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The Inevitability of Symbols

The contemporary culture is marked by an essential heterodoxicality, where opposing cultural factors are constantly and effectively at play. For what we experience is unprecedented dynamics of social-cultural reality contrasted with a paradoxical form of stagnation (if not of regression). As if all changes were only meaningless variations on the same theme. What we experience are unheard of before possibilities of reshaping our social-political (and natural) landscape. And yet, it is hard to avoid the impression that any horizon of genuine possibilities appears to be a mere semblance, a mysterious guise for the condition of ever-growing estrangement and alienation, accompanied by an increasing devastation of the world we live in – both social-cultural and natural. What we experience is an enrichment of the symbolic and imaginary realm, which before and beyond purely theoretical considerations provides us with the basic coordinates for our praxis. And at the same time, it is almost impossible to distinguish it from being just an effect of the overwhelming excess of fabricated images, of a never-ending flow of self-referent simulacra, which leads not only to the constant virtualization of reality, but also, and as a consequence, to losing vital contact with our life-worlds. What we are confronted with is a spectacular level of knowledge about the universe achieved by the natural sciences and accompanied by constant technological development, where both are to make individual lives richer, more conscious and more comfortable. Indeed, they do. But at the same time the pursuit of rational conceptualization, scientific explanation and instrumental control do not coincide with an increase of meaning, with a deepened self-understanding, and with a more critical and reflective participation in cultural reality. Furthermore, the very same pursuit tends to bring culture down to a definite set of determinations and deprive it of the dimension of the unconditional – regardless of whether we would understand it in more religious, normative, ethical, or even cognitive senses.

One can repeat, following whole generations of thinkers, that we are confronted with a great cultural crisis. And that would certainly be a true statement. However, in this issue of our journal we are not so much concerned with possible analyses of the nature and/or a historical-genealogical reconstruction of that crisis.

Rather we pose questions about the conditions of possibility for the new forms contemporary culture can and does take in. Culture as such is the realm of creative tensions, whether they lead, as Hegel wanted to see it, to historical progress and development, or whether these tensions determine its permanent state providing it with an unsurpassable tragic aura – as Georg Simmel would put it. In any case – whether we want to be more Hegelian or more Simmelian– these tensions are a precondition of the *processual* character of culture. To preserve the latter means – from a purely theoretical standpoint – to refuse the resistless, and at the same time impossible, temptation of providing the exhaustive definition of culture. Why this temptation is resistless is clearly attested by sociology, anthropology of culture, and cultural studies in their restless and almost innumerable efforts to create the final picture of *what* culture *is*. Why this temptation appears to be impossible is equally clear – the very fact that we are immersed in culture makes every such effort a highly dubious undertaking. Therefore, instead of focusing, as any essentialist approach does, on presenting culture as a more or less objectified realm of material artifacts as well as social, intellectual, spiritual and axiological achievements, we should think of it in more apophatic terms. We should see it as the realm effectively escaping all ultimate determinations and conceptualizations, and as having an "essentially" tensive character. It means, it is constituted by the series of oppositions, of unsurpassable tensions between: *arche* and *telos*, *nomos* and *phusis*, presence and absence, identity and otherness, the real and the imaginary, immanence and transcendence, human and inhuman, possibility and bare necessity, facts and ideals, and so forth. It does not mean that these tensions cannot be erased. Indeed, they can! As too often they were. The very possibility of such a situation is "essentially" inscribed into culture. But each time it happens we are faced with cultural devastation, often in the most horrific and complete form.

This apophatic perspective presents culture also as the realm of possible human actions. There is a strong assumption – underlying this perspective – that there exists a peculiar entity commonly referred to as the human being. But this assumption strongly opposes any metaphysical or speculative accounts trying to grasp the essence of that being *in abstracto* – by extracting it from the realm of its existence, from the sphere of its experiences and activities. Even within the latter it is never given to itself in the form of direct and immediate self-reference, but precisely as a constant play of presence and absence, as a never-ending series of detours and de-localizations, as a constant task of self-recognition in what is other and strange. This task is always realized within the horizon of the world constituted to the same extent by factuality and possibility, by its inherent limitations and *creative action*, which can take different forms of contesting, negating or transcending these limitations. And in that way to project ever new meanings onto that world, to open up new dimensions within it, to create new practical, affective, imaginative and reflective spaces.

It seems that this apophatic perspective is to be governed by a particular kind of logic, namely that of symbol. There are a few basic features of that logic: first, symbol can be seen – if we follow Immanuel Kant – as a particular form of representation of an impossible object. For a symbolic formation refers us to an "object", which can never be given directly and intuitively. The essence of the symbolic representation rather lies in a "reflective specification".[1] Imagination uses here some intuitively given object and by means of analogy applies the general procedure of reflection to the non-objectifiable idea of reason. That means, what we are confronted with is only the correspondence between the forms of reflection and not between the intuitive object and the idea of reason. That leads us to the second feature of that logic: symbol, as indirect representation, can never be fully adequate, it rather opens up the infinite hermeneutical horizon. It is a moment in the never-ending movement towards the unconditional. Third, symbol is determined as a model, playing the practical function for which

1) Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the "Critique of Judgment"* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 123.

the form of reflection is to be found. Kant wrote about this form that, "…it is not a principle of the theoretical determination of the object in respect of what it is in itself, but of the practical determination of what the idea of it ought to be for us and for its purposive employment."[2] Thus, in the light of these first three features symbol appears as the category which maintains the fundamental tension between factuality and possibility; as posing a constant challenge to our creative powers – always demanding to think more and otherwise; and as practical – ethical and normative – demand. In short, it constantly calls us to transcend our factual determinations, to go beyond them in the direction of the unconditional, the ideal, and the possible.

The fourth point of that logic is the essential plurality and dynamics of symbols. It is true that symbol tends to universalization, but at the same time – as Ernst Cassirer convinces us – it is highly variable, versatile and mobile.[3] Symbols are not only essentially equivocal – posing a challenge to modern symbolic logic – they are also complex and multidimensional structures. We can refer here to the Cassirerian conception of the tripartite structure of symbolization or its three modes/stages: expression – representation – signification, which is not – as one can rightly suppose – purely and exclusively a progressive structure. The symbolizing process starts from the very basic form of perception, but is always situated in the broader context of meaningful interrelations. Therefore, every act of perception is always already meaning giving, it is always already one of the many possible forms of objectification determined by different forms of space and time, different forms of relations between the elements of the life-world.[4] We can also refer to Paul Ricoeur's (putting aside his rather too hasty and therefore unjustified critical remarks on the too broad character of Cassirer's concept of symbol) "a *logic of double meaning*", or double intentionality characterizing every symbol, where a simple relation of designation is replaced by an interplay of multiple meanings.

For symbol cannot be simply brought down to the status of one of the elements of symbolic logic if only subject to conceptual clarification. It does not simply belong to the order of argumentation, of drawing conclusions, nor is it a form of imperfect definition. Symbols designate no-thing, neither are they purely informative. Rather they are – as long as they are telling, as long as we hear their call – the expressions of the irreducible character of human being, and creative, processual character of culture. The expressions in which humans can and should recognize themselves as finite, yet still possible beings.

Finally, the logic of symbol is the transcendental logic. Its main task is to determine the particular fields/objects of experience, in all their variety, and to analyze their conditions of possibility. While doing this task, it attempts at revealing the constitutive and constituting elements of these fields with all typical characteristics, forms (and concepts which would reflect them) giving the basic overall orientation which is to be specific for each of these fields. The next step is to reveal the unity of all of them. Not in the form of Hegelian-like absolute synthesis, but rather as a unity of action. "Here we seek not a unity of effects but a unity of action; not a unity of products, but a unity of *creative process*."[5] But this transcendental logic oriented around the fundamental category of symbol can also be expressed – after Ricoeur – as the analysis of the conditions under which every particular form of empirical consciousness can be legitimately (yet still symbolically) referred to the thetic

2) Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), § 59, 180.

3) Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), 36.

4) For more, see: Antoine Mooij, "Psychosis as the Failure of Symbolization," *Eidos: A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* 4, no. 2 (July 2018): 5–14, doi: 10.26319/4712; Antoine Mooij, *Psychiatry as a Human Science. Phenomenological, Hermeneutical and Lacanian Perspectives*, trans. Peter van Nieuwkoop (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi Editions, 2012).

5) Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, 70.

consciousness.[6] Simply speaking: whether and under what conditions can we recognize ourselves in a particular realm of objectified meanings? *How* can the latter still be seen as symbolic expressions of humanity's most fundamental existential and ontological concerns?

Now, if we return to the introductory paragraph, it seems that what was presented there as the play of opposing factors has very little in common with the creative tensions which are to constitute and protect the dynamic and processual character of culture. Why is that so? It seems that one of the crucial features of our contemporary condition is a phenomenon which could be named *the eclipse of the symbolic order*. By the latter we should not understand by any means the disappearance of that order. Such a claim would simply be nonsensical. It should rather be understood as a set of different forms of its distortion ranging from *imaginative atrophy* to *significative neutralization*. The former refers to all the states of individual or collective forms of confusing a symbol with what is symbolized – exposing us, in this or other way, to the brutal shock of the real.[7] The latter designates the domination of contemporary culture by the tendency to bring the whole richness inscribed into the process of symbolization to its purely rational and conceptual form. In the first case, we can be confronted with the most horrible kinds of experiences (e.g., psychosis, killing, rape etc.) and events (e.g., genocide, massive murders, massive and worldwide exploitation of human and natural resources, etc.). In the second case, symbol becomes nothing more but a sign, a mark of one-sided rationality, which does not tolerate equivocal languages and multivocal apprehensions of cultural reality. And in this sense under the lead of scientism, instrumental reason becomes the means of manipulability and machination. So, at the end one can rightly say that there is no essential difference between those two extreme forms of distortion. Both are in fact the very same process of de-personalization of those who are their victims, and of the destruction of the world understood as the horizon of all meaningful and creative action. In the extreme case all we can be left with is the space of impossibility, where all significant tensions are being effectively erased. Is it really so bad? If we would like to give the answer based on the essays collected in this issue, most probably it would have to be: yes and no; and maybe.

We start our Thematic Section with an extensive essay by Randall Auxier offering a highly original and in-depth presentation of a new humanism, whose prophet is to be Ernst Cassirer. This humanism (taking responsibility for, and freed from the dangerous premises of, the most horrific effects of traditional humanism, including the Holocaust) underscores the necessity of maintaining the dynamic and creative tension between a symbol and a symbolized thing, symbol and world, our limitations and our freedom, "our actual condition and our ideal world". This in-between is the space of dynamic and creative culture. A new humanism is to be based on the deep awareness that symbols do not simply belong to us, even if they are of our own creation, they still present a moral and personal task to us. They call us. The main principle of this new humanism is to be the symbolic function of personalization of the world as the overall horizon of all meaningful actions.

An interesting comparative analysis of nationalism in Cassirer and Aurel Kolnai is presented in the essay by Andrzej Gniazdowski. The author shows convincingly the foundations and inconsistencies in the political thought of these two thinkers, where the idea of national sovereignty is to be the expression of "progressive self-liberation" governed by "internal reason" and only expressed in the form of mythical thought. Yet, political phenomena such as nationalism, as permeated by irrational elements such as emotions, beliefs, religious and mythical thinking should ultimately be seen rather in terms of regression to the lower phase of development. Gniazdowski also offers a critical question as to the real status of this regression. For it appears (and

6) Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. David Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 53.

7) See: Mooij, *Psychiatry as a Human Science. Phenomenological, Hermeneutical and Lacanian Perspectives*.

remains) ambiguous whether such political phenomena as nationalism "seeks to preserve old forms" or "strives to produce new ones".

This point provokes a fundamental question – clearly relevant for contemporary culture, and undertaken to some extent by most of the essays in this issue: to what extent regression can be a dangerous technique of a dynamization of cultural reality? Or to put it differently: can (and how) the old and well-known symbols cease to be the expression of cultural creativity, lose their tensive character and become the means of sheer (political, social, economic, religious, moral etc.) manipulation? Are there any effective means to resist this risk and this temptation?

The idea of undermining the established symbolic order for the sake of restoring the dynamic relation between symbol and what is symbolized – as aptly underscored by Auxier – is undertaken in interesting ways in the essays by Tomasz Maślanka and Eli Kramer. Maślanka offers a thorough analysis of the consequences of the counterculture movement from the 1960s and argues that above all it is to be understood as a new form of culture, which led efficiently to the creation of a completely new symbolic imaginary of Western societies. At the same time, he points to some paradoxes inherent in this new symbolic universe, paradoxes provoking several very fundamental questions: whether these new symbols are truly and necessarily progressive and in this sense creative, or have they at some point become fixities, reduced symbols? Whether they do not exclude the logic of double meaning and as such became at once oppressive and regressive? I believe these questions must remain open, but many social-political phenomena of the last years have shown that they are not unjustified. Kramer, in turn, re-evokes in his brilliant paper the forgotten ideal of philosophical wandering. In his view it is not only to be seen as one among many modes of doing philosophy, but also, and most importantly, as a creative, socially and politically engaged attitude, whose main task is to constantly provoke critical reflection in members of a given society. And in this way maintaining the creative tension between *nomos* and *phusis*, lifeless customs and possibilities, uncritically shared habits and ideals. So, in Kramer's view a philosophical wanderer is to be an intellectual and moral guard of the symbolic universe of culture, of its dynamic, creative and open-ended character.

To every particular field of cultural experience there is a corresponding particular form of space, which differ quite significantly from all other forms. Magdalena Gawin undertakes, in her interesting and inspiring article, a phenomenological analysis of urban space. She shows the complex, multidimensional character of that space, where not only different theoretical perspectives, different forms of spaces, but above all different forces (which tend to shape it) intersect. She argues for a true politics of space, where a deliberative and responsible attitude would win over the external factors, e.g., economic, and which would lead to the creation of a more humane urban space, that which could be genuinely experienced as inhabitable.

The last essay in our Thematic Section presents Daniel Burston's critical diagnosis of the current condition of the academy. In his view the old ideal of the university "begins to crumble". There are two chief reasons for this demise: first, we are experiencing the growing mistrust in any forms of authority, which somehow reflects the current economic and political tendencies. Second, postmodernism which seems to dominate humanistic discourses completely undermined the founding principle of the university – unconditional pursuit towards truth. If we have started with the very sober but eventually optimistic essay by Auxier, we ended up with the very pessimistic voice of Burston. In his view we are enclosed within the realm of factuality, of limitations, of uncritical and non-creative condition, in the space where we have lost from our sight the horizon of ideals. Can we still hear the call of symbols from within such a condition?

In the Forum section we present two essays by the living legends of American phenomenology – Professor James G. Hart and Professor Edward S. Casey. The first of these essays is the extensive interpretation of Milan Kundera's novels in light of the problem of a unique character of one's self – "the finest illusion" of Western

thought. Hart undertakes this "unbearable" problem through the analyses of different phenomena (gesture, face, suffering, love). Even though it seems there is no objectively convincing arguments to solve this philosophical puzzle – at the end our own personal experience is still unshakable evidence of our own unique manifestation, always coinciding with the original manifestation of the world and of other people. Casey in his analysis challenges the traditional view on emotions which treats them as internal or private phenomena. He undertakes an extremely interesting phenomenological investigation pertaining to the peripherality of human emotions. He draws our attention to these (often forgotten) ephemeral types of emotions which appear on the peripheries of our conscious lives as well as to the external "parts" of all our emotions. In both cases, we are exposed, in a very special way, to the world and to other people, transported as if beyond ourselves, connected in subtler, but also much more effective, ways with others.