

INTERPRETATION OF SYMBOLS

Vasil Rainov

Academy of Science, Sofia, Bulgaria

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Summary

The contribution analyses different theories and practices of the interpretations of symbols. It shows different approaches and different fields – and the illusions which are connected with the approaches and the human activity.

When we understand culture as a tradition in this sense that knowledge is handed down from generation to generation or as a part of the human communication in a wide sense then the interpretation of signs is a main part of this process. (see *Theory and History of Culture*)

The way in which I will develop my theory of interpretations and illusions as a psychophysiological and neuro psychological substratum of artistic perception presupposes the inclusion of another informative and content-bound layer: that of semiotics. Devoted to the sign ordering of human communication, semiotics, according to Sebeok, expanded to cover the whole symbolic behavior of man and set itself the ambitious task of not only classifying, but also of interpreting a number of hierarchical levels of human symbolism. The overall metalanguage system allows people to perceive and evaluate in a similar way -- by using symbols -- the additional qualities of objects and phenomena. There have been a number of analyses, comparisons and theories dealing with the interpretation of language and forms of perception. The philosophy of language forms is the methodological base of many existential, phenomenological and personal developments within the general theory of cognition.

1. Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

The link between semiotics, which is generally the study of signs, and the philosophical interpretation of the emergence and function of sign systems with regard to human behavior, is maintained mostly by a trend in philosophy called philosophy of mind.

My thoughts on this issue are related mainly to the tradition inherited from thinkers like Cassirer, Heidegger, Derrida, the neurobiologist Gazzaniga and others. In their anthropological interpretation of symbols in literature and the arts, these authors established a number of significant, and at that time unnoticed, elements of texts, drawings, synthetic works of art and mythology, which point to the development of the conceptual system and its relationships with perception.

The main concepts in each science -- defined by Cassirer in 1972 as a means of posing questions and finding answers -- manifest themselves not so much as passive reflections (*Abbilder*) of the being (*Sein*) but as self-creating intellectual symbols. This, of course, can only be the beginning of the long road to perception, reflection and preservation of certain traits that will turn into the category of concepts and symbols. Cassirer also states, that in science there is the basic assumption which, even before having affirmed itself, makes the mind register the fact that it should be reflected by language and shared concepts (*Sprachliche Allgemeinbegriffe*) as the first form of expression and reflection. Yet when language is used as a material and a base, the necessity arises to go beyond it. A new logos of different principles of language thought becomes dominant and grows ever more necessary and independent.

The creation of a language parallel to the natural one is the great contribution to human thought. In Cassirer's monograph we read that Greek gods might owe their existence to Homer and Hesiodus, but they are also related to the formation of religious thought, an aesthetic beginning and an aesthetic primary image. Since the time of Xenophantes, the mythical and the poetical have often been juxtaposed to the anthropomorphic and its ontological questions about being and human essence. According to Cassirer, the symbolic forms of the mind, in the way they are treated in language, art and myths, evoke mainly a stream of constant *Gestalten* that structure the constant wholeness of the form. By analyzing stages in the psychological development of art, Cassirer interprets important traits of Wundt's national psychology that account for the stage at which art is nothing but a repetition of what has been experienced and preserved by memory. Of course, Cassirer continues, every reproduction in our mind is enriched; in this way the concept of 'memory' is endowed with a more profound meaning. In order to remember a certain content, we must tune in our mind in a different way from that of the sensation of perception. It is not enough to merely repeat. It is necessary to create a new way of conceptualizing and formulating, because every reproduction presupposes a new way of reflection.

In this connection, personal experience and individual, personal peculiarities (the self) are of decisive importance for that process. In Cassirer's interpretation the self not only activates the image, but also interprets it. In this way the boundaries of the "subjective and objective" world become even more precise and clear. By reminding us that Wilhelm von Humboldt was the first to raise the problem of language and symbol in language philosophy, Cassirer continues his analysis within the tradition established by Humboldt. Cassirer claims that every affectation, every artistic outburst has its linguistic characteristic. This characteristic ends at the place where the self and the world unite to produce a synthesis. In addition, Cassirer is looking for an explanation of the following phenomena: How is it that language, myth and art are mutually enriching and complementary instead of being a simple reflection that provokes the subject to its *Sein*?

It is this, Cassirer says, that is the miracle: Simple content matter is endowed with spiritual existence when the physical sound, characterized by its own pitch, intensity and amplitude, provokes all kinds of thought differences. The same applies to the components of a work of art that can never be treated as the total sum of its elements but as a combination of certain rules, according to the specificity of aesthetic formation. One can see that philosophical traditions going back to Plato and Aristotle are still looking for explanations, conceptualization and laying the grounds for everyone who wants to find ontological correspondences. While Plato strives at a "systematic community of pure ideas and concepts", classical philosophy interprets the same concepts mainly through Kant's causality (*Kausalität*), through Leibniz's "similarity in the singular", through the well-ordered system of monadology, Berkeley's descriptions in creating a theory of visual perception, the synthesis of the self, Hume's perceptual sums, etc.

By outlining an intrapsychic theory of perception processes, Cassirer concludes that ideas and perception from the outside world: the notions of light and dark, smooth and rough, tonality and color exist within ourselves as totally subjective states. In this way the symbolism we know, and which has developed as a component of the mind, makes a comeback: Symbolism in art, for instance; when arbitrary signs are combined beyond and by means of language in artistic creation and mythology, the employed signs often remain mysterious for us unless we search for their origin deep down in the historical roots of spiritual events.

The unity of symbols, according to Cassirer, is realized in mythology and the arts as well as in science, while all of them together constitute a reflection of human existence. (see *West/East and North/South Dialogue of Cultures Interculturality and communication*)

The profound meaning of these findings shows that, viewed in historical perspective, Cassirer's ideas create favorable grounds for the development of a Philosophy of Mind, a trend which received its content and support from the works and philosophical tradition inherited from Heidegger.

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Biographical Sketch

Prof. Dr Vassil Rainov, Dr Sc, born 19 September 1942, Sofia, Bulgarien, Institut für bulgarische Sprache der Bulgarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften; studied philology at the University of Sofia, phonetics and linguistics at the – Karls Universität, Prag (Ph D), was a Humboldt – Stipendiat, (5 repeats Institut für Phonetik und Kommunikation, Uni-Bonn; Psychophysiologische Abteilung der Neurochirurgische Klinik der Uni-Bonn). Obtained a Dr Sc , Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft und Kommunikation. He was employed by the Bulgarische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Hirnforschungsinstitut bis 1993; from 1993 Leiter der Abteilung für Phonetik und Kommunikation des Instituts für bulgarische Sprache, Vice Direktor des Instituts 1994-1999