework, such as: How a person's consciousness is developed? Which is the evidence? Is it a linear or spiral process? Are there signs that while a person is situated in a certain order of consciousness he or she has the potential to move toward a next one? Which are the challenges and the obstacles?

Even though the film explores the transformations that occur in the consciousness of a young man and a young girl, due to space constraints, in what follows I will focus only on the man's transformative experiences.

The significant works of art have a multidimensional texture and are open to a variety of interpretations. Hence, I believe my ideas, which will be presented in the following section contain only a part of the possible 'readings' and function mostly as open questions.

A case study: Alice in the cities

First part. In the first scene of the film there is an airplane, like a dot, flying very high, in a hazy horizon, symbolizing possibly a psychic journey toward the unknown. After that the camera captures Philip by the sea, sitting under a dock (symbol of a 'shelter'?). He is a German intellectual, a journalist touring the U.S.A. on an assignment from his magazine to write a representation of America. In his 'shelter', he is happily mumbling a rock song which reveals his cultural references. His appearance and his clothes show

that he is a relaxed wanderer in the style of the 'left intellectuals/easy riders' of the 70's. Furthermore, we will soon realize that he is pointedly critical of the commercial culture which is, as he states – and as the film shows –infiltrated in the whole American 'scene'. He takes photographs consecutively, in an attempt to portray this scene, but, as he explains, they 'never show what you've really seen'. Thus, Philip is incapable to capture the American reality, and simultaneously he is paralyzed by his writing assignment. He hasn't even begun writing his paper, while he has already reached the deadline set by his agency.

In the first part of the film, Philip pointlessly drifts through American cities. Almost all the scenes are nocturnal; the lighting is obscure, often hazy, betraying his psychic stagnation and dissolution. The city sounds – car horns, trains and trucks passing by – are very intense, inciting unawaringly a feeling of anxiety and continuous movement. The scenes begin and end in slow rhythm ('fade in', 'fade out'), suggesting wandering as well. In the background, a musical pattern played by an electric guitar is repeated monotonously from time to time, reproducing the feeling of being trapped.

One night, Philip stays at a small hotel room. From the window one can see enormous advertisements with the words 'SKYWAY', 'FREE' (an ironic comment on the 'American Dream' perhaps). Inside the room, in a dominating position in the centre, is a television set. Philip falls asleep watching TV-series and in the morning, when the film he is watching is continuously interrupted by commercials, like an "angry adolescent" he smashes the television set to the floor.

At some point, Philip reaches New York and visits his (ex?) girlfriend. He begins to tell her his impressions from his trip. When she attempts to tell him something, he doesn't listen, he continues speaking. He starts taking his clothes off to make love to her. She refuses, explaining to him that she cannot relate to a person who is so self-centred.

Here the first part of the film ends. In Kegan's (1994, pp. 30-31) terms, Philip, regarding the 'logical-cognitive' domain of his order of consciousness, can reason deductively – critically, and he is also subordinated to the norms of a certain ideology. These are characteristics of the 3rd order. However, in the 'interpersonal-affective' and the 'social-cognitive' domain, he is mostly in the 2nd order: He is a narcissist, not aware of shared feelings; he constructs himself only in terms of his own point of view, without being interested in maintaining mutual relationships.

Second part. Philip is ready to fly back to Europe. A young mother asks him to watch her 10 year old daughter Alice for a little while, and then she disappears. Philip will have to handle this situation. He knows nothing about Alice, apart from the fact that she has a ticket to Amsterdam on the same flight he does, and that, as she tells him, her grandmother lives in Wuppertal, but she doesn't know the address.

Philip decides to take up on the adventure and travel with her. As a matter of fact, during the next days, he spends his last money with Alice in search of her grandmother's house.

In Kegan's (1994) terms, Philip in the child's company moves toward the 3rd order of consciousness concerning all of its domains: He meets the demands of another person. The norms of his 'progressive' ideology take primacy over himself so that he takes on responsibilities which are related to his conception about the social bonds of the commonwealth. So, he takes care of the abandoned child, avoiding handing her over to the police.

This evolution in Philip's perception, apart from the narration, is evident in the film from a number of morphological elements. Now, the montage doesn't fade in and fade out; the plot evolves faster; the scenes are brighter; the sounds are less 'annoying'; the

advertisements on the streets are scarce and television disappears. The European cities are friendlier. Alice expresses this feeling: 'I find Amsterdam much prettier than New York'… Only the musical background remains unchanged, implying that there are some sides of Philip's immunity that prevent the completion of his transition to the 3rd order.

Indeed, Philip's shift does not occur without internal resistances and regressions. He often seems to be subordinated to a romanticized duty of protection rather than construct willingly an essential interpersonal relationship. Sometimes his new role tires him, he doesn't feel comfortable and there seems to be a mismatch between his free ridership and the way in which he now experiences his present order of consciousness. For instance, he says to Alice: 'Because of you I' m running around in circles', and 'Do you think I'm crazy about driving little girls around?' However, these reactions of his emerge among others which reveal his new capacity for empathy and his disposition to construct a relationship with her. A typical example which shows that he experiences both orders at the same time is when Alice asks him to tell her a bed time story. 'I don't know any stories' is his first blunt reaction. When he sees her disappointment, he changes and begins to tell her a story he improvises that moment with increasing feeling to it.

Their relationship however does go through a serious turmoil, when it is proven impossible to find the grandmother and Alice admits she had given him false information. Then Philip decides to hand the girl over to the police and return to his free ridership behavior, showing his retreat to an order of consciousness where he tends to behave on behalf of his own goals.

After that, he returns to his 'roots' – to a rock concert where he seems satisfied. During the concert though it is worth noticing one detail: Next to Philip there is a girl Alice's age, which he looks at with sympathy. It is as Wenders poses the question 'What could he be thinking…'.

Third part. After the concert, Philip returns to the hotel. Alice is waiting for him there, after escaping from the police. Philip welcomes her, almost relieved, and they begin searching again for the grandmother. Gradually, it is more and more obvious that the whole experience he had with Alice has brought him to the edge of moving toward a next order of consciousness. First he moved away from the relationship with her, then looked at it and decided to reframe it in more complex and functional way. He is now able to replace his idealized approach to take care of her with a new conception of love and closeness. He decides self-consciously to maintain bounds to her and he is authentically committed to this relationship. He seems to be regulating his conflicting values and desires between the free ridership and the task to take care of Alice. In Kegan's terms (1994), he makes a generalization across these values and subordinates them under a larger perspective that he creates. He does not simply adjust his thinking regarding his contact with Alice. He goes through a qualitative inner shift so that his relationship with her derives from a deeper, integral set of convictions. Now it seems as if he enjoys her company. He shares his thoughts with her. He carefully pays attention to her needs, he cares if she is tired, if she is hungry, and he responds in a functional way. She in return reciprocates, e.g. 'When do you want me to wake you up?' They find ways to co-exist and have fun: they bathe in the river; they exercise; Philip – who does not give up on some of his habits – has a fleeting love affair with a woman, but that does not disturb his relationship with Alice who sleeps peacefully in the room next door. The degree of closeness increases. Each one brings the other's point of view into the process of constructing his/her point of view. Symbolically, Alice takes his photograph, and when they look at the printed photo together her face reflects on the imprinting of his.

At some point, Alice's mother is found in Munich and Alice prepares to go by train to meet her. Philip says goodbye to Alice at the station and he is sad because he doesn't have money to travel with her. Then Alice gives him a – very precious to her – 100 dollar bill. In the train, during their new journey, she asks him what his future plans were. 'To finish this story' is his open-ended answer. In the last scene, the two of them embrace and look at the landscape from the open window of the train as it runs through the country side. Symbolisms are dominant: The route, unlike the airplane of the first scene, is specific and 'down to earth'. The train runs next to a river, which marks the flow that cannot turn back. Finally, the camera rises and records an increasingly broader view of the world. We see the river unreeling to the end of the horizon and, for the first time, the melody of the original musical pattern is enriched, becomes more integrated and is performed by a variety of musical instruments.

Reflections

Through the exploration of Wenders's film we may revisit Kegan's theory and draw some insights. A first one is that the development of human beings' consciousness seems to be an extremely complex and dialectical process. During each transformational transition, elements of two orders of consciousness may co-exist. Indeed, it is likely that the 'logical-cognitive' domain of a certain order of consciousness co-exists with the 'socio-cognitive' or 'intrapersonal-affective' domain of the next one and vice versa. Furthermore, the developmental process is not linear. It is quite likely for a person who remains for a long period of time in a certain order of consciousness, to regress to the previous order several times, until stabilizing in the first. Another insight is that it seems that within each stage of development the person experiences a large range of dilemmas, challenges, regressions and urges. Hence, following Kegan (2000), it becomes important, from the point of view of adult educators, that we may be extremely attentive regarding where exactly our learners are situated on the 'bridge'; which are their abilities to move on; which texture of challenge and support may we offer them and which the impact of the surrounding environment might be.

However, even though offering a strong understanding of human development, Kegan's approach also has some inherent limitations. The typology of a series of qualitatively identified and recognizable stages of consciousness cannot indisputably match all the particular forms of human situations that may arise in life or in the creative imagination of an artist. This is because, in each occasion, the behavior of each human being is unique and extremely complex and it has obscure dimensions which seem impossible to decrypt completely. Often, human situations do not have the 'pure' form that has been described in theory and cannot be classified into a pre-defined shape. For example, although we can reasonably believe that, in his relationship with Alice, Philip adopts a stance corresponding to the fourth stage of Kegan's model, there are dimensions of his behavior that are controversial and inscrutable: Does he accompany Alice to the train only because he has developed a relationship with her? Is he perhaps willing to flirt with her mother, the photo of whom he admired while wandering around with Alice? Wisely enough, Wenders leaves the issue 'open': Philip's future plans are 'to finish the story'. Further on, will the qualitative characteristics of the way Philip now relates to Alice extend to other relations of his?
Consequently, the aesthetic experience of Wenders' film probably seems to justify the criticism on Kegan's theory and other relevant developmental theories (e.g. by Piaget

and Erikson) as regards the universalist claim in them that the stages they suggest illustrate that 'this is typically how it can be' (Illeris, 2017, p. 146).

In addition, Kegan's approach is subject to the limitations of any theoretical abstractive view. Its generalized nature fails to represent the particular ways in which each person experiences sufferings, ambivalences, immunity, stuckness, agony, anger, passion, empathy, affection, love and, finally, the difficulty or release of transformation. We have seen though how, through the exploration of the film, aesthetic experience may capture the shades of the unique wealth of a human situation and provide us with triggers that deepen and broaden the way we make sense beyond the one-dimensional cognitive approach.

Ultimately, the use of art has the potential to make the understanding of a theoretical view - in this case, Kegan's perspective - more integral.

Within the literature of emancipatory learning, humans often attempt to be conceived through the exploration of authentic life stories. This method has undoubtedly a significant strength, given that it is based on the concrete experience and on the reflection upon it. Nevertheless, the navigation in human narrations that are included in significant works of literature, theatre, poetry or cinema may offer an alternative way of making sense of the processes of whole person's development, as they are expressed within the field of partnering, parenting, intercultural relationships, learning, working life, social life, citizenship and so on. For these reasons, the aesthetic experience, in concert to Kegan's meaningful theoretical framework, may lead to a further understanding of human existence.

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