

ABOUT LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION THROUGH ART

Professor, Ph.D. MARIN AIFTINĂ

Abstract. This study explores some aspects of language and communication through art. Starting with the post of idea that art has the miraculous power of telling us something significant about the human being, it differentiates from other disciplines like science, ethics, religion, philosophy, that is from all other modalities of culture through the Spirit talks to human world. The art work opens itself towards us through suitable language. The artistic language is the material support of the work of art. The aesthetical theories have identified some properly characteristics of artistic language like: the originality, the individuality, the ambiguity, the connotation. Considering the art language as a symbolic construction, then how could we understand the significance of the artistic symbol?

In this paper, we try to answer this question. Finally, we consider that the contemporary tendencies to excessively abstracting to the work of art are overlooked by reflective manifestations violence, the essence of art itself.

Beyond the variety of definitions that have been given to it, the art is one of the essential dimensions that emphasizes the specific human way of being in the world. It has the miraculous power of telling us what that being looks like, moreover, of telling us something significant about the human being itself. By “telling” we mean the art’s peculiar manner of conveying things, which differentiates it from other disciplines, like science, ethics, religion, philosophy, that is, from all other modalities of culture through which the Spirit talks to the human world. As it is already known, that manner has been conceived as a language¹ offering to the subject – a subject always embodied in an artist – the unbounded opportunity of expressing his feelings, his views concerning both the world and his own existence as a part of the world.

While talking about the generic concept of *art language*, one cannot avoid the following question: what are the features of the above mentioned language consisted of? I must state from the beginning that, unlike other kinds of languages, which merely act as means of transmitting information, the language of art represents the very purpose of the artistic creation. The work of art emerges at the end of an invented language which has been constituted regardless of a definite code, or of a given set of signs. It is a unique, unrepeatable, inimitable structure with infinite corresponding significances. Therefore, it is appropriate to sustain that the artistic

¹ I use here the notion of *language* in its most general sense, as a codified system of communication. Beyond its universality, the language of art, as a peculiar form of communication through works of art, differentiates according to the particular fields of the art: the languages of music, plastic arts, dance, dramatic art, literature, etc.

language is the material support of the work of art. Therefore, any possible change that occurs in the structure of the artistic language irremediably alters the work itself.

The aesthetic theories have identified a series of properties that confer an absolute identity to the language of art. Among them, let us mention: the originality, the individuality, the connotation, the ambiguity, the lack of a definite referent, the unpredictable, the suggestiveness, the openness. Naturally, the list is much longer². All of these features participate together in the process of moulding the reality in the shape of an art work. Each of the mentioned features should be subjected to a specific theoretical analysis, an exigency that exceeds the purpose of the present paper. Yet there is a defining peculiarity of the artistic language which I would like to stress: its symbolic character. The feature is generally admitted by the aesthetic doctrines: either by the doctrine that understands art as imitation of nature, or by the one that conceives art as an idealization, as well as by the neo-Kantian stance, which, surpassing the above mentioned standpoints, conceives art as symbol³. One of the most fervent sustainer of the symbol theory is Ernst Cassirer, according to which „Art could be defined as a symbolic language”⁴. In his opinion, the symbol is an object placed halfway between man and his universe, having the power to conciliate and keep them together. Due to its polarity whom it transcends through its active, interpretative energy, the symbol is always ambiguous: it is a kind of a fundamental tool owing to which the human being left behind the nature and “installs himself in the universe of intelligible forms and functions”. In Cassirer’s view, the beauty is “essentially and necessarily a symbol because it is [...] inwardly split, because it is anytime and anywhere one and double at the same time. Through that split, through that attachment to the sensible and through that rising above the sensible, it [...] expresses the tension that crosses the world of our conscience [...], and the fundamental polarity of existence itself”⁵. Conceiving the symbol in that manner, Cassirer draws the attention to the fact that it is not sufficient to consider art as a symbolic language, a statement which grasps only the *genus proximus*, leaving aside the *differentia specifica*⁶, i.e., the very thing that individualizes and distinguishes the art symbols from the ones belonging to other fields of culture. The linguistics, the science, the religion use symbols as well, but only the artistic symbols bring to presence an “absent” in a concrete form addressed to our spirit and sensibility. The nature of the artistic symbol lies in the fact that it is “a perceived sign, a configuration of lines, colors, volumes, words, sounds, etc., to which we assign a meaning”⁷.

² Cf. *Estetica*, pp. 207–217.

³ Cf. Tudor Vianu, p. 107.

⁴ Ernst Cassirer, 1, p. 234.

⁵ Cassirer, 2, p. 477.

⁶ Cassirer, 1, p. 234.

⁷ Vianu, p. 150.

Considering the art language as a symbolic construction, then how could we understand the significance of the artistic symbol? In searching for a proper answer, let us start from the truth that the significations of the symbols inserted by the creator in his work point to an inner – or outer – reality that is not at all identical to the reality as an object of sense perception. He finds in the later only the suggestions on the basis of which he moulds something “different”, another original reality whose essence doesn’t consist in its bare existence, but in the fact that it signifies “something” that gets the concreteness of the symbol embedded in the work of art. It is a reality that can be found nowhere in the objectively perceived world because it is produced by the creative imagination of the author. It is a trans-figuring having, according to Malraux, a twofold character: on the one hand, he sustains that “Art is an interpretation of nature, of what people are able to see of it”; on the other, “Art is a manifestation of what people are not able to see: the sacred, the supernatural, the unreal”⁸, things that become visible only through the work of art one contemplates.

In other words, from an ontological point of view, the work of art in its peculiar mode of being is an object, or – to quote Heidegger’s term – “a manufactured object”⁹ which doesn’t present, but rather *re-present* a certain reality according to its author’s feelings and ideas, in a multivalent symbolic language. As far as the artistic symbols that are enclosed in the work of art don’t point to definite referents, their significations are both imaginary and united with the symbols or the work of art itself. The outcome of this understanding was the connotative character of the art language, which ended in a pluralism of interpretations.

Although the significations are immanent to the artistic sign or symbol, the deciphering of the later stimulates us to return to the sensitive reality in order to disclose there the deep unlimited meanings – as Vianu called them. According to him, “the sensitive reality doesn’t lack ideality – that is, the specific significations our generalizations confer to it; and it is not the art which primarily lent the mentioned significations to reality. Otherwise, how could art be a symbol, which is a synthesis between the sensitive world and the idea?”¹⁰ Indeed, the artistic symbol has the power to maintain together the material and the spiritual world. It irradiates significations and meanings that ceaselessly attract and challenge the artistic receptor.

From the above considerations on the objective presence of the art work, it follows that the later could be seen as a totality, a cosmos in the Greek sense of the term (Kosmos), meaning inner unity and harmony. Completed by an artist, the work of art is complete, welcoming its contemplator with perfect forms and structures. The aesthetic superficiality and profoundness (Vianu), the front and the

⁸ Malraux, pp. 165–166.

⁹ Heidegger, p. 40.

¹⁰ Vianu, p. 149.

rear plane (N. Hartmann) coexist in a strong, harmonious, and indestructible inner relation that grants autonomy and durability to the work of art.

The miraculous balance that keeps together the sensibility of the form and the profound significations, or, as Hartmann said, “the fullness of the moulding, peculiar to the real creation”¹¹, gives birth to a spiritual content that never completely reveals itself to the intuition. For that reason, the work of art, though owing a personal truth, remains surrounded by a mystery that increases its novelty, its freshness, and also its never-failing attractiveness to those who get in touch with it. It is worth mentioning at this point that the notion of “mystery” doesn’t belong to the theoretical realm as long as it doesn’t suggest there are objects that cannot be possibly known owing to either subjective (related to our finite possibilities) or objective absolute limitations (related to a so-called “irrational” character of the objects). The notion of “mystery” has rather a practical significance that involves the creation and the realization. This is the sense in which I employ the term “mystery” while discussing the mystery of art work, which, at the universal level, is the same thing as the mystery of art. Advancing that the art is not an affective state belonging to the artist, but rather his “announcing of things”, Heidegger conceived art as an enigma¹², inviting the reader to view it as such.

Unlike other kinds of mystery, as those belonging to religion or science, the mystery of art points to that hidden content which the work conceals in its profound meanings, haloing its existence¹³. The work encloses in its universe a mystery which is merely suggested by the intuition, without being given the shape of an image. Therefore, the work of art cannot be the object of an absolute knowledge, remaining forever free, open and seducing in its relationship with the receptor. Precisely its inner mystery is that which accounts for the fascination and joy that people experience in front of it, feelings that bring them again and again in the proximity of authentic art work. People feel close to the work, but never could they take possession of it. When Gabriel Marcel made the distinction between “problem” (an objective incomprehensibility that could be analyzed and solved) and “mystery” (whose “enclosing” incomprehensibility is impossible to define) he intuited a truth. The problem is a matter of determination, while the mystery is a matter of intuition¹⁴. Thus the mystery of the art work is a matter of aesthetic experience; it could be felt, but never known by way of rational approach. Therefore, the mystery, I might say, is intrinsically linked to the authentic art. If we admit the idea according to which the work of art is a spiritual finite *product*, and, at the same time, a *becoming* in the process of art reception, it follows, I think, that

¹¹ Hartmann, p. 104.

¹² Heidegger, p. 107.

¹³ I took over some of the ideas I previously developed in my book *Misterul artei și experiența estetică*, published by The Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, 2007.

¹⁴ Didier, p. 212.

the mystery of the work should be conceived at two levels: the creator's level, and the receptor's (contemplator's) one. At the first level, the artist objectifies in his work the aesthetic idea, as Kant asserted, setting a spiritual content in a sensible form. The content comprises elements that are constituted according to a perceived reality, both inner and outer. From these elements, in the profound intimacy of artist's soul, will emerge the thematic "material" (N. Hartmann) which will acquire, owing to artist's active imagination, an unreal (ideal) expression conveyed in a real, concrete shape. The interiority of the soul is so closed and locked, that the mentioned "material" can reach neither its clear awareness, nor its complete exteriorization in the structure of the work. Accordingly, as Hegel stated, the eloquence of the creative pathos "made itself perceived only through clues and hints, with the help of exterior, consonant phenomena that have not the power and the structure to make it being able to display the whole nature of its content"¹⁵. The creative subjectivity thus brings in the work a reality we use to call "unreal", i.e., unavailable at the empirical level, but able to direct the intuition towards deeper levels of significations that transcend the aesthetic image and open themselves to a world of mystery. Therefore, the aesthetic theories that conceive creation as an actualization of subjective potentiality, or as a "realization" of the fantasy, must admit, as a matter of fact, the miraculous character of the artistic creation.

The second level of the mystery of art is represented by the receptor and his aesthetic experience. The presence of the object in the shape of an artistic work is not a being-in-itself, but a being-for-other. Therefore, the work of art exists in an immediate relationship with an artistic subject, the receptor, "that brings with him the conditions of understanding"¹⁶ the objective creation. Isolated in the real world, the work of art exists as an autonomous physical object that includes in its structure a great "richness of content", an unwitnessed world, yet it is open to anyone willing to enter in dialogue with it. I won't expose here, of course, the entire complex problem of relationship between art and reception. I limit myself to mention few aspects that are closely linked to the present paper's topic.

It is true that the work of art emerges at the end of a creative activity, displaying itself as a spiritual finite product. But it is also true that it doesn't freeze in that static condition equivalent to a never-ending rest. At that point, its life has just started. There begins its great adventure, in the participating at the historical and unhistorical time, aspiring for leaving the temporality realm and entering the eternity one. The work of art is thus an activity, a process, a becoming, maintaining its self-identity by the meanings and the significations it irradiates in the outer world. The process is fed by the reception of the art work. Being an interpretation of the reality, the work of art becomes, at its turn, an object of interpretation for those who engage

¹⁵ Hegel, p. 294.

¹⁶ Hartmann, p. 98.

themselves in a dialogue with it. The receptor's sensibility and intelligence work together in making judgments, distinctions, and interpretations on the basis of the aesthetic experience, developing around the aesthetic object a connotative aura.

The aesthetic theories, beginning with Max Dessoir, generally admit the truth that the artistic reception is a process that develops in time. In what concerns this matter, there are two necessary distinctions I would like to enforce. First of them is related to what Paul Souriau called "admiring ecstasy", a kind of a hypnosis which the receptor experiences under the first impression produced by the encounter with the art work. It is a stage of the reception in which the receptor's soul offers itself to the sensible appearance of the work that fascinates him through its language, its shapes and colors. We are dealing in this case with the "spirit's naïve abandonment to the power of appearance"¹⁷, as Vianu used to say. But this kind of reception, unless it tries to get dipper, remains at the superficial level of things, passively bearing the impression that the aesthetic object produced on the senses. We might say that the work of art, owing to its ambiguity, displays a sort of "cunning": it attracts and subjugates the subject, keeping its distance at the same time. In other words, the work of art fascinates the subject by its beauty only for better hiding behind it. Therefore, by the miracle of its "appearance", the work of art defends its mystery.

The second distinction is related to another stage of reception, which is correlative to the first one discussed earlier: the process of immersion in the inner structures of the art work, where a world of ideas and feelings resides, a world that challenges the soul, inviting it to understand and experience the aesthetic pleasure. However skilled the aesthetic experience could be, the inner word of the art work doesn't utterly reveal itself; it conceals something which intuition cannot reach, giving birth to a kind of "knowledge with rest" (imperfect). Thus the work of art maintains itself in an essential closing, somehow keeping the receptor at distance. The very distance between the real object and the subject, as well as the impossibility of a complete knowledge, is responsible for the mystery that surrounds the work of art. It is a mystery through which the work exerts a permanent seduction on our souls, yet preserving itself in a fascinating otherness, so that one could never take possession over it.

It follows from the considerations above that the nearness and the remoteness toward the work of art are the elements of a free game which involves the subject of the aesthetic experience willing to live the pure joy. No matter how strong the fascination could be, the subject cannot identify himself with the work that attracts him, always having the feeling that there is something unattainable that keeps him at distance. That's because the contemplation is the only closeness that beauty, as a fundamental aesthetic value, allows. This is a truth that made room for the assertion according to which the distance is engraved in the art's condition of

¹⁷ Vianu, p. 306.

existence itself. The work of art, which is responsible for the release of the aesthetic experience, is also responsible for imposing a certain distance, in order to annihilate the material interest in it and to offer the opportunity to be perceived as such. The work of art is essentially open to sight.

With its openness and its closing, at the confluence of which the mystery flourishes, the work of art delivers itself to the aesthetic experience. At the further end of this experience, the human subjects, according to their different individualities, would discover the aesthetic object that could be materialized in various structures. Since the aesthetic value gives meaning to human life, the individuals who perceive it, charmed by its beauty, are at the same time co-authors of the creation. Therefore, through the manifold interpretations of it, the work of art is always in the making, a permanent becoming entertained by individual's aspiration towards plenitude.

The above theoretic approach brings forth the following question: which way the aesthetic experience conducts itself nowadays, when it is compelled to confront the actual artistic trends of extreme abstraction? Though the answer is too complex to be offered at large in the limited area of the present paper, I'll try to roughly sketch it.

It is convenient to remind here the opinion of Paul Klee, who wrote at the end of his artistic experience at "Bauhaus": "We are seeing around in these days a bunch of precise shapes which our eyes is compelled to swallow – squares, triangles, rhombs, and all sorts of processed shapes, as wires on bars, triangles on bars, circles at handles, cylinders, spheres, arches, more or less lifted cubes, all of which being interlaced in a multilateral co-operation. The eye swallows all these things and drives them somewhere in a stomach which more or less tolerates them¹⁸. This symbolism of geometric shapes could signify the triumph of rationality over the matter, but it could annihilate, at the same time, an entire range of feelings which were generated by the richness of existence and the miracle of life. Klee was convinced that the "miracle of life" was beyond the rational understanding and it couldn't be brought nearer by the means of force. Accordingly, he noted that any analysis, the one undertaken by the artist included, must modestly stop at the gates of the realm belonging to mystery¹⁹, which doesn't allow to be explored by the light of the intellect.

Modernist Klee's remark doesn't seem to be congruent with the sometimes excessive abstract tendencies of the contemporary arts. These trends are driven not by the will to repeating pre-existing perceived realities, but to creating and bringing to presence new formal realities. Resorting to the restrictive symbolic language of art, the artist abandons the "naturalist" imitation and the idealization of things (or the idealistic ennobling of them) in order to shape a subjective inner reality in the

¹⁸ Werner Hofmann, p. 194.

¹⁹ See: *Ibidem*.

form of the work of art. He thus inserts in the diversity of the outer world something “new” in comparison with the content of his perceptions. It follows that “the world of shapes thus created is not identical with that which he saw or perceived. Therefore, between his initial intention and its artistic shape, a real impassable abyss emerges”. In such circumstances, “the tendency of loosening the resemblance relationship – which the aesthetics of the imitation art must preserve – is given a justification that allows it to turn a negative character into a positive one, which is a promise of gaining countless possibilities²⁰. As a result, the work of art is understood as a way of “enriching the experience” of both creator and contemplator, bringing them in the front of an ample horizon of possible expressions and interpretations. Symbolic by its nature, the abstract work of art, which dominated the twentieth century extending itself till now, brings with it represented images that, together with their beauty, enclose a plurality of meaning.

As I previously stated, it is the work of art that releases and feeds the aesthetic experience at the end of which the value-bearer aesthetic object emerges. What we use to call the reception of art enters *in actu* through aesthetic experience or feeling, which is a process whose structure comprises a series of successive moments, as cognitive, structuring, reflexive and emotional acts²¹. The one who reads a novel or a poem, the one who contemplates a painting or listens to a symphony feels his soul being penetrated by emotions and his mind being moved by thoughts. These affective states are generated by the very dual nature of art work, in which “the aesthetic superficiality and deepness”²² harmoniously and indestructibly coexist. As a result, the aesthetic emotions that the contemplator experiences in the *kairotic* moment, according to Moutsopoulos’ term²³, which is the moment of the happy encounter with the work of art, intertwine with a series of intellectual acts and states. The later ones are determined by the content of the art work, being a part of those elements of spiritual life we use to consider *extra-aesthetic*. The art puts in motion all these spiritual energies, influencing in different proportions the feelings of the receptive subjectivity. That’s why these energies are being at work in the process of interpretation and appreciation. Yet the aesthetic reception requires every time an adequate attitude, i.e., the conceiving of the aesthetic object in the light of the aesthetic values. It is the starting point for all the other spiritual acts and states, which are subordinated to it. Free of any practical, intellectual, or metaphysical interest, our souls, being guided by the aesthetic intuition, peacefully open to the priceless beauty and to the deep content of the art work, in order to receive it and to experience the charm of its richness and deep

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 271.

²¹ See: *Estetica*, pp. 245–247.

²² Vianu, p. 160.

²³ See: Moutsopoulos, pp. 231–234.

feelings, of its concealed meanings. The receptor's attempt to unveil the truth concerning the sensible life and the meanings comprised in the authentic work of art is both stimulated and limited by the mystery of the later. We are talking of the mystery that surrounds the inner harmony of the indestructible relationship between the sensible appearance and the spiritual content, as well as of the mystery which is fed by the capacity of the subject to penetrate beyond the outer image, into the deep structures of the work of art.

The aesthetic feelings prevail in the perception of the artistic object. If sometimes it happens otherwise, then either the contemplator is under the power of an inadequate/extra-aesthetic attitude, or the object lacks intuitivity, lingering in a non-expressive abstraction. The last situation reveals the author's will to destroy an object that opposes resistance to him, to annihilate it in order to prove his irrepressible power of creating another world. It is well known that the distortion and the simplification of the objective reality, that could alter the later and create new forms, at the reflection level being equivalent to an activity that freely creates another reality as a product of the conscience, are artistic modes peculiar to an abstract art willing to find and express the essences. The notorious success of Braque, Picasso, Boccioni, Kandinsky, Duchamp and others, if I am to limit my considerations to the plastic arts, is now being proved by the high appreciation of their works. It is a fact that rather explains, than aesthetically legitimates, the mimetic trends marked by a propensity for vulgarity and screams in the dramatic art, for deafening noises in the symphonic music, for aberrant lines and colors in the realm of plastic arts, and so on. We are tempted to think that such products are indifferent as regards the aesthetic value, as long as they support the spreading of the ugly, the proliferation of which is most vile and degrading in human being. One must argue in Nietzsche's line of thought that such products account for the tumultuous energy of the artist, who finally managed to rule over the ugly and the terrifying in the daily life. Then let us ask again: what *is* the function of art? Anyway, the artistic products of the mentioned kind are telling us a story about a human will that associates itself with a dominator, destructive power, a story about violence, cruelty and hate. They draw attention to the fact that we are crossing an historical age which became threatening to the human fate. On the other hand, I still think that the actual aesthetic experience is not prepared to assume such artistic products as those mentioned above, products that extend and differentiate on and on, having deconstructive effects on the aesthetic contemplation.

If art is, as mentioned, a specific language through which the human being, giving free play to the irrepressible need of expressing himself, talks about his existence in the world, then the language of the contemporary art cannot be different from the artist's existence itself, and, through him, from the humanity's entire existence; that is, an existence in a world divorced from nature, dominated by utility and reflective intellect. In such circumstances, the essence of art remained

unchanged, but its shapes and content have considerably been altered, being challenged by the loose manifestations of the actual life. Still, has art definitely gave up its calling to participate at the restoration of the inner unity of our souls, lifting them towards the horizon of self-accomplishment, of absolute an eternity?

REFERENCES

1. Cassirer, Ernst (1994), *Eseu despre om. O introducere în filozofia culturii umane*, trs. by Constantin Cosman (Bucharest, The Publishing House of the Romanian Academy).
2. Idem, *Das Symbolproblem und eine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, "Zeitschrift für Aesthetik und Allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft", XXI, 296, Apud: K.E. Gilbert, H. Kuhn, *Istoria esteticii*, trs. by Sorin Marculescu (Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House).
3. Didier, Julia, 1996, *Dicționar de filosofie*, trs. (Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House).
4. *Estetica* (1983), (Bucharest, Romanian Academy Publishing House).
5. Hartmann, Nicolai (1974), *Estetica*, trs. by Constantin Floru (Bucharest, Univers Publishing House).
6. Heidegger, Martin (1995), *Originea operei de arta*, trs. by Thomas Kleininger, Gabriel Liiceanu (Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House).
7. Hegel, G.W.F. (1966), *Prelegeri de estetică*, Vol. I, trs. by D.D. Roșca (Bucharest, The Publishing House of the Romanian Academy).
8. Hofmann, Werner (1977), *Fundamentele artei moderne*, Vol. 2, trs. (Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House).
9. Malraux, André (1977), *Capul de obsidian*, trs. (Bucharest, Meridiane Publishing House).
10. Moutsopoulos, E. (2002), *Kairos. Miza și pariul*, trs. (Bucharest, Omnia Publishing House).
11. Vianu, Tudor (1966), *Simbolul artistic*, in "Postume" (Bucharest, Universal Literature Publishing House).