

Culture and Its Irreducible Pluralities

Culture *is* the relentless, never-ending *process* of symbolic formations, transformations and reconfigurations. This statement, as trivial as it is, means that culture *is* a certain ontological excess whose nature lies in its arti- and trans-factuality, in the modes of its self-differentiation, in the inherent indeterminacy of its meanings, as well as in its historicity. Culture arises out of the creative act of distance toward pure factuality, out of negation of “purely” empirical data, of pure immediacy, of what “simply happens.” It lays structural and functional foundations for what is given. It arranges the environment we live in into a meaningful functional unity, into the dynamic structure of significant relations which provides us with basic coordinates for our existential orientation as well as for our practical and theoretical endeavors. In this sense it is a certain apriorical horizon for all possible meanings. Each phenomenon, each fact always appears within this horizon, that is, it is its articulation, and its actualization. They do so not as something separate or isolated, but rather as something expressive of – to use the Heideggerian idiom – the totality of signification implied by that very horizon.

Culture thus understood is not a one-dimensional collection of fixed and transparent meanings and facts. It cannot be brought down to the level of lifeless forms in a wax museum. Culture is not an archive of past achievements covered with dust. That means, even though all factual phenomenizations of culture are historically determined, culture as such is devoid of history. Obviously not in an oversimplistic sense of not having history, but rather in the sense of the fundamental underdeterminacy of whatever belongs to culture. Simply put, whatever belongs to it has to be constantly undertaken in acts of creative appropriation. In other words, culture is a constant *process* of, realized in ever-changing *context*, actualization and re-actualization of its inherent possibilities. No cultural fact is simply a fact. Each fact bears with it possibilities not-yet-realized. Each cultural phenomenon is just one among many possible actualizations of what is given. Hence what is given still remains possible and calls for re-actualization. There is a certain paradox in that, since on the one hand each act of such re-actualization takes place within historically and socially determined frameworks; that is, it is marked with its

inherent facticity. On the other hand, it is always a creative act of appropriation of that very facticity – in a sense of possibilizing it, of trans-forming it. If culture arises out of symbolic formation of raw, meaningless physical stimuli or purely biological determinations; it lives in the acts of transformation and reconfiguration of already established cultural inventory. That is to say, of situating past achievements in new horizons of meaning, values, or more broadly, human concerns. These creative efforts are not necessarily reflective or thematized. Usually they first take on different forms of pre-reflective experience of ourselves and of the world we live in; forms governed and expressed by collective imaginaries, symbols, archetypes, narratives, shared emotions, common practices and last but not least common forms of sensitivity or *sensus communis*.

However, the dynamics of culture have not only (a)historical, but also apriorical character. We are always confronted with the multiplicity of possible modes of experience, and hence with the plurality of the ways by means of which we humans *in-form* what is given to us. In other words, culture is permeated by the irreducible *plurality* of possible horizons of meaning. The still dominating paradigm of discursive rationality is, in fact, only one among other culturally available modes of symbolic formation. There are ever expanding modes of symbolic formation, mythic, ritual, personal, historical, artistic, scientific, economic, political, and beyond. They all produce a kind of knowledge, some discursive, some (like the arts) non-discursive and presentational.¹ Each of them has its own proper structure, its distinctive forms of evidence and cognition as well as characteristic modes of *in-forming* the experiential givenness (i.e., providing it with spatio-temporal order, coherence, and basic forms of intelligibility). To each of them corresponds a distinctive and irreducible type of semantics. Each of them provides us not only with a different perspective on reality, but at the same time reveals its different dimensions, which, by their very nature, are inaccessible to other modes. If so, then it would be mistaken to see any of them as more developed, hence prevailing over all others. It would be mistaken to see any of them as culture's *terminus ad quem*. Rather their irreducible plurality and richness, their processual, open-ended and polysemic character indicate the very *essence* of culture. Wherever this *creative process* ceases to be operative, whenever it is brought down to the level of production of systems of univocal signs instead of opening up the sphere of multivocal meanings – culture finds itself at the limit. Wherever symbolic process meets unsurpassable constraints (regardless of their nature – social-political, historical, or even purely physiological) it leads to “an abrogation of our human freedom,”² whose most severe form is existential disorientation. The latter can be explained by a characteristic of our contemporary culture: a radical incongruence between ever-new conceptual frameworks and constantly changing conditions of human existence on the one hand, and their (im)possible (or always necessarily belated) symbolic transformation, on the other.³ The most immediate consequence of this phenomenon is, often, a painful experience of uprooting and a de-ritualization of everyday life.

Besides the aforementioned fundamental forms of symbolism, culture is constituted by the almost infinite plurality of world-views (or world representations), of different, and differentiating, cultural codes, idioms, semantic fields. They do not simply co-exist, so to speak, side by side. What shapes the dynamics of culture is not only their incongruence, but also their interplay, the clashes between them, their dialectic interrelations creating a whole series of dynamic tensions. To repeat, the cultural universe is not a realm of univocal meanings. In order to understand culture we have to put aside the language of conventional, hence transparent, signs created on the basis of discursive rationality. Instead, we have to be open to the semantics that builds out of double and indirect meanings, metaphorical apprehensions, contradictions and paradoxes. We have to be open to the multidimensionality of what is, or what can be, expressed; and yet, we also have to be sensitive to what has been passed over

1) See Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), especially the chapter “The Fabric of Meaning.”

2) Ibid., 290.

3) See Ibid. chapter “The Fabric of Meaning.”

in silence, to what has been left unsaid – either because of its discursively inexpressible character, or because what we are confronted with in a particular case is an “empty” or “absent” meaning. We have to be open to the intrinsically transient character of all cultural articulations; and yet, we have to understand their recurrent character. We have to be sensitive to marginal, seemingly irrelevant meanings balancing on the edge of personal idiosyncrasy. We have to be sensitive to cultural phenomena of de-signification, where a particular significant element (be it a linguistic sign, symbol or image) extracted from a nexus of signifying interrelations is referred back to itself.

One of the recurrent, or ever-present, motifs in the history of culture is the dialectical relation between words and images as two competing, and yet essentially interrelated, modes of representation, two modes of establishing relation between symbols and things. In the most simplified formulation – on the one hand, we would have descriptive *signification* whereby an object is given by means of concepts, that is, as something already universalized. On the other hand, we would be confronted with sensuous *presentification*, whereby the absent object is given as if it were there, before our eyes. If we complicate this picture a bit we will have to point at pictorial or imagistic elements of writing and discourse – the most visible in the case of certain literary figures such as metaphors. Likewise, we will have to admit the existence of signitive components, abstract and conceptual elements as well as the pre-narrative structures of images. As such they call for understanding and translation, but at the same time they have to carry some level of indeterminacy. Whenever they are reduced to the level of concrete, specified semantics, or to the local play of economic and political interests – as often happens especially in contemporary culture – they lose their reflective and transformative potential.

What seems to be crucial here is that both words and images appear *instead of* something or as expressing something *as* something – they work as metaphors and metonymies; but they also *stand for* something – in this way they become symbols of what is other and absent, and yet paradoxically present in the interpretative experience of symbols. These are experiences which can never be fully realized because of the irreducible surplus of meaning inscribed into each genuine symbol, because of its overdetermined and polysemic nature. In this sense the symbol is a form of response to the negativity of absence, and at the same time it indicates possibility as a crucial category of cultural experience. It constitutes and maintains fundamental cultural tensions – between presence and absence, activity and passivity, innovation and receptivity. Symbols are not of our making, but they have to be recognized. They have to be recognized in the multiformity of their functions, in their multi-interpretability; they have to be recognized in the irreducible plurality of cultural meanings. To what extent are we still capable of this kind of recognition? Can we resist the dominant cultural tendency to reduce our experience to the univocal language of signs and instrumental rationality? Is it still possible to maintain the symbolic function of images as not reducible to simple signs of dominant political and economic forces? Does the dialectical relation between words and images allow us to render the truth of what is singular?

This issue of our journal, is driven by these kinds of questions. Our Thematic Section starts with the essay by Maria Gołębiewska presenting an in-depth analysis of the metaphorization of silence in the context of performative studies. Metaphor as a figure of speech operates at the intersection of intention and convention, activity and passivity, innovation and interpretation. The author shows in great detail different aspects of the metaphorization of silence underscoring that in this case we are confronted with “unspecified semantics,” which means that there is no single, unequivocal meaning which could be ascribed to an intention of a “silent subject.” “...silence shifts and moves meanings rather than conceals them. Silence appears as behavior replacing other signs – *as a metonymy* replacing words and gestures that do not seem befitting within a given convention ... silence appears *as a metaphor* ... of other actions, it becomes ‘as’ of a different personal expression...”

Another angle on the critique of the idea of univocal meaning is presented by Martin Kaplický in his analysis of Henry James’s novel “The Figure in the Carpet.” The main motif of the story (the mysterious figure in the carpet) confronts us with an “empty” meaning, which is at once felt and ungraspable, real but non-existent, concrete but “unspecified and revealed only through a set of different mirroring metaphors.” This significant absence of any

graspable meaning invites the plurality of possible interpretations. Thus the author presents a comparative analysis of four philosophical interpretations – by Todorov, Miller, Iser, Casanova – underscoring not only the way they were applied, but also how they use the leading motif of James's story for clarification of their own philosophical theories.

Piotr Schollenberger, in turn, provides us with a brilliant analysis of Duchamp's pictorial nominalism filtered, so to speak, through Lyotard's idea of spatial transformation. The author shows how for Duchamp, by suspension of traditional linguistic (conceptual, syntactic, phonological, etc.) determinations of words, they can meet with images in an element of eventual plasticity. This process of the transformation of heterogeneous spaces of representation – finding its philosophical expression in Lyotard's theory of "the figural" (as not so much opposed but rather as transgressing the distinction between figurative and semantic orders) – or to put it more aptly of "pictorial transformation," effects in creation what is genuinely singular.

Our readers will find another example of the dynamics of cultural meanings which transgress the limitations of discursive language in the essay by Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin. The author starts with a thorough presentation of the basic premises and inspirations of Susanne K. Langer's philosophical theory. Next, she offers an inspiring Langerian analysis of twelve murals painted by the Bogside Artists in Derry/Londonderry, which refer to the long and dramatic conflict in Northern Ireland (1968–1998). In her interpretation they escape the univocal logic of signs which would transmit a concrete political or social message, but rather initiate an open-ended process of understanding. They function "as symbols that are vehicles for conception, reflection and commemoration."

The dynamic intersection of the imaginary and the symbolic orders is, according to psychoanalysis, the space of constitution (or imposition) of personal identity. Paweł Dybel's essay offers a fascinating analysis of the relentless efforts of the Polish artist Witkacy to work through the subjection to his father figure and to reach out for personal autonomy. This dramatic and unsuccessful struggle went through the endless projection of symbolic and artistic images of himself, which serve as his doubles, his mirror-images from which Witkacy would never, in fact, free himself.

Stephen Snyder, in turn, offers us an interesting and impressively well-researched analysis of the artistic representations of St. George killing Diocletian undertaken in the perspective of the war of images, or, to put it differently, of the clash of world representations. The clash led to the transition from the age of high classical art to the early Byzantine style. Snyder uses for his analysis Danto's theory of art which allows him to show that it is a complete change of the representation of the world which is no longer congruent with the previous one. Even if all the elements of the cultural vocabulary remain the same, their meaning, and together with that the modes of perceiving and understanding reality, undergo significant transformation. The author argues that the value of the analysis lies in its trans-historical relevance, and draws a convincing analogy to the shift from the modern to the post-modern world representation.

The Forum section starts with the essay by the living legend of American pragmatism – Joseph Margolis. The author proposes a revision of the "pragmatic maxim" and presents the philosophical constraints on normativity. He argues that all truth-claims as well as whole axiological systems are thoroughly historied, language-dependent and deeply enrooted in the local, commonly shared forms of *Bildung*. The second essay, by Laura Mueller, presents the ambitious, inspired by Kantian theory, project of philosophy of culture understood as a practical, virtue-oriented theory of education. In Mueller's understanding, philosophy of culture is, above all, the genuine practice of self-cultivation realized within the horizon of moral values. As such it is to be a response to the current educational system, which, dominated by the "capital form," produces "unenlightened," docile consumers.

I would also like to draw readers' attention to the essay opening our third section. Lucio Privitello provides us (somehow mirroring Mueller's reflection) with an inspiring philosophical-poetic meditation on the pedagogy of philosophy understood as cultivating, through the plurality of methods and intellectual inspirations, a genuine creativity.